

WHAT IF by Rebecca Donovan

excerpt

I'm in desperate need of caffeine to kick my ass as I wait in line at Bean Buzz. Especially today. I was definitely "the drunk college guy" last night. It's not a role I live up to that often. But it was such a messed-up night.

I thank Mel behind the register as she hands me my cup. I'm half convinced I'm sleepwalking as I head toward the door, my eyes barely open. I focus on the light coming from the exit and concentrate on moving my body in that direction.

"Cal?"

I stretch my eyes wide and inhale deeply through my nose in attempt to focus. Carly is standing in front of me. How did she know I'd be here? I never brought her here. I never bring any girls here. I picked the most inconvenient coffee shop off campus so I could avoid accidentally running into them.

"Carly, what are you doing here?" I ask, too surprised to be filtered.

"Uh, getting coffee," she answers, holding up the cup.

"Right," I say with a slight nod, feeling like an ass.

"Do you have a second? I was hoping we could talk."

"Uh..." I hesitate. Right now just standing is a challenge, forget about talking.

"It'll be quick. I promise."

"Okay." I reluctantly follow her over to a table that opens up in front of the large picture window. I have no idea what I'm walking into. I'm assuming she wants to apologize for how she ended things last night.

"I think I made a mistake," she says as I lower myself onto the chair. "I shouldn't have broken up with you."

I definitely didn't see this coming.

My stunned silence encourages her to continue. "I guess I freaked because I'm starting to have feelings for you. But after you left the party last

night, I realized how many douche-wads there are on campus. You're not like them. I screwed up, and I want to give us another chance."

Shit. I am not coherent enough for this. So I stall and take a slow sip of my coffee, looking everywhere but at the girl sitting across from me waiting for an answer. That's when I see those same damn blue eyes from last night, staring at me from the leather sofa on the far side of the café—without the mask.

"Cal?" Carly calls to me.

"No way," I murmur, transfixed.

"What?" Carly questions, a hint of panic in her voice. "No?"

"Sorry," I recover quickly, reluctantly looking away. "Um, I thought I saw... never mind." I shake my head and try to focus. She gave me an out last night. So I'm taking it. It's not like it would have lasted much longer anyway, especially if she was starting to get serious.

I take a quick breath and say, "Yeah, no. I can't get back together with you."

"Uh... what?" Carly's eyes narrow. "Why?"

"Sorry, Carly. I just can't." I stand and walk away before I can see her reaction. I really should keep walking out the door. But I don't. Instead, I cross the café to the brown leather sofa where the girl from last night is reading with her feet propped up on the coffee table.

Then I just stand there and stare at her. She doesn't notice me and that's probably a good thing because I know I look like a creep hovering above her. I have no idea what to say because I'm standing in front of *Nicole Bentley*. But this girl looks... different. She doesn't look *exactly* like the girl who moved into my neighborhood fifteen years ago. So maybe she's not her. It doesn't make sense for her to be here. Except... those are her eyes.

"Nicole?"

She doesn't look up. I'm about to call to her again when someone brushes against my arm.

"Here you go, Nyelle," Tess says, reaching over the coffee table to hand

Nicole a cup. “Hot chocolate with two pumps of mocha and whipped cream. How can you drink that much sugar in the morning? It makes my stomach hurt just thinking about it.” Then Tess looks up at me and smiles brightly. “Hey, Cal.”

“Uh, hi,” I reply, completely confused. I glance from Tess to Nicole and back again. “Um, *you’re* Nyelle?” Maybe I’m still drunk.

Nicole smiles gently. “Yeah. Nyelle Preston.” She reaches out her hand. “Sorry I was a bitch to you last night.” She’s looking right at me, waiting for me to take her hand, which is covered by a knit glove with the fingers cut off. There isn’t a single hint of recognition on her face. “I was a little drunk and wasn’t having the best night.”

“Yeah, uh, no problem,” I say slowly, reaching over and taking her thin hand in mine. “Nice to meet you.” I’m convinced I’m either sleeping, drunk, or in some fucked up episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I swear I’m staring at the face of Nicole Bentley, the girl I spent way too many hours of my life thinking about. But she’s looking at me like she has no idea who I am. It’s freaking me out.

“I’m sorry, but don’t I know—”

“You’re such a fucker! You should have told me there was someone else. I can’t believe I begged you to take me back!”

I turn just as Carly thrusts her coffee cup in my direction. I bow away, but it’s too late. My body clenches in pain as the hot liquid collides with my chest. Stunned, I watch Carly’s blond curls bounce out the door.

Sucking in through clenched teeth, I pull the soaked t-shirt away from my skin.

“Omigod,” Tess gasps. She grabs napkins from the coffee table and begins to frantically blot my shirt. “Why would she do that? Are you okay?”

Mel appears in front of me and hands me a fistful of napkins. “Do you need anything?”

“My dignity,” I mutter. Nicole laughs. I’m suddenly wishing I was still passed out on Eric’s couch. “I look like an idiot, don’t I?”

Nicole smiles. “Well... kinda. But she looked like a psycho. So she wins.”

Just shoot me already.

“Oh Cal, I can’t believe she did that. Who was she?”

“An ex,” I grumble, taking the napkins from Tess. “Thanks for your help. But I’m going to go.” I can feel every pair of eyes on me, including the ones that kept me from taking that exit I should have made earlier. “I’ll see you later.”

I dump the napkins in the trash before I walk out the door. I look over my shoulder to find the girl who looks like Nicole Bentley watching me leave.