



### **Blurb**

Should they risk their friendship for a chance at love?

Alannah Bailey is tired of being the boring best friend of Trenton Johnson and decides on a makeover. After the changes, she starts dating, but instead of being happy, Trenton acts like he wants to keep her under lock and key.

Trenton is used to partying and having his pick of women. Such an advantage comes with the Johnson name, their money, and his own good looks. When he needs downtime, he depends on his best buddy, Alannah. But he doesn't like the changes he sees in her lately, and by the time he figures out why, it might be too late.

# **Just Friends**

by Delaney Diamond

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## **Note to the Reader**

This story takes place during the same timeframe as *Perfect*, Book 2 of the Johnson Family series.

## Chapter One

Pumping his hips, Trenton Johnson gazed down at Tonya, the beautiful young woman beneath him. A thin coat of sweat covered his body in the dark, where only a sliver of light managed to maneuver its way between the thick curtains covering the windows in her bedroom. He had her wrists pinned together above her head and one hand lifted her hips to accept each of his powerful thrusts. Her cries of passion filled the bedroom.

“You like that?” he panted.

“Yes, Trenton! Yesss!” Almost there, tension vibrated in her voice, and his own release pressed ever closer.

Using steady, rhythmic pumps, he sent them both to orgasmic completion. She released a gasping wail, and his body shuddered before collapsing on top of her. With a groan, Trenton rolled onto his back, panting heavily. Needing a few minutes to recover, he ran a hand over his damp face and stared up at the rotating ceiling fan.

“Incredible,” Tonya moaned, finally catching her breath. Limber and enthusiastic, she had turned into one of his regular hookups from the first night he’d dived between her silky brown thighs. He’d be ready for round two soon.

Right then, his phone rang, a special ring tone he never ever ignored. Trenton stretched across the mattress and picked up the phone from the table next to the bed. “Hello?”

“I’m at home. You still coming over?” Alannah asked.

His best friend was back in town. Trenton smiled. “Of course.”

“When are you coming?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?”

“Soon.”

“You busy?”

He glanced at Tonya, whose frowning gaze held a healthy dose of curiosity. “A little bit.”

“*Oh*,” she said, the word heavy with meaning. “I’ll see you when you get here, then. Bring me something to eat when you do.”

“All right. Bye.” Trenton replaced the phone on the bedside table and rolled onto his back.

“Who was that?” Tonya pouted.

When he didn't answer, she stroked his bicep and, resting her head on his shoulder, flung one shapely leg across his thighs. An obvious ploy to get him to relax.

Trenton stirred, disentangling himself from her brown limbs, and she moaned her discontent. "I need to get rid of this." He indicated the condom with a pointing finger.

"Hurry back," she replied lazily, with a languid stretch.

He closed the door to the bathroom and disposed of the condom in the toilet, relieved himself, and then flushed.

Staring at his reflection in the mirror while washing his hands, he thought about Tonya. She had a nice face and great figure, and they'd been lovers on and off for eight months, ever since she'd popped out of the cake at his fraternity brother's bachelor party. But they didn't have much in common besides sexual gymnastics, and he was bored. Probably time to move on.

He re-entered the bedroom and picked up his discarded clothes from the floor.

"I thought you were staying, for another round," Tonya said quietly.

"Nah, I better go." Trenton tugged on his boxer briefs.

"Why?" She sat up and let the sheet fall to her waist. "You can stay the night if you want."

"I have things to do. Have to go see a friend of mine." He slipped the polo shirt over his head.

Only the rustle of his clothes could be heard in the quiet that followed. Then, "Alannah."

She said the name with a heavy amount of resentment, and Trenton bristled but slipped on his shoes.

"What is it with her? What makes her so special?"

His head snapped up, and he looked Tonya squarely in the eye. "I don't like your tone."

She shrank back against the headboard. "I didn't mean anything by it. It's just..."

Definitely time for him to move on. The cracks in their perfectly orchestrated relationship were starting to show. They'd had some great times—excellent, *freaky* times. He turned an eye to the cuffs abandoned on the floor.

But if he didn't end this now, it could get out of hand. He'd been in a situation before where he stayed in a sexual relationship past its shelf life, and there was nothing pretty about a woman who thought she deserved more than he offered. And he sure as hell wouldn't tolerate anyone trying to come between him and his best friend.

Trenton picked up his phone and keys from the nightstand, and Tonya slipped naked from the bed. Pressing her supple body against his, she kissed his bicep, where the image of a hissing snake circled the muscle—one of many tattoos that ran the length of both arms.

“See you next week?” She looked up at him with a hopeful expression on her face and placed a hand on the waistband of his jeans.

He’d have his executive assistant send her flowers and a nice piece of jewelry. Expensive trinkets softened the blow and minimized the dramatic fallout of the untimely end to an affair.

He extricated himself from her arms. “I’ll call you.”

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Trenton parked his white, customized Range Rover in the driveway outside the two-bedroom townhouse Alannah rented. Like the others in the complex, it had an attached one-car garage. All of them, painted in bright, candy-colored paint and white trim, looked like a row of dollhouses in the daytime, each with a perfect little square of grass that was so well maintained and nurtured, it looked like an area rug had been dropped in front of the house.

On the way over he’d stopped at The Best Thai Restaurant, a fitting name. It really was the best, and the only Thai restaurant he and Alannah patronized.

Two weeks had passed since he’d last seen his buddy. She’d used her vacation to visit her parents in Arizona, where they’d moved after her father retired from the post office and her mother from teaching. Fourteen days had never felt so long, and he couldn’t wait to see her.

Trenton strolled up the stone-lined walkway to the unit, second from the left in a building that held four houses. He rang the doorbell, and when Alannah swung open the door, his chest expanded and he couldn’t suppress the grin that spread across his face. Seeing her always filled him with such excitement, as if he’d won the lottery.

“Hey, stranger. What’s that?” She reached for the bag.

He held the plastic sack out of reach. “Is that all I’m good for? Come here, girl. I missed you.”

He grabbed her with one arm and lifted her from the floor. He inhaled her candy-apple smell, the scent of the sanitizer she often used.

Giggling softly, she wound her arms around his neck and squeezed him tight. The best hugs in the world came from his buddy.

“Glad to know I was missed,” she said softly.

He set her back on the floor and closed the door. “You know you were missed.”

Alannah stood before him in a pair of gray gym shorts and a white tank top with her hair hidden under a burgundy satin bonnet. She frowned at him. “I go away for two weeks and you let yourself go.”

Trenton rubbed a hand across his bearded jaw. “See what happens when you leave me? I’m lost without you.”

She ran a hand over his head. “You need a haircut badly.”

“Careful now.” He brushed a hand over the top of his head. “Wouldn’t want you to get seasick from all these waves.”

“Oh lord. These women have your head so swollen, I’m surprised you made it through the door.”

He chuckled and eyed the bonnet on her head. “You’re ready for bed?”

“I didn’t know if you’d be staying late with one of your hoes.”

“I told you I’d be here as soon as you let me know you were home. And by the way, I don’t mess with hoes.”

“If you say so, but I figured I’d better get ready for bed anyway.” Her eyes lit up and a sneaky smile curved her lips. “And I have a surprise for you. But before I tell you my surprise...” She sniffed the air and eyed the bag in his hand. “I smell Thai.”

This time she managed to snatch the bag, and he laughed as she scurried off in the direction of the kitchen. He trailed her to the pint-sized space decorated with mahogany cabinets and stainless steel appliances. Her home had an open floor plan, with the kitchen, dining area—made up of a small round table and four chairs with off-white covers—and living room bleeding right into each other.

“Lemonade?” Alannah asked.

“Sounds good.” Trenton leaned against the counter near the sink while Alannah removed the contents of the bag onto the breakfast bar. Eyeing the row of twenty-odd recipe books of various sizes nestled on the shelf above the microwave, he said, “You added to your collection.”

She nodded. “I picked up two cookbooks on Southwest cooking when I was in Arizona.” She removed two plates from the cabinets and placed them on the Formica counter.

“How was Arizona?” They’d talked a few times while she was gone, but for the most part he’d left her alone to enjoy her time off.

“Nothing special. My sisters flew in the last few days, so the whole family spent time together. We had a blast.” She inhaled deeply. “This smells so good. Who cooked? Aat or Chayo?”

Their favorite chef was Aat. They always increased the tip in the jar at the register whenever he cooked. The meals were hit or miss when Chayo worked in the kitchen.

“Aat, and when he found out you were back in town, he threw in extra basil rolls. He’s in love with you.”

She laughed, tossing a glance at him over her shoulder. “Stop.”

“He is. If you ever show him the slightest interest, I’m sure he’ll leave his wife.” He watched her pull utensils from drawers and then start scooping out brown rice. “So, what’s my surprise?” he asked.

She turned to face him, and her hazel eyes met his hesitantly. “I’ve been doing some thinking. I’m not getting any younger.”

“None of us are.”

“And...well, I want to make some changes in my life. So...you know what, it’s better for me to show you than tell you.” She removed the bonnet from her head and released her hair. Running her fingers through the strands, she sifted them loose until they tumbled past her shoulders. “What do you think?”

Trenton took a good look at her. He walked over and lifted a few soft strands and rubbed them between his fingers. “You colored it.”

“Yes.” Alannah bit the inside of her bottom lip. “What do you think?”

“I like it,” he said slowly. The vibrant auburn brightened her light amber skin tone. “Brings more attention to your freckles.” Rust-colored spots lay splattered across her nose and cheeks. He grinned and tweaked her nose.

She slapped his hand away. “Really? Ugh.” She hated her freckles, but he thought they were cute. She turned around so he could see her hair from the back and pushed her fingers through the shiny strands, shaking her head so the thick mass rippled back and forth across her back. “I had it cut in layers, too.” Turning back around, she said, “I know it’s pretty drastic. Well, for me it’s drastic, but I only had a few inches cut off. The craziest thing is the color. Auburn. Can you believe it? After having dull brown hair all my life, I went with auburn.” Her eyes brightened and filled with the excitement of the change.

“It’s an attention getter,” Trenton said evenly. “Hey, where are your glasses?” Being nearsighted, she seldom went without her glasses. Every time she took them off, she walked around squinting.

“Oh, that’s the other thing.” She pointed to her eyes. “Contacts.”

“Contacts?”

“Yes. I have the long-wearing ones that you can sleep in. It took me a while to get used to them. Sometimes I still reach for my glasses and then realize they aren’t there. It’s crazy, but yep, I’m wearing contacts now. I’ve had them for a week already.”

Trenton scratched the back of his head. “I don’t understand. What’s going on with you? What’s with all the changes?”

Alannah shrugged and started spooning food onto the plates again. “Like I said, I’m not getting any younger. It’s time for me to act and look like a woman.”

“I liked the way you looked before.”

She smiled briefly at him over her shoulder. “That’s sweet, but you’re saying that cause you’re my friend. I want to know what a man thinks.”

“I’m a man.” What the hell?

She giggled on her way to the refrigerator. “You know what I mean. You’re more like a girlfriend than a man.”

Trenton stiffened. Since when?

As Alannah poured lemonade—hers was good and tart because she made it with fresh lemons and none of that powdered stuff—into two glasses, he paid closer attention to her. She didn’t just look different, she was acting different. She displayed more confidence than usual. And the shorts had to be the shortest pair of shorts he’d ever seen her wear. They put her legs on display in a way that made him take notice. Had her legs always been that long?

She was small up top but thick on the bottom, and the contrast was never more noticeable than today. Her butt appeared round and full, and her hips looked as if they’d widened since he’d seen her last. Not likely, but still.

*Dayum.*

“No comment?” Alannah handed him a glass of lemonade.

Trenton blinked. “About what?”

“About everything. My new look?” Her voice fell off into a soft, disappointed whisper. She’d expected a different reaction, and for the life of him he couldn’t figure out why he wasn’t excited for her.

“You look nice. I mean, you know, it’s different. The changes will take some getting used to.” Trenton took a large swig of lemonade, wishing the glass contained something stronger.

She nodded and handed him a plate of brown rice, seafood with panang curry, and three basil rolls.

“Hey.” He stepped closer, studying her downturned face. “You took me by surprise, but you look really nice.” This change couldn’t have been easy for her to make. She wasn’t the kind of person to bring attention to herself. She preferred to be quiet and in the background, so auburn hair really was a drastic change.

“You’re not just saying that?” She looked up at him with uncertainty.

“From one girlfriend to the other, I’m not just saying that.” He grinned and she grinned back. “Come on, let’s go watch that movie you promised me. It better not be a foreign film, either.”

“You liked the last one,” she said, following him into the living room.

“Just because I liked it doesn’t mean I want to see that mess all the time.”

She sighed dramatically. “This one is a South Korean thriller.”

He groaned. “So I have to read subtitles?”

“Oh my goodness. What a horror. You have to read.”

“That mouth of yours is going to get you into serious trouble one day.”

Plates in hand, they piled onto the sofa and set the drinks on the table closest to Trenton. Alannah folded her legs beneath her and turned on the television. A few presses of the remote and the opening scene rolled out, immediately capturing their attention with an explosion.

Trenton forked a shrimp into his mouth. He chewed slowly, ruminating on Alannah’s altered appearance. “What brought on all these changes? Are you really worried about getting older?”

“Well...”

Her hesitation caught his attention. “Well what? Are you seeing someone?” He stared at her.

“No.” She ducked her head and her hair fell forward, hiding her face so he couldn’t see all her features.

“Are you sure that’s a no, or do you really mean yes?” Discomfort set up residence in his stomach. She hadn’t mentioned she was seeing anyone, and if she was, he’d certainly never seen her go to all this trouble for a man before.

Alannah moved rice around on her plate with the fork. “I’m not seeing anyone, but there is a guy at work. I don’t know...he’s attractive and seems nice.” She shrugged.

“What guy? I didn’t know there was a guy.” They told each other everything, but she’d been holding out on him.

“It’s not a big deal. He doesn’t work in my department. I noticed him, that’s all. And I think he already has a girlfriend, anyway.” She bit into a basil roll, the crispy vegetables crunching between her teeth.

“Do I know him?” He’d been to her job plenty of times and knew a lot of her coworkers.

“No,” she said shortly.

“Hold up, what’s going on?” Trenton set his plate on the glass coffee table. “If your mystery man is with someone, why are you going through all these changes?”

She sighed. “Can we watch the movie, please?”

“No.” Trenton picked up the remote and paused the movie.

She shot him an annoyed look.

“Talk to me.”

Alannah gave him the silent treatment and stared at the TV screen.

“What happened in Arizona?” Trenton asked.

She tilted her face away from him, again keeping her expression hidden.

“Hey.” Trenton grasped her chin and forced her head back around to him. “What’s going on, Lana? What happened? Did somebody hurt you?” The thought of anyone hurting her filled him with rage. One hand clenched into a fist, and he leaned in, paying close attention to her body language.

She shook her head. “Nobody hurt me, and nothing happened in Arizona. It’s...everything, Trent. I’m tired of being me. I want to be noticed.” Watery eyes looked up at him.

“What’s this?” Trenton took her plate and placed it beside his. Then he pulled her into his arms and she pressed her face into his chest. “There’s nothing wrong with you, knucklehead.”

She sniffled and swiped a tear from her cheek. “I know there’s nothing wrong with me—not anything major, but I want to stand out.”

“Well, auburn hair will do it,” he said. She lightly punched him in the stomach and he laughed, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “It’s a compliment, dipshit.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. I like the color.”

“Terri suggested it,” Alannah said, referring to one of her close girlfriends.

He had reservations about her friend’s influence but kept the comment to himself. He kissed the top of her head. A new scent. Liking it, he smiled a little and took a bigger whiff.

“Your hair smells different.”

“I’m trying a new shampoo. It’s honeysuckle scented.”

Trenton took another whiff. He really liked that scent. Stroking her hair, he asked, “Nobody messed with you, though, right?”

“No, Trent.” She sat up and away from him, breathing heavily, an annoyed sound. “I’m not eight years old anymore. You don’t have to keep protecting me.”

His throat closed up, and the discomfort he’d experienced earlier reappeared and filled all the corners of his stomach. He’d always been there. For twenty-two years, they’d always been there for *each other*. He didn’t know any other way to behave.

“That’s bullshit. We have each other’s back.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I know,” she said quietly.

He took her hand, rubbing a thumb over the slenderness of her wrist and the delicate, narrow fingers. “We look out for each other. That’s what we do.”

“Yeah.” Her upper lip trembled but she forced a smile. “Best friends forever,” she said, repeating the mantra they’d said for years.

“Forever,” he confirmed. He squeezed her hand.

Instead of happiness, Trenton thought he saw sadness in the depths of her eyes. But before he could properly analyze the emotion, she averted her gaze, picked up her plate, and restarted the movie.

“Yay, I’m really looking forward to reading this movie,” he grumbled.

Alannah rolled her eyes. “Give it a chance,” she said, past a mouthful of seafood.

He picked up his own plate, set his feet on the coffee table, and reclined against the back of the sofa.

But Alannah’s minor meltdown stayed with him for a long time after the movie started. Every now and again he watched her from the corner of his eye. She appeared normal enough, back to her old self, yet he suspected she hadn’t told him everything. The makeover and what she’d said worried him. He had a feeling even bigger changes were coming.

And he wasn’t going to like a single one of them.

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