

THE  
PRICE  
*of*  
EVERYTHING

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS MODERN ROMANCE

TRISHA FUENTES

The Price of Everything  
A Friends to Lovers Modern Romance  
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# *a note on language*

This story's characters tend to swear.

Often.

Reader discretion is advised.

ONE

*party hard*

LENNOX ASHBY



**NEW YORK**

I'M USED to nights like this—mansion parties where the bass thumps so hard it feels like a second heartbeat in my chest. Jill's parents have really outdone themselves this time. The grand foyer of their estate has been transformed into something straight out of a high-end nightclub in Miami or Vegas. Laser lights cut through artificial fog, painting everyone in neon greens and pinks that make us all look slightly alien and infinitely cooler.

“Michael,” I say, pressing myself against my boyfriend's

back, draping my arms around his broad shoulders. “Dance with me?”

I can feel the moment he tenses beneath my touch. *Five seconds.* That's all I get before his hands come up to gently disengage my arms. It's always the same choreographed move—remove girlfriend's affectionate touch, pivot to face her, plant a quick kiss somewhere in the vicinity of her lips, then create distance.

“Maybe later,” Michael says, his blue eyes scanning the crowded room over my head. “Let's just chill for a minute.”

He pulls back, creating that familiar gap between us that makes my heart sink a little. Six months together, and sometimes I still feel like I'm chasing him across an ever-widening space.

But he does kiss me—a quick peck that's just enough to placate—and I tell myself it's fine. Michael isn't into PDA. He's reserved. Mature. It doesn't mean anything that he never holds my hand in public or that he stands just far enough away from me at parties that someone might wonder if we're together.

We turn to face the sea of dancing bodies, and I catch sight of my best friend, Jill, across the room. She's perched on the arm of a leather sofa, surrounded by three guys from the lacrosse team, her head thrown back in laughter. Her parents' crystal chandelier catches in her hair, making her look like she's wearing a crown of light. She spots me and raises her red cup in a salute.

“I'm going to grab another drink,” I tell Michael, raising my empty glass.

He nods absently. “Cool. I think I see Tanner over there. I'll catch up with you.”

I weave through the crowd, nodding and smiling at faces I recognize from school, from the country club, from my parents' charity galas. The bar Jill's parents set up is ridiculous—a full-service setup with two professional bartenders mixing custom cocktails. Having finally turned twenty-one last month makes this the first party where I'm actually legal, unlike most of the

seniors here. Not that it matters in our world—the bartenders give knowing smiles to those underage regulars whose family names guarantee discretion. Rules have always been more like gentle suggestions when your parents donate wings to buildings.

“Can I get a frozen Mai Tai?” I ask the bartender, who nods and turns to his blender without bothering to check my ID. The novelty of being legally allowed to order hasn't quite worn off yet, even if I've been drinking at these parties since junior year.

“Lenny.”

I know that voice—equal parts honey and vinegar—before I even turn around. And no one, I mean, *no one else*—not even my mother—calls me *Lenny*.

Kingston Hartley slides up beside me at the bar, all five foot ten of him radiating that particular brand of entitled confidence that somehow works on everyone. His dirty blonde hair is *Johnny Depp*' long, tousled, ear-length that falls just past his ears in that perfectly imperfect way that probably takes twenty minutes and expensive product to achieve.

“King,” I say, turning to accept his hug. His arms wrap around me briefly, smelling of expensive cologne and that underlying scent that's just him. “Where've you been hiding? Haven't seen you in days.”

*Who am I kidding? I see the guy almost every day.*

He pulls back, grinning that lopsided smile that's made half our graduating class swoon at some point. “You know me, Lenny. Places to go, hearts to break.”

“Where's Whitney?” I ask, accepting my Mai Tai from the bartender with a quick thanks.

King takes a sip from his tumbler—bourbon neat, his signature drink since sophomore year when he decided that's what sophisticated men drink. He gives me a chin nod toward a corner of the room where a cluster of girls stand talking.

“Over there with her girls. Been attached to her phone most of the night. Something about her sister's engagement drama.”

He shrugs like it's of no consequence. "Haven't seen you tonight either. This place is basically a small country."

"Jill's parents love her, look at this place," I say, gazing around at the pandemonium.

"So how's the equestrian thing going?" he asks, shifting his weight to lean against the bar. "Still planning to destroy the competition next month?"

I can't help but smile. King has always called it "*the equestrian thing*," like my entire competitive career is a casual hobby.

"The Berkshire Invitational is in three weeks, and *yes*, I plan on bringing home another trophy. Duchess and I have been training five hours a day."

"Of course you have," he says, smirking. "Lennox Ashby never does anything halfway."

"How are things with your dad?" I counter, knowing it's a sore spot but asking anyway because that's our relationship—honest to the point of occasional cruelty.

He rolls his eyes dramatically. "Status quo. Still disappointed I'm not following him into the family business. Still trying to bribe me with material goods." He takes another sip of bourbon. "He did offer the yacht for spring break while he's in Monte Carlo. You should come. Bring that boyfriend of yours if you must."

I shake my head, not because the offer is extravagant—it isn't, not in our world—but because it's so typically King. Casually offering a multimillion-dollar yacht as if he's suggesting we share an Uber.

Across the room, Whitney raises a perfectly manicured hand, beckoning King with an imperious wave.

"Looks like I'm needed." He kisses her cheek. "Stay where I can find you. This party's mid without you anyway."

*Typical.*

I watch him saunter across the room, people gravitating toward him like he's got his own magnetic field. Hands slap his

back, girls touch his arm, guys nod in deference. Kingston Hartley doesn't walk into a room—he claims it.

When he reaches Whitney, he wraps his arms around her waist and lifts her off the ground in a twirl that makes her laugh despite her obvious attempt to look annoyed. It's a picture-perfect moment between two obscenely attractive people who seem made for each other.

Something twists in my chest watching them—not jealousy, exactly, but something adjacent to it. King and I have a history that predates anyone else in this room. Our parents bought vacation homes in the same exclusive communities. We attended the same private elementary school, where we were both the kids who got picked up in cars with drivers instead of by parents. We spent summers learning to sail on his family's first yacht and winters skiing in Aspen, where both our families kept chalets.

We're cut from the same exclusive cloth, King and I. Both only children of absurdly wealthy parents. Both expected to excel at everything while making it look effortless. Both pretending that the pressure doesn't get to us.

I've watched him transform from a gangly ten-year-old with a mischievous streak into *this*—the guy every girl wants and every guy wants to be. His dirty blonde hair falls just right, his brown eyes crinkle at the corners when he laughs, and his body has filled out in ways that make even me, his longtime friend, occasionally forget what I'm saying mid-sentence.

If there's one constant in my ever-shifting world of social obligations and parental expectations, it's Kingston Hartley. He's seen me at my worst—like when *Duchess* (my horse) threw me during a competition, and I broke my arm, or when my parents announced they were separating (for the third time) during my sweet sixteen party. He's the one who taught me how to drive stick shift in his father's vintage Aston Martin, and the one who held my hair back the first time I drank too much at a party.

Despite his cocky attitude and the way he seems to coast through life on charm and family connections, Kingston is my

rock. My best guy friend. The one person who truly gets what it's like to be me.

And sometimes, when I'm being completely honest with myself in the dark at 3 AM, that connection hurts in ways I don't fully understand.

I'm halfway through my Mai Tai when Michael materializes beside me, slipping an arm around my waist with uncharacteristic possessiveness. His blue eyes are slightly glassy—he's been drinking, more than usual.

“Dance with me now?” he asks, his voice carrying a playful edge I rarely hear.

Before I can answer, he spins me around, guiding me toward the makeshift dance floor where bodies move in sync with the EDM beat pulsing from the massive speakers. The DJ transitions into a remix of a popular song, and the crowd roars in approval. Michael pulls me close, his body moving against mine in a way that makes heat rise to my cheeks.

This is new. Michael isn't usually so... present when we're together in public. I glance around, wondering what's changed, and notice a group of guys from a rival school watching us. Brad Thompson is among them, his arm draped around his girlfriend Zoe's shoulders.

I turn my attention back to Michael, enjoying this rare moment of connection. The lights flash across his perfect features, casting shadows that make him look older, almost dangerous. For a moment, I remember why I was attracted to him in the first place—that sense of controlled power, like he could do anything but chooses to restrain himself.

Emboldened by his sudden attentiveness, I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling myself closer. He allows it, his hands resting on my waist as we sway to the music. One second, two seconds, three seconds... I count in my head, waiting for the inevitable moment when he'll disengage.

*Five seconds.*

Right on cue, Michael's hands come up to gently remove my

arms from around his neck. He steps back slightly, creating that familiar gap between us.

“I’m going to grab another drink,” he says, leaning in so I can hear him over the music.

I nod, trying to mask my disappointment. “Sure. I’ll find you later.”

As he walks away, I stand there alone in the middle of the dance floor, feeling suddenly conspicuous. Couples move around me, lost in their own worlds. I scan the room, looking for a friendly face, and spot Jill standing by herself near one of the enormous potted palms her mother insisted on bringing inside for the party.

I make my way over to her, weaving through the crowd. When I reach her, I dramatically throw my arms around her shoulders from behind.

“Hey, bestie,” I say into her ear.

Jill turns, her face lighting up when she sees me. Unlike Michael, she doesn’t remove my arms but instead covers my hands with her own, squeezing them affectionately.

“Lennox! Where have you been hiding?” She looks radiant, her cheeks flushed from dancing and probably a few too many drinks.

“Just making the rounds,” I tell her, finally releasing her to lean against the wall beside her. “This party is incredible, Jill. You’ve outdone yourself.”

She beams with pride, surveying the scene before us. “I can’t believe it. Everyone actually showed up! Even that senior class from Westlake is here.”

“Did you invite them?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Jill laughs. “God, no. Word just spread, I guess.” She takes a sip of her drink. “For my first time hosting without my parents around, I’d say it’s going pretty well.”

“It’s epic,” I confirm, genuinely impressed. The Burrow estate has been transformed into the kind of party people will

talk about for weeks. “Your parents are going to freak when they see the security footage, though.”

Jill waves away my concern. “Already handled. Carlos is very loyal to me, not my parents. He's wiping the system tomorrow morning.”

I shake my head, laughing. “You think of everything.”

“I try,” she says, then suddenly her expression shifts from pride to confusion. “Wait, what the fuck is going on there?”

I follow her gaze to the center of the dance floor, where the crowd has begun to part like the Red Sea. Two figures tumble to the ground in a tangle of limbs as dancers scramble to get out of the way. A circle forms around them, people craning their necks to see what's happening.

“Jesus Christ,” Jill mutters, pushing away from the wall. “A fight? Really? What grade are we in?”

I stand on my tiptoes, trying to see over the heads of the spectators. When I finally get a clear view, my stomach drops. Michael is on the ground, his pristine button-down ripped at the collar, his hair falling into his eyes as he struggles to maintain a headlock on Brad Thompson.

“What the fuck?” I gasp, my eyes widening in shock. “It's Michael!”

Without thinking, I push my way through the crowd, using my elbows when necessary to create a path. The circle of onlookers has tightened, everyone eager for a front-row seat to the drama. Michael and Brad roll across the floor, grunting and cursing. Brad's face is red with exertion, and Michael's lip is already bleeding.

“Move!” I shout, shoving a guy from my calculus class out of my way. I want to help pull them apart, but I'm not stupid enough to jump between two drunk guys throwing punches. Someone could easily get hurt—specifically, me.

I grab the arm of Tess Gardner, a girl from my equestrian team who's watching the fight with fascinated horror.

“What the hell did Michael do?” I demand.

Tess leans in, her eyes never leaving the brawl. “I heard he was flirting with Brad’s girlfriend all night. She was into it, too, apparently. Brad lost it when he saw Michael with his hand on her back.”

I look across the circle and spot Zoe standing with her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with a mixture of horror and something that looks suspiciously like excitement.

“Of course he did,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. “Asshole.”

Anger bubbles up inside me, hot and familiar. This isn’t the first time I’ve caught Michael’s attention wandering. But it’s the first time he’s been stupid enough to make it so public.

Across the crowd, I spot Kingston watching the spectacle with ill-concealed amusement. He’s leaning against a column, bourbon in hand, a smirk playing at his lips like this is the most entertaining thing he’s seen all night. Our eyes meet over the heads of the crowd, and I give him a withering look that could freeze hell.

King’s smirk falters. He has the decency to look slightly abashed, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. I nod my head toward the fight, silently commanding him to help break it up. He rolls his eyes dramatically—classic King—but I can see him reading my thoughts as clearly as if I’d spoken them aloud.

With a sigh that’s visible even from across the room, King pushes off from the column and signals to Whitney that he’ll be right back. He grabs two of his friends—massive guys from the rowing team—and they wade into the circle. King seizes Michael’s arms, pulling him backward while his friends restrain Brad, who’s still thrashing and cursing.

“That’s enough, boys,” King says, his voice carrying that particular tone of authority that comes from a lifetime of people doing what you tell them to. “Save it for the field.”

I storm forward, grabbing Michael by his torn shirt and yanking him away from King’s grasp. “Outside,” I hiss. “Now.”

Michael has the good sense to look both angry and embarrassed as I drag him through the crowd, past the curious

stares and not-so-subtle whispers. I push him out the side door onto the expansive lawn, where the cool night air hits us like a slap after the heat of the packed house.

Once we're far enough away that no one can hear us, I release his shirt and turn to face him, arms crossed tightly over my chest.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demand, my voice shaking with rage. "Fighting at a party? Are you serious right now?"

Michael wipes blood from his lip, not meeting my eyes. "It wasn't my fault. Brad overreacted."

"I heard you were flirting with his girlfriend," I say flatly. "Is that true?"

He has the audacity to look offended. "I was *talking* to her, Lennox. That's all. We were just *talking*, and he lost his shit."

I stare at him, taking in his disheveled appearance, the way his eyes can't quite meet mine, the defensive set of his shoulders. Six months together has taught me to recognize when Michael is lying. And right now, every cell in my body is screaming that he's full of shit.

"You know what? I don't believe you," I say, my voice deadly calm. "You've been distant all night, barely dancing with me for five seconds before pushing me away. Then suddenly you're *'just talking'* to Brad's girlfriend? Cut the crap, Michael."

Michael's hands curl into fists at his sides. "Oh, please. You're seriously doing this right now? After I just got my ass handed to me?"

"Don't play victim with me," I snap, taking a step closer. The manicured lawn feels unsteady beneath my feet, or maybe that's just the cocktails catching up with me. "We both know what this is about. You've been looking for an excuse to flirt with other girls for weeks now."

"You're being paranoid." He runs his fingers through his hair, messing up the careful styling that probably took twenty minutes in front of a mirror. "This is exactly why I can't relax

around you anymore. You're always watching, always waiting for me to mess up."

I let out a laugh that sounds hollow even to my own ears. "Mess up? Is that what we're calling it now? You were flirting with Zoe, and Brad caught you."

"It was nothing! Just a friendly gesture." His voice rises, attracting curious glances from a couple smoking by the pool house.

"Really? Because you never seem to have those *friendly gestures*' for me. I can barely get you to hold my hand in public." The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I can't stop them from spilling out. "What's that about, Michael? You don't have any problem being touchy with other girls, but heaven forbid you show your girlfriend some affection."

His eyes narrow. "So that's what this is really about? Your neediness?"

"Neediness?" I repeat, feeling like I've been slapped. "Wanting basic affection from my boyfriend is needy now?"

"You know I'm not into PDA," he says, as if explaining something to a child. "I've told you that from the beginning. It's not my style."

"Except with Zoe, apparently. And Melissa at the winter formal. And that girl from the Hamptons." I count off on my fingers. "Funny how your 'style' changes depending on who you're talking to."

His jaw tightens. "You're being ridiculous."

"And you're being caught," I retort. "Own it, at least."

Something shifts in Michael's expression, a flash of genuine anger replacing his careful mask of indignation. "You know what? I don't need this. I don't need some jealous girlfriend analyzing my every move, questioning who I talk to."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have a girlfriend at all," I suggest, my voice dangerously calm despite the storm raging inside me.

For a moment, Michael looks surprised, like he didn't expect me to push back. Then his face hardens. "Maybe you're right."

The words hang between us, heavy with implication. I wait for him to take them back, to apologize, to do anything that might salvage this moment. But he just stands there, his expression closed off, already distancing himself from me.

"Great," I say finally, wrapping my arms around myself. "Glad we're on the same page."

Michael rubs his jaw where a bruise is already forming. "I'm done with this conversation. I'm going to find Tanner and get outta here."

"Of course you are," I mutter. "Run away the second things get real."

"I'm not running away," he snaps. "I'm removing myself from a toxic situation before I say something I'll regret."

"Too late."

He gives me one last look, a mixture of frustration and something that might be regret if I squint hard enough. Then he turns and walks away, his shoulders set in that familiar stubborn line. I watch him disappear back into the house, wondering if this is it—if six months ends just like that, with a fight on Jill's perfectly manicured lawn.

The night air feels too cool against my skin now. I wrap my arms tighter around myself, fighting against the wave of emotions threatening to pull me under. This can't be happening. Not again. Not after I finally let someone in, finally thought maybe I had found someone who would stick around.

*But they never do, do they?*

My father left when I was twelve, only to come back and raise hell. My mother is physically present but emotionally vacant, more concerned with her social standing than her daughter's well-being. Friends drift in and out depending on what I can offer them—connections, invitations to exclusive events, homework help.

*And boyfriends?*

They stick around until they get bored, or until I start asking for too much. Apparently, basic affection falls into the “too much” category for Michael.

*What is wrong with me?*

*Why can I never keep people around?*

Is it something fundamental in my personality, some fatal flaw that drives everyone away eventually?

I make my way across the lawn to one of the lounge chairs arranged around the Olympic-sized pool. The water shimmers in the moonlight, ripples of silver dancing across the surface. I sink down onto the chair, not caring that the fabric is damp from the evening dew.

“What the fuck is wrong now?”

I don't need to look up to know who's standing there. King's voice is unmistakable—that particular blend of concern and mockery that's uniquely his. I can smell the cigarette smoke clinging to him, mixed with that expensive cologne he's been wearing since junior year.

“Go away,” I say, staring resolutely at the pool. “I'm really not in the mood for your particular brand of charm and sarcasm right now.”

“Ouch,” he says, but I can hear the smile in his voice. “You wound me, Lenny.”

“I mean it,” I insist, finally looking up at him. He's silhouetted against the fairy lights strung around Jill's garden, a tall, lean figure with his hands shoved into the pockets of his designer jeans. “I want to feel sorry for myself in peace.”

King takes a long drag from his cigarette, the ember glowing bright in the darkness. “Sorry for yourself, huh? Doesn't sound like the Lennox Ashby I know.”

“Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do.”

He considers this for a moment, then drops his cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his heel. Without invitation, he collapses into the lounge chair next to mine, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

“Michael's an asshole,” he says matter-of-factly. “Always has been.”

“You've made that abundantly clear over the past six months,” I mutter.

“And yet here we are,” King sighs, folding his arms behind his head. “Let me guess—caught him flirting with someone else, confronted him about it, and he made it your fault somehow?”

I turn to glare at him. “Has anyone ever told you how annoying it is when you're right all the time?”

“Only you, Lenny. Only you.” He grins at me, that lopsided smile that makes his eyes crinkle at the corners. Then his expression softens. “It's not on you, you know.”

“What?”

“This thing with Michael. It's not on you.” King shifts to face me more directly. “You always think it's you, and it's not. It's the assholes that you think are great, but after a while, when you give them too much—they take it and leave.”

I roll my eyes, ignoring the way his words hit too close to home. “I'm not giving up on him just yet.”

King throws his hands in the air in exasperation. “Never said you should! Jesus, Lenny, do you ever actually listen to what I'm saying?”

“Occasionally,” I admit, feeling the corners of my mouth twitch upward despite myself. “When you're not being insufferable.”

“Listen, babe,” he says, his voice softer now. “You've gotta stop being so hard on yourself. Your self-esteem is going to shit.”

A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside me, surprising us both. “My self-esteem is perfectly intact, thank you very much.”

“Is that why you're sitting out here alone, convinced that Michael's wandering eye is somehow your fault?”

I don't have a good answer for that. Instead, I lean my head against King's shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of him.

For all his flaws—and there are many—Kingston Hartley has always been there when I needed him.

“You're the best, King,” I murmur, closing my eyes.

“I know,” he replies smugly, reaching over to tap me on the head like I'm a dog who just performed a trick. “Good Lenny. Such a good girl.”

I sit up immediately, shoving him hard enough that he nearly falls off the lounge chair. “I take it back. You're the *worst*.”

King rights himself, laughing that deep, genuine laugh that few people ever get to hear. “Your words say '*worst*,' but your eyes say '*devastatingly handsome and charming*.'”

“My eyes need glasses, apparently.”

“Devastating blow.” He clutches his chest dramatically. “How will my ego ever recover?”

“I'm sure you'll find a way,” I say dryly. “Your ego is like a cockroach—it would survive a nuclear holocaust.”

King grins, stretching his long limbs like a satisfied cat. “That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me.”

I can't help but laugh again, the tension from my fight with Michael finally beginning to ease. King has that effect on me—the ability to pull me out of my head when I'm spiraling, to make me laugh when all I want to do is cry.

“So,” he says, nudging my shoulder with his. “What's the plan? Are we drinking away our sorrows, or are you going to go back in there and make Michael jealous by dancing with someone devastatingly handsome? I volunteer as tribute.”

“Neither,” I decide, getting to my feet. “I'm going to go home, take off these ridiculous heels, eat an entire pint of ice cream, and plot Michael's social demise.”

King stands too, offering me his arm with exaggerated formality. “I fully support this plan. Especially the ice cream part. What flavor are we thinking? Please say cookie dough.”

“We?” I raise an eyebrow. “I don't recall inviting you.”

“Lenny, Lenny, Lenny,” he sighs, shaking his head. “When have I ever needed an invitation?”

“What about Whitney?”

“What about her?”

“You're still a boyfriend,” I say crassly, “or did you forget?”

“She'll live.”

“You're bad.”

“I know.”

I loop my arm through his, letting him guide me back toward the house. “I'm not sharing my ice cream.”

“Fine,” he concedes. “I'll bring the bourbon. For medicinal purposes.”

“Of course. Medicinal.”

As we walk, King leans down to whisper in my ear, “For what it's worth, Michael's loss is everyone else's gain. Including mine, because now I don't have to pretend to like him at social events.”

“You never pretended to like him.”

“True,” King admits with a grin. “But now I don't have to pretend to pretend.”

I let out a groan that comes from somewhere deep inside me, somewhere beyond the ache of tonight's humiliation. It's a sound that holds six months of forced smiles, calculated planning, and careful navigation of Michael's moods.

King stops walking, his arm tensing under my hand. “What now?” His expression shifts from playful to concerned in an instant, those perceptive eyes scanning my face like he's reading a book he's memorized.

“I can't just leave,” I say, hating how small my voice sounds. “I have to at least try and see if I can patch things up.”

“With Michael?” King's eyebrows shoot up toward his hairline. “After that scene? After what he said?”

I pull my arm free from his, suddenly annoyed by his judgment. “Yes, with Michael. It's not like I can just throw away six months because of one fight.”

King runs a hand through his already-messy hair, making it stand up at odd angles. In the dim light from the garden

lanterns, he looks almost vulnerable—a word I've never associated with Kingston Hartley before.

“Lenny, come on.” His voice is gentler now, coaxing rather than commanding. “You heard him. He said maybe you shouldn't have a girlfriend at all. Those aren't the words of someone who's looking to work things out.”

I cross my arms over my chest, feeling the chill of the night air raise goosebumps on my skin. “People say things they don't mean when they're angry.”

“Sure,” King agrees with a nod. “But they also say things they've been thinking for weeks and just haven't had the balls to admit out loud.”

His words hit me like a punch to the stomach, but I keep my expression neutral. Years of practice have made me an expert at hiding the impact of painful truths.

“I just need to talk to him,” I insist. “Clear the air. Make sure we're actually on the same page before this gets blown completely out of proportion.”

King studies me for a long moment, his expression unreadable in the shadows. Then he sighs, a deep exhale that seems to carry the weight of a thousand unspoken words.

“Big mistake, Len,” he says finally, shaking his head. “But I know you, and I've met your stubborn pride.”

Despite everything, I feel a smile tug at the corners of my mouth. “Yes, you have, Kingston,” I agree softly. “Yes, you have.”



TWO

*traitor*

KINGSTON HARTLEY



THE BASS POUNDS so hard I can feel it rattling my ribcage. Or maybe that's just the bourbon. Either way, I'm feeling good—not drunk enough to be sloppy, just loose enough to stop giving a shit about anything that isn't fun.

Whitney's pressed against my side, her fingers drawing lazy circles on my thigh under the table. She's been extra touchy tonight, probably because Blake Henderson showed up with his new girlfriend from Columbia. Whitney may be with me, but she never misses a chance to remind her exes what they're missing.

“I need another drink,” she announces, giving my leg a squeeze before standing up. “Want anything?”

“I’m good.” I hold up my half-full glass, and she slinks off toward the bar, making sure to put extra sway in her hips.

I scan the room, taking in Jill’s ridiculous mansion. Her parents went all out this time—professional DJ, light show that would make a Vegas club jealous, and enough booze to drown a small nation. My gaze lands on Lennox across the room, arms wrapped around Michael like she’s afraid he’ll float away if she lets go.

Even from here, she’s captivating—dark hair falling in perfect waves down her back—a dark red blouse exposing a red bra, white tight jeans. Lennox has that rare quality of looking effortlessly beautiful, no matter the situation. I’ve seen her half-asleep at breakfast after our families’ joint holiday trips, sweaty and disheveled after riding, and dressed to the nines like tonight—somehow she always looks like she belongs on a magazine cover. It’s not just me who notices; every guy here keeps stealing glances her way. It’s just a fact of life: Lennox Ashby is gorgeous, morning, noon, or night.

Poor Lenny. She’s trying so damn hard with a guy who’s clearly just passing time with her.

My phone buzzes with a text from Ashton:

whitney looks hot tonight. how long you keeping that one? 🍷🍷

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Ashton Whittington has been relentless for months now, sliding into my DMs with increasingly desperate attempts to get my attention. Six months of “casual” check-ins and “coincidental” run-ins at parties. The girl doesn’t understand subtlety—or rejection. I’ve never given her any encouragement, but she’s like a mosquito that won’t stop buzzing around, no matter how many times you swat it away.

I don’t bother responding. Whitney is... *complicated*. We’ve

been doing whatever this is for three months now, which is about two months longer than my usual attention span. She's smart, keeps me on my toes, and doesn't pretend this is anything more than what it is. But lately, she's been getting this look in her eye—calculating, assessing. Like she's trying to figure out if I'm worth the long-term investment.

*I'm not.*

My phone buzzes again, but this time it's Lennox:

need u outside in 5

I down the rest of my drink and stand up just as Whitney's making her way back.

"Where are you going?" she asks, perfectly shaped eyebrow arched in suspicion.

"Getting some air. Back in a bit." I drop a quick kiss on her cheek and thread my way through the crowd.

Near the bar, I spot Troy and Marcus lounging on leather couches with a group of girls from Westlake.

"King! Where you going, man?" Troy calls out, his words slightly slurred. "We're about to do shots with these ladies!"

I gesture vaguely toward the door. "Got something to handle. Save me one."

On my way out, I grab an unopened bottle of Blanton's from behind the bar. Jill's parents won't miss it—they have a collection that would make a liquor store jealous.

The night air hits me like a splash of cold water. It's gotten colder, and clouds hang low and heavy. Rain's coming. I spot Lennox's Tesla idling in the circular driveway, engine purring quietly.

"Hartley!"

I turn to see Whitney standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, looking like she's about to commit murder. Specifically, my murder.

“Where the fuck do you think you're going?” She grabs the back of my shirt as I try to walk past her.

“Out.” I hold up the bottle. “Got bored.”

“Bored?” Her eyes narrow dangerously. “You're with me tonight. How can you possibly be bored?”

I take a step back, trying to create some breathing room between us. The buzz I had going is rapidly fading, and Whitney's tone is scraping against my nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

“Look, I'm just stepping out for a bit. Lennox needs me.”

“Lennox needs you?” She laughs, but there's no humor in it. “That's rich. What's wrong with her tonight? Boyfriend not paying enough attention to her?”

“Don't know. Don't care. She asked, I'm going.”

Whitney steps closer, lowering her voice to that husky whisper that usually precedes us finding an empty bedroom. “Stay with me tonight. I'll make it worth your while.” Her hand slides up my chest. “My parents are in Aspen until Wednesday.”

Any other night, I might have taken her up on it. But something in Lennox's text felt off.

“Can't. But I'll call you tomorrow.”

Her expression shifts from seductive to furious in a heartbeat. “You're seriously choosing to hang out with Lennox over spending the night with me? That train wreck over this?” She gestures down her body, which—fair point—looks incredible in that dress.

“She's my friend, Whitney.”

“Friend?” She scoffs. “*Please*. She treats you like her emotional support animal. Whenever her perfect little life hits a bump, she whistles, and you come running.”

“That's not—”

“It absolutely is. And you know what the worst part is? She'll never fuck you, King. *Never*. You're firmly in the *friend zone* while she cries about whatever douche she's dating this month.”

I grip the bottle tighter, counting to five in my head. “Friend

zone? That's cute that you think I'm worried about that. Unlike you, I don't measure every relationship by whether I'm getting laid."

I turn and walk away before she can respond, juggling the bourbon in one hand while fishing my cigarettes out of my pocket with the other. The sky's gone almost completely dark now, heavy clouds promising a downpour any minute.

Lennox's car still idles in the driveway, and I can see her silhouette behind the wheel. I've known her *forever*—she was there when I broke my arm jumping off the boathouse roof on a dare in sixth grade; I was there when she placed in her first equestrian competition. We've watched each other grow up, seen each other at our worst and our best.

Whitney's wrong about Lennox. What we have is *different*—it's real in a way that none of my hookups ever are. I don't have to pretend with Lenny. She already knows all my bullshit and likes me anyway.

I open the back door and toss the bourbon onto the seat before sliding into the passenger side.

"Bourbon? Really?" Lennox wrinkles her nose. "You know I hate that stuff."

I laugh, settling into the heated leather seat. "It was closest to the door. Not like I was gonna raid Jill's parents' wine cellar for you, princess."

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes, but I can see the tension in her shoulders. "We can stop by my place. Mom has a secret tequila stash she thinks I don't know about."

"Your folks still in Europe?"

"Yep. Third trip this year without me." She tries to sound casual, but I catch the hurt beneath it. "Mom texted me a picture of the Amalfi Coast this morning with '*wish you were here.*' Like, *no you don't*, or you would have actually invited me."

"Their loss is my gain. No parental supervision means we can raid more than just the tequila." I stretch out my legs. "So, what happened with Michael?"

“Just...” She waves a hand dismissively. “The usual. God forbid I want to actually act like his girlfriend in public.”

She's about to put the car in drive when a knock on her window makes us both jump. Michael's standing there, looking annoyed and slightly drunk. Lennox sighs heavily before rolling down the window.

“What do you want?” The ice in her voice could freeze hell over.

“Are you serious right now?” He looks between us, confusion giving way to anger. “We have *one argument*, and you're just leaving? With him?”

“We're not broken up,” Lennox says, her voice softer now. “I just need some space to cool off.”

Michael's eyes narrow as they land on me. “Why is Hartley here? You dropping him off somewhere?”

I give him a lazy wave, enjoying how much it pisses him off. The guy's always been threatened by me, though he has no reason to be. Lennox and I have never been like that.

Lennox laughs, the sound sharp and a little mean. “He's helping me cool off.” She slams her foot on the accelerator, and we peel out of the driveway, leaving Michael standing there like an idiot.

Once we're on the main road, I burst out laughing. “Jesus, Lenny! The look on his face!”

“Fuck him.” She's laughing too, but there's an edge to it. “He spent the entire night ignoring me, then gets all possessive the minute I decide to leave?”

“Men are trash,” I say solemnly. “Present company excluded, of course.”

“Oh no, definitely including you.” She reaches over to shove my shoulder. “Whitney looked ready to claw my eyes out when she saw you getting in my car.”

“Whitney needs to realize I'm not her property.” I kick my feet up on the dashboard, knowing it drives Lennox crazy.

“Though she did offer me a very compelling alternative to hanging out with you tonight.”

Lennox swats my legs down. “Keep your dirty shoes off my clean car, Hartley.”

\* \* \*

THE ENGINE CUTS out as Lennox pulls into her designated spot in the garage—one of six, because apparently the Ashbys can't decide which luxury vehicle they prefer on any given day. Her house is lit up like a Christmas tree, every light blazing despite no one being home except the small army of staff her parents employ to maintain their absence.

“Jesus, Lenny. Your electric bill must be higher than my last bar tab,” I say, stepping out of the car. “Which is saying something.”

“You know my mom likes it this way. Says it deters burglars.” She shrugs, grabbing her purse. “Like the security system, guard dogs, and actual human guards aren't enough.”

Before I can respond, a deep, threatening bark echoes through the garage, followed by the click of nails on concrete as a massive German Shepherd rounds the corner, teeth bared.

“Shit!” Lennox jumps. “Negan, stop!”

But I'm already dropping to a crouch, extending my hand palm-down. “Hey, buddy,” I call out softly, keeping my voice steady. “Remember me? Your favorite delivery boy of contraband treats?”

Negan's aggressive stance falters. His ears perk up, and his growl morphs into an excited whine as recognition hits. In seconds, he's bounding toward me, tail wagging so hard his whole body shakes with it.

“Traitor,” Lennox mutters as I scratch behind his ears. “Some guard dog you are.”

“We have an understanding.” I rub Negan's belly as he flops

over. “I bribe him with bacon when I visit, and in return, he doesn't tear my throat out.”

A flashlight beam sweeps over us, and I look up to see Jerome, the night security guard, rounding the corner. He relaxes when he recognizes us.

“Evening, Ms. Ashby. Mr. Hartley.” He nods, professional but friendly. “Everything alright?”

“Just peachy, Jerome,” Lennox says. “Home for the night.”

Jerome whistles, and Negan immediately abandons me, trotting to his handler's side with military precision. “Your parents called. They'll be extending their trip another week.”

“Of course they will,” Lennox murmurs, so low only I can hear it. To Jerome, she says, “Thanks for letting me know. We'll be by the pool if you need us.”

We enter the house through the service door, and I'm hit with that familiar Ashby mansion vibe—sterile perfection. Everything is white or cream or some other non-color that makes you afraid to touch anything. High ceilings, marble floors, furniture that looks like it belongs in a museum. The place feels more like a showroom than a home.

“Your mom still going through her minimalist phase?” I ask, trailing behind Lennox as she heads straight for the bar in the great room.

“God, I wish it was a phase.” She grabs a bottle of Bacardi and two glasses. “It's been three years of *'Lennox, darling, white opens up the space.'* As if twelve thousand square feet needs opening up.”

I snort, leaning against the kitchen island while she rummages through a pantry larger than my first car. “Your impression of your mother is scary accurate.”

“Years of practice.” She emerges with a bag of Fritos, tucking it under her arm. “Come on. Outside.”

I follow her through the house, pausing to grab a cigarette from my jacket pocket. The Ashby residence is familiar territory

—I've been coming here since we were kids—but it never feels comfortable. Too perfect. Too empty.

Lennox pushes open the French doors leading to the pool area, and we're hit with the humid air and sound of rain pattering on the surface of the water. The infinity pool stretches out toward the darkness where the ocean lies beyond, its blue lights giving everything an otherworldly glow.

She beelines for the cabana, a gorgeous structure with open sides and a solid roof, furnished with oversized lounge chairs and a second, smaller bar. Dropping onto one of the chaises, she immediately starts pouring drinks, looking more at home out here than anywhere else in the mansion.

I hang back at the doorway, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep drag. The nicotine hits my system as I watch Lennox settle in, kicking off her shoes and curling her legs under her. Even in the dim light, I can see the tension in her shoulders, the slight tremble in her hands as she pours a generous amount of rum into each glass.

“Whitney's jealous,” I say to the rain, blowing smoke toward the wet night air.

“Whitney's jealous of everyone you're with,” Lennox responds without looking up, mixing our drinks with practiced precision. “I'm half-convinced she's jealous of your phone.”

I laugh, raising my eyebrows. “True. Very true.” I take another drag. “Girl's getting possessive. Three months in, and suddenly she's planning our Christmas holiday.”

“That's what happens when you break your one-month rule.” She holds out a glass for me, but I'm not ready to sit yet, too restless with thoughts of Whitney's narrowed eyes as I left.

“So,” I pivot, “are you really giving Michael a second chance after that performance tonight? That nimrod showed his true colors, Lenny. *Again.*”

She doesn't answer.

“Seriously,” I press, “the guy treats you like you're an

inconvenience in public, then gets all territorial when you leave? Classic manipulative bullsh—”

I turn around, cutting myself off when I realize Lennox hasn't spoken because she's crying. Not the dramatic sobs girls usually employ when they want attention. These are silent tears sliding down her cheeks as she stares out at the rain-rippled pool, looking small and lost in the oversized chair.

“Shit.” I flick my cigarette out into the rain and cross to her in three strides, lowering myself onto the chaise beside her. It's big enough for both of us, and I stretch out, crossing my ankles and tucking an arm behind my head, trying to seem casual even though the sight of her tears has my chest feeling tight.

“Why are you crying over that asshole?” I ask, gentler than I intended.

She wipes at her face, embarrassed. “It's not just him. It's... *everyone.*”

“Everyone?”

“Every guy I date.” Her voice is small. “They all get bored and leave. Every single one. I just... what's wrong with me, King? Am I that forgettable?”

The question hangs between us, heavy and raw. I stare at the ceiling of the cabana, watching the play of light reflected off the pool. Lennox Ashby—beautiful, smart, wealthy beyond reason—wondering if she's forgettable. If it weren't so fucking sad, it would be laughable.

“It's not *you*,” I say finally. “It's *them.*”

“That's what people say when it's definitely me.” She snuffles.

“No, listen.” I prop myself up on one elbow, looking directly at her now. “You pick guys who are safe. Predictable. Guys who check all the right boxes for the perfect Ashby son-in-law. But they're shallow, Lenny. Surface-level douchebags who care more about their Instagram following than anything real.”

Her eyes narrow. “So I have bad taste in men. That's your expert analysis?”

“You have *careful* taste in men,” I correct her. “You choose

guys who won't challenge you. Won't get too close. Then you act surprised when they turn out to be exactly what they advertised: emotionally unavailable pretty boys who bolt when things require actual effort."

She sits up straighter, defensive. "Oh, that's rich coming from you. How long is your longest relationship? Three months? You're about to hit that expiration date, dude."

"Hey, I'm not claiming to be relationship material. I know exactly what I am." I grab my drink from the side table and take a long sip. "But at least I'm honest about it. I don't pretend to want something serious then bail when it gets real."

"Like Whitney?" Her eyebrow arches perfectly.

"Whitney knows the score." I shift uncomfortably. "We're having fun until we're not. Simple."

"Nothing's ever that simple," Lennox says softly. She looks out at the rain again, hugging her knees to her chest. "I'm so tired of being alone, King. I'm surrounded by people all the time, but I'm always alone."

I know what she means. It's the curse of our world—crowded rooms where no one sees you. Parties where everyone knows your name, but not a single person knows *you*.

"You've got me," I tell her, bumping her shoulder with mine. "I see you, Lenny."

"You see everyone," she says with a weak smile. "That's your superpower."

"Nah." I shake my head. "I *notice* everyone. Big difference."

We fall silent, listening to the rain hitting the pool. Lennox leans her head against my shoulder, and I can smell her shampoo—something expensive and floral. For a moment, I'm struck by how comfortable this feels, how easy. No games, no performance, no calculating my next move to maintain the upper hand.

Just Lennox and me, as we've always been.

The Friend Zone.

“Michael called me high-maintenance tonight,” she says suddenly. “Because I wanted him to dance with me. One dance.”

“Michael's an idiot.” I drain my glass. “And for the record, you're not high-maintenance. You just know what you want.”

She looks up at me, mascara slightly smudged under her eyes. “And what's that?”

“Someone who isn't afraid to claim you. Who's proud to be with you and doesn't treat you like a secret or a burden.” I refill our glasses, careful not to dislodge her head from my shoulder. “You deserve that much. We all do.”

I shift on the chaise, trying to ease the weird tension that's suddenly crawled up my spine. Lennox's head still rests against my shoulder, her hair tickling my neck as she breathes. The scent of her perfume—something expensive that smells like rain and flowers—wraps around us in the humid air.

“Hey,” I say, nudging her gently. “Want to know a secret about Michael?”

She lifts her head to look at me, curiosity replacing some of the sadness in her eyes. “What?”

“I heard from Chase that he got rejected from every top-tier law school. Columbia and NYU passed on him, and Harvard—his father's alma mater—didn't even waitlist him.”

Her eyes widen. “No way. He told me he got early admission to Harvard Law with a merit scholarship.”

“Total *bullshit*.” I take another sip of my drink, enjoying the burn. “His dad's pissed. Apparently, the Horton name isn't as influential in legal circles as it once was. Or maybe junior's LSAT score wasn't daddy-approved.”

A small, vindictive smile tugs at her lips. “That would explain why he's been such an asshole lately. His entire identity is wrapped up in following his father's footsteps at the firm.”

“Rich boy problems,” I say with a dramatic sigh. “We should start a support group.”

“You'd be the president.” She laughs, and I'm relieved to see

some of the light return to her eyes. “King of the Daddy Issues Club.”

“Hey now.” I press a hand to my chest in mock offense. “I’ll have you know my relationship with my dad is perfectly healthy. We text each other happy birthday every year, without fail.”

“When’s your birthday again?” she teases.

“See? That’s cold, Ashby. Ice cold.”

She laughs again, louder this time, and something in my chest loosens. I’ve always loved making Lennox laugh—the real laugh, not the polite society one she uses at her parents’ functions or parties. The real one is a little too loud, a little snorty, completely unguarded.

“God, I needed this,” she says, wiping at her eyes. “I don’t know why I let him get to me. It’s just...” She trails off, staring into her glass.

“Just what?”

“Sometimes I think about my mom and dad. How they’ve been married for twenty-five years and barely speak to each other unless there’s an audience. How they live these completely separate lives and only come together for appearances.” She looks up at me, vulnerability raw in her eyes. “I don’t want that, King. I don’t want a marriage that’s just for show.”

“Then don’t settle for it,” I say simply. “You’re not your mother, Lenny.”

“Aren’t I, though?” She sighs, running a finger around the rim of her glass. “I keep dating these guys who look good on paper, who my parents would approve of. And every time, it ends the same way—with me feeling like I’m not enough.”

“That’s because you keep choosing guys who don’t deserve you.” I’m getting worked up now, the alcohol loosening my tongue. “You’re smart, gorgeous, funny as hell when you’re not trying to impress anyone. You ride horses better than anyone I know, you speak three languages, and you make killer margaritas. You’re the full *fucking* package, Lennox. And these

idiots can't see it because they're too busy checking their hair in every reflective surface."

She blinks at me, taken aback by my intensity. A small, pleased smile plays at her lips. "You think I'm gorgeous?"

*Of all the things I said, that's what she fixates on?* I roll my eyes. "Obviously. Everyone thinks you're gorgeous. That's not exactly breaking news."

"Still nice to hear it," she murmurs, looking down at her lap. When she glances back up, there's something new in her eyes, something I can't quite place. "What about you? Why do you burn through girls so fast? Is Whitney just another conquest for the Hartley collection?"

I shrug, suddenly uncomfortable with the spotlight on me. "Whitney's different. She's not clingy, doesn't have stars in her eyes about what dating me means. She gets it."

"Gets what?"

"That it's temporary. That everything is." The words come out more bitter than I intended. "People aren't meant to be together forever. Look at our parents. Look at literally every couple we know over forty. They're all miserable or faking it."

"That's depressing as hell, King." Lennox frowns at me. "You really believe that?"

"I believe in being realistic." I run a hand through my hair, pushing it back from my face. "Relationships have expiration dates. Some are longer than others, but they all end eventually. Why pretend otherwise?"

"Because some people actually want real connections?" she counters. "Not everyone is afraid of getting close to someone."

"I'm not afraid," I say, too quickly. "I just don't see the point in investing in something that's doomed to fail."

Lennox studies me for a long moment, her eyes serious. "That sounds exactly like fear to me."

I scoff, but there's no real heat behind it. Maybe she's right. Maybe I am afraid—of ending up like my father, trapped in a

loveless marriage with a woman who's more business partner than wife. Of giving someone the power to hurt me. Of caring too much about someone who might just walk away.

"Whatever, Dr. Phil." I deflect, reaching for the bottle again. "We're supposed to be dissecting your tragic love life, not mine."

She catches my wrist before I can pour another drink. Her fingers are cool against my skin, and something electric passes between us. For a second—just a second—I wonder what would happen if I leaned in right now. If I closed the distance between us and kissed her.

The thought jolts me like a bucket of ice water. This is *Lennox*—my friend, practically my sister. We've known each other forever. There are boundaries, lines we don't cross.

I pull my hand back, clearing my throat. "So, about Michael..."

"I don't want to talk about Michael anymore." She sighs, leaning back against the cushions. "Let's talk about something else. Anything else."

"Fine by me." I stretch, trying to dispel the weird tension that's settled over us. "Did you hear about the mess at the Daniels' last weekend? Apparently, old man Daniels caught his son's girlfriend skinny dipping with the pool boy."

Lennox snorts. "Classic. Was it that bottle-blonde he brought to the charity gala? The one who kept asking if the champagne was 'real Champagne' or just sparkling wine?"

"The very same." I grin. "Turns out she has a taste for the help."

"Can't blame her. Jimmy Castro has been breaking hearts since he started cleaning pools in ninth grade." She laughs. "Remember when Mrs. Wilson from down the street used to schedule her pool cleaning when her husband was at work, then conveniently decided to sunbathe topless?"

"How could I forget? That was the summer Jimmy got his first car—a brand new Mustang that nobody could figure out

how he afforded.” I shake my head, chuckling at the memory. “The guy’s a legend.”

We fall into an easy rhythm after that, trading gossip and stories, laughing at the absurdity of our social circle. The rain continues to pour outside, creating a peaceful backdrop to our conversation. By the time we’ve finished most of the bottle, Lennox’s eyes are bright again, her earlier sadness pushed aside, if not forgotten.

“You know what’s weird?” she says suddenly, breaking a comfortable silence that had settled between us.

“What?”

“Out of all the guys I know, you’re the only one who’s never hit on me.” She tilts her head, studying me with those big brown eyes. “Not once in all these years.”

I blink, caught off guard by the observation. “We’re friends, Lenny. I don’t shit where I eat.”

“Charming.” She rolls her eyes. “But seriously, you’ve hit on literally every female with a pulse in our social circle. Except me.”

“That’s not true,” I argue. “I’ve never hit on your mom.”

“Gross!” She shoves me, laughing despite herself. “You’re impossible.”

“It’s my charm.” I wink at her, grateful the moment has passed. “Besides, you’ve never shown any interest in me either. It’s a two-way street.”

Lennox takes a sip of her drink, considering this. “I guess you’re right. We just... skipped that phase and went straight to being friends.”

“Best decision we ever made.” I clink my glass against hers. “Friends is better anyway. Less drama, less heartbreak.”

She nods, but her expression is thoughtful, almost wistful. “Where is that guy?” she asks flippantly. “The one who won’t get bored or scared? The one who’ll stick around?”

I almost say “here”—the word on the tip of my tongue

before I catch myself, surprised by the impulse. *Where the hell did that come from?* I'm not relationship material. Everyone knows that. Especially Lennox.

Instead, I say, "You'll find him one day."

"One day..."