

STARTING FROM FAMILY

A STARTING FROM THE TOP SHORT STORY

LANE HAYES

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This short story is a companion piece to Starting From the Top. If you haven't read Johnny and Sean's story, you'll want to check that out first. Along with the rest of the Starting From Books!

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JOHNNY

“Hey, princess. How’s my girl?”
“Okay.”

Penny opened the door of the Range Rover and gingerly climbed in, setting her pink unicorn bookbag on the floor at her feet before tugging the seatbelt. She whimpered in frustration when it got stuck.

“Need help with that?” I asked.

She shook her head and tried again. “I got it.”

“Awesome and how was school today?”

This was the part of the program where my stepdaughter burst into nonstop lively chatter. If I was a betting man, I’d guess she’d start by reminding me that she was a warrior in training or a warrior princess, but never a plain ol’ princess. She might grumble about sticky seatbelts which could take a side turn into all things sticky...tape, glue, cinnamon buns. Of course, any mention of sweets was a sure sign we should stop for ice cream or make something when we got home.

Don’t ask me to explain. It was just Penny. Her mind worked like a well-oiled pinball machine. Always active, always fun, and always two steps ahead of everyone else.

I braced myself for the verbal mayhem as I pulled into traffic. Instead, I got a tired sounding, "Fine."

I shot a curious glance in the rearview mirror and frowned.

"You okay, Pen?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes. "No, I don't feel so good."

Oh. Fuck.

Okay, here's the thing. I was the adult on duty. Me. That was bad news for anyone who needed serious adult consideration. Although according to my boyfriend, I was better at handling curveball situations than I credited myself and I was good with his kids. I wasn't so sure about curveballs, but I loved Parker and Penny. They were sweet-natured, smart, and generally well-adjusted. It couldn't be easy navigating living between their mom's house and ours, but they never complained.

Then again, they were lucky to have two parents who worked hard to build a stable, loving environment for them. Which, funny enough...included me. The boyfriend slash guy currently in charge. Oh boy.

But maybe there was no reason to panic. Maybe Penny just needed to eat something.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, lowering the volume on a Smiths classic. "We can grab milkshakes from that drive-thru burger shack you like."

"No, thank you."

"Do you want make something at home? Parker's getting a ride after his science lab this afternoon, so it's just us. Do you have any school work?"

"Yes," she mumbled.

I waited a beat for her to gripe about math or tell a funny anecdote about her day. Monosyllabic responses weren't Penny's thing. She wasn't a drama queen when it came to friendships

and playground posturing. She was a sensible, cool kid, and surprisingly mature for a ten year old. Her only real quirk was that she didn't like silence.

Hmm.

I stopped at the red light and turned to get a good look at her.

She propped her elbow on the armrest and cradled her chin on her hand. Strands of her long hair fell over her eyes, shading her face from view. I reached back to pat her knee.

"Hey, honey. Talk to me. What's up?"

Penny flipped her hair over her shoulder and grinned. "You called me honey."

I raised a brow and shrugged. "Is that okay?"

"Yes, it's nice." Her breezy smile slipped a moment later. "But I really don't feel good, so can we just go home?"

I bit the inside of my cheek nervously and nodded. "You got it."

I kept up a lighthearted monologue about the adventures of Lullah and Tabby to entertain her on the remainder of the drive. My cat pretty much adopted Penny when I moved into Sean's house last summer. Lullah had been a little jealous at first so I gave the dog extra attention and unintentionally became her new best friend. Lullah followed me everywhere, sat next to me at dinner, and even conned me into letting her on the sofa when Sean wasn't home. And yeah, I wasn't going to tell him I let her sleep in our bed last night while he was away on business in Palm Springs. That wouldn't go over well.

Sean was pretty strict when it came to house rules. I wasn't. But I obeyed the important ones. I made sure the kids did their homework, ate a healthy dinner at the usual time, and went to bed when—

Oh...I fucked up last night. I baked rubbery chicken and

burnt the vegetables to an inedible crisp then gave up and made breakfast-for-dinner instead—pancakes, eggs, bacon. The kids were happy, which was great, but I hadn't paid attention to the time. I let them start a movie way too late and now...Penny wasn't feeling well.

Now I won't claim that was entirely my fault, but staying up past your bedtime after eating syrup-laden pancakes probably didn't help. Fuck. Sean was going to kill me.

I cast a wary gaze up and down our street as I waited for the high-tech gate in front of the house to slide open. The security team Charlie had hired would sniff out any crazies before they attempted to aim a camera at the Range Rover's tinted windows. I was on extra alert whenever the kids were with me. I didn't care for myself, but I did my best to shield my family from the not-so-fun aspects of living with a dude in a famous band.

Thanks to an incredibly successful tour supporting our third album, Zero was a household name. No...better than that, we were one of the biggest band in the world. No joke. How fucking cool was that? It was amazing! However, Charlie had been right to warn us that life as we'd known it would never be the same. I wasn't able to do a lot of the "normal" activities I'd always taken for granted—like meet friends at a coffee shop or leisurely cruise the ice cream aisle at the grocery store.

Don't get me wrong, I could do those things as long as I didn't mind a security detail on my ass. It wasn't fun having someone follow me around. I couldn't help thinking they were secretly judging my choices. "No, not rocky road again. What's the matter with fucking rock stars?"

Luckily, there were a few places I didn't notice them at all. I could still pick up the kids from school and even have a drink at the Zebra Den with my buddies. The kids went to private schools that already had security measures in place and the

Zebra Den was so damn dark that it was hard to see anyone clearly.

I APPRECIATED OUR FANS' enthusiasm, but I was well aware that I'd introduced a level of crazy into Sean's life that he might not have been fully prepared for. Hell, I wasn't prepared for it. I knew this wasn't how normal people lived. I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to keep my family safe. Their safety and well-being were my number one priority.

Health kind of mattered too, though. And...I was obviously not doing such a great job there. I glanced over my shoulder at my almost-step-daughter then pulled into the garage and checked my watch. I had three hours to nurse her back to health before her dad got home from his business trip.

No problem.

I hopped out of the SUV and flung the rear door open. "We're home, Penny-pie. Let's go inside and get some homework done. Then you can fix my nails. I smudged them on a towel last night."

She sat up gingerly, inspected the state of my nails with a solemn nod...and then threw up.

Yeah, I was not cut out for adulting.

ALL RIGHT. I'm happy to report that I wasn't a total disaster. My brain kicked into a gear I didn't know I possessed. I moved Penny into the house quickly and led her directly to the bathroom. I held her hair back, assuring her in my softest voice that everything was going to be okay while she alternately dry-heaved and sobbed. On the outside, I was Mr. Cool, Calm, and

Collected. On the inside, I was a hopeless wreck on the verge of stupendous breakdown.

I must have been a decent actor. After a few minutes, Penny stopped crying and let me fuss over her. I picked out her favorite Wonder Woman pajamas and set them on the bed while she brushed her teeth, then waited in the hallway for her to dress. When she handed me her puke clothes, I didn't flinch at all and better yet, I didn't panic. I held her hand, led her downstairs to the chaise end of the sectional sofa and set up a makeshift bed for her.

"Here you go...remote control and art supplies." I set a blanket over her lap and inclined my head toward the kitchen. "I'll get you some water then I'm gonna clean up the garage and wash your clothes. Lullah and Tabby will keep you company, but just holler if you need me. I'll leave the door open so I can hear you, okay?"

Penny shivered and closed her eyes.

Fuck. This wasn't good.

I hurried back with water then pulled out my cell on my way to the garage. *Please answer, please answer.*

"Hi, baby. How are you?"

Sean's deep masculine voice moved through me like a magic elixir. I felt the worst of my panic ebb and subside as my subconscious sighed in relief, happily acknowledging that we'd finally found the guy in charge.

"Terrible," I choked.

"What's wrong?" his tone was sharper now. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but Penny's sick." I filled him in on the last awful thirty minutes of my life as I gathered old beach towels to clean the mess beside the SUV.

SEAN LET OUT A RAGGED SIGH. "Fuck, I'm sorry, baby."

“You’re sorry? It’s my fault. I did this.”

“Johnny...”

“I fed the kids crap, let them go to bed later than usual, and I even felt pretty okay about it until Penny yacked all over the garage,” I confessed, holding the gross towels away from me while I tried to decide what to do with them. “Don’t worry. I’m cleaning up now.”

“Johnny, relax and—”

“Relax? I can’t relax! She’s sick, Sean. Sick. On my watch. The house is crumbling around my ears as we speak,” I added theatrically.

“The house?” he repeated dubiously. “What else is going on?”

“Well, nothing. Except I’m going to throw away your towels. I’ll buy you new ones and—”

“Just leave it, honey. I’ll take care of it when I get home. Now listen to me. Are you listening?”

“Yeah, but I’m still throwing the towels away,” I grumbled.

I leaned against the doorjamb and stared unseeing at a box labeled “Christmas” on a high shelf. I’d never had a Christmas tree or owned a single ornament until I moved in with Sean. I’d never had anything sentimental worth storing and bringing out for special occasions. I’d lived in this house for almost a year now and sometimes I wondered if I was worthy of all of this. I couldn’t rationally explain my reasoning. See, I worked my ass off and knew I deserved the accolades associated with Zero’s success. But sometimes, I still wasn’t convinced I deserved to be part of a family.

“You’re not throwing anything away,” Sean scolded, pulling me from my reverie. “Either rinse it or leave it. Take a deep breath, Johnny.”

“I can’t. I’m saving my energy for Penny. I don’t want her to see me freak out.”

Sean chuckled. I could practically feel the warmth of his smile through the phone line. "You're a good nurse."

"I'm the worst," I corrected with a huff. "She has a fever and she's trembling. I gave her some water and a blanket. I'll see if she can handle electrolytes when her stomach settles. Should I do anything else?"

"SOUNDS like you have everything under control. Let me talk to her."

I stepped into the great room and paused beside the sofa where Penny was fast asleep with Lullah cuddled on one side and Tabby on the other.

I moved out of earshot and whispered, "She's sleeping."

"Good. She probably needs the rest."

"Yeah." I pursed my lips and massaged the bridge of my nose, unsurprised that my voice cracked when I added, "Fuck, I'm so sorry, Sean."

"Hey, kids get sick. You didn't do anything wrong so quit blaming yourself," he said gently. When I didn't respond, he continued in a no-nonsense tone, "I'm not kidding, Johnny. Cool it. Look, I'm in the car now. I'll be home in a couple of hours. Sooner if traffic cooperates. I love you."

"I love you too."

I slipped my phone in my pocket and moved to Penny's side. Her eyes fluttered open when I picked the cat up and sat next to her.

"Hi, Johnny."

"Hey, kiddo. How are you feeling?" I whispered.

"Better." She reached for my hand and inspected my nails. "Can I paint them pink?"

I nodded. "Sure."

Her sweet grin faded when she met my eyes. “Why are you sad? Does your tummy hurt too?”

“No, I’m just worried about you,” I admitted.

“You are?”

“Yeah.” I pushed a strand of hair away from her eyes and smiled. “Rest your eyes, little one. It’s gonna be okay.”

I hoped.

SEAN

In spite of the brutal afternoon traffic, I made it home from the desert in record time, weaving around slower moving vehicles like I was practicing for a run in the Indy 500. Hey, my people needed me. Not that there was much I could do. This wasn't my first rodeo. I'd dealt with my share of flu bugs over the years.

But Johnny hadn't.

I pulled my BMW in the garage next to the Range Rover and hurried inside.

Lullah raced down the short hall off the kitchen to greet me. She let out a plaintive whimper as she plopped herself in the laundry room doorway where we kept her food. She didn't bark, but the message was clear.

"Someone's hungry, eh? I'll be right back, Lu. Let me check on Pen and Johnny first."

I scratched her ears and moved into the oddly quiet great room, setting my briefcase on a barstool before heading into the living area where a muted SpongeBob cartoon played on the flatscreen. I peered over the sectional and stopped in my tracks. Johnny and Penny were both

asleep. And damn, my heart suddenly felt a bit too big for my chest.

Call me crazy, but my daughter drooling on my lover's shoulder with a crayon in her hand and coloring book propped between them filled empty spaces inside me. Apparently, I had nothing to worry about.

I loosened my tie, noting the bottle of Gatorade, the glass of water, and a piece of uneaten toast on the coffee table next to an iPad, a stack of coloring books, art supplies, and a paperback copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Entertainment, fluids, and a snack covered, I mused as I skirted the sofa and accidentally kicked a red pail. I picked it up, chuckling lightly at the attached Post-it note that read, "Just in case."

"You're home," Johnny whispered.

I sat beside him and kissed his lips, his nose, and both cheeks. "How are you? It looks like have everything control."

"Well—"

"Daddy. Hi." Penny smiled groggily then scrambled to sit up before launching herself at me.

I pulled her onto my lap and kissed her forehead. Penny had grown an inch or more over the past year, but she was still a pipsqueak. And thankfully, she didn't think cuddles were uncool. Yet.

"Hi there. I heard you aren't feeling so great."

Penny nodded solemnly, twisting a lock of hair around her finger. "My stomach was funky. But I feel better now."

"Funky? Is that a medical term?" I teased.

"Johnny said it was funkyed up. Right, Johnny?"

He made a comical face and shrugged. "Yeah, something like that."

Penny giggled then leaned over to greet the dog when she set her snout on my knee and whimpered. "Oh, Lullah! Lullah, girl, come. Did you miss me?"

I straightened the collar on her Wonder Woman pajama top. “I’m sure Lullah was worried about you, but I also think she’s hungry. I’ll feed her now and—”

“Fu-funk-y farts.” Johnny winced as he hopped off the sofa. He set the coloring book on top of the others and picked up a stray crayon wedged between the cushions, accidentally leaving a small mark on the fabric. He stared at the unintentional sofa art with his mouth open. “Geez, I’m sorry. I’ll clean it after I feed the dog. I can’t believe I forgot. I’m sorry, Lullah.”

“Johnny, relax. I’ll do it.”

“No, it’s my chore. I’ll do it,” Penny announced, wriggling off my lap. “I really feel better. I promise I won’t yack.”

“Yack?” I laughed.

“That’s what Johnny called it,” she confirmed with a grin. “He said—”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m a riot.” Johnny tugged his black tee and swiped his fingers through his hair before pointing at the sofa. “You’re on sick leave, Pen. Park your tuchus and chill. Speaking of Park...Parker is eating dinner with his friends. He’ll be home by eight. I have no idea what time it is, but that might soon. And you’re probably hungry and Lullah’s fu— starving. Let me feed her and then I’ll feed you and clean up this mess and...Yeah, it’s all good. All good. You’re good, I’m good, the house is still standing. I got this.”

I arched my brow and watched him hurry into the adjoining room with Lullah at his heels.

“He’s okay, Daddy. He’s just worried,” she said sagely.

“I know. You had quite an afternoon, didn’t you?”

Penny sighed. “I don’t know what happened. I was okay at lunch, but I started feeling worse and worse. I got sick again after we got home, but I made it to the bathroom that time. No big deal. Johnny was super worried though. He looked up the flu on the internet and asked Tegan to buy us Gatorade and chicken

noodle soup. I haven't eaten anything yet. I'm still not hungry, but I don't feel bad."

"Sounds like Johnny took very good care of you."

She fixed me with a serious look. "Very good care. I should help him with Lullah and—"

"No, Johnny's right. You need rest." I kissed her forehead again and motioned for her to lie on the sofa. "I'm glad you're feeling better and you don't seem to have a fever anymore, but I'll get the thermometer to be sure. I'm going to check on Johnny and change my clothes. Holler if you need one of us, Penny-pie."

"Okay, but can I watch a different show?"

I spread a blanket over her legs and handed her the remote. "Go for it."

I found Johnny in the laundry room with Lullah. He was singing to the dog in a low voice...something that sounded like an original tune. He had a habit of making up off-the-cuff silly songs to make the kids laugh. He'd strummed his guitar like a madman and strike rock star poses while singing, "Homework sucks, oh yeah!" They loved it.

They loved him.

Parker and Penny were charmed by Johnny's good-natured attitude and upbeat personality. He could take seemingly any negative and spin it into a positive. And unless I was mistaken, he was using the same tactic to apologize to the dog for forgetting to feed her.

"...it's gonna be a two treat night, oh yeah!"

"Two treats?"

Johnny jumped, spinning around with a scowl on his handsome face. "Geez, no sneaking."

"I come in peace." I held my hands up in surrender then opened my arms. "You look like you could use a hug."

He closed his eyes briefly and sighed as he wrapped himself

around me, resting his head on my shoulder. God, it was good to be home.

"I'm glad you're here," he mumbled against my shirt.

"Me too. I'm sorry you had a rough day."

"Hmph. I thought I was doing pretty good at this stand-in parent thing, but I suck."

I held him a little tighter. "You don't suck. You're amazing."

"Yeah, right," he huffed sarcastically, pulling out of my embrace. "The good news for you is that I suck in other ways too...good ways, if you know what I mean. Hopefully, that's enough reason to keep me around."

That last line was barely audible, but I heard it and no, I didn't like it at all.

"Hey, what's going in your head?" I set my fingers under his chin. "Look at me, Johnny."

He did...and it was impossible to miss the anguish in his beautiful brown eyes. "I'm sorry about all this. I really am."

"There's no reason to apologize, baby. It's just life. Sometimes it comes at you wrapped like a Christmas present and other times, it's a shit storm."

"I know that, but I caused the shit storm. That's the difference."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I—"

"Cool it." I cradled his face in my hands and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Come upstairs. I think we need to talk."

"Talk?" Johnny rasped. He crossed his arms and shook his head. "I don't want to talk."

"Why not?"

"Sounds ominous. Like you're gonna fire me or something."

I rolled my eyes and smacked his ass. "Upstairs...now."

I moved ahead of him, pausing to check on Penny again before making my way to the master suite.

I'd unbuttoned my oxford shirt, removed my shoes, unbuckled my belt, and was about to unzip my suit pants when Johnny finally waltzed in and sat on the corner of the bench in front of the bed.

"Let's get this over with, Sean. I don't do well with uncertainty. I'm sure you're worried about my ability to care for the kids and the house when you're away...well, I guess I don't blame you. I'm a disaster, but I can do better. I can set alarms to remind myself when they should eat and sleep. And I'll look up doable recipes so I don't feed them crap and—"

"Stop."

Silence.

I let it grow even though I knew it made him nervous. Maybe that seemed unkind, but I needed his full attention. I needed him to listen to me and hear every word I said.

"Say something already. Or are you trying to give me a fuckin' heart attack?" he grouched, hanging his head unhappily.

"Johnny..."

"And you need to put some fuckin' clothes on. I can't concentrate with you looking like that."

I pursed my lips to hide my smile. "Is that a compliment?"

"Yeah, whatever. Just...what did you want to tell me?"

I sat beside him on the bench and mirrored his posture—legs spread wide, elbows on my knees. Then I glanced sideways and smiled.

"I love you."

"I love you too, but—"

"No buts. I love you. That's all. Johnny, the house could fall around our ears and I wouldn't give a fuck. As long as you and the kids are safe and happy, I'm happy. Get it?"

He knit his brow and huffed. "They weren't safe though."

"Johnny..."

"I dropped the ball and I have no excuse. I wasn't lazy.

Maybe I just wanted to be the fun ‘parent.’” He shook his head and winced. “That’s the wrong word. I know I’m not a parent. You don’t have to remind me. I’m just...sorry.”

“Life happens, Johnny. You know that better than anyone. You’re rolling along, thinking everything is good, then something unpredictable happens. If the worst thing is a flu bug, take it. Everyone gets them. They’re not fun. I feel bad for Pen, but you took care of my baby like she was your own. You held her, you comforted her, you entertained her. You did everything I would have done...maybe more. So, don’t tell me you aren’t enough. Don’t tell me you messed something up. You didn’t. You were perfect.”

He leaned against my side and flashed a sweet smile. “Perfect, eh?”

I shifted on the bench, resting my knee against his as I leaned in to kiss him. “Yes. And as for the parent comment, I—”

“Daddy! I don’t feel good,” Penny yelled from downstairs.

Johnny patted my knee. “It’s your turn.”

JOHNNY

Interesting fact about me...all of my relationships before Sean were sexed-based only. Not that I hadn't participated in normal "boyfriend" activities with those guys. I did. However, the previous men in my life weren't exactly sophisticated. Playing video games while eating greasy pizza on the floor then blowing each other ranked as an acceptable date night. Titillating conversation wasn't usually on the agenda. Sex was all that mattered. Once the thrill of exploring a new lover wore off, it was over. No hard feelings.

Sean wasn't like anyone I'd ever been with. My man was Mr. Sophisticated. If I wanted to play video games, I played with Parker. And though Sean liked pizza as much as anyone, he was a health nut—the kind of guy who insisted on vegetables at every meal and daily workouts. He didn't do spur-of-the-moment very well. He liked life to be orderly and disciplined with regular schedules and reliable information. Things I wasn't good at unless music was involved.

It wasn't that I lived like a slob before we got together. I just had my own system and it was much looser than Sean's. If I felt like eating a Pop Tart for dinner and cold pizza for breakfast, so

be it. Sean didn't operate like that. Don't get me wrong. He didn't forbid junk food or make lame house rules I would have gone out of my way to disobey. He was sneakier than that. He gave a fresh perspective, good suggestions, and yes, he made killer roasted veggies. And in return, he went along with some of my ideas. Camping in the backyard, picnics at the beach, cannon ball and belly flop contests in the pool...you get the gist.

And there was music everywhere in the house. Parker had turned into a decent guitarist and Penny was taking piano lessons. We'd soundproofed the downstairs guest bedroom and turned it into an in-home studio. My friends came by often to play—which the kids freaking loved. We'd play mini concerts and switch up instruments to make them laugh. It was mayhem. But Sean didn't seem to mind.

It was a bit quieter when the kids were with their mom, but I had a habit of leaving the studio door open or waltzing around with an acoustic guitar strapped over my shoulder, randomly strumming chords in a quest to find a new riff until Sean paused in the midst of whatever he was reading and fixed me with an exasperated look over the rim of his reading glasses.

In other words, I brought more chaos into his life.

Look, I rarely apologized for it 'cause hey, a little madness was good for the soul. In a way, I figured a healthy dose of fun was my contribution to my new home. But after Penny's flu bug incident, I worried that I'd done more harm than good. Nonstop fun wasn't sustainable.

I knew that Sean didn't expect me to be a clown or offer endless entertainment for the kids. But I worried about my role in his house. I wasn't the kids' stepdad or their babysitter. I was their father's live-in lover. Was that enough?

It's not like I expected a ring or anything, but—whatever. The point was...I'd never thought twice about my place until the flu fiasco. And now, I thought about it all the fucking time. I

tried to act cool and casual, but I paid extra attention to details and rules. I figured if we needed to make any adjustments as a couple, it was best to be proactive.

A couple weeks later, everything seemed fine. The kids were good, our pets were good, and Sean was...great.

He was happy, upbeat, playful—and if possible, the sex was better than ever. Which I hadn't thought was possible. I'd never been with anyone who pushed my limits and thrilled me the way he did. The dirty talk alone was worth the price of admission.

"That's right, baby. So fucking hot. Such a good boy," he purred.

Sean ran his hands along my thigh, squeezing my ass as he rode me from behind, setting a slow but steady pace. I curled my fingers of one hand around the slats of the headboard and the other around my shaft. I jacked myself, pushing my hips backward to meet his thrust for thrust. I groaned when his dick nudged my prostate and upped the tempo, stroking and writhing wantonly. I was right there. Sweat and precum dripped from my brow onto the pillow beneath me. My balls drew close and pleasure tingled at the base of my spine.

"Mmm. Sean, I'm gonna—" He stopped. I heard him panting behind me and could feel his hands on my ass, but he didn't move his hips. I glared at him over my shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't say you could come. You wait till I tell you."

I opened my mouth in dismay. "You're not the boss of me."

Sean shot a devilish grin at me, chuckling as he leaned forward.

"We'll see about that." He smacked my ass. Hard. Then he swatted my hand from my cock and took over. When I wiggled forward, looking for friction, he stopped again. When I went still, he moved.

“Grr. Fuck me,” I demanded.

“I will. My way. I want you to come so hard you see stars. You love this, don’t you?”

“No,” I lied.

Sean snickered. “Are you lying?”

“Y-yeah,” I choked, sighing with relief when he quickened his pace, setting one hand on my shoulder.

“That’s a good boy. I’m gonna come inside you. I want you to wait till—”

“Ungh.”

Too late.

My orgasm ripped through me like a tsunami. Jizz shot over Sean’s fist and across his pillow just as he poured himself inside me, roaring with the force of his release.

Our heavy breathing was the only sound in our room. After a few minutes, we wordlessly cleaned up, changed the pillow sheets, and fell into bed with our feet tangled.

“You’re a terrible listener,” he snorted, caressing my hip and kissing my nose sweetly. “Of course, I’m the boss of you.”

It was a joke and we both knew it. This was my cue to egg him on, call him Daddy, and ask him if he was going to spank me. He’d probably smack my butt and we’d laugh.

No judging. It was how we played and we both fucking loved it.

But that wasn’t how it went down.

“Are you the boss of me?”

Sean must have caught something in my voice. He narrowed his eyes and pushed my hair from my forehead. “Well, no. I’m not actually the boss of—”

“I know that. I know.” I winced, immediately pulling the sheet over my head.

Sean plucked it away. “But?”

I released a lungful of air, intending to brush my foolish

insecurities aside. But the look of absolute love and adoration in his gaze stopped me. This man loved me. I didn't get it and I didn't always feel worthy, but I'd do whatever was necessary to keep this in my life. Even admit that I was a head case.

"I know this is stupid, but..." Okay, never mind. I couldn't do it. I shook my head and collapsed on the pillow. "It's nothing. I'm tired."

"Don't do that, Johnny. Talk to me. Please." He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip and kissed it. "Please."

"Okay, um...I'm worried about something."

"What is it?"

"When Penny had the flu and the house turned upside down and I panicked and...I realized that I don't know what my job is here. Everyone has a place in a family, right? I don't know because I've never had one till now. The thing is...I think I need a title. Is that weird? It can be silly, like official dog feeder or music man or—"

"Husband."

My mouth fell open. "What?"

"Marry me." Sean reached for my hand and kissed it. "Be my husband. Be my lover, my best friend, step dad to our kids...be mine."

I swallowed hard, blinking in shock. "I wasn't looking for a proposal. I just wasn't sure what—"

"I don't want you to be unsure of anything, Johnny. This is your home. We're your family, baby," Sean said softly.

"Th-thank you, I..."

"I have a ring."

"You do?"

He nodded and kissed my fingers. "Yes. I had a plan to do this...properly, at the right time. But I think that time is now. I love you, Johnny. I am desperately, madly in love with you. I have never been more sure of anything or anyone in my life. I

want to grow old with you. I want your forever. Will you marry me?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” I flung my arms around him and crashed my mouth over his.

We had tears in our eyes and wore big, goofy grins when we broke for air. I traced his jawline then threaded my fingers with his. I could envision the rings there already. Symbol of commitment and a forever promise. Those weren't things I'd ever thought possible. But I wanted this with all my heart.

I wanted him. Always. And it was kind of perfect that we were starting from family.

STARTING FROM SERIES

Take it from the top! It begins with a song, then a record deal, followed by a tour, and a little geekiness...

Starting From Zero, Book 1

Justin Cuevas is going through a rough patch. A broken relationship, a scandal, and the demise of his band have shaken the aspiring rock star's confidence. With a little luck, he's hoping to re-launch his music career in LA with his new band, Zero. The key is to stay focused, and not get distracted by his past...or the sexy songwriter he can't get out of his head.

Gray Robertson has written dozens of hits and worked with some of the biggest names in the industry. But he's never met anyone like Justin. The younger man is fiery, passionate, and smart. A powerful voice for a new generation. Other than an unforgettable one-night stand and a passion for music, the two men have nothing in common. Or do they?

Starting From Scratch, Book 2

Charlie Rourke is an ultra fabulous human whirlwind on a mission to launch the next biggest band in the world. However, he might have taken on more than he could handle when he signed on to manage Zero.

Ky Baldwin loves a challenge as much as anyone, but Charlie doesn't make things easy. Zero's manager is a force of nature and Ky can't stop thinking about him.

Starting From Here, Book 3

Everything is finally going well for Declan...until his drummer breaks his wrists. He needs a quick replacement to record one more song and the obvious candidate hates his guts. Isn't there an expiration date on holding a grudge?

Tegan doesn't trust Declan McNamara. Sure, he's talented, smart, and has more sex appeal than any one person should be allowed, but—he's trouble. However, Scratch Record's survival may depend on a truce and extreme measures...of the fake boyfriend variety. It may be time to set the past aside and start over...here and now.

Starting From Somewhere, Book 4

Bobby J knows what he likes and he isn't afraid to go for it. And he likes the adorable geek from the bar. A lot. He's smart and sassy...and he doesn't seem to know or care that Bobby J is in a hot up-and-coming band. However, when he finds out Cody is the new intern at Scratch Records, things get tricky.

Cody's quest is to research cool things and interesting people before starting his job as aerospace analyst—not fall for a rock star. He may be in over his head, but you've got to start somewhere.

**COMING SOON! FOLLOWING THE RULES -
MAY 2021**

Geeks rule! Get ready for my new geeky series, The Script Club!

EXCERPT FROM FOLLOWING THE RULES -
MAY 2021

When in doubt, offer libations...

“Sorry, Chris. My timing has been off for a couple of weeks.” I raked my fingers through my messy locks and gestured toward the great room. “Can I get you something to drink? OJ, Diet Coke, water, tequila?”

“My name isn’t Chris. It’s Christopher,” he said primly, scanning the high ceilings and the collage of black and white photography in the foyer. “My friends call me Topher or Toph.”

“Cool. Pleased to meet you.”

“We’ve met,” he blurted. “It was a long time ago. You probably don’t remember. I was at your parents’ house for a small party for George’s birthday. You were there with a bunch of... football people.”

I smiled. I probably had met him. But I’d met a lot of people and names were not my forte. “That could be—”

“Beowulf? Did you really say Beowulf?” He sighed heavily, awkwardly clutching the strap of his computer bag as he paced from one corner of the small foyer to the other. “I’m very rusty on my Old English poems.”

I chuckled. “Dude, so am I. Let’s head this way. I need to put on a pair of shorts.”

He moved behind me down a short hallway to the main living area. Now this was where most people dropped their jaws and gaped in wonder at the stunning view of the Pacific beyond the floor to ceiling windows. Sunlight glittered like diamonds on the waves. I’d lived here for two years and woke to this view every day I wasn’t on the road. It never failed to impress.

But Chris—excuse me, Topher didn’t seem particularly impressed. He seemed agitated. He mumbled about Grendel, Anglo Saxon construction, and...alliteration? No idea. He set his bag on a barstool and continued pacing from one end of the island to the other.

“Think, think, think. Beowulf is a hero’s tale. I know that much. He defeats Grendel but dies fighting a dragon some fifty years later. Maybe. I’ll have to do some research. Not to worry. I’m very good at research.”

I wasn’t sure he was talking to me, but I gave him a thumbs up and inclined my head toward my room.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll be right back.”

I stepped sideways and bumped into him on his third lap, dislodging the towel from my waist. It slipped to the floor between us in a *whoosh*.

Now here’s the thing...I’d spent a good deal of my life in locker rooms, and dropping my towel didn’t register as even slightly embarrassing. Teammates, coaches, physicians, sports reporters...they’d seen it all. However, I wasn’t in a locker room and Topher was my brother’s very tightly-wound friend. Any moment now, he’d freak out.

On the bright side, he might stop talking about Beowulf.

“Oh, my God. You are fucking huge.”

I widened my eyes comically and let out a very undignified snort-laugh.

“Well, thanks. I think.” I bent to retrieve the towel and did a double-take before wrapping the fabric around my ass. “You’re staring at my junk, Christopher.”

“Topher,” he corrected. “And don’t mind me. I’m just doing the math.”

“What math?”

He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times then cleared his throat. “Um...nothing. It’s just a science thing.”

“My dick is a science thing?”

“Everything is science. Even your penis. Did you know that the humans may have the largest penis of all primates? Girth-wise, that is. A gorilla’s appendage is just two inches long.”

“You don’t say.” I set the towel on the island and crossed my arms over my chest, leaving said appendage on full display. In the name of science.

Topher adjusted his glasses. “It’s true. The average human male’s genitalia is just over five inches long when erect. Chimpanzees and bonobos are similar in length, but more slender than ours.”

“So a chimpanzee has a pencil dick.”

“Some humans may as well.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced away as if to hide his pinkening cheeks. “You don’t.”

My grin was so wide it hurt. “No, I don’t. But how can you tell in my, um...current state?”

He met my gaze then and furrowed his brow. “You should put some clothes on. I think this is an inappropriate conversation.”

I chuckled as I wrapped the towel around my waist again. “You think?”

“Well, if you want honest opinion...the human anatomy is fascinating and quite beautiful. I don’t find it inappropriate, but I’m...”

“A scientist,” I finished for him.

“Exactly.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lane Hayes loves a good romance! An avid reader from an early age, she has always been drawn to well-told love story with beautifully written characters. Her debut novel was a 2013 Rainbow Award finalist and subsequent books have received Honorable Mentions, and were winners in the 2016, 2017, and 2018-2019 Rainbow Awards. She loves red wine, chocolate and travel (in no particular order). Lane lives in Southern California with her amazing husband in a not quite empty nest.

***Join Lane's reading group, Lane's Lovers for immediate updates!**



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Starting From Scratch

Starting From Here

Starting From Somewhere

Starting From the Top

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Out in the Offense

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