

BENJI'S DECISION

FOR LOVE OR FRIENDSHIP
BOOK 1



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BENJI'S DECISION: FOR FRIENDSHIP OR LOVE BOOK 1

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For Friendship or Love

Benji's Decision

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The Field of Blood

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SHAYNE MAGIC

The bass of the music vibrates through the wooden stool as I gulp down my lukewarm beer and take in the dance floor. The sea of scantily clad bodies writhe together in the dim light. I watch in morbid fascination as two girls, who wear matching dresses that stop at their asses, drunkenly grab at each other, hoping to entice the small group of guys sat at the table nearby. My nose wrinkles in disgust when one of the guys throws a fifty-pound note at them, causing his mates to laugh and high five each other.

Disgust at the blatant disrespect those fuckers have for women forces my teeth to grind painfully together as I clench my fists, fighting the need to go over there to teach them a lesson. My friends won't be happy if I cause another brawl in the same club within a week. This is the only club close enough to the house where we can all drink and not worry about one being the driver or wasting money on a taxi.

But Jason, the manager, will get an earful from me later.

Even after years of friendship, none of us like how he deals with shit around the club. His thirst for money overrules the need to ensure the women's safety. And his

staff. Fuck. They always tend to show up after it all kicks off and not a moment earlier. While they're only following Jason's orders, surely morals float around in those tiny brains.

I put my back to the group on the dance floor and focus my attention on my best friends, Shayne and Morgan. We all had a busy week at work, but mine was a nightmare. If Mr. Stuart, the latest client, changes the plans of his garden one more time, I might bury him under the new patio he wants.

We came to the club hoping to let loose and knock back a few beers. Someone bumps against my stool, which pushes me into the bar top.

Straightening, I faintly hear a, "Sorry."

I glance over my shoulder to get a look at the fucker, and my eyes instantly lock onto the back of a girl in the club uniform. I take in long legs, barely covered by her short skirt, before a group of giggling women sidle up to the bar, blocking me from getting a better look at her.

Shaking my head as the noise level increases, I barely make out Shayne's bitching about his lady boss. Over the past month, she rides his ass daily about his poor standards on his presentations. Complete bullshit. Morgan and I stayed up until the early hours more than once to help make his work damn near perfect. She has absolutely no reason to bitch at him. Doesn't stop her from doing it, though.

I lean back on the stool to stretch and catch a glimpse of the same waitress who

bumped into me. She sashays through the crowd, which causes me to frown when I notice her balancing a tray full of drinks above her head. That's got to be dangerous.

Drinking the last of the bottle of beer, I place it on the sticky, wet bar and jokingly offer up my own take on Shayne's troubles. "You know why she's like that, right? She's probably not getting laid. You could show her some of your 'Shayne magic'."

Shayne shouts in outrage while rubbing his junk. "Fuck, Ben! That's fuckin' wrong! My dick would never be the same again!"

"You're so drama—" Morgan laughs, but his words cut off as his attention focuses over my shoulder. He slams his bottle down on the bar, and I wince as the glass breaks with a loud crack. "Mother fuckers!"

He leaps off his stool, his towering body forcing a path through the crowd as he heads straight for the group of assholes I spotted earlier. Not wanting Morgan to face those guys alone, I quickly nudge my shoulder into Shayne's before we follow the pissed off giant through the writhing bodies.

The two girls the assholes threw money at earlier latch onto Shayne and me as we try to push through the crowd. Fingernails painfully scrape down my forearm when I pull free, and I ignore the sting as I continue to follow my friend.

We catch up to Morgan in time to witness him roughly grab the collar of the main shithead in the group and pull him up until they're nose to nose. A girl sits in the lap of another one of the guys at the table, her expression petrified. She wears the clubs'

work uniform, and I immediately recognise her as the girl who bumped into me earlier. Quickly, I scan her body for injuries. My anger spikes as the dude holding her passes her over to another of his boys. This one's even more handsy.

Her short skirt gives him easy access to run his hand up her outer thigh, and my anger spikes higher when he tries to slip his fingers under her skirt. She makes a grab for his hand and attempts to stand, but his friends roughly grab her and hold her still. Not wanting to allow them to do anything to her, I push past Morgan and the first guy at the table. In my peripheral, I glimpse another of his friends stand up to stop me, but Shayne gets to him first and blocks his way.

I lurch over the sticky table, knocking bottles and shot glasses out of the way as I make a move to snatch her out of their arms. Before I reach her, the dude restraining her throws a drunken fist at me. He catches me and her at the same time. I shake off the sting of the punch and check the girl, realising she took most of the impact.

A blur flies past me from my left and a quick glance shows Morgan grabbing the dude who threw the punch by his shirt. Knowing I need her and me out of this situation before it gets worse, I pull her over the table quickly but as gently as possible while being mindful of the broken glass.

As I lift her weight into my arms, she grabs hold of my shoulder, her fingers digging in painfully. A hand clamps down on my other shoulder, and I pray it's not another of those assholes' friends.

I let out a silent breath when I spin to find one of the bouncers. He stares down at the girl in my arms, and when he spots her busted lip, his face immediately darkens. *Fuck, the guy's huge!* I don't doubt the one who did this to her will be receiving an extra something before the bouncer allows him to be on his way.

I pull her body closer to mine as I make my way through the club. When her body stiffens against my own, I kick myself. She doesn't know who I am or where I'm taking her. But her body relaxes when she spots the familiar door with *Staff Only* written on it. Jason won't mind me taking her back here. What he will mind, though, is me busting his ass for his bouncers not doing their jobs right. Again.

I kick the staff door open, step through, and make my way down the hallway until I stop at a door with a sign saying *Office* on the door. Not giving a shit about the likelihood of disturbing Jason from whatever he's doing, I roughly push the door open and step inside.

Jason immediately stops undressing April on his lap and shouts, "what the fuc—" the voice cuts off when he realises who's barging in. Roughly pulling April's top up then none-too gently helps her stand. "Shit! Set her down there. April, grab the first aid kit for me, honey."

BLACK BETTY

I barely notice as April, Jason's wife, leaves the room because my attention is solely on the girl. Noticing a trail of blood on her chin and the bruise forming causes my mood to darken even more. My teeth clench in anger, but stop when I remember Shayne's words of wearing a mouth guard to stop the dentist bills from piling up. My heart and head fight with each other over what to do. Half of me wants to go out there and find the guy that did this to her, but the other half wants me to stay here, to protect her.

Shaking my head, I turn to Jason, he's still sat in the same spot, not having moved. The impulse to smack him urges me into taking a step toward him. I only pause when he addresses the girl on the sofa.

"What happened, Arlia?" His voice sounds stern and I shoot forward, wanting to punch him even more. Like hell am I allowing him to blame this on her!

He shoots his hands up dramatically in surrender and playfully tries to placate me. "Slow down, asshole! I'm not blaming her. I only want to know what went down." He has the nerve to smirk at me.

“Don’t pull that bullshit, nothing would’ve gone on if you gave a shit about the girls in your club! When did you turn into such a bell-end?” I rub the back of my neck and sigh, plonking my ass down on the side of his desk. He doesn’t get the chance to answer, April comes back carrying the first aid kit. She kneels in front of Arlia and starts rifling through, trying to find what she needs.

She growls and dumps the whole thing out, spreading it across the floor. Giving up, she pushes it away in frustration, turning to glare at Jason. *Ub-oh, he’s in trouble.* “Do you not restock these damn things, ever?”

He starts to stutter out a reply, but she doesn’t give him a chance to answer before she marches out of the office. Jason visibly gulps and I release a chuckle knowing he’s in trouble. He huffs his annoyance and it only causes me to laugh more. *He isn’t getting any tonight.*

I straighten up when Shayne and Morgan enter the office, the space gets considerably smaller with all of us together. They’re both a little roughed up, but I’m happy neither of them are sporting any bruises. They both give me a slight head nod and I know those assholes left. For the second time tonight, I catch a quiet sorry, my eyes instantly shoot to Arlia. She’s sat with her back pushed tight against the sofa and ringing her hands together nervously. I closely inspect her face. Deep blue eyes, button nose, and plump lips. I make sure to keep my eyes above her shoulders, but it still takes me a minute to take in the expression on her face and recognise it as guilt.

Not wanting her to feel guilty for anything, I slowly walk to the sofa and lower myself next to her, pleased when she doesn't flinch away from me. My eyes lock onto the blood on her chin and it's driving me nuts, I take a minute hoping to find something in the pile of stuff April dumped out. Spotting a couple of gauze packets, I take one out of the packaging and straighten up. My hand moves automatically to her face, wanting to help clean it, but stop. I don't want to touch her without her approval. Especially with what those guys did earlier.

The soft skin of her fingers gently touch my clenched fist. My eyes shoot up to hers and I notice for the first time there's a ring of yellow in both her eyes. We stare at each other for a few seconds before a cough sounds from behind me. Immediately releasing the gauze, she presses it to her lip with a quiet thank you.

I turn my attention away from her for a second to try and compose myself, but catch the eye of Shayne, he gives me a wink and I'd kick the fucker if I could be assed to stand up. I'll return the favour in our session tomorrow though.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Jason." Morgan gripes. He perches his ass on the arm of the sofa next to me, his elbow briefly digs into my ear. I pull back and scowl at the twat, his smirk tells me it wasn't an accident. *Why am I friends with these fuckers?*

April enters with a bottle of water and a small box in her hands. She crouches down, somehow balancing in her heels and hands over two pills. Opening the bottle

for Arlia, she insists, “you should go to the hospital, Babe. Get checked out, and before you start arguing, Jason will cover whatever money you’re supposed to get tonight.” She turns slightly to glance over her shoulder and pins Jason with a look that could kill. “Won’t you, Honey?”

“I don’t need the hospital April, these pills will kick in soon and I’ll be fine, nothing a long soak can’t cure.” Arlia tries to reassure.

“Are you sure? I can have someone take you, it’ll save you the money on a taxi.” April tries again.

“Honestly, I’m fi—” Arlia says more firmly, but gets cut off from the last person in the world I expected to put his two pennies worth in.

“It’s fine, April. We can take her home.” Morgan speaks up. My head immediately turns in his direction, hoping to figure out what his game is. He’s casually leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed loosely and a foot resting against the wall. If I hadn’t known him for years, I’d miss the tick in his jaw. *He’s pissed.*

“I-I-I, uh... um it’s okay, it’s not far from here, I’m fine to walk.” Arlia fidgets with the gauze in her hand.

April pats her knee in sympathy causing a smirk to cross all our faces. Straightening up, she wiggles her hips while pushing her tight skirt back to a decent length. “Give it up, Babe. These boys won’t take no for an answer once they get a crazy idea in their heads. They’re safe, they’ll deliver you home in one piece.”

I stare at Morgan first and realise he's staring directly at Arlia, cocky eyebrow raised in a silent challenge, then I turn to Shayne, a knowing smirk on his face. I chuckle before turning my attention finally to Arlia. Her eyes bounce, watching all three of us silently before she groans. *Got ya!*

"Come-on, Sweet. Let's get you home." Morgan says, he walks over to where she sits and makes a big deal out of extending his hand for her to take. *He's a cocky bastard.*

I hold my breath, waiting to see what she'll do. Only a minute passes before she makes her decision, but it feels like forever before she finally holds her small hand out to his. His hand immediately engulfs hers, and I sense a weird jealousy take root. I frown at the floor and rub my hand through my hair in frustration. I don't know this girl and already I feel something for her. Weird, right?

Pushing my jealousy away, and standing up, I make to follow Shayne, Arlia, and Morgan through the door. I stop at the doorway though, turning back to Jason. I ignore April being seductive in his lap and cut him a scowl, "sort your shit! If you don't, you'll take my place in the ring for Morgan to beat the shit outta you!"

I walk out the door not giving him a chance to give me some bullshit excuse about making money and all that bollocks. Before I manage to shut the door fully, I overhear a smack, quickly followed by April's squeal and laughter.

I catch up to the guys and Arlia at the entrance of the club. I catch Shayne grumbling something about skimpy clothing and the weather. Taking in the crowd

properly, I realise he's bitching about the women and their outfits. How the fuck do they not feel the cold? Shaking my head, I take the BMW keys out my pocket and press the button to unlock the car. A low whistle sounds behind me causing me to turn around. Shayne and Morgan stand stock still, both gawking at Arlia in surprise.

I watch in fascination as her eyes slowly rake over my pride and joy. "Arlia, meet my baby, Black Betty."

"Wow." She whispers under her breath and I can't keep the smug smile off my face because of her appreciation of Black Betty. Being the cocky bastard I can be, I open the passenger door with a flourish and lay on the charm.

"Your chariot awaits, M' Lady." Shayne and Morgan both mimic my overly done English accent and cackle like a couple of old ladies as they climb into the back seat, not waiting to give Arlia an option to turn down the front seat.

I catch her giving them both the stink eye before getting into the passenger seat. *Guess they made that move too obvious.* Smiling, I shut her door before rounding my beaut to get in the driver's side. I resist running my hands over the paintwork because she's recently been polished, I don't want her smudged.

Before I turn the key, I lean to the side, taking my phone out my front pocket and placing it in the holder. Doing a quick glance round, I make sure everyone is wearing their belts before finally starting her. The roads are overly icy and I've a feeling the backend is going to be a little twitchy on the way to taking Arlia home.

After receiving the address of her home, I realise I know the area and I don't need her to give me directions, freeing her up to make idle chit chat with the guys in the back. I don't know how I feel about her living in the area she does. It's well known in town for being a shit-hole with drug addicts and dealers living there. The last time I was in the area for work Black Betty ended up with a small mob surrounding her, and I know they were eyeing her up for the stereo system, as for the fuckin' scratches I found on my baby once I arrived home. I was beyond pissed. I glance at Arlia a couple of times, trying to work out why she lives there. Her wages can't be so bad to a point she can't afford to live in a better area. Anywhere must be better than here.

I become too lost in thought, but I'm dragged out of my musing when I sense the car slide slightly, immediately followed by a squeak. Morgan reaches through and places his hand gently on her shoulder causing her to jump.

"Benji's a good driver. He won't crash because he won't wanna risk scratching the paint work on his 'Black Betty'." Morgan laughs.

"This is why I've been walking to work, the roads are too slippery for my car, I won't make it off the driveway without going sideways." Arlia explains.

I glance in the rear-view mirror to see Shayne frowning before he questions, "why not grab a taxi? Got to be better than running the risk of landing on your ass."

After a tense moment, Arlia murmurs, "It's cheaper to walk." I spot the moment the conversation is off limits because she turns her head to watch out the window.

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