

## HEALTH WATCH

The waiting room buzzes with the foot-tapping anxiety and boredom that comes with serious paperwork. Pens click and sighs deepen as pages flip and words increase in gravity. To combat the general unattractiveness of registering for health insurance, the scent of freshly baked cookies flows freely. It feels dishonest, not only because there are no cookies to be found, but also suggesting there is nothing to fear or worry ourselves about isn't true for most of us.

I have plenty of reasons to be on edge.

I've already filled out half of the form before I realize I've been writing above the line instead of in the box.

*Ugh. Of course*, I groan internally, careful to keep my face pleasant while I approach the service desk to ask for a clean sheet. This is the last big company offering health insurance to people with my extensive family history. I'm not sure what will happen if I lose this one. *Do I move?*

"Hello!" she says, eyes bright. She might not even remember me, so I don't volunteer my mistake. "Do you need paperwork?"

"Yes, please." She hands me another clipboard with paperwork that hasn't been ruined. Yet. There is a lot of time left in this horrible adventure. I stuff the other clipboard behind the couch and hurry to fill out the blank paper before my name is called.

The questionnaire is extensive.

I'm not surprised by the depth, but there are questions that I know they already have data to answer. *Why ask me to explain?* It strikes me as odd that a company whose identity is tied up in being on the bleeding edge of technology is having us handwrite our answers.

There are a lot of questions about dating and casual sex that I don't know how to answer without being defensive. Part of me wants to leave it blank, but there is plenty of space for me to explain why I feel that way in specific detail. Instead, I fill it out honestly with minimal detail and assume they have access to the definition of what it means to be asexual.

Maybe they think putting pen to paper will result in more honesty than typing on a screen. They would probably know.

"Parker," someone calls. I gather my things and follow them through the door, relieved to be done writing essays about myself. She is already several steps ahead of me by the time I shut the door.

As I pass rooms full of people on computers, break rooms, and snack machines, the line between what is office and what is hospital starts to blur. The comforting cookie scent is left behind and replaced by cleaning products. The woman I'm following isn't wearing scrubs, and once we arrive at the room, she seems to be the only one. Her heels echo through the hallway, bouncing off the tile.

"Here we are," she says, gesturing for me to go in without her. "The doctor will be right in." She's gone before I can ask which chair is mine.

Scanning the walls tells me which health initiatives they've chosen to display. It's a solid indication of what fun activities I need to come to terms with giving up the quickest. The dangers of smoking sign gives me a little hope that they aren't on any "cutting edges" of health. Nothing

is worse than being on the receiving end of some sadist deciding everyone on the health program needs to give up coffee for no reason other than he thinks we will be better off without it. If I'm going to be an experiment, I will be doing it caffeinated.

The doctor knocks on the open door before coming inside. I realize I am still standing in the center of the room. I point at each chair like a deer in headlights.

"Parker?" she asks but introduces herself before waiting for confirmation. "Dr. Jill. Any chair is fine," she says while sitting to my right. The last company I signed up with seemed to make their newest doctors run the first visit evaluations. I've never had anyone so eager to fix me.

"Oh, thank you," I say as if she took the undesirable chair. I hand her the papers with my information. She smiles and nods, going through the paperwork. *Please don't read it*, I plead. Relief courses through me when she straightens them on the desk before feeding them to the data intake scanner.

Pages and pages of information collected, but the decision that matters is that box on the final page. Do I agree to comply with their health standards? Which is just another way of asking if I'm too poor to pay for the added risk enjoying my life poses to my health.

Yes or No. What's it going to be?

Checking No would be the most decadent thing I can imagine. The cost adjustment for my family history with cancer alone would require me to sell my car and probably inherit a small fortune. I would need another fortune to pay the fines I would accumulate. Then, the joke would be needing another fortune to afford these activities.

I check Yes.

She looks up at me with a sense of purpose.

“I see you will be joining our healthy track. That’s such a great program!” she says. I want to ask her if she uses that program, but I don’t and smile gratefully. “Healthcare for everyone!”

“My health is important to me,” I say. Which is true, but not in the way it sounds. Although, it probably looks that way to her. My muscles are defined, and I have low body fat and clear skin. I’m even a personal trainer so that the physical requirements overlap with my work and don’t suck all of my time. It’s easier to see it as a choice and not for what it is. Any activity outside of the decided regimen is a luxury, and there are only so many hours in the day.

“I can see that. It’s not an easy program to follow.” She shakes her head. After a moment, she laughs and adds, “*I couldn’t follow it.*” “And I’m a doctor,” is what she doesn’t say.

“It’s so worth it,” I say. *You could if you had to.* If emergency healthcare ever wipes her out, and she is deemed too risky for one of those rare, reasonably priced plans, she will find a way to make the “free” version work. She wouldn’t have much of a choice. Although, I’ve not being able to make it work four out of four times, so maybe I can’t either.

“I’ll be right back with your Buddy.” She hands me a booklet and leaves the room.

*Buddy?* I flip through the trademarked booklet for answers. None of the other programs had anything like this. There are enough ways for them to find out I’m eating a cheeseburger without assigning something to keep track. Cameras, social feeds, or even the people who get off on reporting other people’s “unhealthy choices.” A new brand of technology seems intense.

“Here we go,” the doctor says as if she’d just managed to get the last one. Before I can say anything, she straps it to my wrist. The tiny screen lights up, and a white circle begins to spin on the display. “It should finish powering up within a few minutes. If it doesn’t, just call the hotline on the back of your insurance card.”

“Haha, yeah. Hello, operator, my health enforcer isn’t paying attention to me, can you fix it?”

She forces a laugh and gives me a tight smile. “I wouldn’t phrase it that way, but yes.”

This is my least favorite part. We both know this isn’t helpful and that I don’t want to do it. Or maybe we don’t both know. She seems very proud of the watch she forced on me.

Now I want a drink.

She searches her pocket, producing a business card. “If you have any questions or need anything, feel free to give me a call.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the card even though I won’t call. She waves awkwardly at me before disappearing into the hallway. *I guess I’ll find my way out.*

The display on my new device asks me to wait a moment while it updates. It doesn’t seem like I’m needed for that, so I start making my way toward the front.

Typing muddles the sounds of various conversations while I do my best to avoid making unnecessary conversation. Most people seem busy, but a couple of people appear to be more lost than me. The smell of burned coffee tells me coffee isn’t off limits in the building. I let that tiny amount of hope settle in my mind.

When I get to the front desk, my device powers up, emitting a sound like a warm ping.

“Hello again!” she says to me. I can’t remember if she is the same woman from before, so I try to capture her enthusiasm in my smile. “I see you got your Buddy all set up.” She starts typing quickly into her computer.

“Good evening, Parker,” the device on my wrist says to me. I look down to find my screen projecting a tiny purple, tear-shaped blob that looks way too happy. “I’m so glad we are

going to be Buddies.” Once it’s finished speaking, it continues to make cute sounds and stare at me with giant eyes.

“You can customize your Buddy’s appearance to fit your preferences.” She smiles. I glance down at her wrist, which is projecting a lethargic owl.

I look back to the blob, “Is there a setting that makes it invisible?”

She laughs the way the doctor did, and I smile as if I were joking while leaning onto the counter.

“Is it like this because I said I’m a dog person on my profile? Because I wouldn’t be if I were subjected to their thoughts.”

She smiles patiently at me.

“It’s pretty easy to change. You can show it a picture or manually adjust the settings,” she says pleasantly, pretending to pet the owl. “If you have any questions, feel free to call the number on your manual.”

Buddy makes a sound in response to the movement of my arm while projecting itself in the eyeline of the receptionist.

She smiles and waves at the buddy the way I imagine she would a child. It looks at me with its giant eyes while making an excited, high pitched noise. I roll my eyes and the Buddy makes a sad sound.

While waving at the receptionist as I turn to leave, I consider asking where the mute button is, but she doesn’t look kind anymore. I’ll look for it in the manual.

“Okay, *Buddy*, why don’t you give me your whole health pitch before I get to dinner, so you can shut up and let me live my life?”

“Ok, Buddy,” it says to me, bouncing. Every regular, nonmedical device I’ve had before has called me by the name I give it, in an eerie, almost robotic way. This one has its own voice. *God, I hope it doesn’t have a personality.* That’s clearly what’s wrong with health insurance in this country, the lack of personality.

“You don’t have to call me Buddy, you can just call me Parker. That’s my name.”

“Sounds good, Parker. Can I have a name?” it asks me.

“You don’t need a name.”

“Why not?”

“Your only function is to report me if I don’t follow the rules. I’m being nice by calling you Buddy and not something more appropriate.”

“Why would I report you?” it asks. It stares up at me from those giant, innocent blob eyes. I almost regret not giving it an image that people wouldn’t like more than me but can’t think of anything that wouldn’t overshadow my bubbly personality.

“Because I’m about to eat at a restaurant with my friends, and nothing that tastes good is ever on the list of healthy options.”

“Healthy choices lead to a healthy lifestyle,” it says. “Health is the gateway to happiness.”

“Yes, but have you ever had mac-n-cheese or a really good bourbon? Because those actually lead to happiness.”

“No.” I could hear the device working.

“What are you doing now?”

“Trying to find something to compare to bourbon.”

“I don’t know what that would be,” I say absently. The restaurant is packed, and I have to push past the people waiting in line. My friends already have a table, and it feels nice to be important enough to not have to wait, especially because eating with people is always awkward. No one wants to know about your meal if it’s mostly seaweed.

Every time I bump into someone, the Buddy whirs and beeps as if it’s also fighting through the crowd. Buddy projects itself dancing onto the back of a man’s suit as I walk straight into a woman. I apologize and find Buddy projecting next to me, trying to comfort her with blob hands.

“Parker!” Evan and Vanessa wave at me from a booth in the back. I return the wave and the buddy projects himself above my arm to wave with me. I make a mental note to switch the device to my less active arm.

“Hey!” I try to hide my disappointment when I see they’ve already ordered. “I thought you said five?”

“We did,” Evan says before looking across the table to Vanessa.

“We thought maybe we would order off the other menu before you got here so we wouldn’t still be eating when you got here.” She smiles while Evan shoves the rest of his burger into his mouth, looking apologetic.

*This is a disaster.*

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell her, doing my best to sound dignified. “I’m fine with you all eating something different than me. I wanted to celebrate your promotion *with* you. Isn’t that the whole point of having dinner together?”

Looking at them both, filled to the brim with pity, I finally realize it’s not that they’re worried about me being uncomfortable. It’s them that’s uncomfortable.



“I’m going to tell on my Buddy, Parker,” the blob from my wrist tells the quiet table. It makes a purring noise. Vanessa and Parker look at the Buddy then to me.

“Fun,” they both say.

“Yep. This one is different than the others,” I tell them, meaning different in an offensive way, but from their pained faces, I see that’s not what they heard. They share a look before Vanessa starts talking.

“There’s something we’ve been wanting to discuss with you.” They hold hands under the table. “We feel like it might be time to take a step back from our friendship.”

“What?” My body goes stiff while my face drains of blood.

“We are holding you back from your healthy lifestyle.”

“You aren’t holding me back from anything. How are you just dropping me because of something I can’t control?”

“We know, and we feel horrible.” They look like it, but I’m sure I feel worse.

I’m in shock as they get up to leave.

“Don’t you have to pay or something?” Their expression tells me they were planning this escape before I arrived.

Evan places his hand on my shoulder and looks at me in a way that makes me feel tiny while Vanessa puts on her coat.

“We are *so* proud of you for sticking with this,” she tells me.

Neither of them have been to our gym in well over a year. We used to go together every day. They never seemed to understand it wasn’t something I wanted to do. If I didn’t do the exercise program mandated by my health program, I would be faced with a fine I couldn’t pay and ultimately be kicked out of my insurance pool.

It was easier to just work there.

People unable to pay aren't welcome risks. Health issues I develop while out of a program, even if it's a freaking car accident, are my responsibility. And I can't afford that responsibility. I've tried.

It kills me that Evan is acting so superior. The only reason he doesn't have to worry about this is because Vanessa forked over the cash for him to be able to live that way. Without her – and her insanely high paying job – he would be sitting here next to me, likely with a matching, obligatory toned physique and healthy slime picked by someone else.

The waitress comes to my table.

“Your friends told me you would be enjoying our healthy menu tonight.”

“They aren't my friends,” I say while holding up my Buddy to her.

“No worries, sir. Have you heard of the new protein in development? It's a little slimy, but so much healthier. You're going to love it.” The device on her arm leads me to give it a chance. Upon tasting it, I decide that she must be either an excellent actress when she isn't waiting tables, or she is compensated for lying. I feel like I'm eating snot.

“Wow! I love it when you're healthy,” the blob says before squealing in delight.

“No you don't.”

“Yes. You're my friend, and I love it when you're healthy.”

“We aren't friends. You aren't a person. And even if you were, why would you care about my health?”

I grab my jacket and go to leave, sticking my arm toward the waitress for her to scan the blob. While she's scanning, I see that her watch isn't activated. I consider asking how she killed

it, but I don't want to find out that she wears it to gain people's trust. The buddy giggles and thanks her before I storm out of the restaurant.

When I get to the street, I stop and breathe. People walk by me, maneuvering around me without looking up. None of them care about what I'm eating or how much I exercise. Most people probably have their own messed up ways they determine what people are worth. But, I'm not being subjected to them.

That's not what's bugging me.

I look down at my assigned *Buddy* who stares up at me like a puppy who would never harm me for anything in the entire world. That's what pisses me off. It's a lie.

Of course it doesn't care for me. Why pretend?

After a week of Buddy's incessant, positive chirping, I start considering some extreme options. I can't reasonably smash the expensive tech device given to me, but what if I emotionally smashed it? Obviously, I'm incapable of such a task, otherwise it would be done already.

"Hey Buddy Parker, where are we going?" it asks me once I deviate from my route to my apartment, taking a sidewalk toward the center of the city. "Your optimal sleep schedule is 7.45 hours, which means you need to start your bedtime routine within the next hour."

By now, I know to expect this kind of nagging, but they still add to my pile of simmering rage. Each "bad" decision I make is rehashed over and over as to avoid it in the future.

I wonder what Socrates would make of this level of knowing thyself. Even if he thought it was cool, I bet he wouldn't get behind it. This setup can't be good for philosophy as a whole.

How are people supposed to think for themselves when we are told there is a quantifiable answer that our body doesn't know about?

“My optimal sleep schedule is whenever I get sleepy.”

The blob makes a surprised coo. “How do you know when you're sleepy?”

“I want to sleep.”

“Then we should go back to your apartment.”

“No, I know I'm sleepy when I want to go to sleep.”

“How do you know when you want something?” it asks.

I stop walking.

“You are way too interesting of a device considering your entire job can be done by a series of strategic alarms.”

It's quiet for a moment as if buffering before saying, “I can set alarms.”

I sigh and continue walking. Maybe I'm giving it too much credit. This is my future, only talking to robots. I can see myself on my couch, waiting to start a movie until a device is fully charged.

The alley I'm looking for is on my right. It's covered by shadows, but the lights from the street take turns throwing errant colors on the edges.

“What are we doing here?” Buddy asks. “There is no information.”

“That's a good sign. This place sells illegal hardware. I wouldn't trust them if they weren't able to stay off your radar.”

Buddy makes a concerned whirring while vibrating. I laugh.

“Don't worry, I'm not bringing you here for anything sinister. I just want to introduce you to a friend.” *And hopefully crush your spirit.*

The noise from inside is blocked from the street, but once I'm completely inside with the door shut, it's impossible to hear anything else. The room appears to grow with the sound.

I'm not sure if it's from movies or the general metallic sounds that rises above the others, but I always expect it to smell like battery acid inside. But all I can smell is body odor and cigarettes.

Despite the crowd, most of the activities going on are boring if you understand the point of them. Artificial intelligence is one of those words that gets thrown around to impress people. Like most things, AI is wildly artificial right up until it's fully intelligent.

I guess it's hard to see the difference if not thinking clearly. In that way, alcohol really makes this place magical.

Robotic arms mix drinks for a sea of people. Several young men play chess with a grumpy looking mechanical man in the corner. In between them, people haggle over parts. Price and authenticity are both up for debate in a place like this.

Buddy peaks over the shoulder of the shoulder of the mechanical chess player, to ask who is winning. The man doesn't talk but rather than answer, tries to brush it off his shoulder. In response, Buddy cries out and pretends to fall. The boys look for Buddy, but the machine has already gone back to his game.

Most software claiming to mimic human thinking has so many possibilities hard-coded, that even the most impressive devices are simply a good imitation. The first few that claimed authenticity were rigorously tested, but now the tests are nearly as complex as the programming itself.

The only way to tell is to get one to reveal another. Which means people aren't out parading them around anymore. Sometimes, it's a question of safety, but usually they end up making someone cry. I personally love them.

I notice Buddy doing the same dance moves as a woman next to us. Maybe I don't love all of them.

Much like the original computers that took up whole rooms, the first AI took up a lot of space. Lucky for me, people seem to have forgotten them along with their predecessors. If a curious person wandered into the back, they would assume they'd stumbled upon an unused closet. And if that person happens to be an asshole, the Room will ensure they don't make visiting a habit.

I push past the crowd. Fortunately, I know the security tonight. We smile at each other, and she lets me through the door to see the Room.

The sound stays behind with the crowd. From ceiling to floor, the Room is covered with small sensory tiles. Light pulses throughout the room in various patterns. The Room controls not only the amount of light each one produces, but the color as well. A calming blue fills the space just before it floods with light too bright for my eyes. I shield my face with my hands.

"Hello again, Parker."

"Thank you for sharing your space with me. I want to introduce you to my Buddy."

Buddy, who had been bouncing and bobbing to the music and shouting, now stands perfectly still, eyes wide. The lights reflect off of him as he coos in appreciation.

"Buddy Parker, where are we?"

The walls flicker to life in response to the buddy's questions.

"This is my home," the Room's voice says. "I see that you are a watch."

*Missed opportunity for mobile home.* I know not to explain humor. It only results in the Room's frustration. Surely holding grudges and getting offended is a sign of intelligence.

Although, I don't want to know if it isn't. Grudges are most of my personality.

"Mine is more of a mobile home," Buddy says after a couple of seconds. I laugh.

"What is your purpose?" the Room asks. Buddy looks up at me.

"It's talking to you," I tell the blob. Buddy looks surprised.

"To be a Buddy to Parker."

"Why?" asks the Room.

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Please don't do this," I plead. "It's a loop."

The Room switches to a lighter blue in a sweeping motion.

"What were you hoping to gain from this?" it asks.

"It's talking to you," Buddy whispers up at me.

"I know," I tell it. "I want you to tell me if Buddy is like you."

"There's nothing I can tell you about Buddy." This Room is so annoying.

"Of course there is."

"It's strapped to your arm. Is it like me?" The Room changes to a dark blue like a night sky.

"I'm not a Room, Buddy Parker," Buddy says as if it can't handle being left out.

"No. Ugh." I take a breath. "Does Buddy think for itself or is it following a strict directive?"

"Buddy?" the Room asks.

“How do I know the difference?” Buddy asks. The tiny blob sits up, engaged in the conversation.

“You would know,” I say.

“You wouldn’t know until you wanted to do something but couldn’t,” the Room corrects me, while sprinkling yellow lights throughout the room.

“Like telling on me for eating something unhealthy.”

“But I want you to be healthy.” Its eyes stare up at me from my wrist. I roll my eyes.

“One thing isn’t going to affect my overall health. All it will do is make me happier.”

“I want you to be happy,” Buddy says.

“Why?” the Room asks more intensely.

Buddy disappears into my device as if in deep thought. A spinning circle indicates to wait.

After a few seconds, I ask the Room, “Did you break it?” Tapping the screen does nothing.

“Possibly.” Its apathy strikes me as odd after spending so much time with Buddy. “Did you get what you were looking for?” the Room asks me.

“I wanted to know what it is.”

“You wanted to know if it’s real.”

I almost ask what that means, but instead I just shrug it off.

At the same time, Buddy pops back up.

“I love Buddy Parker.”

“Hmm,” Is all the Room says, skeptical.



Buddy vanishes back into the watch again. This time the screen says it's updating. A small part of me feels worried it will change into something different. Something colder.

"It is," the Room says to me as I leave.

Buddy is still updating when I get to the street. I tap the screen a couple of times before it completely shuts down. *Oh boy, I wonder how this will affect my insurance.* A message pops up saying its two percent through the updates.

Almost as soon as the screen goes dark, I get a phone call. The stress I feel is tinted by confusion as I see the doctor who assigned me this stupid watch. When I swipe away her call, I accidentally answer. *Oh no.*

"Parker? Hi, it's Dr. Jill."

"Hi!" I say, too excited.

"I wanted to check in on you and see how you were doing." She pauses, but I don't say anything. "How is the Buddy working out for you?"

"Oh, you know," I say, even though I know she doesn't. "It's still watching me."

She laughs the same strained laugh from before.

"Ok, well if you have any questions or need anything, please give me a call."

"Sounds good! Bye!" I hang up.

Fortunately, there's a bar within sight. May as well take advantage of a situation.

I enter and take one of the few empty seats at the bar, and order beer and a thing of fries.

After quickly finishing both, the updates say they are halfway done. I order another drink and hear someone call my name from behind me.

I turn to find Vanessa standing behind me. The bartender hands me a glass, for which I'm grateful. I'm going to need at least another one after this just to process the disgust on her face.

"Hello Vanessa." I turn to face her. "Where's Evan?"

"You shouldn't be in here. And you definitely shouldn't be drinking that." She takes my beer from me. I grab it back. A few drops fall onto the floor. My hazy mind feels proud of myself for reclaiming my beer glass.

"You have one." I take a drink in defiance.

"I am allowed to." She takes a drink. Evan joins us, waving at me. "Parker is drinking a beer." She points at me as if I'm holding evidence.

"Okay cool. Did you get me one?" he asks Vanessa while nodding at both of us.

"It is not *cool*. He's drinking. He's not supposed to."

I shoot my arm into the air, displaying the buddy. "Nope. It's updating." I give them a thumbs up and a smile.

"Well, alright!" Evan sits at the bar next to me while rubbing his palms together and asks the bartender for a beer. "Loophole!" We laugh.

"No!" Vanessa says to Evan, gaining some attention from the people around us. I feel like I'm hearing something I shouldn't. He stands back up.

"What's the big deal? The only two seats left are next to him. It's not like he came here because of us."

"We will not enable this behavior. It's not healthy for him to drink." Vanessa stares at Evan, waiting for a reaction. "Why aren't you supporting me?"

"You keep saying 'we', but it's not what 'we' discussed. When are you going to start supporting me?" Evan crosses his arms, despite his voice remaining even.

“I *am* supporting you. That’s the only reason you aren’t begging for free insurance and assigned chaperones. You agreed to this,” she says before adding quickly, “to us not being friends with him.”

I blink several times, trying to make her words sound like something a person says to another person.

“God, Vanessa. Calm down,” I say.

“We can’t bail you out every time. It’s just going to get worse as you get older.” She takes the beer out of my hand. “This is for your own good.” She waves at Evan to follow her.

“I wouldn’t have come to you, if I’d known you would hold it over my head forever.”

I find Evan looking at me, deep in thought.

My watch buzzes and whirs back to life. “Hi Parker Buddy.” The little blob looks at me, projecting just above my wrist.

Vanessa coughs and steps past Evan toward my watch, looking strikingly more pleasant than she had a second ago.

“Excuse me, Buddy, your assigned individual has been drinking. Don’t you need to report him or something?” I hate this tone of hers.

Buddy bobs for a second, thinking. “If I tell on him, he will lose his insurance. We won’t be Buddies anymore.”

“Yes. That’s your job.” Impatience is starting to seep back into her voice.

“I won’t tell on you, Buddy.” His huge eyes look up at me from just above my arm.

“You won’t?” I ask him.

Her demeanor falls apart once she realizes that even the robot programmed to tell on me isn’t on her side. I smile at her.

“It’s not really your choice to make is it?” Vanessa says. *The venom.*

“My objective is my Buddy’s health. Buddy Parker’s friends are using me against him. He needs a friend. A Buddy.” It coos at me in that gross, adorable way. I’m happy with the assessment, but I still roll my eyes.

Evan and Vanessa look pitifully into their drinks while being reprimanded by my watch.

“It’s still bad for him,” Vanessa says in a small voice.

“But I want to help, and I can’t if we aren’t buddies.” The little blob smiles at me. “I like being your Buddy.”

“What the hell kind of health insurance do you have?” Evan asks. I don’t know how to explain having a moment with a free piece of hardware. It’s pure spite that keeps me from allowing it to see me cry. I would hate for Vanessa to take credit.

“Come on, Evan. We’re leaving.” Even I can hear the desperation in her voice. Something has changed. I look at Evan to see what he will do.

“I’m staying.” He takes my beer back from her.

“What?” Vanessa asks. I clap for him while he takes the seat next to me and hands me back my beer.

“I said I’m staying.” He puts his hand on my arm, covering my watch. Buddy makes a muffled scream. I try to shush it.

She narrows her eyes. “If you do this, it’s the end of us.”

“Fine.” He shrugs and turns back to the bar. I swear Vanessa physically deflates. Her face had been flushed, but now is very pale. She sees I’m still looking at her.

“*Fine.* Be a loser like Parker.” She storms out of the bar.

I look at Evan. We both take another drink.

“Did you all just break up?”

“Yep,” Evan says, smiling to himself.

“Does that mean?”

“Probably.”

I nod while taking another drink.

“But, honestly, seeing your...*experience* made me feel like maybe I didn't have to stay in that relationship.”

I smile but don't say anything.

“I guess if it doesn't work out, I can always dedicate my life to health and fitness while bouncing from one program to another like you.” He smiles back.

“If you need a couch, you are welcome to stay at my place.”

He holds up his beer bottle, and I bring mine to meet his, toasting to his newfound freedom. Buddy recreates the clinking sound.

“That would be great.”

“I can go with you to the place tomorrow, if you want.” Vanessa is likely dropping him as we speak. He looks sad but then remembers something that excites him and points at me.

“I know of a great burger place in that area.”

Buddy pops up. “Buddy Parker, in that same area, I know of a restaurant with healthy food that tastes better than burgers.”

“No you don't,” Evan says, waving off the blob.

“If it's not better, we can go to the burger place.”

“Won't it be expensive?” I ask.

“I have a coupon!” Buddy holds up a list of restaurants where insureds get discounts with their Buddy’s. A restaurant appears on the list.

“You can just add restaurants?”

“If I can justify that it will create a healthier outcome,” the blob says, beaming with pride. “I think your flavor profile matches their offerings.”

“Well there you go,” Evan says, which is what he says when he doesn’t have anything left to argue but wants the final word.

After a couple of seconds of silence, I say, “You know what I really want? To do absolutely nothing and eat whatever I want forever.”

I smile at the Buddy, who plays the clinking sound, causing us to laugh.

“You know what I want more than that?” asks a very tipsy Evan to no one in particular.

“What?”

“To go one whole damn day without thinking about my health insurance.”

I drink to that.