

LBRIS

We know
books

Well, Actually

MAZEY EDDINGS



**HEADLINE
ETERNAL**

Content Notes

Hello, dearest reader,

We meet again! Unless, of course, this is your first time with one of my books, in which case, welcome! While this romance is rompy, goofy, and fairly irreverent, please be aware that the following are present/discussed in the novel:

- Internalized biphobia
- Workplace abuse
- Toxic masculinity and internalized misogyny
- Grief after loss of a loved one

As always, I've done my best to handle these topics with nuance and compassion. Please take care of yourself while reading.

All my love,
Mazey

EBRIS

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Chapter 1

I ALWAYS EXPECTED MY CAREER WOULD REVOLVE LESS around wieners than it does.

I assumed there would be *some* wieners, of course (more euphemistically, less the ingested type), but as I finish my fourth hot dog of the day, sliding it down my gullet along with any dignity and self-respect I may have had, say, a year ago, I'm reminded that assumptions don't pay the bills and when your hard-hitting journalism career (read: clickbait-centric joke of a job) asks you to eat hot dogs with B- to D-list celebrities for social media videos, you don't ask *Why?* just *How many?*

"Do you have a favorite cheese?" I ask Harry O'Connell, an Irish keyboardist of an up-and-coming band called Tea Time Tantrum.

"I feel like it's rather basic, but I'd have to say cheddar." He flashes a cheeky smile, his eyes so blue they make me blush.

Which also makes me feel old because he's only twenty-one and I'm a haggard twenty-seven navigating life without health insurance or a clue.

"Would you also say you're a Kraft Single ready to mingle?" I volley back in my deadpan, dead-soul voice that got me this job of "acting" miserable on the internet while talking to beautiful people.

Unfortunately, my stupid joke doesn't land. Not even in a way that we can turn into a "Hot celeb stares in disbelief and confusion at Eva Kitt's ridiculous question" that garners us shareable moments. Instead, Harry looks at me with an expression that's equal measures pained, confused, and blank, and I'm left wondering if I should take up a religion that believes in confession and repentance just so I can be absolved of how fucking pathetic this all is.

After a reset and replaced hot dogs we have to eat half of for continuity purposes, I hit him with, "We'd be Gouda together, don't you think?"

Prepared for the final joke, Harry doesn't give a truly honest reaction, but he's a good sport, shock and humor playing out in spades across his handsome face. It's a performance convincing enough that when he looks me in the eyes and says, "Don't toy with me if you aren't serious. You might just break my heart if this is a joke," I know viewers will eat it up and spread wildfire gossip about us.

"That's a wrap," Aida, my producer/guardian angel/best friend, calls after I take the last bite of my room-temperature weenie.

This is the extent of my love life: lukewarm hot dogs under

glaring studio lights, some contrived flirty banter with a guy too young for me, and us hugging briefly at the end as we lie about how much fun we had chatting, then parting ways forever . . . Or until his career stagnates and he's scheduled with me again to respark rumors around our flirtatious interview.

How shocking that I walk home alone.

Well, not fully alone. Aida keeps me company for the shared blocks of our commutes, her to Hell's Kitchen, me to the Lower East Side.

"That went really well, I think," she says, more to herself than me, as she furiously types an email on her phone, responds to a text, and somehow manages to post a flawless selfie to her story, finding the only slice of sunshine on this dreary October day, the rays highlighting her light-brown skin and the smattering of freckles across her nose so she looks like some sort of ethereal creature. The woman is the blueprint of the hustle, and that includes knowing her angles. "He was a great guest. We'll push this one hard on socials. I think there were a lot of meme-able moments in there."

"Yeah, some real disruptive journalistic investigation." My voice is as dark as the questionable puddle I accidentally splash through while crossing the street. "Can't wait for my Pulitzer."

Aida rolls her eyes. "Your dedication to groundbreaking news and truth telling was cute when you had student loans to live off, but maybe tone down the angst. We're getting paid to create this fluff. Relatively decently, I might add."

I scoff but let it go. My paycheck would be objectively

comfortable in a small Midwestern town, but in New York, it makes splurging on silly little treats—which, granted, is a daily self-care measure in the form of Diet Cokes and lattes—come with a splash of financial panic. Just enough to keep things spicy.

We both chugged through college and grad school with the naive idealism afforded to students, but real life kicked us in the teeth as soon as we got a glimpse of our debt-repayment plans. She's handled it with a much stiffer upper lip than I have.

My listlessness must be palpable to Aida, because she grabs me by the shoulders at her subway stop, giving me a little rattle before smooshing my cheeks between her palms and placing a rough kiss to my forehead.

"Everything's okay," she says, making me hold her gaze as she gives me another shake. "Satirically interviewing low-level celebrities over hot dogs wasn't your dream career . . . so what? You're at least in the field you want to work in, even if it's a different beat."

I go to argue, but she cuts me off.

"You don't have to have it all settled and perfect. Life marches forward regardless of your plans, babe. Soundbites is a decent media outlet, one you could work your way up in to start covering topics you actually care about. Plus you have your column thingy. That's growing, right?"

I nod, deciding to spare her the bleak reality of my latest creative endeavor. I started posting a recurring column on a platform called Babble after reading about some frenetic twenty-year-old whose writing career took off on the site

from her pieces about living with ADHD. The app basically gave blogging a Gen Z facelift, merging the best parts of Pinterest, Reddit, and Twitter (in its golden age). The content runs the gamut from aesthetic pics to current events, with plenty of shitposts in between.

I put out my column, “Unlikeable,” weekly with updates in digestible segments on women’s issues ranging from legislation to pop culture with a fair amount of international analysis too. While most news impacting women ranges from bleak to downright disgraceful of late, I try to end every piece with a touch of optimism—glimmers of humor and hope wherever I can.

It did well at first, gaining about four hundred subscribers in the first few weeks—admittedly modest by many standards, but I was shocked—and I stupidly started fantasizing about what it could become: maybe adding an audio component where I interview authors and activists. Have comedians write special guest posts until I top the engagement charts. Earn sponsorships and monetization deals while having my choice of freelance gigs for all my dream publications.

But it stagnated and is now on a downward trend. Any engagement I get, especially from screenshotted snippets I cross-post to other social media platforms, is filled with men familiar with my role on *Sausage Talk* taking to the comments and asking me to deepthroat a myriad of phallic-shaped foods.

“Stop acting like all your dreams need to be manifested before you’ve even had a chance to strive for them,” Aida scolds.

“Stop being so reasonable, it’s killing my vibe.”

She smiles, giving my cheek a light smack. “Eva Kitt, you’re the next Anderson Cooper, I can feel it. You’re already half-way there with your hair.” She fluffs my platinum-bleached tresses.

I roll my eyes, face twisting into a sour grin. I’m delusional, but not *that* delusional. “Whatever you say.”

“That’s the dispassionate spirit! See you later, dickhead.” She jogs down the stairs to catch her train.

Ducking my chin against a sharp autumn breeze, I trudge the remaining blocks to my building. I huff up the five flights to my matchbox-sized apartment, stripping off my scarf and coat and dropping them to the floor as I flick on all the lights.

My place, which at one time felt significant and special to early-twenties-me, is sad and pitiful in the tepid October evening light. The popcorn walls are stale gray, a color that artfully reflects my sense of self, and my hand-me-down furniture isn’t as quaint as it once was. When you’re *nearing* thirty, without the automatic confidence boost of fully *being* and *embracing* and *loving* thirty, your thrifted, cigarette-and-vanilla-scented velvet green couch isn’t the hipster, art-nouveau centerpiece you thought it was.

I’ve technically lived alone in my cramped one-bedroom since college, but it’s only within the past year or so that I’ve actually felt *lonely*. Those first few years after graduating were filled with a restless hope shared among my friends, a stream of them crashing on my couch for months at a time as they waded from one situation to another until they found their footing.

I didn’t even pretend to be annoyed at having squatters. I loved coming home to Donna stretched out on my carpet,

crystals and tarot cards flung around her as she'd excitedly tell me about an energy shift or new reading for the day. Or Ray with a drama-filled Grindr incident he'd relay over mouthfuls of takeout. Even Aida had a not-so-put-together phase of unemployment before Soundbites where she'd alternate between manically cleaning my tiny apartment and moping on my couch. Despite her cloud of restlessness, every night ended up having a giddy, slumber-party feel for the six months she stayed with me.

But Donna migrated upstate where the energy was clearer, and Ray truly found The Ones and moved to Queens with his throuple and some sourdough starters, and Aida worked her way up to media producer, eventually getting me a writing gig for the celebrities and entertainment section—which was supposed to be temporary—that somehow morphed into me shoving dick-esque foods in my mouth and outwardly displaying my misery for laughs.

But even as my friends stepped into adulthood without me, it felt okay. I always had a relationship, or at least a situation-ship, to fill my apartment with noise and company.

Lana, who I started seeing around the time Aida got her own place, was great. The love of my alternate-universe life. She wasn't a believer in monogamy, and while I tried my best to be chill for the eight months we dated, my ugly jealous streak didn't play well with an open relationship. We dragged out our breakup for months of emotionally charged hookups, but she eventually moved out west, leaving my heart a bit bruised and my booty call-less.

Cal was next, a finance bro who I wasted over a year on. But still, even an annoying talking head in my apartment

droning on about crypto and his AI “art” felt more comfortable than being alone with my thoughts for more than a few hours.

Then there was sad-boy Dom, and musician Tyler, and fashion designer Lisa, all burning bright for the first few months of dates and texting, then fizzling out as the newness withered and the reality of my sarcasm and emotional detachment became far less charming and much more draining.

Now, my friends are outpacing me in adulthood with their fulfilling careers and relationships while my love life is as dry as burnt toast. I don’t even have a cat to blunt my loneliness. Marinating in my patheticness, I change into my sweatpants, burrow into a nest of blankets, and pour a glass of prosecco.

And another.

Oops, and a third because in this economy I can’t afford to waste leftover bubbly, and I have far too much class to mix the flat leftovers with orange juice tomorrow morning.

Nothing pairs as well with a tipsy Friday night in as much as a social media doomscroll. Lab rats probably have greater resistance to stimulus than me at this point. The algorithm, which usually shows me unhinged shit posts and soup recipes, has pivoted to videos of men talking about how to be a supportive partner and offering practical examples.

While I don’t, by principle, enjoy seeing men inflate their egos further (or talk in general), these content creators seem to offer genuinely helpful advice and action items to support a significant other, so I don’t feel disdain quite so acutely as I usually would.

And then, I get the jump scare of all jump scares.

Him.

Dark, wavy hair. Piercing gray eyes and offensively thick lashes framed by tortoiseshell glasses. A jawline that could tempt a nun to sin and a rumbling voice you can't help but imagine between your thighs.

Gorgeous and he damn well knows it.

Rylie fucking Cooper.

I've worked hard over the years to train my algorithms not to show me this asshole despite his prevalence and ever-growing fanbase, but the universe is a messy bitch that loves disrupting my peace of mind.

Rylie Cooper has built a platform on the fallacy that he's the prophetic one to guide men out of toxic masculinity. This successful long con has earned him a heavily sponsored and well-listened-to podcast and over one million followers worshipping his hollow gospel.

The hypocrisy is unmatched.

I've always been the type of person to poke a bruise, press my tongue to a cavity, just to see how much I can make it hurt, and obsessively watching his videos over and over again when they pop up is no different, the rage growing hotter with each caress of his deep voice. This time, like most times, he's talking about what makes a man a good partner, particularly in bed. As if this discarded foreskin of a person has any clue.

"If this describes your man," Cooper starts in his low, sensual voice, holding a teeny-tiny bedazzled mic up to his perfectly formed lips, "he's not the man for you."

He launches into a spiel of poignant—if not obvious to actively dating women everywhere—reasons to be wary of

certain behaviors, a floating notes app list greenscreened behind him. My blood starts to boil at the final three points.

“If he’s dedicated to a frat to the point that he refers to other men not biologically or familially related to him as his blood brothers, run.” He levels a devastating look at the camera, humor glinting in his eyes. “And if you’ve had the unfortunate experience of being in said frat house, run to a clinic that can immediately test you for communicable diseases.”

He pauses for half a second with perfect (fucking gag me) comedic timing. “If you try to tell him before sex or during foreplay what you really want, and he waves you off like he knows all that, then is six inches to the left, he’s not the man for you. Do not return to his bed.” There’s an almost-imperceptible cocky tilt to his lips, like this is a problem he’s never created.

“And if you have real feelings for him or he says he has real feelings for you, then he ghosts you, he is, most definitely, not the one for you. Protect your peace, delete his number.” This one is delivered with raw sincerity, a stunning good guy acknowledging the plight of so many women.

What a crock of horse shit.

This is coming from the man whom I dated for about two months in college, an experience so awful, he scarred my love life for eternity. He is the archetype of a dirtbag and it makes me sick to my silly little stomach that he’s seduced the world into thinking he’s the patron saint of nice guys.

My drunken fingers take over, and I’m hitting “stitch” before I can even worry about the fact that I’ve never used the feature before.

Cooper’s video cuts off as he advises viewers to not return

to a fumbling man's bed, and my skeptical reflection stares back at me, lip curled and one dark eyebrow raised, my blond hair as icy as my attitude as I hit record. I keep it together for point-two seconds before bursting out laughing.

"I'm sorry," I say through a snort. "But that video is pretty hilarious coming from the biggest fuckboy I've ever met." I cackle again, then let out a steadying breath through pursed lips. "Either Rylie Cooper is dabbling in extremely personalized satire, or he knows his pretty privilege will allow him to get away with lying to you all." I laugh again. "To fuck around is human, to find out is divine, so allow me to shed some light on the truth of who he is."

I'm unreasonably happy that my deep red lipstick I put on for shooting earlier today survived my drinking, because I am fucking *feeling* myself as I cock a dangerous smile at the camera.

"This guy"—I make a mental note to edit in a picture of Cooper at this spot—"took me on a handful of dates in college, filled with at least half a dozen red flags, mind you. Our relationship"—I throw in some aggressive air quotes with my free hand, my long, almond-shaped nails painted a dark green, adding extra drama to the movement—"culminated on the night he told me he had feelings for me, then made me watch him play hours of shirtless beer pong at his frat's party. This three-pump chump then led me to his room with a mattress on the floor—nary a fitted sheet or pillowcase in sight, I might add—then finished up what might be some of the most artless intercourse known to human history in about twelve seconds. What an amazing first time for me, one for the diary,