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For Steve—my last, my only, my everything

1

Tonight, I'm doing Evan Brown's girlfriend a favor. An awkward, sweaty, fumbling favor. Melanie, or whatever her name Firsts: A Novel is, owes me big time.

Except she'll never know it.

"Wait there," I tell Evan before slipping into my walk-in closet.

I sneak a glance back at him, at his crouched-over stance on the edge of my bed, his skinny shoulders hunched forward and his hands on his knees. He looks like he's getting ready to play a video game. I stifle a laugh. This is one level he won't beat on the first try.

When I'm carefully ensconced in my walk-in, I wiggle into a pair of pink satin boy shorts and a matching camisole. I know by the fear on his face and the smell of nervous sweat emanating from his armpits that Evan can't Firsts: A Novel handle the black lacy negligee, and especially not the red slip, the Firsts: A Novel one with the slit that goes all the way up.

I open the drawer containing my garter belts and collection of fishnet stockings, then close it again. Evan wouldn't know what to do with a garter belt or fishnet stockings, and it's not Firsts: A Novel my intention to embarrass him Firsts: A Novel any more than he already is.

I apply pink lipstick and leave my hair loose around my shoulders. It's wavy, still damp from the

shower. Normally I'd flat iron it into stick-straight submission, but this time, maybe I'll drop the getup. I rub the lipstick off, but the judgment in my eyes remains.

Evan will get what I'm most definitely not—the good girl.

“God, Mercy,” he says when I emerge. His voice cracks and he blushes redder than his hair, which makes the pimples dotted across his cheeks stand out. Puberty wasn't kind to Evan Brown.

“Don't say that,” I command, climbing Firsts: A Novel onto his lap. His legs are trembling.

“Don't say what?” His voice is trembling, too.

“Mercy. That's not my name.”

“But that's what Angela calls you.”

“Angela's my friend. You're not. You're somebody I'm doing a favor for. You don't have to call me anything. But if you want to, my real name will do.”

“Mercedes,” he says, squeaking out the extra syllables. “My mom always wanted one of those.” He slaps his forehead. “Shit, I didn't mean to bring up my mom. I'm not thinking about her or anything.” He removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. “I just didn't think I'd be so nervous.”

I used to like my name. Mercedes. That is, until I figured out I was named after a car. The shiny red car that my dad loved more than anything—the one he waved from as he drove away. I remember liking that car, too. My dad used to let me sit in the front seat and pretend to steer. “You're going to have a lead foot,” he would say over my childish *vroom, vrooms*. “Somebody'll need to teach you how to slow down.” But he didn't stick around long enough for that person to be him.

Out of Evan's mouth, my name doesn't sound fancy or fast. It just sounds complicated, like he's trying to speak a foreign language. I guess for Evan, I *am* a foreign language.

I smile and run my fingers through his hair. Or at least I try to, but he put so much damned Firsts: A Novel gel in it that my hand gets stuck.

“Don't worry about it,” I say, wiping my sticky fingers on the back of his shirt. “Everyone gets nervous.” I kiss his neck, where I can feel his pulse beating against his skin. I move my hands to the base of his T-shirt and pull it over his head.

“I brought these,” he says, jamming his hand in his jeans pocket and pulling out a roll of condoms. There must be about ten of them. He attempts Firsts: A Novel a smile, but it looks more like a grimace.

“It’s always good to be prepared,” I say. “But save those for Melanie. I’m prepared, too.”

I lean over and open my nightstand drawer, where the boxes are piled neatly like little soldiers. Ultra Thin, Ribbed for Her Pleasure, Second Skin, Magnums. I pull out an Ultra Thin. No matter what they think, most guys are Ultra Thins. Just enough for protection, no extra frills. This fact was drilled Firsts: A Novel into me early. My mom started teaching me about birth control when other moms were still on tampons.

Besides, Evan doesn’t look like a Magnum kind of guy.

“How far have you got with Melanie?” I say.

“Melody,” he says. “Melody—that’s her name. Not Melanie. Melody, Firsts: A Novel like a song.” He looks down to where my Firsts: A Novel cleavage is propped in front of his face. Firsts: A Novel “She let me feel her up. And one time when her parents were out of town, we almost did it. We did other stuff.”

I put my hands on Firsts: A Novel my hips. “You’ve got to be more specific. Other stuff, like you’ve seen each other naked? Like you went down on her?”

He nods and blushes an even darker shade of red. “But she didn’t want to go all the way. She wants it to be the best night of her life. So I have this whole thing planned, a dinner and stuff.”

“Very romantic,” I say, smiling broadly. *This* is the reason I do what I do. “Sounds like you like her. And she likes you.”

I love when guys take the time to Firsts: A Novel make a plan. And even though Evan mumbled “a dinner and stuff” without making eye contact, I know he means much more. He took the time to know Melody, what she likes, and what will make her happy.

“That’s the problem,” he says. “She says she loves me. She says because she loves me, she just knows I’m going to rock her world.”

I nod. I understand this part. Melody sounds like every other girl, the kind who expects fireworks the first Firsts: A Novel time. I know better. Fireworks don’t just happen. They need to be carefully arranged and then Firsts: A Novel ignited slowly.

Which is exactly what I’m doing for Evan.

“But you don’t think you’re Firsts: A Novel going to rock her world,” I say slowly. “That’s why you’re here.”

“Well, yeah,” he says. “She’s way hotter than me. And my friend, Gus—he’s still with his girlfriend because of you.”

I know exactly who Evan is talking about, except I remember him more by his nickname, the

one I secretly gave him. The Crier. Gus was number six, the one who acted all tough and practically tried to instruct me—until he broke down and sobbed into Firsts: A Novel my pillow afterward.

I brace my hands against Evan's shoulders. "Well, you're a lot farther along than some people. You've already seen each other naked. You got that out of the way. For some people, that's the most awkward part." I slip the straps of my camisole down my shoulders. "Like now. What would you do if I was Melody?"

"I'd tell you you were beautiful," he says. "I'd ask if I could touch them."

"Right and wrong," I say. "You're always right to tell a girl she's beautiful. But never ask if you can do something. Be bold, because confidence is one thing you can absolutely fake until you actually feel it."

Evan continues to stare at my breasts. He's breathing heavy, and I can feel his erection through his jeans. Maybe Evan will need a Magnum after all.

"So go ahead," I say. "This is the place to make mistakes."

And he does—he makes plenty of mistakes. He palms my breasts like they're baseballs, slobbers on my neck, sticks his tongue halfway down my throat. They're rookie errors, the kind most people don't get right the first time. But that's Firsts: A Novel what I'm here for. I tell Firsts: A Novel him to close his lips, follow the curves of my body with his hands, use his fingers to trace an outline for his tongue to follow. I teach him how to open the condom packet, how to pinch the tip before rolling it on to make sure all the air gets out. I dim the lights for the final act, help him guide himself into me, don't chastise him for the first fifteen seconds of fumbling in the dark but give him credit for his improved technique in the last fifteen.

But when he asks for a round two, I shake my head firmly. I have never allowed a round two. "Save Firsts: A Novel it for Melody," I say.

He stretches out under the covers and turns his head on the pillow. His breath is still coming in ragged gasps. "Should I stay over?" he says. "We could do it again in the morning. I bet I'll last longer."

I cover my breasts with my hands and stand up, searching Firsts: A Novel for something to better cover myself Firsts: A Novel with but only finding a sheer robe. I curse my lack of actual pajamas. This is the part I don't like. In the dark, when I'm the one in control, even with everything on full display, I feel less naked than now. Then the lights come up and they want to talk. To ask questions. Questions I can't answer for myself, let alone for them.

Firsts A Novel

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