

DEADLY COOL

by

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Chapter One

There are three things you never want to find in your boyfriend's locker: a sweaty jock strap, a D-minus on last week's history test, and an empty condom wrapper.

Lucky me, I'd hit the trifecta.

I pushed past the near-failing grade and underwear, honing in on the ripped foil packet. I grasped it between my thumb and forefinger, actually feeling my jaw drop open like some cartoon character as I leaned against the locker for support.

"No way," my best friend, Sam, said as she peered over my shoulder. "Hartley, is that...?"

"I think so," I croaked out.

"Holy effing crap, that sucks!"

I turned to her. "Effing?"

Sam shrugged. "What?"

"We're censoring now?"

"Kyle says I have a mouth like a trucker."

"You do have a mouth like a trucker. It's one of the things I love best about you."

"Kyle says it's not very feminine."

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling. "Yeah, I'd be taking femininity tips from a guy who lives in his football jersey."

Sam put her hands on her hips and threw me a pointed look. "Yeah? Well, at least *my* boyfriend's not effing the president of the chastity club."

I looked down at the Trojan wrapper in my hand. She had a point.

"God, this cannot be happening," I moaned.

Which is exactly what I'd been saying ever since Ashley Stannic texted me during first period English that someone had seen my boyfriend, Josh DuPont, feeling up Courtney Cline after Cross Country practice yesterday. At first, I'd dismissed it. Because A) Courtney Cline was the staying-a-virgin queen, putting up "Earn your right to wear white!" posters all over the cafeteria and even urging students to sign an abstinence pledge the first day of school, and B) Josh and I had been dating for, like, ever. Our relationship had even survived going long distance for two whole months this summer - one while I went to Ohio to visit my grandmother and another when Josh went to football camp in Sacramento. Each one had felt like an eternity, but once he got home again, we spent the entire week before school started glued to each other's sides, only letting go when one of us had to sleep or pee. We were solid. I knew there was no way he would step out on me. Ashley *must* have been mistaken.

Only, by second period both Jessica Hanson and Chris Fret were mistaken, too, texting me to ask if the rumors of Josh hitting second base with Courtney were true. By lunch, half the school was mistaken, and I was the recipient of sidelong glances and barely concealed snickers over trays of pizza sticks and applesauce.

And I was questioning that solidity.

So, I did what any good girlfriend would do. I broke into Josh's locker. Would the more mature thing have been to confront him directly with the rumors? Possibly. Would it have been as effective?

I looked at the shiny gold, foil square in my hand.

Doubtful.

No matter how much I may love - scratch that, *loved*, past tense - Josh, I was no dummy. Everyone knows the Y chromosome carries with it the instinctive urge to lie under pressure.

Which, incidentally, was what Josh was going to be under when I found him. Serious pressure.

On his larynx.

I balled the wrapper in my fist. "Where is he?" I demanded of the world at large. "Where is that cheating piece of -"

But I didn't get any further. The bell sounded above me, echoing off the halls of Herbert Hoover High. Immediately conversations around us stopped, lockers slammed shut, and hundreds of shoes squeaked against the over-waxed floors as people scattered to fifth period.

"Look, maybe there's a good reason for it being there?" Sam offered, shrugging her backpack onto her shoulder.

"Such as?" I shoved the wrapper into my plaid bookbag, slammed Josh's locker shut and followed Sam down the hall.

"Well, maybe it's for sex ed class?"

"I don't know about you, but the last time I had sex ed was in eighth grade."

"Good point. Okay, maybe it's for some science project about, um, reproduction?"

"You're totally grasping."

"Fine. But maybe it's just one he used with you, and the wrapper got stuck in his backpack or something. That could happen, right?"

I bit my lip. No, it couldn't. Because my dirty little secret that I couldn't even share with my best friend? Unlike the president of the Chastity Club, I was an actual virgin.

Okay, I hadn't signed any pledge or made any promises to save myself for some hyped up Mr. Right to propose. It just... well... it hadn't really happened for me yet. I'd tried. Once. During freshman year when it seemed like everyone was doing it, and I thought I was destined to be the only virgin left in the entire Silicon Valley. I'd been going out with Cole Perkins for a couple months at the time, so when he wanted me to come over to his place one Friday after water polo practice, I agreed.

His room had smelled like stale pizza, gym socks, and the Glade air freshener his mom used. He'd docked his iPod and played some horrible list of Christine Aguilera songs that I guess were supposed to put me in the mood but really just made me question what I was doing getting naked with a guy who downloaded Christina Aguilera songs. Cole swore he'd done this lots of times before, but I'd bet money that was his Y chromosome talking because it had been awkward, kinda painful, and, in the end, he'd squirted all over his bedsheets before we could even really do it.

After that one experience, I figured I probably wasn't missing out on much after all and gave up on the idea.

Until Josh. I'd always assumed that I'd do it someday with Josh. You know, when the timing was right.

Apparently the timing had been right with Courtney Cline first.

"Look, we'll track him down after school," Sam promised, pausing outside her lit class. "Don't worry, Hart, I'm sure this is all some big misunderstanding."

She gave my arm a quick squeeze before disappearing into the classroom. I stared after her, vaguely hearing the tardy bell fill the hallway with its ugly warning.

Right. Misunderstanding.

Josh better pray that's all this was. Otherwise, I was gonna *effing* kill him.

Chapter Two

The first thing I did when I got to chem (only two minutes late) was text Josh. If he had a good explanation, now would be an excellent time to hear it.

need 2 talk asap

I set my cell to vibrate and shoved it in the pocket of my jeans. Then, reluctantly, I opened my chem book, trying to follow along with the class while my entire being was focused on waiting for that telltale vibration of Josh's response.

One explanation of ionic versus covalent chemical bondage later, my phone still hadn't buzzed. As Mrs. Perry turned her back to write our homework assignment on the whiteboard, I pulled it out and tried again.

911 call when u get this

Then I tucked it away again, pretending to care about atoms swapping electrons.

But by the end of the class my phone was still conspicuously silent. I tried to catch a glimpse of Josh in the hallway as we scrambled for last period, but considering he had history in the east wing and I had trig in the west wing, it was a lost cause.

I sent three more texts during math, trying to concentrate on functions of acute angles, but completely distracted by the lack of activity coming from my pocket. With each second that ticked by, I could feel the possibility of this being just some stupid

misunderstanding becoming slimmer and slimmer, until by the end of the period it began to resemble an Olsen twin. On crack. After a colon cleanse.

So, as soon as the bell rang and the halls filled with people making their mad dash for freedom, I called Sam and told her to meet me on the field where the cross country team practiced.

By the time I'd navigated the mass exodus, Sam was already there, watching the team stretch before their first run. I scanned the group of guys in orange and black HHH Wildcats jerseys for any sign of Josh's blonde hair. Usually he stood out in a crowd - tall and lean, a shaggy chic haircut and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. Think Zac Efron. But blonde. And hotter. There was something about his smile - kinda lopsided with dimples - that drew both guys and girls into his circle like little mosquitoes buzzing toward a bright, shiny bug zapper. For better or worse, no one could resist Josh Dupont.

But, today, there was no sign of him.

Undeterred, I stalked up to a short guy with wiry black hair at the head of the track who was struggling to touch his toes. "Hey, Cody."

Cody Banks looked up, sweat already collecting on his wide brow. "Hey, Hartley. 'Sup." He nodded at Sam. "'Sup."

Sam nodded back.

"Where's Josh?" I asked.

Cody shrugged. "Dunno."

"He's not at practice?"

He shook his head. "Nope. He hung out for a few minutes, but then he said wasn't feelin' well. Maybe he went home."

Coward. If Josh thought he wasn't feeling well now, just wait 'til I got my hands on him...

"So," Cody said, leaning in closer, "Is it true? About Josh and Courtney?"

I shot him a look that clearly said if he valued his life, he wouldn't go there.

"She found a condom wrapper," Sam supplied, instead. "But we're pretty sure it's for a science project."

Cody shook his head. "Dude. Sucks."

"I know, right?" Sam said.

I ignored them, squinting into the sun as I swept my gaze across the field, toward the bleachers where the Color Guard was practicing, twirling their oversized flags in the afternoon breeze like fluttering batons. While it wasn't a total given that all members of the Color Guard also belonged to the Chastity Club, twirling flags was considered one of the most wholesome activities on campus, meaning the ratio of Chastity girls in Color Guard was something like that of Mormons in Utah. I scanned the line of girls in short skirted little uniforms. One perky brunette bob was conspicuously missing from the formation.

Courtney's.

I turned to my friend. "Sam, think you could borrow your brother's car?"

"Probably." She paused. "Why?"

"Because if I find Courtney Cline at Josh's and kill them both, I'm going to need a quick getaway."

Sam bit her lip, her eyebrows doing a concerned pucker on my behalf. But, good friend that she was, she finally said, "Okay, but we need to think of a convincing alibi on the way."

* * *

Half an hour later we were rolling down Blossom Hill Road in her brother Kevin's 1986 Volvo sedan with "Live green!" bumper stickers plastered all over the back. Much to their parents' dismay, Sam's brother had dropped out of college and joined Greenpeace last year instead of graduating from Stanford like his father had. And his father had. And his father had. It was a Kramer family tradition that had ended painfully when her mom had found Kevin not in the undergrad Business Law class he was supposed to be taking, but outside the Whole Foods grocery with a clipboard in hand, urging shoppers to sign a petition to decrease urbanization in the swamps of the black spotted river toad. While her parents freaked, Sam had been cool with her brother either way - Stanford alum or hippie frog lover. That was, until her parents made it clear she was now their sole hope of having a child graduate from college, go on to be a celebrated surgeon, and make enough to support them in a fancy retirement village in their old age. Needless to say, Sam's trig grades had become the sole topic of conversation around the Kramer family dinner table.

Lucky for us, Sam's parents were still both at work, and Kevin had traded us his keys in exchange for a promise to use recycled paper for our homework that night.

Unluckily, a 1986 Volvo sedan crawls only slightly faster than a Vespa.

"Can't you make this thing move?" I asked, watching an old lady in a giant Buick pass us.

"Sorry. Kevin put an SVO conversion on the engine, and it's kinda slow."

I cocked my head to the side. "SVO?"

Sam nodded. "Straight vegetable oil? It burns cleaner than traditional fuel. Basically just dump a bunch of cooking oil in the tank, and we're good to go."

"Seriously?" No wonder Granny was passing us.

"Yep. Kevin goes around to all the fast food restaurants to collect their used oil once a week."

"Gross."

"I know. But, it'll get us there," Sam promised. "Which leads me to ask... what exactly are you going to *do* when we do get there?"

I thought about it. "Rip Josh's nuggets off and feed them to his hamster?"

Sam nodded. "Creative." Then she turned to me as she slowed for a stop sign. "But seriously. What are you going to say?"

I sighed, leaned my head back on the seat and closed my eyes. "I don't know."

Which, I realized, was the truth. I had no idea what I was supposed to say in a situation like this. I knew I was supposed to be angry at him. And I was. That feeding his family jewels to the hamster thing might have been a joke, but it wasn't too far off the mark. Every time I thought of that condom wrapper burning a hole through my bookbag, I wanted to hit something.

Hard.

Preferably his face.

But, as much as I hated to admit it, part of me kinda didn't want to hate him. Kinda didn't want to break up with him even though that seemed like the logical next step. What I really wanted was to go back to yesterday when everything was fine, I had a great boyfriend, and Courtney Cline knew how to keep her legs together.

Sam rounded the corner onto Beacon and pulled our clean burning machine to a stop with a quick cough of relief from the engine. Which was starting to smell like French fries.

Beacon was like any other street in suburban Silicon Valley: California ranch style homes built one right next to the other, squares of lawn out front with mature trees

acting as a buffer between the street, mini-vans and SUVs with those little stick figure families in the back windows resting in every drive. By seven, the neighborhood would be filled with the scents of meatloaf and sounds of *Jeopardy*. Currently, the only sign of life was a guy three doors down, taking photos of an old Camaro with a dented bumper in his driveway.

Josh's Jeep Wrangler was parked in front of the curb.

I took a deep breath. God, what was I going to say to him? What was he going to say to me? Would he try to deny it? Lie his way out of it? Maybe he'd confess and beg for forgiveness, promise he'd never touch another girl again as long as he lived. Would I believe him?

"So... you going in?" Sam asked from the driver's seat.

I nodded. "Uh huh." But for some reason, my butt stayed firmly glued to my seat.

"Sometime soon?"

"Sure."

"Before we graduate?"

"Maybe."

"You scared?"

"Totally."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

I nodded. "Would you?"

Sam grinned. "Hey, I'm already driving the getaway car. I might as well be a full blown accomplice. Let's go." She hopped out of the car, forcing me to do the same, and grabbed my hand as we crossed the street and made our way up the walkway to Josh's front door. A little stone goose dressed in a rain slicker sat on the porch, two pairs of

muddy gardening Crocs beside it. On the door hung a wreath of dried flowers with a little "welcome" sign in the center.

"What if his mom answers?" Sam asked, staring at the goose as if it might come to life and begin pecking her kneecaps.

I shook my head. "His parents are on some cruise to Alaska. Anniversary." Which yesterday had meant we could make out all we wanted on his living room couch with no one to bother us. Today... the thought of my tongue touching any tongue that had touched Courtney Cline's tongue sent a wave of nausea running through me.

I sucked in a breath of courage, squeezed Sam's hand for support, and rang the bell before I could change my mind. Muted chimes echoed on the other side of the door, and I strained to hear the sound of footsteps approaching. Silence greeted us instead, so I hit the bell again, feeling Sam shift nervously from foot to foot beside me.

No answer.

I gave up on the bell, pounding a fist on the front door just below the welcome sign. "We know you're in there, Josh! Open up!"

I thought I heard movement inside, but after waiting a full minute we were still standing on the porch like idiots. I grabbed the door handle and jiggled it. Locked. Great.

"Maybe he's not here." Sam peered in the front window, craning her head to see around the oversized sofa and oak entertainment center.

"His car is here."

"Maybe he's just not answering? Maybe he figures if he doesn't answer the door, you can't break up with him."

I narrowed my eyes at the welcome sign, my anxiety converting to determination. "Let's go around back."

I crossed the lawn to the wooden side gate, reaching around the top and popping the latch.

"Back door?" Sam asked, struggling to keep up with my purposeful march.

I nodded, reaching the sliding glass doors that led into Josh's family room. Only, as I tugged on the handle, it became clear those were locked, too.

"Looks like we're not getting in," Sam said.

I surveyed the backyard. Thick green grass covered the lawn, and fruit trees stood along the fence shielding the yard for privacy. To the right was a covered patio with a barbecue large enough to roast a small elephant. To the left, a portable storage shed sat flush against the stuccoed wall of the house. I looked up. The shed's roof ended only a few feet shy of the second story.

Just under Josh's bedroom window.

Sam followed my gaze. Then narrowed her eyes at me. "You have got to be kidding me."

"If we can get on the roof, it'll be easy to climb in the window."

"What are you, ten? Who climbs on roofs?"

I turned on her. "Look, I've got two choices here, Sam. I can either climb onto the shed, go in the window and make Josh explain why a condom wrapper was in his locker, or I can go home, text him twenty more times and wait by the phone like some pathetic sap while I imagine him swapping God knows what bodily fluids with Courtney Cline."

Sam bit the inside of her cheek, her gaze going to the roof again. "Effing hell. I hate heights."

"Don't worry, it's not that high," I assured her. Even though I wasn't totally keen on high places myself. While mandatory P.E. and the occasional trip to the gym kept me

in single digit sizes, I wasn't exactly what you'd call athletic. And that shed looked like it was made out of recycled cans.

But no way was I playing the text waiting game any longer.

I cracked my knuckles then dug the toes of my Sketchers into the corrugated metal side of the shed, grasping at the edge of the roof with my fingertips. "Give me a boost," I instructed Sam.

A second later I felt her hands on the seat of my jeans, shoving me forward with a grunt.

"One crack about the size of my butt, and I'll disown you," I warned, my triceps straining as my feet slipped, doing a jogging in the air thing. Finally they found their grip again, scrambling up the side as I hoisted myself onto the roof belly first.

The shed gave a low groan under my weight, and I lay perfectly still, half expecting the entire thing to collapse under me.

It didn't. Which I took as a good sign.

I scrambled to my hands and knees, leaning down to help Sam. She kicked off her flip-flops to get better traction, threw them up first, then grabbed my hand and crawled up the side of the shed to join me.

Again the structure groaned as Sam flopped onto the roof beside me, both of us pausing to catch our breath.

"Now what?" she asked, eyeing Josh's bedroom window as she slipped her shoes back on.

I stood on tiptoe, trying to get a good look inside. The curtains were pulled, so I couldn't make out much. Just a flash of color between the panels that could have been someone's shoulder or just as easily a lampshade.

"I'm going in," I decided.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Sam hedged.

No, I wasn't. But, since it was the only idea I had, I slipped my fingers between the glass pane and the window sill, slowly lifting the window open until I had a good three feet of clearance. I paused, listening for any sounds from within.

Nothing.

I took a deep breath, parted the curtains, hoisted myself up and over the sill, and then lowered myself into Josh's room, Sam a step behind me.

Most of the room was in shadow, the only light source the window we'd just crawled through. My eyes glanced over Josh's bed, unmade, covered in the same solar system themed sheets he'd had since fifth grade. Beside it sat his desk, with his laptop and a collection of textbooks strewn on top. A shelf above held his sports trophies - cross country, baseball, soccer. Lots of little chrome guys holding balls, contorted in uncomfortable positions. On the opposite side of the room was a wooden dresser and a pile of dirty clothes that I blamed for the slightly sour smell in the room. And next to that was Josh's closet.

Where my eyes froze.

In the crack between the wall and closet door, the purple, shimmery, spandex fabric of an HHH Color Guard uniform stared back at me.

Gotcha.

I poked Sam in the arm, gesturing to the closet. Her eyes went big as she mouthed the words, "Oh my God!"

I slowly tiptoed toward the closet, sure the sound of my heart pounding was loud enough for Sam to hear it. I reached a hand out and quickly slid the door back...

To reveal Courtney Cline, cowering on the floor of my boyfriend's closet.

"I knew it!" I shouted.

Only Courtney didn't move. Her head was bent downward, her hair covering her face as if pretending she couldn't see me would make her invisible, too.

"I see you, Courtney. Get up," I commanded, towering over her, hands on hips in what I hoped was a very intimidating pose.

Only she still didn't move.

Okay, now she was *really* starting to piss me off.

"Hart-" Sam started.

But I held up a hand to stop her. Whatever she had to say could wait. At the sight of Miss Chastity, the fear that had been growing in my gut all day was suddenly confirmed in the flesh. And the resulting adrenaline pumping through my system was too good to waste. Courtney and I were going to have this out here and now.

"I said get up!" I repeated, then punctuated my command by grabbing her scrawny arm and yanking her forward.

But as Courtney's head dropped back like a rag doll, I realized there was no way she was getting up. Her hair fell away to reveal her porcelain pale face. Her big, blue eyes were open, staring straight ahead. Her mouth was fixed in a surprised little "O". And the smooth, blemish free skin of her long, dancer's neck was bruised purple beneath the cord of her white iPod buds, wrapped in a deadly stranglehold around her throat.

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