

Some Assembly Required  
(1<sup>st</sup> chapter sample)

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CHAPTER ONE

We met by the Billy

I didn't mean to meet anyone at Ikea. It just sort of happened.

I definitely don't consider furniture stores some new sort of hang out, but, you know what they say: when you know, you just know.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and my brother Mike had made me tag along with his fiancée to buy something for their home.

She wanted a couch, he wanted a bookcase, they wanted someone who could compromise for them.

So she brought with her single friend Susan, an early-thirties blonde with a love for Lady Gaga, Britney, and aerobics. Fantastic.

Mike brought me, his brother: a single writer in his late-twenties with a love for everything not aerobics and pop music.

Perfect. I love it when things started off well.

And it did. It started off perfectly fine to begin with.

Mike picked me up at my place, with everyone coming already sitting where they needed to be.

I opened the door behind his fiancée, sat down, buckled up, and they left.

There we were, all four adults sitting in the car - Mike's car - driving down to the local large Swedish style consortium. Slightly cramped in the back of his Toyota, we all struggled to find a common ground.

"Let's listen to Britney!" screamed the delightfully high-pitched blonde.

"It's not Britney weather," said Mike's fiancée Loren, looking out the window at the blue skies, white puffy wisps of cloud, trees, parks, and dogs playing frisbee whirred by the highway at super-fast speeds. "It's more like Dave Matthews weather. Play that."

"Why not find some jazz?" I chimed in, like someone lost in time who shouldn't have been here in the first place.

"Look," Mike said, his voice jumping in over the top of all of us, "it's my car and I say what we're playing. And it's this."

And he reached over and switched on the radio to a rock station to keep our ears tuned for the rest of the journey.

Which lasted a good ten minutes or so.

Throughout this time - this ordeal - everyone pretty much kept to themselves. Someone would occasionally say "nice weather" and we'd all grunt, sigh, wish we were out there

swimming in a pool, taking it all in, enjoying it all, and then we'd all shut up and go back to listening to 99.6 Rock Always Rocks FM.

And then we arrived, parked, got out, stretched our legs, and piled into the store, a giant box of a place painted blue with a Swedish flag hoisted on top. Customers were clambering in and out, ready to buy goods that came in pieces in boxes with a simple tool to put them together.

And here I was trying to be set up with one tool whom I had nothing in common with.

As we walked to the boxy building, I could see Loren motioning Susan to talk to me, to be friendly with me, he's a writer you know, very important, you and I would be like close family, get friendly with him.

So she did. Or attempt to.

She walked up beside me, keeping pace almost identically with me and said "so, Loren tells me you like to write."

"I do," I said, almost absent-mindedly, wishing I had stayed at home or walked around the block a few times. I wasn't good at social situations. I could see that, I was pretty sure everyone else could see that. I don't really know why people bothered. "I do it for work and for pleasure."

Susan's interest piqued - a word she probably didn't know - she said "oh really? I write at work too. I'm a secretary. I do a lot of writing there. What do you write at work?"

"I write the dead," I said, stopping Susan in her tracks

and still moving forward. She turned to Loren and instead Mike caught up with me, the sun beating down on us like rats in a desert.

"Danny," Mike said, his voice uneasy and comfortable and still trying to be controlling, at least of this situation.

"Mikey," I said, still walking, "what are we doing here?"

"I told you on the phone," he said, "I need to buy some furniture. You're our helpful opinion."

"You're trying to set me up," I said. "You know how much I don't like to be set up."

Mike shook his head, walking more slowly as we waited for the women behind us to catch up.

"Hey, I'm not trying to set you up," Mike said. "Loren is. She's got this crazy idea that because you're single and her friend Susan is single, that maybe you two could hit it off."

I turned to him to see his smiling face in the sun. Despite being younger, he had always been more mature when it came to dealing with ladies. He had been the one with the social life, the charm, the charisma. What I'd been left with was still up for debate, but it damn sure wasn't the ability to attract women.

My last few dates had been grabbed from the Internet, because I had so wilfully given up meeting people in bars.

It had always worked like this:

I'd go to club or pub or bar or art opening, start

talking to a girl that looked like she and I could have an interest, and then I'd go get us some drinks. An easy start, sure enough. Several drinks in and a couple of hours later, the talking would be fine and both of us semi-lubricated, the end result would be almost exactly like clockwork. She would tell me that it was great getting to know me, and thanks for the drinks, and then she'd go over and find someone better looking than me, more charming, and thirty minutes later - if that - they'd leave together.

Sometimes it would even be Mike they'd leave with.

Or at least, that's what it was like when we were younger.

My Internet dates went a little better, while still leaving me worse for wear. It's not that I had a problem with the web - no, it was an excellent way to meet women without spending fifty bucks on drinks only to find them ditch me for someone else at the end of the night.

It's just that the people I met online had the tendency to be crazy.

One tried to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while I still had food in my mouth, chewing on a chicken schnitzel at a new local schnitzelry. Maybe she enjoyed open-mouth meal kissing, I don't know.

Another told me that she was so strong, I could punch her anywhere. Being the gentleman I was, I refused - it's not polite to hit a lady. It was then that she told me she was

formerly a man and stormed off.

Mike had much better luck with women. He had found beauty in every girl in high school and university. He had been Mister Popular, walking down the corridors of where ever he went and finding hot girls staring right back at him, all the while his geeky brother went through life being ignored by everyone.

I looked at Mike and then at his beautiful fiancée - Loren, the envy of everyone at university whom Mike had somehow convinced to marry him. Her long brown hair and perfectly tanned skin, large round breasts, and always visible midriff still made men turn their heads.

How had Mike turned out so well?

"Mike," I said looking back at the girls wrapped in a conversation, "she and I will have nothing in common."

"I know, right," said Mike, already aware of it. "I mean, she's dumb and hot, and you're smart and not."

I quickly stared at him walked forward, Mike catching up and grabbing my arm.

"Brother," he called out after me, "you know I'm just playing."

"Look, it wasn't my idea. Loren has this thing she does. She likes to set people up. She's convinced herself that she's good at it, that she's a bona-fide matchmaker."

"I just wish she'd stay out of my life," I mumbled, stopping outside of the blue building marked so boldly in

yellow I, K, E, and A capital letters.

"So would I," Mike said, "believe me. But just give her this one, try her out. And help me buy a bookshelf."

I looked at Mike and shook my head, smiling.

"Fine, fine," I said.

The girls finally caught up to us, Susan recovering from my weird words and Loren squinting at me. I had inadvertently attempted to sabotage her hopes to intertwine her friend with my life. Heaven forbid.

If she thought that was bad, she must have hated what would happen later.

It was around thirty minutes in when I saw her, a shortish girl - shorter than my five-foot-nine height - with short brown hair and a fair complexion looking at a bookcase, squinting and trying to imagine it in her room.

Our group was standing by the couches on the other side of the room, trying to do the exact same thing.

Loren would say "sit on it, tell me if it's comfy, and then try to imagine it in our home."

So I sat on it, as did the now overly flirtatious Susan, who had been trying her best to touch, prod, and feel me for the better half of whenever we entered this place.

"Relax into it," Loren said, "let the couch overtake your body."

I pushed my body into the couch, but only felt the hard frame underneath. Perhaps I was pushing too much.



Mike just shook his head and looked over to the bookcases, what he actually wanted.

"I really like it!" Susan screamed with delight, inching toward me as she said so. "It's soooooo comfy and I could just get into something with someone here." She looked at me with glee.

At least I think it was glee. It's highly possible it could have been some other emotion that I wasn't used to seeing.

Susan had been more touchy-feely since we entered the store, no doubt thanks to a quick talking to by Loren who still thought we'd make a cute couple.

"I'm not sure," I said, trying hard to get out of Susan's gaze.

"Oh pish posh," Loren said, dismissively, "you just haven't pictured it in our home."

I got up from the seat just as Susan tried to put her hand around me, getting a little too comfy before she'd even met me.

I'm sure Loren had this day all planned: shopping for couches is probably a perfect way for two people to get close to each other. It was probably a pointless affair anyway. When did they buy a couch last?

"He doesn't care about where he sits," Mike declared proudly, his grizzly voice shining through. "He cares where his books go, where his records go, where his little boxes of

whatever the hell he buys goes."

"Umm," I started, not really sure what was going on.

"Fine," Loren said, rather defiantly. "You sit down then dear, and tell me what you think."

Mike did as he was told, a good boyfriend, fiancée, a good future husband.

"Fine, fine," he said, falling to Loren's will, "but Dan, do us a favour and check out the shelves. I really need something for the office."

"You have an office?" I asked, curious of this new room that was being made for someone who could work anywhere where there was a power port available for his laptop.

"It's this weird idea he has," Loren said, as if it was the farthest thing from her mind, as if she wanted no part in the idea whatsoever, as if she didn't care. She probably didn't. "Mike thinks it'll make him work better."

"It will," he cried, looking up at his future wife before taking a quick glance or two at the legs of Susan sitting next to him. "Just go and check out the bookshelves for me. We'll be over in a minute."

I merely shrugged and walked off, keeping inside the lines and following the path to the shelves on the other side of the room, the side where she stood.

I had noticed her when we entered, when we were still looking at couches.

You know that moment where you see someone and it just

has to be? I got that feeling looking at her. It's not that I had to have her, I just had to meet her. I had to do everything in my power to at least make the attempt to get to know her. It was that sort of feeling.

As I got closer, I could see she was by a bookshelf, which was nice and coincidental, because I needed to look at a bookshelf.

I walked closer - almost next to her - examining the bookshelf, trying hard not to accidentally intentionally walk into her, while other customers of the store walked around us, into us, ignoring us, doing their own shop.

The bookcase was easy. It could store books, CDs, DVDs, documents, and ultimately would serve Mike's needs well. It even came in beech, Mike's favourite colour scheme.

Ultimately, I didn't really care about colour, function or form, I was just desperately trying to come up with anything that would let me talk to this girl, who ever she was.

My mind was racked, my brain struggling to come up with something fun and stupid and playful enough to get her attention as she shifted her head from one side to the other, looking at the bookshelf and probably picturing it in her home. With her books, with her DVDs, with a cup of coffee on a Sunday morning as she stood in a towel and waited for the day to dry her off.

Nothing. I had nothing to say, standing near her as I

gazed at the bookshelf and tried to imagine what she was thinking.

"Billy!" I exclaimed, probably a bit too loudly for a Sunday afternoon shopper, reading the tag, the name of the product. I laughed a little, a school girl giggle, and said "why would you name something after a goat?" chuckling to myself.

She smiled, didn't turn, and said "or after an idol".

I smiled too, but didn't turn to face her, chuckling some more, "or after Joel."

She chuckled with me, our faces still not meeting, now imagining a bookcase as a rockstar, as Billy Idol, as Billy Joel.

"Or a kid!" she said, turning to me as she said "Maybe they named it for Billy the Kid?"

I laughed some more, pointing out that "isn't a kid a goat?"

"And here we are," she said, chuckling, "back to where we started from!"

I chuckled. She chuckled. We all chuckled.

"That was nice," she said.

"Yeah," I agreed, a nice diversion, albeit a stupid opening line. I noticed her necklace, with gold writing, "Alexandra?"

"Have we met?" she said, curiously.

"No, I don't think so," I said, covering quickly. "I was

just reading your necklace. I'm pretty sure I'd remember someone as pretty as you."

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"Oh," she said, her hand coming up to her name necklace, covering it, rubbing it, wishing it wasn't there pointing out the obvious. "Well," she said, her smile fading, "I've gotta go buy this Billy."

"Great," I said, raising my hand to say goodbye, friends that had never met in the first place.

She backed up, walking away facing me, and then turning her back as she got closer to the entrance to the next section of the furniture store.

I didn't follow her. That would just be strange. There's nothing romantic about a weird guy following you from room to room, place to place. Unless you're into that sort of thing, which I doubt she was.

A second later, Mike came up from behind me, and put his hand on my shoulder, practically shouting "so what did you find" into my ear.

"Argh!" I screamed, once again, a bit too loudly for a Sunday afternoon at Ikea. "You scared me," I said, looking over my shoulder to a smiling baby brother with larger arm muscles than me.

"I found this," motioning toward the bookcase where a few minutes before, a beautiful girl whom I was chatting up once stood.

Mike took a few steps toward the bookcase, his eyes taking it in, my eyes still glossed over while I thought about that tiny chat with the girl whose necklace told everyone her name.

"And it even comes in beech," Mike said, "because you know how much I love the beach."

Hardy har freaking har. He loves the beach. Beech. One of them. Both. Who cares.

"You love beech," I said, walking behind him and slapping his shoulder like he did to me.

"I love the beech," he said, again, nodding his head. "This'll do fine. Although Loren will insist I get it in chocolate. Or red."

"Why would you want a red bookcase," I asked, scrunching my face up.

"I think it's a designer thing," Mike said, referring to Loren's day job.

"Why would she want it in red, though?" I asked, still confused.

"She settled on this orangey-red couch," Mike said, his face never turning to meet mine, instead imagining the red bookcase in the same room as the orangey-red crouch. It was a very colourful imagination Mike was forced to keep.

"I thought the bookcase was for your office," I said, recalling the conversation only a few minutes prior.

"It was," he said, "but I know the way she thinks."

"That's what relationships do to you," he said, now turning to me, his smile turning to slightly upturned serious face.

"Ah," I said, nodding, seeing my brother's predicament, and getting over it and going back to Alex.

"You okay?" Mike asked, "you look like you're missing something."

"I'm fine," I said, nodding.

I was missing something. I hadn't really acted. Or had I? It was all confusing. I wasn't used to acting out and trying new things. What was happening to me?

"Did we find something suitable?" Loren called from behind both of us, Mike and I both turning to find the smiling faces of Loren - who was about to get a new couch - and Susan, who was trying to get close to me.

"Hun," Mike said, putting out his arm, "meet Billy," pointing to the bookcase.

Loren gazed at it, staring at the design, taking it all in, and imagining it in Mike's office, and then the lounge room.

"Perfect," she said, "can we get it in red?"