

# On The Prowl

I can't decide if it's the best or worst \$1500 I've ever spent.

If life were a movie, my next move would be simple: douse the interior of Cuong's Honda S 2000 with gasoline, light a cigarette, and walk away from the inferno; like Angela Bassett does in *Waiting to Exhale*. Unfortunately, there are many issues with this revenge plan. First, I can count on one hand the times I've filled up the tank of my hand-me-down Toyota Camry since acquiring my driver's license, thanks to my dad's obsession of never allowing the fuel gauge needle to fall below the halfway point. Second, I've never lit a match without burning my fingers. Third, I hardly look like the face of a scorned-yet-empowered woman, with my pilled-at-the-inner-thighs leggings and Lululemon outlet Scuba hoodie. This is what I get for rushing to my fiance's dental practice to confront his cheating ass directly after a run on the elliptical.

My phone rings. The incriminating video disappears, replaced with a snapshot of my smiling best friend on the day she graduated law school. I slide the button to answer. “Hey.”

“Oh my god, I had the worst date last night.” Should I be more sympathetic to Vi’s plight as a single twenty-six-year woman living in the Bay Area? Probably, given it’s been ten years since I’ve been on a first date. Then again, it won’t be long till I’ll be joining her on Tinder, swiping right as a form of Friday night entertainment. “He had a man bun and couldn’t stop talking about how he was going to revolutionize the gig economy. I don’t even know why it matters anymore. I’m never going to be in love again.

“Of course you will.” This is my cue to reassure Vi she’s worthy of a functional relationship; that there were plenty of other men in the world who didn’t have questionable hair styles or egos the length of the California coast. “And just think—there’s someone you haven’t met yet, thinking the same thing. You just have to find him.”

“You’re so lucky. Not everyone meets the love of their life at seventeen.” There’s the sound of muffled conversation, followed by the echo of footsteps. Knowing Vi, she’s walking down the stairs to pick up her firm-expensed takeout dinner. “How is Cuong anyway?”

It would be so easy to continue lying to Vi and repeat the same phrase I always do. *Busy. Just like you.* But there are only so many secrets you can keep before it feels like your chest’s about to burst. So I take a deep shuddering breath, daring myself to say the words out loud.

“We haven’t seen each other since I started school a few weeks ago. He’s been doing a lot of after-hours calls.” Another inhale and exhale, because a public safety chaplain once said breathing is essential to keeping calm during a crisis. “But then last week, Cô Lan came up to me after mass and asked if Cuong had a brother, because there was a guy that looked like him at Emerald Queen, dancing with another girl.”

“That’s weird. She was probably drunk.”

“I thought so too!” My hand fiddles with the Hello Kitty air freshener clipped to my side vent. “But then I keep thinking about all those *Cheaters* episodes we watched in college.”

“You’re hilarious! We all know everyone on there is an aspiring actor, or looking for their fifteen minutes of fame.” For once, I wish Vi would let me talk without interjecting her opinion. “Hey, I’ll probably be heading into San Jose this weekend to get measured for my áo dài. Yours is red, right? I’m wondering if pink will clash—”

“There isn’t going to be a đăm hỏi.” In a weird way, it’s a relief to say it out loud—that finally, I have evidence to back up that uneasy feeling I always got when Cuong would get distant for months at a time. He always blamed it on something else—dental school, board certifications, sociopathic bosses, learning how to operate a private practice. But then I started second-guessing those weekend poker tournaments in Vegas; the faint whiff of floral perfume I got once while rummaging through his drawers for an extra t-shirt; a strip of condoms in his messenger bag that he claimed was a work

conference freebie. "Because I hired a private investigator. And now I have video footage that proves he's messing around with Sonia."

There's such a long silence on the other end, I have to jab the phone to make sure we didn't get disconnected. Then a door slams, followed by a blood-curdling scream that makes me glad I put Vi on speakerphone. Now my ears are ringing and she's yelling curse words—why am I not as furious as she is?

"That piece of shit! I'm going to murder him with my bare hands—"

"Don't. I'm getting exactly what I deserve." This would have never happened if I had sucked up my pride and joined the practice as his office manager, because in his words, "You'll need a different job when we have kids." Initially, I thought he was dismissing my five years as a cardiac care nurse. Now I can't ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach that Cuong was silently pleading for me to hold him accountable.

"Stop it, Thuy! A man should be able to work with someone of the opposite sex while keeping it in his pants!" Vi's voice dips into a growl, and I suddenly feel jealous at the wide range of emotions she can showcase in a matter of seconds. When Vi is happy, it's like fireworks at a Disneyland parade. When she's pissed, it's like the energy of a thousand atomic bombs going off at once. I can practically feel the uranium glowing through the phone with how angry she is. "Where are you right now?"

"Parked in the alleyway behind his car. I followed them after work." My head ducks when the side door opens, but it's no one I recognize—just a blonde girl holding a water bottle, who disappears

around the corner towards the juice bar. “That asshole took her to the spa! You know where the last place we went on a date was? Red Lobster, for all-you-can-eat shrimp! He didn’t even care that I had to take Benadryl later that night!”

“Smash his windows.”

“What?!” I forgot Vi has seen *Waiting to Exhale* almost as many times as I have. “No! I’m pissed, but I don’t want to get arrested!”

“Just make sure there aren’t any security cameras around.” Vi’s voice raises to a commanding pitch, or how I imagine her advising a client doing questionably ethical things. “And if you get caught, I will fly to Seattle to bail you out.”

My trembling fingers pop the latch of the glove compartment, rifling through six years of oil change receipts for the safety hammer my dad slipped in three summers ago. It’s a real shame Vi’s parents pushed her into corporate law instead of public defense work—annoying dating rants aside, she’s the one person I’d trust to help me bury a body in the middle of the night while crafting a Rubix cube of an argument to justify my crime. Gripping the hammer, I do a quick scan of my surroundings, tiptoe towards the driver’s side window of Cuong’s car—and ram the glass with the hammer’s spiked end. Nothing. I set my phone on the roof of the car and hit the glass again. Not even a scratch. Maybe if I use both hands? I strike the same spot, over and over and then, after a baker’s dozen tries and me gasping for air, I see the tiniest hairline crack appear.

“What’s going on?”

"This is way harder than it looks in the movies." The mist of rain-turned-steady drizzle forces me to abandon my pathetic attempt at being a jilted ex-girlfriend. I huddle in my car and zip my Scuba hoodie up to my neck, flinging the hammer to the floor. "Ten years! I've been with Cuong for over a third of my life!"

"And he's a sack of garbage who doesn't know a good thing when he has it. Imagine being married, birthing his babies, and then dealing with this." I open my mouth to protest, but from the sounds of Vi's articulated points, it sounds like she's been preparing this speech for a long time. "So let him have the younger girl and see how he feels when she spends all his money and leaves for someone richer. Meanwhile, you are a beautiful, brilliant nurse who could walk into any bar on Capitol Hill and go home with the hottest guy in the room. If he's going to have some fun, so should you."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "You're only saying that because you're my best friend."

"I'm saying it because it's true. Don't sell yourself short, Thuy Nga." My heart is so full of affection from her words that I don't even mind that she's using my loathed middle name. "Are you okay? Do you need me to fly up and smack some sense into him?"

"It's okay. I know you're—" But the word "busy" dies on my lips as the woman—really a girl, because she can't be over twenty-one—who replaced me appears, dressed like she's heading to Hot Import Night in her leather mini-skirt, mesh top, and pink stilettos. A low growl escapes my mouth. My hand clamps on the handle of the door.

"You know what? Let me call you back. I have a homewrecker to confront."

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I wish I could say I clawed her eyes out. But I know it's futile when I make eye contact with Sonia and she asks if I'm having car trouble, twisting the knife in my heart even more when she volunteers to "call her boyfriend for help." As if it's not humiliating enough to have your man stolen by a girl who was in kindergarten when you were a tween, that's when I realize how divergent Cuong's and my lives have become. His own employee didn't even recognize me, let alone try to make up a lie about their relationship.

So I stammer an "I'm okay" before gunning the accelerator out of the alleyway. In the back of my mind, I know I would have to deal with canceling our đám hỏi, telling my family, and managing the gossip train as a result of ousting Cuong as a cheater. Except right now, I'm singularly focused on Vi's earlier challenge, playing in my ears like a song on repeat. *You are a beautiful, brilliant nurse who could walk into any bar on Capitol Hill and go home with the hottest guy in the room.*

So that's what I do, merging onto the floating bridge into Seattle instead of heading home to binge-watch Korean dramas while crying into a pint of ice cream. It takes me another twenty minutes of circling the block for street parking, before I give up and head into a paid lot a block away from my intended destination: Rockbox, a karaoke bar that I went to a few months back for a coworker's birthday party. Once I'm parked, I swap my cross trainers for riding boots, rifle for a pair of hoop earrings in my gym bag, and pile on shadow to disguise my red-rimmed eyes. There. If nothing else, I can sing my sorrows away while downing a \$10 cocktail.

Except the minute I push open the double doors, my feet yearn to bolt back to the safety of my car. Somewhere in my mind, I came to the conclusion that the bar would be filled with droves of attractive, single men itching to buy a woman a drink. Except I neglected to remember that Rockbox has Japanese-style private rooms, meaning almost everyone is scrolling on their phones, waiting for their reservation to be announced. I also forget that the typical Seattle male is bearded, wears flannel shirts, and works in tech—meaning they were just the lumberjack versions of the man-bun guy Vi went out on a date with.

Panic rises in my throat at the thought of transforming into my workaholic of a best friend, who found it easier to bill overtime instead of putting herself out there after excruciating heartbreak. Oh my god. Am I really going to throw away ten years of something decent in exchange for the fuckery that is dating in 2015? What if the private investigator I hired is a scam artist, concocting clandestine footage of Cuong and Sonia through some advanced Photoshop techniques? Maybe the guy on the video happens to wear the same striped polo shirt and lease the same car as my fiancé, and—

“Thuy?”

I turn towards the sound, my mouth dropping in shock at the sight of Zach Casteneda’s infectious smile. One of Vi’s closest friends from college. Someone I knew. I squeal in surprise, sprinting across the bar to smother him into a hug.

“Oh my god, it’s been forever! How are you?!”



"Hangin' in there." Zach leans over to plant a kiss on my cheek, his latte-colored skin shimmering from the overhead lighting and his white kangaroo pocket sweatshirt. "Are you waiting for a room?"

"Not really. Just wanted to check out the bar—" But the door opens once again, bringing in a gust of wind and the person I've been waiting for all evening, but hadn't realized until now. Any thoughts of begging Cuong to take me back evaporate into thin air as Simon "Heartbreaker" Hardwick's dark, penetrating stare meets mine. *Gross*, Vi would lament when I would half-jokingly make comments about visiting the gym at her college so I could catch a glimpse of Simon's legendary abs. *Need I remind you that you have a boyfriend?*

For the first time this evening, I feel the curves of my mouth lifting into a grin. *Jackpot.*

"Simon! Look who it is!" Zach booms, waving Simon forward.

"It's been a while." I offer Simon my biggest and brightest smile. "Didn't realize you were back in town."

"Yup." Right about now, something coy and slightly raunchy should slip out of Simon's cupid bow lips, typically ending with "baby girl"—I suspect he used that catchphrase to avoid having to remember names. Except nothing comes, making me wonder if I imagined our teasing banter over the years when he stalks off towards the hallway.

I glance at Zach in bewilderment. This was so unlike the cocky asshole who once invited me to froyo while Vi, her then-boyfriend Jay, Cuong, and I were on a double date; prompting an argument about whether I was showing off too much cleavage and “asking for it.” And that’s just one of the many shitty things Cuong has said to me over the last decade. “Did I say something wrong?”

“He’s going through a rough time.” Zach shrugs in apology, waving to someone else across the room. “I saw on Facebook that you started a master’s in counseling program? Maybe you can talk to him.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Maybe it’s my experience from earlier this evening, but I can’t help but feel a wave of sympathy for Simon. He may have had a reputation for breaking hearts across the University of Washington campus, but it didn’t change that I always thought he was cute. My fingers itch to text Vi this tidbit of gossip, but I think better of it. She may have complained about her date last night, but at least she was dating again. Telling her about Simon would only remind her of Jay, which would devolve into a self-loathing commentary about her love life a thousand times worse than what I experienced on the phone earlier. “And I’m only a year in. Practicum doesn’t start until next Fall.”

“It’d be better than what he’s doing, which is nothing.” Zach points to the room at the end of the blue-tinted hallway, where Simon is handing a credit card to the waitress. “At the very least, come sing a few songs with us?”

“I really shouldn’t—” Then my mouth goes dry as Simon pushes up his arm sleeves, revealing veins and an expensive-looking wristwatch. Even after all these years he makes my pulse race; with his

chiseled jawline, full brows, and strong looking hands that could do serious damage to a woman's libido. My conscience interjects, reminding me that getting involved with Simon Hardwick would be a disaster for many reasons.

Then again, Cuong was the one who threw away a decade of loyalty in exchange for a blow job. As for Vi, she's the one who told me to go home with the hottest guy at the bar. It's not my fault Simon is also Jay's old college roommate and best friend.

"You know what? I'd love to." Even though there's plenty of space to squeeze by, I graze my hip against Simon's as I follow Zach into the room. "A lychee martini, please," I say to the waitress while touching Simon's bicep. "He'll put it on his tab."

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By the time we slip out of the bar at 10 pm, I've drunk-screamed Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" with a brown-skinned girl named Amie; impressed myself with my Italian language skills on a duet of Josh Groban and Andrea Corr's "Canto Alla Vita" with Zach; and performed a rendition of "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" with a series of vocal runs that would make Whitney Houston proud. But unlike the rest of us, Simon spends most of the session perched in the corner, shaking his head when someone offers him the iPad or microphone. The longer I observe, the more my intuition tells me something is very wrong because he hasn't checked out my rack once since I peeled off my hoodie.

So I wait for a chance to talk to him one-on-one when we're exchanging goodbyes. I linger on the sidewalk, waving as Amie and a broad-shouldered guy with dark hair (I think his name is Ryan?)

leave in an Uber. Zach offers me another hug, yelling "Text me!" as he disappears around the corner. Which leaves a scowling Simon on his phone as I shuffle to my other foot and pray my gamble works.

"Hey, so—Zach mentioned you're going through some stuff right now." I choose to ignore Simon's eye roll, because he is certainly not the first patient who's gotten fresh with me. "And I don't know what it is, or if I can even relate. But just know that if you need someone to talk to, I'm here to listen."

More silence. Seriously, clergymen have been more flirtatious with me, so I turn on my heel, reaching into my shoulder bag for my car keys. "I guess I'm off. Have a good—"

"If you're looking for a hookup, there are apps for that now." Simon holds up his phone, flashing a screenshot of my relationship status on Facebook. My stomach clenches at the thought of changing it from "Engaged to Cuong Nguyen" to "Single" and what my inbox will look like afterwards. "See you around, Thuy."

"It's not like that! Wait!" I grab one of Simon's wrists to keep him from stalking away, surprising myself at the smoothness of his skin against my fingers. To my surprise, he doesn't pull his arm away, his tortoiseshell eyes searching mine as I fumble for the words to defend myself. "He's cheating on me, Simon. Probably has been for years and I've been too blind to notice until now."

My knees buckle. I suddenly remember I've had nothing but vodka and a few handfuls of furikake popcorn since my workout. Luckily, Simon has quick reflexes, his grip on my shoulders being the only reason I don't faceplant on the sidewalk.

"Hey." I choke back a sob as Simon dips to meet me at eye level. "It's going to be okay."

"Easy for you to say! You have a body that can stop traffic and an Excel spreadsheet of girls waiting for their booty call!" My back slumps against a brick wall, ignoring the pointed stares from pedestrians as they pass by the bar. From inside, someone wails an off-key rendition of Fergie's "Big Girls Don't Cry" and I immediately despise them for not allowing me this moment of self-pity. "I have thigh stretch marks and work the weekend night shift! What guy's going to want to date a nearly thirty-year-old woman he can't see on his days off?"

Simon's mouth twitches into the tiniest hint of a smirk. "Or maybe he'd enjoy getting freaky in an empty hospital bed."

"Gross! Do you know how disgusting those rooms are?!" Despite my outrage, I let out a shiver and Simon immediately slings an arm around my shoulders. When I do another inhale and exhale to calm my nerves, I nearly drug myself in the process through the scent he's wearing. "Hey, is it true your cologne has whale sperm in it?"

"Ambergris." I'm looking towards the street as Simon answers, but I can tell he's amused by the way his body relaxes into mine. "Comes from the digestive system of a sperm whale. So not quite."

"Whatever it is, I like it." In fact, there were many things I enjoyed about being this close to Simon—especially how sturdy his martial-arts-toned frame felt against the curves of my body. "So what's the deal with you? You haven't hit on me all evening, and it's making me feel like one of those raw meat packages with the sale expiration sticker on the front."

“Believe it or not, people change.” Simon reaches into his wallet to slip out a yellowed prom photo. “Also, you’re not the only one who’s been with the same person since high school.”

“But—” I blink in surprise at the image of a high school-aged Simon dipping a petite blonde girl in a baby blue gown. My fingertips rub against the indentations on the backside as I flip it over to read the inscription. *The first time you fall in love, it changes your life forever. Alli & Noah 4-ever.* “Is that a quote from *The Notebook*?”

“Nicely done. Most people don’t get that.”

“I always forget your first name is Noah.” My thumbs stroke the corners of the photo, trying to imagine Simon as a teenager falling in love for the first time. “So what happened?”

“Alli moved to Rhode Island for college. Said she wanted to be 100% certain we were right for each other.” I note the way the bridge of Simon’s nose wrinkles as he stares at the photo, as if suffering from a tension headache. “By the time I graduated and made it to New York, she was engaged to someone else—some hedge fund guy she met at one of her art shows. Takes her two years to break it off.” I watch passively as Simon slides the photo back into the wallet, tucking the leather case into the front pocket of his jeans. “Then she embezzles money from my startup to fund her cocaine addiction.”

“Seriously?!” And I thought I had it bad with Cuong’s weekend gambling habit. “Is this what Zach was referring to?”

“Yup. Laid off my employees, liquidated the assets. No V.C. will ever invest in me again.”

"But your dad owns a venture capital firm." Despite working in healthcare, I knew enough about the tech world to be dangerous—meaning I laughed on command when Vi made jokes about the other prominent V.C. in our lives (The Viet Cong). "Why not ask him?"

"Because I wanted to prove I could do it on my own. Now, it's probably the only place who'd hire me."

"That must have been heartbreaking to lose her on top of everything you've worked so hard for." I chew my lip in thought, thinking back to a unit on cognitive behavioral therapy. "As for your dad, maybe I'm not understanding the entire picture. It's a big company, right? Could you do something that doesn't involve reporting to him?"

"Theoretically, yes. It's more that he would pit me against my brother." I frown at the loss of body warmth as Simon pulls his arm away. "When Jay and I started the web agency in college, we only got the green light because Nathan was doing something similar at Yale and my dad wanted to see who would execute the idea better."

My jaw drops to the concrete. "That's fucked up."

"Tell me about it." Simon stares off into the distance, as the smell of waffle cones drifts into my nostrils from a nearby ice cream shop. "I swore to myself that if I ever had kids, I wouldn't treat them like that."

“But that’s a good thing. Recognizing the problem is the first step towards making change.”

My stomach rumbles in protest again, as I spot a group wandering towards a

Taco-Bell-turned-taqueria. “Sorry, but can we talk while getting some food? I’m starving.”

“On me.” Simon extends out his hand to pull me off the wall. “For offering to listen.”

“You don’t have to.” When Simon’s fingers brush against mine, a fluttering sensation erupts in my belly. I immediately tell myself to get a grip; that Simon’s holding my hand because I nearly collapsed on the sidewalk earlier. “But thank you. And thanks for—you know—not taking advantage of me earlier.”

“Anytime.” A version of the Simon I remember flickers for the briefest moment, as his lips curl up to a smirk. “I always figured you had a crush on me.”

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After we devour an assortment of tacos and split a glass of horchata, Simon insists on walking me to my car, even though it’s parked less than two blocks away. I tell him I’ll be fine, showing him the keychain pepper spray I carry in my bag. But he comes along anyway, staying a respectable few inches behind me so our hands don’t accidentally brush against one another.

I’d be lying if I said I’m not disappointed.

“So what’s next with the fiancé?” Simon asks as we round the corner towards the parking garage. “Do you think you’ll be able to work it out?”



“Probably not. It’s been over for a long time; we’ve just both been too stubborn to unravel everything. Our moms are old friends and it’s—complicated.” No need to bore Simon with the social dynamics of a Vietnamese-Catholic community. So I point to an electric blue sports car with the familiar BMW insignia on the front, parked three spots to the left of my Toyota Camry. “Now that looks like a car someone having a midlife crisis would drive.”

“Sounds about right.” When Simon clicks a key fob and the headlights to the BMW flash, my hand claps to my mouth in mortification.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was my dad’s 50th birthday present to himself. Just driving it until I figure out my life.” When a chuckle escapes Simon’s throat—a genuine one, not his usual scoff—it makes me wonder what the real Simon Hardwick is like, stripped of his bad boy persona. “But I’ve always appreciated how you don’t waste time trying to impress me.”

“Minus tonight. We can just blame my temporary lapse in judgment on the alcohol.”

“Funny, you weren’t drinking anything when I walked into the bar.”

“Emotional shock from watching grainy video footage of another woman go down on my fiancé. Hypoglycemia. You were the only dude in the room not wearing a flannel.” I giggle at my joke, tossing my shoulder bag into the backseat of the car. “I should head home.”

Simon’s eyes flash with an emotion I can’t put my finger on. “Say that again.”

“Emotional shock—

“No. The medical term you used.”

“Hypoglycemia?” Simon’s eyes flutter shut for a minute, before he opens them again, staring at me like he’s got the front seat to the Victoria Secret Angels fashion show. Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes, even though my heart is pounding beneath my chest. “Exactly what I need post-breakup. Someone with a hot nurse fetish.”

“Coming from the girl who said I looked like a young Andy Lau with washboard abs.”

I blush so hard that the tips of my ears feel warm. “I can’t believe Vi told you that.”

“In her defense, she was really drunk.” When Simon’s hand trails to my right hip, I step forward, assuming he’s positioning himself to make a move. Instead, he grabs my phone from my pocket, cupping it in the palm of his hand. “What’s your passcode?”

“071404.” Now I wonder how many online passwords of mine involve a variation of my anniversary with Cuong. Yet another thing to deal with on my never-ending to-do list, as Simon punches in the digits before taking a selfie of himself. “What are you doing?”

“Adding myself to your Contacts.” When Simon leans over to brush my temple with his lips, an unfamiliar giddiness swells in my chest—a feeling I haven’t had since I first saw Cuong at church camp. “Call me when you’re ready for a date.”