

A KIND OF IN BETWEEN

A KIND OF SHORT STORY-CARTER IN BETWEEN A
KIND OF ROMANCE AND A KIND OF HONESTY

LANE HAYES

CHAPTER 1

Carter The nondescript East Village walkup was close to Bowery Bagels. I was supposed to be excited about this somehow, I thought rolling my eyes. Zeke used the geographic proximity of Benny's old apartment slash work studio to his father's store as a major selling point when he suckered me into helping them move "a couple" things to their SoHo condo. Fuck, I was an idiot. No one in their right mind liked moving. And no bagel was worth the headache. Besides, it was six o'clock now. I had better things to do with my Saturday night. Well... maybe not. But trudging up and down three flights of narrow stairs was no one's idea of a good time.

"This is the best!" Benny gushed as he twirled around the almost empty room. "We just need to get the bed out of here and—"

"It's not happening today, baby," Zeke said in a firm voice. The 'baby' part sounded a tad sappy, but I let it slide. I was grateful he was on my side and willing to put an end to his husband's overly enthusiastic take on the joys of manual labor.

Benny pushed his electric blue tinged bangs away from his eyes with his thumb and cocked his head. A subtle look passed between them. It involved a twitch of Benny's lips and a hint of humor evident in the creased corners of Zeke's eyes. It bespoke a language shared between lovers. Something intimate and special that had nothing to do with sex. I fought the familiar tug of jealousy as I cleared my throat to break up the love fest, and remind them they weren't alone. If it was up to me to reset moving expectations, so be it.

"I'll hire a couple guys from my office to take care of the bed another time," I offered. "It's getting dark and it's icy on the steps. Not safe. Let's get a drink instead. Zeke's treat."

Benny sighed as he sauntered toward Zeke. He slipped his arm around his husband's waist and then cast an exasperated look between us. "We're so close though. We could be done tonight."

Zeke turned Benny to face him and pressed a kiss on his forehead. "The van is packed as it is. We can drop every off at the theater or in storage in the morning. Carter's right. It's cold, dark and icy outside. And we're both over it. Don't bat your eyes at me, it's not gonna—"

"Hey, I'm out. My internal third wheel beeper is buzzing. I'll check in with you guys tomorrow."

"Carter, don't go. We're behaving! Besides, the mirrors are gone and Zeke won't want to have sex here when our own bed is a couple miles away," Benny said with a chipper grin.

"Of course I would!"

Benny rolled his eyes. "Fine. You would, but we aren't going to. We're going to move the bed and then...I'll make dinner. How does penne arrabiata and a giant salad sound?"

"Yes to the food. No more moving. Let's go, Ravioli. Lock up and get your cute ass in gear."

This time their kiss wasn't a peck. It was a serious lip lock involving tongue, groans and roving hands. Oh boy. Time to go.

"I'm out, boys. I have a date," I lied. "I'm gonna—"

"You told us you didn't have plans tonight," Benny said, frowning his brow.

"I just remembered something I need to do." I waved absently as I moved toward the open door and then turned to head down the short hallway to the stairwell.

"Cart!" Zeke pulled my sleeve before I reached the landing. "What's up?"

"Nothing's up, dummy. You and Benny are newlyweds. I appreciate you including me, but it's not necessary. Especially when your idea of fun is schlepping heavy crap up and down stairs. Go on. Do husband stuff with your man. Tell him I'll be over for dinner tomorrow night. It's the least you two can do after torturing me all afternoon. See ya, Zeke."

I pulled out of his grasp and hurried down the stairs before he was tempted to offer any halfhearted platitudes that would only end up making both of us uncomfortable. Things had changed. It was time to accept it and move on. Again.

The transition from college boyfriends to best friends for had taken some getting used to. Zeke and I had muddled our way through hurt and misunderstanding to eventually find more common ground than we ever had as a couple. Over ten years had passed since we'd been more than friends. We were good at it.

In fact, we were so good at it, we were more like brothers. Sure, Zeke had three brothers and certainly didn't need another, but I was an only child with no family. Zeke's parents had practically adopted me when we started going out. They included me for every family dinner and holiday. I was an honorary member of the Gulden family and I loved it. Now... I wasn't sure where my place was exactly.

I only knew I wasn't going to be the perpetual third wheel. The friend they loved but were anxious to set up with someone nice so the weird shimmer of guilt faded and we all found our place again.

Real life wasn't that tidy. There was always a period of unrest and adjustment when close friends met and married the person of their dreams. With Benny and Zeke it had all been very... surprising. They were nothing alike. And I do mean nothing.

Benny was a fabulous fashionista who changed his hair color according to his mood. The blue streaks in his bangs today might be pink, orange, purple or green tomorrow. He was five foot eight tops which made him at least four inches shorter than Zeke. He was lean but toned and had gorgeous golden skin... good looking for sure.

Zeke had always had a thing for pretty things and people. But this was definitely the first time my conservative Wall Street financier friend had gone for anyone who wore eyeliner every other day. Or someone who wasn't afraid to let him have it when his grand opinions and prejudices threatened basic common sense. Benny was good for Zeke. Hell, they were good together. I loved being around them. They made me think anything was possible. Including me eventually finding someone.

In the meantime, it looked like it was me, myself and I on a Saturday night in Manhattan. The possibilities were endless. I could go to a bar, a club, the theater... I pulled out my phone when I stepped outside to call for my driver just as a message popped up on my screen.

R u free tonite?

I studied it for a long moment. *Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea. Don't say yes*, I told myself. Then again, why not? His timing was perfect and unlike meeting a random guy at a bar, we knew what to expect from each other. A drink or two, maybe dinner and then sex. Good sex. White knuckles gripping the bed post as my

lover plowed into me relentlessly, sweat dripping as fingernails raked along my spine and...

I pushed Call as I moved toward the Mercedes idling at the curb.

“Hi Lance. How are you?”

CHAPTER 2

Lance Gandle was an extraordinarily good-looking, six foot two African American man with chiseled features who was built like a professional athlete. Or a god. He was a lawyer whose firm occasionally did business with my company. We dated for about a year before I put an end to it a couple months ago. I liked Lance. He was a decent enough guy and he was great in bed, but... something was missing. If relationships consisted of marathon sex with little communication, he would have been a keeper, but on some level we didn't click.

However, on a random Saturday night when my senses were skewed by too much alcohol, bright lights and the niggling feeling of an unreasonable jealousy I couldn't seem to shake, Lance and I clicked just fine. I'd worry about my questionable moral code and why I tended to gravitate to men I knew were bad for me in the morning. Tonight I was horny as hell and the sultry look my date flashed over the rim of his vodka tonic told me he felt the same way.

We'd met at a sushi restaurant I loved in Greenwich. He

claimed to remember it was my favorite when he made our last minute reservations. What he probably also remembered was that a good friend of mine owned it and always comped my meals. And since it was within walking to my house, which was located on an exclusive side street in the Village, he probably figured distance wouldn't hamper the time it took to be naked and writhing. I concentrated on his plump bottom lip and the low timbre of his voice and made myself overlook the small irritants that were a big reason I broke up with him in the first place.

If I stayed in the moment, I'd forget we didn't like the same movies or music. I'd forget he didn't like sharing the food off his plate or that he had a habit of being five minutes earlier to every social function he attended. Or worse yet, that he was a know-it-all who never rooted for one team consistently. Maybe I was picky, but come on! How could any self-respecting baseball fan vacillate between the Mets or the Yankees? It didn't work like that and everyone fucking knew it! You chose one team and you cheered them on through thick and thin, for Christ's sake. Wishy-washy allegiance in sports was a flashing red light signaling a possible breakdown in ethics.

Zeke laughed outright when I voiced my concerns. He'd suggested my wariness of my former boyfriend turned booty call had less to do with his weak devotion to the Yankees than it did with how I actually felt about Lance. Friendship took a backseat to physical attraction with us. Maybe he answered my calls for the same reason I answered his.

Sex.

I clandestinely adjusted myself as I held Lance's gaze. The loud restaurant, the flash of lights and the rumble of traffic outside heightened my awareness of him. Fuck the Yankees. I'd defend them tomorrow morning. Tonight I didn't care. The city was coming alive and I wanted to be part of it. With Lance. We

could dance, we could bar hop or we could just go back to my place and fuck. All night long.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked. His low lusty tone sounded like an invitation. Or a proposition.

“Yes.” I stood quickly and walked toward the entrance.

Lance set my coat over my shoulders, leaning in to whisper in my ear. “Where to next, Carter?”

He didn’t move. His nose brushed my ear, a featherlight touch that made my spine tingle. When he licked my lobe, I shivered and turned to face him. “My place.”

His rakish, knowing grin sealed the deal. Fine. Who was I kidding? I was a hopeless. It was time to get off my so-called moral high horse and admit that I was not in control here. My dick was.

Twenty minutes later, I wasn’t pretty sure it didn’t matter who was in control as long as he kept moving. Because questionable taste aside, this man knew his way around my body. He knew what I liked without being told to go harder or faster. And the man had a thing for dirty talk that made my eyes roll back in my head.

“On your knees, baby. That’s it,” he purred. “Hang on to the headboard. Tighter. I want those knuckles white. I want you to beg me to fuck your sweet hole.”

Holy shit.

I obeyed him with a loud groan and tried not to tremble at the sight of him pumping his thick cock as he added lube. The second I was in position, he was on me and inside me. His hips flew double time, fucking me with a crude abandon I loved in the moment but would worry about after the fact. If I loved this man, all bets would be off. The dirtier, the better. But I didn’t love him. And sometimes the things that turned me on the most, made me feel dirty in a place inside me Lance would never know.

He smacked my ass hard, effectively demanding my attention. Then he held my hips and drove into me relentlessly. I braced all my weight on my left hand and reached for my dick. He must have been close already because this was usually when he'd hold my hands captive as he pummeled my ass with hard strokes and made up a story so dirty I could sometimes cum without him touching me. The sound of his voice and the steady slap of his balls against mine did it for me every time. Tonight, it was over too soon.

Lance roared as his orgasm hit him. To his credit, he didn't stop jacking me. I exploded a moment later, shaking like a leaf as he rested his head between my shoulders. Then I collapsed on my pillow and immediately grimaced as I landed face first in the wet spot.

Great.

CHAPTER 3

When I awoke the next morning, I wasn't alone. I glanced over at Lance and offered a groggy good morning before heading to the bathroom. One nice thing about waking up next to an ex with benefits was that we'd already established a routine of sorts. I woke up, made coffee and pretended to have an urgent message or ten on my cell. Lance was good about gracefully taking the hint. He didn't linger for long. But the act was getting old. I stared at my reflection in the mirror over the marble sink and wondered for the millionth time, why I settled for a less in my personal life.

Yes, Lance was smart, sexy and great in bed, but I dreaded the thought of going through the motions with him. Again. It was insulting to both of us. We deserved better than this and we weren't going to find it together. One of us had to stop responding to booty calls, I mused, just as Lance pushed open the door and headed for the toilet. I tried to avert my gaze, but his morning wood was impressive. He caught my stare in the

mirror and gave me a lopsided sleepy smile that made my dick twitch. God, I was hopeless.

“Get back in bed. I’ll be right there, baby.”

I swallowed hard and nodded.

Okay, just once more...then I’d stop.

After another orgasm, a cup of coffee and a stilted conversation, he finally left. I had an entire day to myself, but I didn’t know where to begin. The gym or maybe yoga. Then I’d call Zeke and— no. I had to leave Zeke and Benny alone. They didn’t need me hanging around. I’d shower, go exercise, shower again and then maybe I’d work while I watched football. Zeke would want to watch the game too.

Pre-Benny, I would have showed up at his door with chips and beer and the knowledge the day would take care of itself. I glanced down at my phone hoping for inspiration just as a new message flashed on my screen.

I need help hanging a fucking chandelier. You in?

My brow knit in confusion. I studied the words, wondering if the text was meant for someone else. Then I pressed Call because honestly, I wasn’t sure how to respond to that one.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked when Zeke picked up on the first ring.

He chuckled lightly and then let out a low groan. “Benny wants that little crystal chandelier from his place to go in our guestroom. It doesn’t exactly go with the décor but—”

“It’s perfect!” Benny yelled in the background. “Come over, Cart! You have to see it!”

I snickered at his over-the-top excitement. “I’ll come by, but not to get electrocuted. I don’t know how to hang a chandelier and neither do you, Zeke.”

“Sure I do. While you Upper Eastside types were busy at boarding school, I was doing time changing bulbs and whatever

miscellaneous chore my dad came up with at Bowery Bagel. I got this.”

“Changing a light bulb isn’t the same as changing a fixture,” I said warily. “What do you really want? If I get there and you’ve got ten fifty pound boxes to carry from one room to the next, I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just get over here. Benny’s making pasta. We’ll feed you for your services so you won’t feel used and abused. See ya.”

The moment I stepped into the industrial style hallway leading to my friends’ SoHo penthouse, I had a feeling this wouldn’t be a relaxing day. I could hear Benny singing loudly to a disco classic through the open door while Zeke grumbled about not having the proper tools for the job.

“I love your tool!” Benny exclaimed. “Oh hi, Carter. Perfect timing!”

“Hmph. Let’s keep the tool talk to a minimum and— what are you listening to?”

“Uh oh, someone’s cranky. I thought you had a date last night,” Benny said as he lowered the volume to Donna Summer’s “Last Dance”.

“I did.” Benny and Zeke shared a brief glance. It was the couple-y kind of look that made me rethink the wisdom of agreeing to... what was it? Hang a chandelier. “What did you guys do last night?”

“We...um...” Zeke couldn’t keep his goofy smile to himself. It spread until it lit up every bit of real estate on his handsome face. I was just grateful he wasn’t inclined to share tidbits from their married sex life. Things already felt awkward enough.

“Got it,” I said grumpily. “Where’s the lamp?”

“It’s not a lamp. It’s a teensy chandelier. I put it in the guestroom because Zeke doesn’t want it in ours. He’s very adamant. I think this

is a 'pick your battle' married moment. You win, honey," he said with a serious expression before turning to wink at me. "I want something bigger for the master anyway. Be right back!"

Zeke kept his gaze on Benny's ass as he left the great room. "You're a sucker. You know that, right?"

"Yep!" Zeke nodded emphatically before moving to the kitchen. "Want a beer?"

"It's not even noon. You can buy me a beer if we survive our stint as electricians," I snarked.

He barked a quick laugh and handed me a water bottle instead. "Deal. So...how was Lance?"

I cocked my head as I uncapped my water. "Why do you think I was with him?"

"He's your go-to guy when you're feeling kinda... blah. That's why. Don't argue. I know you too well. Lance is nice enough and he's sexy as fuck, but we've been over this a million times before...why go out with someone you barely like?"

"Sex," I said flippantly.

"I'd say that's a good reason, but I wish—"

"Hey, so do I," I interrupted. "I wish for a lot things money can't buy, Zeke, but then I end up with Lance, who at least isn't a complete asshole like some of the guys I've brought home before."

"It makes no sense to spend time with a guy you can't wait to kick out of bed in the morning."

"Get off my case, Gulden. Or help me find someone like Ben. You're lucky, you know."

"I do." Zeke gave me another megawatt grin then rolled his eyes when his husband yelled for his help.

"Be right there, baby," he said before turning back to me. "You'll find the right guy, Cart. Just don't sell yourself short."

I took another sip of water to avoid responding. There wasn't anything new to add. Everyone knew I had notoriously bad taste

in men. At least Lance was employed and was an out and proud gay man, I mused as Benny sashayed back into the kitchen. He looked fresh faced and happy. It was hard not to return his smile.

“Zeke’s checking his tool box,” he said with an eye roll. “We may have to go to the hardware store.”

I shook my head. “No chance. I’ll hire an electrician for you.”

Benny snorted. “We can hire our own if we need one, wise guy. It’s more fun to do it yourself.”

“Hmm.”

“Hey, um... before he comes back, I just—I wanted to say something to you.”

His switch from a playful to serious tone was disconcerting. I frowned and swiveled on the barstool sideways to face him. “What is it?”

“I want you to know I’m not taking your place, Cart. I respect your friendship with Zeke and I don’t want you to ever feel like you’re not welcome here. That’s all.”

Well, I didn’t expect that. It was funny because Benny had said something like that on their wedding night. We were all tipsy on amazing wine and a general sense of joy and well-being associated with once-in-a-lifetime celebrations. I thought he was feeling sweetly sentimental at the time, but I was... touched now. I could tell he’d put some thought into this and had maybe even orchestrated a few minutes alone with me.

“Thank you, Ben. I’m—that means a lot to me, but... things *have* changed and it’s the way it’s supposed to be. You make him happy. There’s no part of me that would deny either of you happiness.”

Benny launched himself into my arms. I held him for a long moment then gently pushed him back and kissed his forehead. Just as Zeke walked in.

“I leave you alone for five minutes and you start makin’

moves on my husband. Hands off, Carter. Get your own guy.” Zeke hooked one arm around my neck and the other around Benny’s and squeezed us both.

I elbowed him and broke out of his hold. Then I pointed toward their guest room as I swiped at my nose. I had to do something to keep my emotions under control. If fooling around with light bulbs was the best offer on the table, I’d take it. “Are we doing this or what?”

Zeke nodded as he drew Benny against his side. “You can supervise, babe.”

“Of course!”

I told them to go ahead without me, claiming I had to use the bathroom first. The truth was I needed a second to regroup. I felt strangely raw and off balance. I tried to tell myself I was being ridiculous but something was different. Maybe I was in an in between phase at the moment, but I had a strong premonition change was coming my way.