

THE PERFECT BROTHER by Chris Patchell

EXCERPT

Prologue

Katie Lord knew her fiancé Tim couldn't possibly mean what he'd said when he'd stormed out of her apartment last night. They weren't over. It was just a stupid argument. But for the hundredth time that morning, she picked up her phone, hoping to see a message. *Nothing*. Despite the dozens of texts she'd sent him, she hadn't received a single response. She checked her reception. It wouldn't be the first time she missed a message because the cellular network was crap.

Four bars.

Dammit.

Katie slammed down the phone, no longer able to deny the ugly truth. He was ignoring her, treating her as if everything was her fault.

Hell yes, she'd been angry. Any girl in her situation with a brain in her head would be. They were engaged, and yet he was getting text messages from a girl at work—a girl he claimed was “just a friend.”

Just a friend, her ass. That damned girl was always sniffing around him. Whenever a group from work went out for beers, she was eager to join, and when the guys had planned an overnight camping trip, guess who wanted to tag along? Then when everyone else had dropped out... Well, it should have been obvious to Tim that the right thing to do would have been to cancel the trip. But no. They'd had to fight about it instead.

“Don't you trust me?” Tim had snapped, hands on his hips, glaring at Katie as if she was in the wrong.

“This isn't about you. It's about her.”

“If you trusted me, we wouldn't be arguing about this.”

Tim was dead wrong. If he wanted to act naïve and treat Katie like she was a jealous lunatic, then so be it, but Katie wasn't fooled. She knew how girls operated and this one didn't give a damn that Tim was engaged. She was trying to drive a wedge between Katie and Tim, and it was working.

Katie wrenched the engagement ring off her finger and stared at the ugly white tan line left behind. She tried to imagine what her life would be like without him, but she couldn't. Just the thought of it made her ache as if half of her soul had been stripped away. Shoving the ring back into place, Katie shook off her fears.

She was being ridiculous. Dramatic. Didn't Tim always say so? Once he'd had time to cool off, he'd call her, and they'd make up, the same way they always did.

Until then, she'd lose her mind if she spent another minute obsessing. Grabbing her phone, Katie plugged in her earbuds and headed outside. A run would be just the thing to get Tim off her mind and quiet the drumbeat of panic steadily building inside her.

The morning had started out rainy, but now the sun had pierced a hole in the angry clouds and set the maple leaves ablaze. Stunning shades of crimson and gold adorned the trees that bordered the twisty trail through the woods to the park.

Katie didn't bother stretching. Surely the steep uphill walk from her apartment to the trail would be enough of a warm-up. Jamming her favorite playlist, she broke into a lumbering jog, losing herself in Meghan Trainor's rendition of "Me Too." It was just the right song to shake off her dour mood.

A quarter mile into her run, Katie was already panting. With her chest heaving and heart pounding, she slowed. *Damn, this is hard.* It had been months since her last run. She didn't expect to feel winded quite so soon. Katie promised herself she would only walk long enough to catch her breath, then she'd hit it again. If she needed more motivation to get back into shape, her pathetic lack of cardio would be enough.

Besides, just last week Tim made a crack about the five pounds she'd gained since they'd gotten engaged. Five lousy pounds.

He was the one who insisted they swing by the coffee shop every morning before he dropped her off at school instead of going for a run. She would have suggested he go alone, but Katie didn't like the way the barista at the coffee shop flirted with him. Tim didn't seem to notice, and when she'd finally worked up the nerve to mention it, he'd accused her of being paranoid.

Easy for him to say. He wouldn't much like it if some strange guy was hitting on her. And why wouldn't someone hit on her? Despite the extra weight she was carrying, she still looked cute.

A burst of anger at Tim's thoughtlessness spurred her into another sprint. She'd get back into shape and then she'd be the one going on hiking trips with her friends instead of wasting hours waiting for a message that might never come. The thought of Tim waiting on her for a change cheered Katie.

By the time she made it to the center of the park, her heart rate crested one hundred fifty beats per minute. Half a mile. Not bad for her first run.

Katie flattened her palm against her chest and waited for her breath to slow, and that's when she felt it. The first pea-sized pellet of hail streaked down from an angry sky. Charcoal clouds gathered overhead and choked out the sun. The first strike was quickly followed by a second, and then...

Katie uttered an indignant squeal. Desperately scanning the trail, she searched for a place to take shelter and spied a white gazebo. She hurtled across the slippery grass as fast as her neon green Nikes would carry her and pounded up the steps. Katie slid to a sudden halt when she realized that she wasn't the only runner seeking shelter from the storm.

Tim.

Just the sight of him standing in the gazebo with his back turned sent an electric pulse of relief surging through her. Her hungry gaze devoured his broad shoulders and lean waist. She yanked out her earbuds and rushed toward him when he turned.

Tim's name died on her lips. Katie's hopes plummeted as she took in the man's face. It wasn't Tim, but there was something familiar about the handsome stranger. She studied his bronze complexion and ebony eyes, trying to place him. She'd seen him before, she was sure of it, but where? As if sensing her confusion, his mouth curved into a grin that made Katie's heart stop.

"Hell of a storm," he said.

Katie's breath sped up, forming dewy clouds in the cooling air. He had a killer smile.

"Sure is."

"You were running too?" he asked.

With a self-conscious grin, Katie glanced down at her bare legs, which she hadn't shaved in a few days, and shrugged.

"If you could call it that. I used to run every day, but it's been a while."

She was lying. Even back when she did run, she'd be lucky to make it out twice a week, but that sounded pathetic. From the way his rain-streaked hoodie clung to his well-toned torso, he looked in shape. His buff frame showed no hint of the slight paunch that Tim's belly was starting to form.

"Nice shoes," he said.

A glimmer of admiration flashed in his dark eyes as his gaze swept over her, from her flushed cheeks, all the way down to her size nine Nikes. She warmed under his lingering appraisal, wondering how long it had been since Tim had looked at her that way.

"The trail over by the reservoir is my favorite," he said. "What's yours?"

"I like the one through the woods."

God, could she sound any more lame? Hailstones struck the gazebo's tin roof in an atonal symphony that filled the silence between them.

"You're Katie, right?"

An unexpected thrill raced through her.

"Do I know you?"

He flashed an amused grin. "From school. Business ethics class."

Something clicked inside Katie's mind and her mouth dropped open.

"Oh my god, of course. You know how it is when you see someone out of context."

"Yeah."

He gave a quick laugh and shifted his gaze beyond her, watching the ice pellets bounce off the tin roof onto the grass. Goosebumps rippled across Katie's arms and she shivered, wishing she'd brought a jacket. As if reading her mind, he stripped off his sweatshirt and draped it around her shoulders. The soft fabric still held the warmth from his body. Katie hugged it close.

"Thank you."

"Seeing as how my run's pretty much shot for the day, want to grab some coffee? I know a place close by..."

Her pulse leapt at the unexpected question. It was dangerous. She was engaged. What would Tim say?

Nestled in the armband strapped around her bicep, Katie's phone buzzed. In that moment, a sudden realization struck her. She didn't give a damn what Tim thought. He was the one who had

walked out on her. He was the one who saw no harm in flirting with the girl from work. And the barista. And god only knew who else.

It was just coffee. Nothing more.

Besides, a little harmless flirtation never killed anyone, right?

Chapter 1

One hundred seventy-two days until graduation, and then she'd get a real job. One that didn't start so damned early. Even god wasn't up yet, Mallory Riggins thought as she eased out of the apartment, locking the door behind her. The wind hissed through the towering pines, sending a damp chill racing through her. Deep shadows fell across the lawn, and not for the first time, she wished the security light mounted to the edge of the house still worked.

It was spooky out here alone. Normally, she parked her car in the garage, one of the few luxuries the small apartment carved out of the sprawling duplex offered, but the landlord's son had arrived home last night for an unexpected visit and had parked in her spot, which meant that she had to park her rust bucket on the side of the road.

The sound of the closing door triggered the landlord's dog. From somewhere up above, JoJo erupted into a barking fit. Mallory cringed.

"Hush, JoJo," she muttered, hoping the dog wouldn't rouse her roommate. Shelby was already annoyed that after two years, the dog still greeted them as if they were armed intruders.

The barking dog had jarred her awake last night too. Mallory hadn't bothered to see what was causing all the racket. Between her heavy class load, late-night study sessions, and her new boyfriend, she needed all the sleep she could get. As much as she would have preferred calling in sick and getting some extra rest, the meager funds in her bank account were already dangerously low, and somehow, she still had to make it through the end of the school year.

Then all she had to do was find a job that paid more than minimum wage to cover the rent, the utilities, and still have enough money left over to buy food. In a city as expensive as Vancouver, how hard could that be?

Mallory scrambled up the steep hill toward the roadside, her feet sliding in the wet earth. It had stormed overnight. Pine cones and downed branches lay scattered across the narrow road, shaken free from the fierce wind.

By the time she reached her car, Mallory was shivering, and her day, which already wasn't winning any awards, got a whole lot worse.

Pebbles of glass crunched beneath her feet. She stared at her car in dismay. The driver's side window was shattered.

The universe was definitely sending her a message, and if she had an ounce of common sense, she'd crawl back beneath the covers and start over. But that wasn't an option. With a broken window to fix, she needed the money from her job even more. Sheathing her hand with the sleeve of her coat, she swept the chunks of glass from the seat and climbed inside the car.

Rain had blown in through the broken window. The wet seat soaked through her jeans and Mallory groaned. She cranked the key and the sputtering engine coughed to life. Lights from the neighboring houses flickered on. The sleepy residential neighborhood was just beginning to stir to life as Mallory drove off.

The Daily Grind, with its brick walls, metal stools, and wooden tables, had a homey feel. The earthy scent of freshly roasted beans welcomed her as she pushed through the doors. For the next three hours, this place would be the first stop for every caffeine junkie in a five-mile radius starting out on their morning commute.

No sooner had she entered the shop when she locked gazes with her boss. There was no denying the fact that she was late. Rather than belabor the point, Mallory muttered an apology, strapped on her apron, and went to work.

Nothing about the morning had gone smoothly so far, so it should have come as no surprise when Mallory fumbled a hot cup of tea. It struck the edge of the countertop, spun around in a cartwheel, and sent a plume of hot water flying. Mallory jumped back, avoiding the worst of the spill, but a few stray drops scalded her forearm. She breathed in a painful hiss and grabbed a rag.

Meanwhile, the line tripled in size.

Ignoring the painful burn, she pinned on a frozen smile and greeted the next customer. *Mr. Quad Grande Breve*. He was cute with dark hair and kind eyes.

"The usual?" she asked.

"You always remember," he said with a grin. "Toss in an extra shot this morning, please. God knows, I could use it."

Puffy bags shadowed his dark eyes, and Mallory noticed that the poor guy looked as tired as she felt.

“A quad grande breve with an extra shot of love for Tim,” she called to her boss, Jenn, who was working the machines. “That will be four dollars and ten cents.”

Uncapping a black Sharpie, Mallory jotted down the drink order, and winced at the sting of the red welt forming on her arm.

“Are you okay?” Tim asked, gesturing toward the angry burn. “You really should get that under some cold water.”

If it wasn’t so damned busy, she would do just that, but with the lineup curving out the door, she didn’t have time.

“Tis but a flesh wound,” Mallory quipped, making light of the pain.

“Kind of early for Monty Python, don’t you think?”

Mallory grinned in surprise at his quick pick-up on the line. “Well, what can I say? So far, it’s been a shitty day. My car was broken into last night.”

“The Toyota?”

Mallory nodded. “They smashed the window.”

“That sucks. What did they steal?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. I might need to sacrifice a chicken, or an eggplant, or whatever the universe deems necessary to get back into karma’s good graces.”

Tim chuckled, handing her a stack of one-dollar coins. Loonies. Mallory made change, which Tim dropped into the tip jar. The coins rang against the glass and she thanked him with a smile. The next customer in line uttered an impatient sigh. Mallory took the hint.

“Have a good one,” she said to Tim.

“Hope your day gets better. If you need someone to fix your glass, or find a live chicken, I know a guy. He does good work.”

“With the window or the chicken?” Mallory smirked.

“Both.”

With a friendly wave, Tim was gone, and Mallory took the next order. Dozens of customers later, when the line finally began to subside, something he’d said stuck inside Mallory’s mind.

“Wait. How does he know I drive a Toyota?”

She’d muttered the question under her breath. Both Tim and his drink were long gone.

“Who? Mr. Quad Grande Breve?” Jenn asked. “Any fool with eyes could see he’s got a thing for you.”

“Nah, he’s got a girlfriend.”

Jenn snorted. “That bitter pill? She wasn’t with him this morning. Besides, you know how men are. My ex was onto his third girlfriend before I found out.”

A single mother with two exes, Jenn never had a nice word to say about anyone.

“Maybe he’s a stalker,” Joe the dishwasher said.

Joe was an acting student. He was always mimicking someone, and this morning, it was Arnold Schwarzenegger, adapting a line from the movie *Kindergarten Cop*.

“Not you too,” she groaned.

Joe chuckled and slid behind the counter, carrying a tray of freshly washed mugs. Mallory shook her head and took the next order. They were both paranoid. Mr. Quad Grande Breve...Tim...was a nice guy. He always asked how her day was going, and unlike most people she met, he seemed to care about the answer. And he always bought his girlfriend’s drinks. Few guys she met at the shop were that considerate.

By ten o’clock the rush had slowed to a trickle. Mallory tallied her tips and grabbed her purse.

“Leaving?”

“Gotta run. Class awaits.”

“Do it. Do it now,” Joe called after her, still using the ridiculous Schwarzenegger voice.

Mallory rolled her eyes. “Hate to break it to you, Joe, but you’re a foot and a half too short to make a convincing Arnie.”

Even with his chest puffed out and stretched to his full height, Joe was still an inch or two shorter than she was.

“If Tom Cruise can play Jack Reacher, why can’t I be the Terminator?”

“Point taken,” she said with a laugh.

By the time Mallory left the shop, she’d forgotten all about the burn on her arm and Tim, and pretty much everything but school. Sheets of rain blew across the busy street. Mallory pulled her hood up and waited for a break in traffic. Why couldn’t her car have been broken into on a day when it wasn’t so blustery? By now, with the rain blowing through the busted window, the driver’s seat would feel like a wet sponge.

The stream of traffic slowed, and Mallory dashed across the street. She didn't see the car that streaked around the corner until its headlights hit her square in the eyes. A burst of panic exploded inside her chest as she dodged out of the way. Tripping over a storm drain, she crashed to the ground beside her car, landing on all fours.

And that was when Mallory's phone broke.