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Beat the Band

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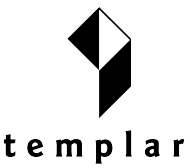


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BEAT THE BAND

DON CALAME



CHAPTER ONE

BORN TO RUN

"This is it, dawgs," I say. "From boys to men. Tenth grade is the year we tag all the bases. First, second, third and then we *slide* into home."

"I'd just be happy to step into the batter's box again," Sean says.

I shoot him a gimme-a-break look. "Don't be so mopey, dude. Tianna was just a practice swing. Now you're primed to aim for the fences."

Me, Matt and Sean shortcut across Dreyfus Park, our bikes kicking up the dust that settled over the summer as we head towards the beige brick building of Lower Rockville High that looms like a penitentiary. A penitentiary chock with hotties, to be sure, but a lock-up for most of the daylight hours, nonetheless.

"I don't know," Sean says. "I don't think I'm over her yet."

"Of course you aren't," Matt consoles. "It's only been a week since you split up."

I laugh. "Are you kidding me? They were only going out for a month. A week is more than enough time to get over it. It's standard formula: One day of angst for every week you were dating. Four weeks, four days. Over and out. Any more time is just a wank."

Matt looks at me in disbelief. "Where do you get these things?"

"It's common knowledge, dude. Google it."

"What do I do if I see her in the hall?" Sean asks.

"What do you mean, *if*?" I say, pumping the pedals on my creaky mountain bike, feeling the strain in my legs as we split up for the goalposts and ride over the football field. "You are going to see her in the hall. She might even be in a bunch of your classes. Who gives
a crap?"

"Just say hi," Matt offers.

"*No.*" I glare at Matt. "Wrong. Do not take advice from the Whipped One." I turn to Sean. "You say nothing. She dumped you, so she no longer exists. Simple as that."

"Ignore her?" Sean says. "I don't know if I can do that."

I sigh, exasperated. "Look, Sean. You're a changed man. We all are. This past summer was epic. Look at

all we accomplished. Our first party, yours and Matt's first girlfriends, Matt kicking ass in the butterfly, seeing our first naked babe—"

Sean cringes. "*Please*. Do *not* bring that up ever again. I'm still having nightmares about Ms Luntz threatening to suffocate me with her gargantuan gazongas unless I swim a thousand laps."

"What I'm trying to say is, you're no longer wet behind the ears. Tianna breaking up with you is the best thing that could have happened. I mean, seriously, why would you want to waste the best years of your life tied to just one babe? No offence, Matt."

"Why would I be offended?" Matt says. "It's not like me and Valerie are getting married."

"No," I say. "You're just having her baby."

Matt scowls. "You're so full of it, Coop."

"Sean-o? A little back-up here. Matthew is, in fact, carrying Valerie's baby, is he not?"

"Leave me out of it," Sean says, the wind whipping his hair.

I raise my eyebrows at Matt, like "Need I say more?"

"Jealous much?" Matt says.

"Oh, yeah, without a doubt. Green as hell. Aren't we, Sean? We'd love to have to ask permission any time we want to do something. And be dragged to

every chick flick that comes out. And have to drop everything whenever our 'honeykins' calls."

Matt shakes his head. "Everything you just said is total bullshit. And you know it."

I smirk. "Then why is your face getting red?"

"Because it isn't."

I glance at Sean. "Sean-o?"

Sean looks off into the distance. "I said, leave me out of it."

Matt rolls his eyes. "Yeah, you guys have really matured this summer. It's staggering."

We hop the kerb into the student car park and pedal towards the bike racks. The lot is already full. I don't have my driving licence yet – another thing I need to get started on this year – but everyone knows that if you want to nab a parking space you have to get to school at least twenty minutes early. We pass my sister Angela's car, recognisable by the fact that it's the only one in the lot with a car cover. It's her sickness. One of many.

"Look, Matt," I say. "You're acting like we think it's a *bad* thing. So, Valerie's got a tight grip on your Mr BoDangles. At least you're getting some. Some of what, I'm not sure. But you seem comfortable with the trade-off. Personally, I wouldn't be. And I'd be lying if I said Sean and I don't miss you sometimes. But we get by. Don't we, Sean?"

Sean says nothing. Jesus, I hope he's not going to

use this Tianna thing as an excuse to be such a soggy turd all year long.

The three of us coast up to the bike racks and leap off our bikes.

"All I'm saying is, we have an opportunity here." I pull a key from the pocket of my jeans, unlock my bike lock and unravel the chain from round the seat post. "Our summer goal was a success. We saw a live naked—"

"Hey!" Sean shouts, waving a yellow coil lock at me like a weapon. "Did I not just ask you never to bring that up again?"

I laugh. "Sorry. But remember what I told you at the beginning of the summer? About the natural order of things? Internet porn, live naked girl and then the dirty deed? Well, we're ready to take that next step."

"Would you stop it with that stupid theory of yours?" Matt says. "You wouldn't know the natural order of things if it crapped on your head."

Sean snickers. I ignore him and give Matt a you-can't-be-serious look. "Correct me if I'm wrong here, Matt. Maybe I shouldn't be including you with me and Sean. Maybe you've already rounded all the bases.

If you have, just say so."

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Matt says, snapping

his lock shut for emphasis.

"So, *no*. That's cool. Maybe they're more conservative up in Canada. Valerie probably wants to wait until you tie the knot or something. Tell me you've at least gotten to second, though?"

We start our trek past the soon-to-be-smelling-like-hell dumpsters towards the back doors of the school.

"You know what?" Matt sighs. "The only people who talk about sex as much as you are the ones who haven't even gotten up to bat yet."

I slap my forehead. "Oh, my God. Not even second base? Jesus. What's the point of letting Val cinch the choke chain so tight then, Mattie?"

"Valerie and I are doing just fine, thank you very much."

"Well then?" I ask.

"It's private."

"It's private," I mimic. "Dude, you don't think she's gabbing about it to all her galpals? That's all babes do. They talk and talk and talk about *everything*."

"Whatever," Matt says. "Anyway, even if I was going to tell you – which I'm not – I have no idea what *your* definitions of the bases are. I'm sure they're probably incredibly sick and twisted."

I place my hand on my chest. "Hey, when it comes to the bases I happen to be a purist. First is Frenching.

Second is fondling the floppers. Third is rummaging in the basement. Home run is all the way."

"I thought third was oral," Sean says.

"No, that's choking up on the bat," I say. "And then of course there's the conference on the mound. The knuckleball. A doubleheader. Extra innings. A grand slam. And, of course, the triple play." I waggle my eyebrows at my friends. "Which also happens to be in my plans for this year."

"In your dreams." Matt grabs the door and holds it open.

"All great things begin with a dream, Mattie," I say as we enter the building, ready to start what promises to be an epic first semester.

CHAPTER TWO

COME TOGETHER

"And here we go," Mrs Turris says, reaching her soft, dumpling hand into the blue shoebox that sits on her desk. I feel like I swallowed a still-buzzing bee as she pulls two slips of paper from the box.

I can't believe we're already being subjected to the humiliation lottery and it's only third period on the first day back to school. Mrs Turris says that this will be a 'glorious and enriching opportunity' for us to work with one of our classmates for an *entire semester*. Each couple will get to research a specialised health topic, after which we will – as a pair of studied-up experts – present our findings to the class by 'teaching' everyone what we've learned.

Not a ten-minute presentation. Not a twenty-minute demonstration. A *whole hour lesson* with handouts, visual aids, questions and answers and who

the hell knows what else, the whole of which will make up 85 percent of our grade in Health.

It's a big old diaper load if you ask me. Sounds like a way for our Health teacher to get out of doing her job. Make the helpless slaves do the dirty work.

When I brought this up with Mrs Turris – in not so many words – she just laughed and said, "Cooper Redmond, you rascal, you've found me out." Like it was all a big joke or something.

But she's going forward with it anyway.

If this were one of those work-with-a-partner-for-one-week deals there'd be a lot less at stake. But we're talking about being shackled to a person for *three solid months* – in and out of class. Depending on who you get, it could either be genius or a world of pain. If I'm lucky, I'll get Matt or Sean. If I'm super lucky, I'll be partnered up with one of the Phenomenal Four – Prudence Nash, Kelly West, Bronte Hastings or Gina Lagotta. It's rare you get four of the school's hottest girls in one class, which I take as a solid omen for the year. Working that close with any one of them will give me ample opportunity to play some serious *babes*ball.

The papers make a rustling sound as Mrs Turris unfolds them. "Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Hickey," she reads.

All the kids in the classroom snicker.

Andy winces.

Nicky's head drops.

Class assbag meet Cabbage Boy. Sometimes there *is* justice in the world.

I can breathe again. The first pairing has been decided, and already two of the biggest booby prizes have been awarded. And to each other. Which is classic.

The only thing you have to know about Andy Bennett – besides the fact that he's been desperately trying to grow a moustache for the last two years – is that he likes to spit Jell-O cubes at all the babes and can't understand why this move doesn't make them lie down naked at his feet.

And Nicky Hickey? Smells. Bad. Real bad. Like Brussels sprouts rolled in fish food. He might not even be such a terrible guy, but you just can't hang with him long enough to find out.

Me, Matt and Sean share a thank-holy-Jesus look.

Mrs Turris brushes a curly blonde lock from her forehead. "The topic you will be researching and teaching a lesson on will be…" She grabs the nearby yellow shoebox and blindly plucks an index card from it. Drum roll please. "Alcohol."

"I did a few pints of research on that very subject this past weekend," Andy quips, running his hand down the baby beard he's sprouting on his chin.

One person sniggers in the back corner, but really, nobody wants to encourage him.

Mrs Turris ignores Andy's comment and continues reading the card. "Its effects on the body. Consequences of driving under the influence. Alcohol addiction. Et cetera."

Personally, I don't give two turds what subject I get. But I *have* to get a cool partner. Everything else is dealable.

Mrs Turris dips her paw back into the blue shoebox and draws two more names.

"Sean Hance and Matthew Gratton."

Matt and Sean fist-bump. The bastards.

They both turn to me and make apologetic faces. I give them a shit-happens shrug, 'cause what else am I supposed to do? Threaten to ignore the food pyramid and eat a crap diet until Mrs Turris pairs me up with one of them? As if I've ever eaten 'heart healthy' in my life.

It would have been stagg to work with Matt. We would have had a ton of laughs and maybe even gotten a decent grade, 'cause Matt's actually pretty smart.

I wouldn't even have minded Sean. I mean, sure, we'd have barely passed, but at least we're friends and neither of us smells like anus.

Mrs Turris scratches hard at her pad, trying to get

the ink running in her pen so she can write down their names.

I take a breath. No need to panic. Everything's chill here. I'd rather get one of the lovely ladies anyway.

I lean over to Prudence Nash – her soft brown hair framing her Victoria's-Secret-model face – and shoot her my irresistible, whadda-ya-say grin. "Looks like our odds just got a little better, huh?" I whisper.

"For what?" Prudence says, staring straight ahead. "A reason to commit suicide?"

"For you and me, babe. That is, if your luck holds." I give her a sly head tilt as Mrs Turris rummages in her drawer for a new writing implement. "Who knows? Maybe we'll be assigned the *Kama Sutra*. We can demonstrate the seventy-two most pleasurable love-making positions. What do you think about that?"

Prudence flips me the middle finger. Still not looking in my direction.

"Mee-ouch. You do know that's how the deaf talk dirty to each other."

Prudence whips round and gives me the slow burn.

"And your topic is," Mrs Turris says, finally ready to reveal Matt's and Sean's fate, "sexually transmitted diseases. STDs. Contraction, prevention and treatment."

Matt's and Sean's life-is-great expressions suddenly sour. Pube lice and penile scabbing. Not exactly a car for Christmas, is it, fellas?

My cheeks start to tug a smile, but I wrest control.

Mrs Turris scribbles the topic down, then grabs two more names.

"Gina Lagotta and Kelly West," she calls out.

Jesus Christ. Two more of my prospects paired up with each other. I don't like how this is shaking out.

Okay, just stay positive. There's still Bodacious Bronte and Primo Prudence.

I smile at Prudence to let her know she's still my number one. Waggle the eyebrows. "The plot thickens."

Prudence's hand rockets into the air. "Mrs Turris?"

"Yes, Prudence," Mrs Turris says, her sausage-fingers hovering over the yellow shoebox.

"I'm not feeling well. May I go to the nurse?"

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I just got *really* nauseous."

"How about you wait until we see who your partner is, so you two can schedule a time to meet. Then you can go to the nurse."

Prudence huffs and crosses her arms.

"Kelly and Gina, the subject of your lesson will be…" Mrs Turris pulls an index card. She's having way too much fun with this. "Nutrition. What constitutes

a healthy diet? Effects of an unhealthy one. How to read a nutrition label. And the like."

I scan the room to assess the situation. Beyond the two choice babes left, all the other potentials are bottom-feeders at best. I suppose I could deal with most of them if I absolutely *had* to. Anyone except Justin 'Stoned Senseless' Sneep. I'd end up having to do all the work, which would be a giant sack of blowage.

Come to think of it, if I wind up working with Prudence or Bronte, I'll probably have to do the whole project myself as well. Although, if they'd be willing to work out an appropriate barter system, it might not be so bad.

Still, I think I should have a plan B. So I'm not completely devastated if I lose out on my first tier of partners. Preferably someone who's so concerned about being paired with me and my slothful ways that they'll take up the lion's share. Someone who's too nice to get mad at me. Someone like…

"Sam Shattenkirk," Mrs Turris reads, fumbling with the folded second slip.

Yes! Smart, clean, friendly, non-threatening Sam. He's my back-up man. My back-up plan. A lightness fills my chest. A flicker of hope. Come to Cooper. Come on. Cooper Redmond. Cooper Redmond.

"And…" She gets the paper unfolded and reads. "Prudence Nash."

Damn it. It's like I'm sinking in quicksand and all my lifelines keep snapping.

Mrs Turris smiles at Prudence. "There you go, dear. You can go see the nurse now."

"That's okay," Prudence says, tossing me a screw-you smirk. "I feel *much* better."

I wink at her to let her know I understand she's disappointed.

Prudence rolls her eyes.

It's the dance we do. Like birds before they mate. She hates me now, but some day soon, at some party or something, she'll succumb to the Cooper charm and we'll fall into each other's arms, making out like a couple of horny cave people. We'll retreat to one of the bedrooms and chew and claw each other's clothes off. And then, finally, I'll get a full view of the serpent tattoo that snakes down the small of her back. The one I've only gotten teasing glances of when she squats to pick something up off the floor and her low-rise jeans ride just a little lower.

Mrs Turris reads out Sam's and Prudence's topic but it doesn't register. I'm still stuck on Prudence's tattoo. I'm imagining what it will be like to spend the rest of my life examining every inch of it.

"This is so exciting." Mrs Turris laughs. She's got the kind of round, trusting face you'd see on a pancake box. "I love placing things in Fate's hands. It always

turns out for the best in the end, I think."

Okay, I may yurp.

I sigh loudly. Several of my comrades stifle chuckles.

Mrs Turris pays no attention and grabs another slip of paper from her torture box.

I've pretty much given up trying to will the outcome of this. My Jedi mind control is obviously on the fritz today. I don't even care who I get twinned up with any more. Like it even matters. It's just stupid Health. Sure I need to pass to graduate, but how hard is it going to be to swing a D-plus? Really. I'll even take Stoner Sneep. Bring it on. Give me the worst you've got, Mrs Turris. Give me boogers-in-the-nose Gerald Tyrell. Toss me Tara ten-chins with the wandering eye and steel-wool mullet.

I breeze cheese in Fate's face. How do you like that, teach?

"Cooper Redmond…"

Here we go, people. I maintain my chillaxed pose: slouching posture, one arm dangling carelessly over the back of my chair.

Mrs Turris does an on-purpose, anticipation-inducing, Academy Awards-y delay.

Whatever. Let her have her fun.

Nothing can faze me at this point.

"And Helen Harriwick."

Except.

Maybe.

That.

The class bursts with laughter.

Hot Dog Helen? Are you twisting me? I hadn't even considered this. I didn't even notice she was in the class. She makes herself that invisible.

My skin prickles with heat and my head swims, but I keep my face blank. Need to be cazh. Can't appear weak.

But come on! Jesus Christ!

Prudence has her hand clasped over her mouth. Her eyes dart over to me and they are filled with evil glee.

Matt and Sean have matching 'yikes' expressions plastered on their mugs. They're trying to be all sympathetic, but I can see both of them stifling laughs.

I turn around and find Helen, whose skim-milk skin has gone blotchy with clouds of pink. She is staring hard at her Health textbook, pretending the hysteria has nothing to do with the fact that she's the school's most taunted pariah.

Thanks a ton, Mrs Turris. Fate can eat me. There is *no way* this is 'for the best'.

Okay. I need to breathe. To think. How can I get out of this? There has to be a way. I just need to concentrate.

Maybe Jell-O hawkin' Andy would be willing to flip stinky Nicky. But as soon as I think this, I see the mirthful tears coursing down his cheeks and I already know he'd never go for it.

Nothing could be worse than this.

Absolutely nothing.

"And your topic shall be…" Mrs Turris announces like a judge handing down a life sentence. She has suddenly grown thirty feet tall, sprouted horns and is engulfed in flames. Her voice is distorted and timpani-low as she reads my conviction. "Contraaaaceptioooon."

The room erupts in a nuclear explosion of whoops and howls. Gina and Kelly actually do a double fist-bump, exploding their hands in celebration.

I try to keep calm but my head is still spinning.

I swear I see Mrs Turris look up to the heavens and cackle.

"The various forms of, including condoms, the pill and diaphragm. Cost, reliability, effectiveness, ease of use…"

The desks, the chalkboard, the windows, the laughing mouths of Kelly, Bronte, Prudence and Gina all swirl around me. I can only catch snippets of their jeers: "field research…", "Corn Dog Coop…", "Put some *condom*-ments on that wiener…"

The last thing I see is Helen, books clutched

to her chest, fleeing the classroom.

And then the darkness collapses around me, and right before the world disappears, I hear Andy's voice calling out, "Theebedda – theebedda – theebedda – that's all folks!"