

Chapter 2

“So, Biff,” Carrie said to me. “What’s this I hear about you becoming a perv?”

It was Saturday, two days before the start of senior year, and we were eating breakfast at the cheesiest fifties diner in all of Southern California.

Nothing beat the Durango Five and Diner. It was really tacky in that vintage kind of way, and we always pretended to be a teen couple from fifty years ago out on an ice-cream-social sort of date. She called me Biff and I called her Annette, after Annette Funicello, who was the star of lots of those old surfer movies.

“It’s the ‘in’ thing, don’t cha know?” I answered.

“Neat!” she said, crumpling her napkin into a ball. “Being a perv is peachy!”

“It sure is, Annette.”

Carrie smiled and ran her fingers through her hair. “Okay, Biff. Truth or dare. If you had to choose only one girl in school you could have sex with, only one, who would it be?”

“Well, gosh, Annette,” I said, grabbing her napkin and smoothing it out. “I don’t know if I could choose only one. How’s about a big orgy?”

At that moment our waitress, a woman about my mother’s age with deep creases under her eyes, loomed over us with a look of alarm on her face.

“Don’t worry,” Carrie said. “Talking about it keeps the impulse in check.”

“You kids with your casual sex,” she moaned, shaking her head. “What’ll it be?”

We ordered our signature breakfast of champions, hash browns and root beer floats. Carrie always wanted us to order one with two straws, but that was a little intimate for me. I always had an excuse as to why we couldn't.

"Bronchitis again?" she asked me, rolling her eyes, after our waitress left.

"Something like that," I said.

"Oh, Bobby," she said, deadpan. She said that a lot.

Carrie smiled at me, and like usual, I wondered what we were supposed to be. We'd be perfect together. We'd been friends or whatever since ninth grade, and the thing was, she was really pretty. Everyone thought so. My buddies labeled her hot but weird.

They were right on both accounts.

She had long legs and favored turquoise clothing, but tended to wear it with colors it should never be associated with. Orange. Purple. When all the girls were dressing as Lindsay Lohan and Avril Lavigne for Halloween back in ninth grade, she came wearing a black mask and a totally black outfit with tiny little eyes on her chest. She called herself "Avril Lavigne's eyeliner."

Just weird stuff that you either appreciated or you didn't, and I really did. She had indigo eyes that when she squinted reminded me of warm blueberry pie, and a wicked sense of humor that was almost unfair in a girl so pretty. We'd been hanging out all through high school, and never had a credible date.

She must think I'm a geek.

"So can someone send Finch Gozman to some third-world country?" I asked.

"Finch? Why? He's harmless. He's the definition of harmless."

“He’s annoying! He’s doing some Durango football preview, and today he called me to get a quote from – his words – the Bulldogs’ ‘quarterback supreme.’ He actually said that. And every single thing I said, he laughed at. He needs to be killed.”

“That may be the worst motive for murder ever,” Carrie said.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “He’s always calling me and asking me stupid questions for his articles. It bugs the crap out of me.”

“Getting all that attention must be hard. Pity party of one, your table’s ready.”

I laughed. “It’s just the way he does it. He showers you with compliments that you don’t even want. He makes me nauseous.”

“That’s your story, and you’re sticking to it, I presume,” she said.

“Amen.”

“Quarterback supreme,” Carrie said. “That’s hilarious.”

“It sounds like something you’d order at a Dairy Queen,” I said.

“One quarterback supreme, two straws,” Carrie said. “Oh, wait. Two *separate* quarterback supremes, two straws.”

The waitress arrived with our root beer floats. Foam was running down the side of mine, and I licked the outside of the glass before it could spill onto the table. Carrie rolled her eyes at me; she’d seen me do this before.

“I’m sure that glass is like sparkling clean,” she said.

I shrugged. “You drink stuff that’s on the inside, is that, like, cleaner?” I said.

She considered this. “By the way,” Carrie said. “Your hair called. It misses you and wonders if you miss it. I told it yes, definitely.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “It’s a team thing, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Apparently not. So anyway, Shaundra has now had thirty-seven partners,” she told me, changing the subject and then slurping loudly through her straw. Shaundra was her best friend from elementary school. They had been inseparable until ninth grade, when, according to Carrie, Shaundra became a total slut. Now they didn’t talk and I got a daily update on her alleged sex life.

We talked about sex all the time. Or, Carrie talked and I listened.

I didn’t know if that made it more like we were dating, or less. But once the subject was up again, Carrie wasn’t about to let it slip away. She started talking loudly about her virginity.

“It’s still here,” she said, wrapping strands of her dark hair around her index finger. “And it doesn’t want to be. It wants to move to Hawaii and retire, drink piña coladas under a palm tree, and get catered to by muscular Samoan boys in short shorts.”

I laughed, and blushed a little. I didn’t want to discuss how she was going to lose her virginity, and she was speaking so loud that the three closest tables couldn’t help but be aware of her so-called problem.

“So,” she said, almost as an aside, looking up at the ceiling and lowering her voice a bit. “Why don’t you just take me?”

“Whoa!” I said.

“I mean it, Biff. You are the most terrible, terrible brute of a boy in our high school. I just wish you’d have your way with me already,” Carrie said, her eyes wide with mock sincerity.

Amazing, how Carrie could go from serious to kidding and back without batting an eye, all sort of mixed in together. It made her vulnerable and powerful at the same time, in a way I couldn’t quite fathom.

“Gosh, Annette, you know I want to, but today in health class we saw a film about social diseases. And there’s this one that can make you blind if you get it, and if you have it, you get sort of a drip from your privates, and I think, well, I think I may have it.”

“That’s okay, Biff,” she said, suddenly demure. “Gee, if that’s all you’re worried about. I have it, too!”

I felt a euthanasia skit coming on. Austin hated when Carrie and I performed our scenes. He always walked away when we started in on one at a party. I’d be on my deathbed with Carrie at my side, holding my hand. “Unplug me!” I’d hiss, hardly able to speak. And Carrie would respond, “What, honey? No, you’re not ugly.” And we’d keep going until someone in the room was in hysterics.

It was always one of us.

Carrie was only about halfway through her float when I finished mine. I called the waitress over and asked about our hash browns. Carrie took out twelve packets of sugar, six blue and six white, and divvied them up. She gave me the blue ones, and set them up like the table was a checker board, which it definitely wasn’t.

“Okay, you go,” she said.

I looked down at the random packets of sugar. I slid one blue packet forward about an inch and looked at her, wondering if this was legal. She showed no signs that it wasn’t. She was studying the table, real serious. Finally, she picked up a white packet close to her and jumped it over each of my blue packets, in no particular order.

“Checkmate,” she said, smiling at me.

I heard Austin’s voice in my head: “You need help, kid.”

“So how do you feel about stupid questions?” Carrie asked, loosening the tops on the salt and pepper shakers.

“I love stupid questions more than life itself,” I said, tightening them back up.

“Well, here’s a stupid question for you. It’s really dumb,” she said, addressing my chin. “So why aren’t we dating?” She paused and then started again at incredible speed. “Or are we in fact dating? Is there some sort of official process one has to go through to make it official and what is it and should we be dating or is this just crazy and do you think I’m totally ugly oh just forget about it.”

I grabbed a pink packet of sugar substitute and flicked it with my finger several times to see if it would break. It did not.

“First of all, you’re not even close to ugly, you’re completely gorgeous and you know that. You’re a babe.”

Carrie smiled at me, relieved. “I know! I’m just totally perfect and wonderful. So remind me, why aren’t we dating?”

She’d never asked me that kind of question before and I assumed that meant she had agonized over it. She’d probably been wondering about it at least as long as I had.

I ran my tongue over the inside of my teeth, counting the top row. Some 1950s girl was singing a song about it being her party, she’d cry if she wants to. I looked at Carrie and thought about what I could possibly say.

Just blurt out the truth? I mean, she has a million drama club friends, and some of them are gay. But with me, it’s different.

Something told me that a gay Bobby Framingham wasn’t a good thing for Carrie.

I swallowed and smiled at her. “I don’t know, Carrie,” I said. “We’re friends.”

“Ouch,” she said, maintaining eye contact. “Friends without benefits. Peachy.”

“Carrie . . .”

“No, let’s stop. Discussion over. This is what we’re going to do. I am going to go to the restroom, vomit, cry my eyes out, compose myself, and return. We shall then pretend this conversation never happened.”

“What conversation?” I said, smiling apologetically as our hash browns arrived.

“Attaboy,” was her reply as she headed to the bathroom.