

BLIND KISS EXCERPT

WE SAT AT the bar of the pub as I continued to stare at him, a mixture of curiosity and fear boiling in my gut. He ordered a beer, and I ordered Chardonnay with beer-cheese pretzels.

“That’s different for you.”

I usually stuck to salads, an old habit from my dancing days, but I had lost a lot of weight in the past few weeks. “Don’t think you can distract me so easily. Tell me what’s going on. Did you break up with Briel?”

He took a long pull from his beer and stared straight ahead. “Don’t be mad, okay?”

I stared at him, wordlessly, the fear fully boiling over. And then he dropped the bomb on me.

The next few minutes were hazy as Gavin, the bar, and my glass of Chardonnay swam together before my eyes. I tried to reach for the glass but found it suddenly empty. *That’s weird. It was full a minute ago.* I motioned to the bartender for another, then poured it down my throat in a steady stream.

I was breathing fast when I slammed the glass on the bar, shattering my fugue state—and bringing Gavin into sharp relief. I was reeling.

“Shit, Penny! Be careful. You almost shattered your glass!” He practically yelled.

“You’re moving to fucking France?!” I yelled back.

The bartender jerked his head toward the door, and within minutes Gavin was forcibly dragging me out of the bar by the arm. I slipped out of his grip and stood in the middle of the parking lot, seething, very much drunk, and fully freaking out. “So, do you love her?”

“Briel? What kind of question is that?”

“Just answer me.”

“Fuck, Penny. That’s not what this is about. I don’t really have a choice here, though, do I?”

“You always have a choice.”

He glared at me. “That’s fucking rich, coming from you.”

I shook my head vigorously. “Totally different situation.”

“Like hell it was.”

“When do you leave?”

“In two days.”

“WHAT?!”

He ran up and shook me by the shoulders. “Jesus, if I knew you were gonna take it like this, I wouldn’t have told you in public. Pull yourself together.”

I screamed at the top of my lungs and then made a guttural sound as I hunched over and held my stomach.

“First Milo, now you?”

“Don’t you put that on me. I’m not the reason why you’re about to be alone and unhappy.”

“Fuck you, Gavin!”

“Fuck you, Penny!”

He didn’t turn around—he just stormed off in typical Gavin fashion: petulant, recalcitrant, and a total shithead. People in the parking lot were gawking, appalled, covering their children’s ears. But no one made a move to leave. When Gavin and I got like this, we were like a car wreck by the side of the road, impossible to look away from.

Gavin slid into his ’67 Chevelle and fired up the engine. I hated that car because he loved it so much. It had a black leather interior, a flawless paint job, and tinted windows, like it belonged to some kind of celebrity—which Gavin definitely wasn’t. It was his only possession worth a dime, besides his garage, a few guitars, and a Zippo lighter he swore River Phoenix had given to him at the Viper Room the night of his death.

I ran to the exit and stood in the middle of the lane, daring him to run me over as he ripped out of his parking spot and raced around the corner toward the exit. “We’re not done talking, you coward!”

He slowed but let the car idle while he revved the engine. “I *dare* you!” I yelled.

He stuck his head out the window, leaned his tattooed arm against the door, and actually *grinned* at me.

So smug. What a dick.

“You look ridiculous standing there. Get out of the way!”

I walked toward his window and noticed that his demeanor had completely softened. There was even humor in his expression. He wanted me to block him, and he knew I would.

“Can’t you have a proper fight without running away?”

“You were lecturing me, yet again. I have a mother, thank you. You have a child you can order around . . . and a husband you can control. I don’t need your shit, okay? Don’t you realize that I’m freaking out, too? I’m going through the hardest time of my life, and you’re making this all about you.”

“You’ve been going through the hardest time of your life for the whole fourteen years I’ve known you.”

“And as my friend, do you think you’re helping my situation right now?” he spat back, his mood shifting once again. “Don’t even. Don’t you dare act like I haven’t been a good friend to you. You’ve put me in the most awkward situations, you’ve bolted on me, you’ve stopped speaking to me for weeks at a time, but still . . . I make myself available to you. I’ve been *here* for you, always. And now you’re moving thousands of miles away when I need you most?”

He shook his head slowly. “That’s right, Penny. You *have* been here. You’ve been right by my side, lecturing me, rolling your eyes at me, pressuring me to get serious about Briel, all so I could go and fuck up my life even more while you sit in your nice house, with your KitchenAid mixer, your Oracle espresso machine, and your fucking yellow Lab.”

“Don’t talk about Buckley that way! He’s a good dog. And you love our espresso machine.”

Gavin's lips turned up at the corners. "You're so messed up, Penny. You definitely have a chemical imbalance."

I pointed to my chest, shocked. "Me? Look who's talking? Please, pull into a parking space. I don't want to stand here anymore, making a spectacle of myself. Some parent from Milo's school is probably watching this whole thing. There'll be whispers at the next PTA meeting. Is that what

you want for me?"

"Don't pretend like you go to PTA meetings. And look around; everyone's gone. It's just us."

He was right. The parking lot had cleared out. Gavin was sitting in his idling car while I was standing outside his window like a moron.

"I resent you for saying I pushed Briel on you. And yes, for your information, I do go to PTA meetings."

"*You* encouraged me to go out with her, then you needled me about it until I finally did."

"You were horribly depressed! I thought you were gonna jump off a bridge. I told you to go out with her and to have some fun. She's a nice girl. I didn't say turn your life upside down, pack up, and run away with a foreigner! You're thirty-six-years old, Gavin. I think it's time you grew up." I shook my head. "God, I can't believe you."

He jerked his head back and squinted. "Great band but not totally PC to call someone a foreigner, Penny." His voice was low.

"Are you going to become a French citizen now, too? You better brush up on your French."

"Everyone speaks English there."

"No, they don't! People always say that, but you'll see. They might be able to communicate to a degree, but it's not conversational English."

Why am I still standing here, screaming about French people?

I needed to tie this conversation up in a pretty little bow. I needed closure. I couldn't say good-bye to my best friend without it. He was leaving, going to France to chase a girlfriend

I knew he didn't love. I was losing him. And it was my fault. We couldn't leave each other angry.

"I'll figure it out," he said. "Try not to make me feel worse about my situation, though I know that's hard for you." "Your situation? It's always *your* situation. What about *my* situation?" He just stared at me. He was hurting; I could tell. But I was hurting, too. "Listen—"

"What?"

"Don't interrupt me." I cleared my throat. "Gavin . . . it's just . . . I'm going to fucking miss you, okay? I'm having a hard time right now, and life is about to get a whole lot harder the second you leave." I started to cry.

He hated it when I cried, but he didn't ask me, "Why are you crying?" He never had to ask. He took a deep breath in through his nose, then released it forcefully in a burst of frustration. A second later his car stalled. He put it in gear, got out, and swooped me up in a bear hug. "Penny, Penny, Penny . . . my crazy girl," he said as he rubbed my back. I was wiping my snot-covered nose on his black T-shirt and he didn't care one bit.

He held me for a long time. When he started to release me, I said, "It's not enough."

He picked me up again and squeezed me harder. Tucking his face into my neck, he said, "It'll never be enough."

"Why?" I said, fully bawling against his shoulder. He brushed a strand of my hair, damp with tears, behind my ear. "I have to go, and so do you. You need to be with your family now."

I felt the lump in my throat growing. "You don't have to constantly remind me that I have a family. I love my family. But you're a part of it, too, and that's why I'm here. That's why I'm fucking crying in the parking lot in front of Bank of America."

He pulled away and we stood there, two feet apart, staring at each other, as if we were committing each other to memory. Allowing one another to really look at and take the other person in, stripped down to our bones, without scrutiny.

"Is this it?" I asked.

"This is it, P."

I shook my head, leaned up on my toes, and wrapped my arms around him. We hugged again for a long time before he got into his car. I tried to hold on to the

feeling of having him in my arms, or maybe I was trying to hold on to the feeling of being held in his.

He started the engine as I stood there, waiting for him to leave.

“We’ll talk on the phone or email or something, okay?”

“Okay,” I told him.

He swallowed nervously. Looking up at me from the car window, he said, “I wish it were you, Penny.”

That was my bow. He knew I needed it, good or bad—no matter what feelings it shook loose from our long and complicated history together.