



**excerpt**

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undecided  
by Julianna Keyes

“About this,” he says.

I jump. Crosbie’s right behind me. So close I can feel his breath on my hair when he speaks. I don’t move a muscle, every traitorous part of me unwilling to step away even though I know I have to. “About what?” I hear myself say, motionless.

“This.” He pushes open the door farther and gestures at my lame bedroom set up. “Why haven’t you built your stuff yet?”

I wilt a bit, disappointed. I don’t know what I expected him to say. “*About this strange chemistry we seem to have, Nora. About the fact that I’m the only one left in your apartment, and you slept in my bed last night. What are we going to do about this?*”

I clear my throat. “It’s on my to-do list.”

“You need a hand with anything?”

A strange tingling starts in my feet and shoots straight up my legs, converging between my thighs. *There is something I could use a hand with, Crosbie...*

And last year, maybe I would have said those words. But this year? Nora Bora 2.0? Even with a three-month sexual hiatus? She’s going to say no.

“If you don’t mind.”

He slaps his hands against his thighs. “I don’t mind. I like this sort of thing.”

I stomp all over the strange warm feelings that are trying to bloom, like they’re a patch of weeds that needs to be destroyed. It’s not easy, and maybe one or two twisted tendrils remain, but I do a pretty decent job. Especially when Crosbie takes off the button-up so he’s just in jeans and the wife beater, muscles flexing as he grabs the box holding the pieces of my soon-to-be desk and lays it on the floor.

“Do you have a box cutter?”

“Sure. I sleep with one under my pillow.”

It takes him a second to realize I’m being sarcastic. “Jerk.” He makes a face at me. “Kellan’s got a toolbox under the sink. Want to grab it?”

I come back with the toolbox, then join Crosbie on the floor as he cuts open the box and finds the instructions. To my surprise, he reads them. Or, rather, looks at the pictures, since there are no words. In any case, he doesn’t try to pretend he knows everything, like he’s a desk building master. Once he’s done with the paper he sets it aside and starts assembling pieces, telling me what to hold, what to look for, what to do. I

should be annoyed, but I really didn't want to do this so I don't mind at all. And after an entire summer of solitude, it's kind of nice to have someone to hang out with.

"What'd you get up to last night?" he asks. He's got his lips pursed around two screws he's holding in his mouth as he twists a third one into the wood.

"Not much." I concentrate on holding the boards at a ninety degree angle so my desk isn't tilted. "I just worked then went to bed."

"On a Friday?"

"I'm not very exciting."

He glances at me. "I'm sure you're very exciting, Nora."

I laugh and he smiles around the screws, fishing one out of his mouth and sliding it into the next hole.

"How'd you do on your quiz?"

"What? Oh, Bio? Aced it."

"Good for you."

He shrugs and moves onto the last screw. "You know what's weird?"

*This whole situation?* "What's weird?"

"I fucking hate school."

"You do? I thought you wanted to teach."

"Yeah. I want to be a teacher. Stupid, right?"

"Not really."

"No? Why not?"

"If it's what you want to do, I don't see why it's stupid."

"Because I hate school," he repeats. "And I suck at it. Why do you think I have to study for hours to learn what other people can learn in five minutes?"

I watch him assemble a drawer like he's buttering a piece of bread. There's nothing stupid about him. "Because you know how to work hard?" I offer. "There's nothing wrong with trying."

He's focused on his task, but I see his mouth quirk. "I guess you'd know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how you're always at the library. You've got five classes and a job. You work hard, too."

I think about last year, how I did just the opposite and landed myself in this position. “Well, I have to.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“To have a good life. Isn’t that what everybody wants?”

“I guess so.”

“You want to have a bad life, Crosbie?”

Now he grins. “Yeah, Nora. I want to have a terrible life.”

I laugh and hand him the piece of wood he points to. “What do you want to teach?”

He blows out a breath and begins work on the second drawer. “Maybe history.”

“I thought you’d say Phys Ed.”

“Why?”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, I don’t know, Crosbie. Just a guess.” He’s totally fishing for a compliment.

“Is it this?” he asks, flexing his biceps. And though I do my very best to look unimpressed, a little frisson of sexual awareness trips down my spine. He’s very...big.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He laughs and gestures for me to move aside so he can work on the other desk leg. “What about you? What’s going to make your life so great?”

“I don’t know. But a degree seems like the first step.”

“A degree in what?”

“I’m still undecided.”

“Really? I’d think a girl who spent her whole summer at school would be working toward a very specific goal.”

My goal was to raise my average to a C+ from a D- and complete my two and a half months of community service without attracting too much attention. “Just trying to keep on top of things.”

“What’d you do when the campus was so empty?”

I swallow. I don’t want to lie, but I’m not ready for another person to know how badly I messed up. “Just worked, mostly. Studied and worked. Went for...walks.” Where I picked up trash along the highway.

“Alone?”

“There were four people on my floor,” I say. Eight in my clean-up crew. “Two didn’t speak English, and the other girl spent twenty hours a day practicing piano. Her fingers actually bled.”

He grimaces. “That’s gross.”

“Tell me about the party.”

He grunts. “You don’t want to know.”

“Why not?” If I can’t actually attend parties, maybe I can live vicariously through Crosbie. But even as I think the words, I find myself hoping he doesn’t tell me about hooking up with strippers—or any other girls.

“You ever been to a frat party, Nora?”

I avoid his stare. He probably thinks I’m too timid, but I just find it hard to meet his eye when I’m lying. “No.”

“Well, stay far away. They can get pretty out of control.”

“But you can handle it?”

Another laugh. “I kind of love it. It makes all the other shit worth it. It’s the only thing that comes easy to me.”

“Partying?”

“Yeah.”

I think about last year. How I’d thrown myself headfirst into that world. How great it had been. Until it wasn’t anymore.

“What do you do for fun?” he asks. I realize he’s trying to be kind. To make my assumed hobbies of knitting and star gazing sound interesting.

“Ghost hunting,” I say.

“You’re a fucking liar, Nora.”

I can’t keep a straight face. “I don’t do anything fun,” I tell him. And this time it’s easy to meet his stare. “I kind of...can’t.”

“You can’t have fun?”

“I can’t balance it,” I clarify. “How you study and run and party—I can’t. It’s all or nothing for me. Always has been. I don’t know why.”

“So you just study? You never have fun?”

“Studying’s not the worst thing in the world.”

“Well, that’s a ringing endorsement. Okay, stand up.” The desk assembled, we both rise as he arranges it upright and positions it against the wall. He rattles it a bit, one big hand wrapped around the edge, and I want so badly to do something “fun” right now. To feel that hand on me. “Look good to you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say too quickly. A bit breathlessly.

He gives me a weird look. “Are you okay?”

“Totally fine.”

“Did anyone bother you last night?”

“No. I didn’t even see anyone.”

His brow is wrinkled, and slowly it relaxes. “Good.”

Because my bed takes up too much room, we assemble the wooden frame in the living room, where there’s just barely enough space. As before, Crosbie does all the work. I mostly watch and pass him pieces. I don’t know if he senses that things were getting weird in my room or he just wants to change the subject, but he asks again about my “Steve Holt!” artwork and from there we just talk about TV.

When the frame is assembled he carefully edges it through the doorway and back into my room. I stand at the end closest to the door and hoist up the frame, then he lifts the mattress as I push the frame under. It sounded better in theory, but we eventually get it in place, and when I start to smooth the rumpled blankets, Crosbie stops me.

“What?”

“You’ve gotta make sure it’s sturdy,” he says.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Up you go.” He grips my arm and herds me onto the bed so I’m standing in the center. “Jump,” he says.

“I’m not going to—” I feel absolutely ridiculous.

“Jump, Nora. For my peace of mind.”

“I’m not planning to do a lot of jumping on this bed, Crosbie. If the frame collapses, it’s a six-inch fall. I’ll survive.”

He folds his arms. “Jump.”

“Screw off.” I try to climb down but he blocks me. “Crosbie—”

“Have fun,” he says. “Just for a minute. I want to know that you can.”

“All right, you know what?” Now I’m just annoyed. “I appreciate your help, but you’re making me feel really stupid. I know how to have fun, I’m just choosing not to right now. I don’t need to perform for you to be fun.”

He looks surprised. “It’s not a performance.” Then he glances at the bed. “Though I can see how it might be misconstrued.”

He doesn’t stop me when I step down, and I feel a little bit bereft. Like maybe that was my chance and I missed it. And later tonight by myself, if I jump on the bed alone, it won’t be nearly as fun as if Crosbie were here.

“Okay,” he says, stepping up onto the bed. “I gave you a shot. But if the frame breaks, you’re on the hook for it.”

“What are you—”

He starts to jump. The mattress squeaks, the pillows bounce, but nothing breaks. And still he jumps. “This is the most fun ever, Nora!” he mock squeals.

“Shut up. Get down.”

“I can’t believe you’re missing out on all this fun!”

“Knock it off.”

“One jump.”

“You’re going to break something.”

“Who cares? You’re paying for it.”

“Crosbie—” It’s impossible to keep a straight face. This may have started as a joke, but I think he’s really enjoying himself. And when he holds out a hand, I take it and climb on.

“Just once,” I say.

“Totally,” he agrees.

I jump and the frame breaks.

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Make a decision.

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