

FINDING FRIENDSHIP



SAMPLE

A **bromance** is a close and emotionally intense, non-sexual bond between two (or occasionally more) men. It is characterized by affection and bonding, and a high level of emotional intimacy. The concept emerged in the 21st century appears to reflect a change in society's views and interest in the topic, with increasing openness of society to reconsider gender, sexuality, and exclusivity constraints.

Chapter One

This was our seventh session with the marriage counselor. Sue had given it her best professional efforts but the spark was gone. I think I still loved Cathy, but we had so little in common any more that I wasn't sure it was enough. Cathy said she loved me, and I believed her. Like me, she wasn't convinced that loving each other was enough by itself. We had to like and enjoy each other as well. We were friends, but even that wasn't enough.

Our needs were different. I needed physical touch, Cathy thought it a waste of time. She needed alone time, and I was jealous of the hours she spent reading or working on something for her job. I was emotional, Cathy was cool and detached. She wanted to talk about politics, I wanted to talk about taking a vacation and making love on the beach.

I liked being around people, Cathy could care less. All of this is the tip of the iceberg. The enjoyment had gone out of our relationship, and neither of us knew how to get it back. In fact, neither of us knew whether we wanted it back. That was the real crux of the matter. Neither of us had enough invested in making it work. And that's what Sue finally told us.

"You can change what you do but not who you are." She looked at me and I felt guilty. I wanted Cathy to be affectionate and clingy and that just wasn't her. I suppose she could pretend to like clinginess and affection, but that wasn't what I wanted.

She began to tick off the pieces of the status quo. "First, you don't enjoy each other much anymore. Second, you have completely different likes and pursuits. Third, you have no children. Fourth, and most important, neither of you seems willing to put the effort needed into saving your marriage." She stopped and looked at each of us in turn. "What conclusions do you draw from this?"

Cathy spoke first, but she said what was on both of our minds.

"We love each other, but that's no longer enough. Neither of us has been unfaithful in the relationship, but that's not enough. Our sex life has gotten into a rut. I want sex more often, Mike wants cuddling and hugging more often."

"Sue, should we call it quits?" I was the first to bring this up, but I knew it was on both of our minds.

“Cathy, do you think the marriage is worth the effort you’ll need to put into saving it?” Sue was staring at my wife, and I knew what the answer was going to be.

“No. I love Mike, but the relationship just isn’t working. I want Mike to be happy, and he’s not. Mike wants me to be happy, but I’m not. I think we both need to get on with our lives.” She reached over and took my hand. I squeezed her hand, leaned toward her and gave her a soft kiss on the mouth.

“I agree.” There, I had said it. “Cathy, we’ve both changed since we got married. There’s nothing wrong with that, we both need to evolve and grow. Neither of us is meeting the other’s needs. I want to remain friends, but you need a chance to find love that brings you more fulfillment.”

“As do you.” I was the emotional one, but Cathy was telling the emotional truth. Each of us deserved to have our needs fulfilled, but this just wasn’t going to work for either of us. Time to move on.

“You two seem to be agreed that it’s not worth the necessary effort to keep the marriage together. I concur. Do you have any questions?” Sue was ever practical, one of the few attributes both Cathy and I shared.

“Sue, how can we arrange for a friendly no-fault divorce?” Cathy and I had never discussed divorce, but we were of one mind. We wanted to protect and provide for the other, nobody wanted to take revenge for anything, we wanted things done simply and fairly.

Sue told us how to do it and recommended a couple of attorneys who could handle the matter. She suggested that we each contact one of the attorneys but that we go together to the initial consultations and ensure that the attorneys understood exactly what we wanted. We thought that was great advice.

Cathy chose the first one off the list, a woman who had been practicing “family law” (fancy term for divorce lawyer) for about twenty years. She agreed to what we asked, a simple and equitable separation. She noted that spousal support probably wasn’t necessary.

I made about two hundred thousand a year as an independent management consultant, Cathy about one twenty as a senior accountant. I could triple my income if I wanted; Cathy would make partner in the next two years and her income would soar. Each of us had independent investments worth about eight hundred thousand. Our joint accounts held maybe three hundred thousand and there was probably two hundred fifty thousand equity in the house. Cathy suggested I take two hundred fifty in cash from the joint

account, she take the house, and we split the remaining cash evenly. No spousal support, each has a car, and things were really pretty simple. I agreed.

Cathy said that I should take Nosilla Investments as well. It was inextricably linked to my management consulting practice. Less than half a million in cash, and the equities were all speculative at this point. It was a tool of my work, so I agreed.

I picked another lawyer and almost immediately fired him. We met with him together and he insisted that Cathy leave. He was only going to represent my interests and did not want the opposing party to have input to his strategy. The second guy listened to us, asked if Cathy had an attorney, and called Ms. Rothstein (Cathy's lawyer) to verify what we said. It was that simple. We filed a joint motion to dissolve the marriage.

We left the courthouse and I took her out to lunch at her favorite restaurant. Cathy was a vegetarian while I loved animals because they were so tasty. Neither of us had any problem with the other's diet, we were just different people. After lunch we drove to the house and Cathy asked me to wait five minutes and then join her in the bedroom.

She was nude when I walked in. I stripped and we made slow and romantic love. Sex had never been a problem, just my need for physical affection and her lack of that need. When we were finished I kissed her, got up and dressed. It was over.

Chapter Two

“Well, that’s that,” Cathy said. We had just filed for divorce after six years of marriage, then went home and made love. We were still friends who loved one another, it’s just that the marriage wasn’t worth the effort to either of us to make it work.

We had grown apart over the years. The spark was gone, we had different interests, and the divorce was a friendly one. The sex had become routine. We tried going away for a romantic cruise, but it didn’t help. So Cathy got the house (and mortgage), the furniture, her car and a smaller part of the joint money. I got my car and most of the joint money. I was glad to be gone; I didn’t really like the house anyway.

“Where will you live, Mike?” she asked.

You know, I hadn’t thought about that. Stupid, sure, but it never occurred to me to wonder. Cathy, a 28-year-old five-foot-five brunette, in shape and attractive, worked as an accountant at a large firm. She would make partner before long. I, twenty-nine, five-ten with brown hair and reasonably fit, was a freelance management consultant and wasn’t tied to anywhere specific. Nearing the age of thirty, I was homeless. Oh well.

I went to hug Cathy good-bye. She went for a handshake instead. I liked to hug, Cathy didn’t. I liked to cuddle, she’d rather sit and read. Our sexual relationship had been more about mutual release than affection. I regretted that, but there was nothing to do about it now.

I took boxes and suitcases containing most of my possessions to a storage locker, and headed to the airport with my travel bag. A client in Louisiana wanted some help acquiring a competitor, so I didn’t need to worry about where to live for the next three weeks.

The flight from St Louis to New Orleans went by quickly. At the New Orleans airport, I grabbed my bag, picked up a rental car and headed to my hotel near downtown. I’d been to New Orleans before, but on previous trips I was always working. This one promised to give me some free time to explore and enjoy the city. I’d heard some enticing stories about the French Quarter and wanted to experience it for myself.

My client, Al, and I met for dinner that night. He asked about Cathy. I told him we were divorcing, and I would fill him in on the details later. We discussed the acquisition and Al handed me the company’s financials to review. After dinner, I returned to my hotel, stripped and got in bed for several hours’ reading of Profit & Loss, Return on Investment, Balance Sheet, and similar fascinating subjects.

In the morning I got a shower, dressed, grabbed a quick breakfast in the hotel café and headed to Al's warehousing business. The owner of his largest competitor was retiring and had no children to whom to leave the business. Al asked me to head over to the other company and look around.

No surprises. The owner had invested little in new technology or process improvements over the past decade, and some changes were needed. I looked at inventory, talked to a couple of his largest customers, and spoke with some key employees. I noted which ones should get retention bonuses, and told Al to go ahead. I also told him about the changes that were needed.

It was going to take me another few weeks to implement the changes, then I'd head back to St. Louis and start looking for a place to live.

The following day Al and I headed over to his new company. He spoke to as many employees as he could and announced there would be no layoffs for three months. He added that everyone would get at least a small ninety-day retention bonus. He introduced me and said I would be implementing some technology and process changes. Al would talk one-on-one with the managers, and I would talk one-on-one with the other forty employees.

Ten minute talks with forty separate employees took up the rest of the day. Al dropped in during my last interview and asked why I didn't just move to New Orleans. The guy I was interviewing – Brett Dupree, my age and height but a little heavier - asked if he could offer a suggestion.

"My brother's roommate moved out without notice recently, and Luke wants to find a replacement. He doesn't need the money, he just doesn't really like living alone." He suggested I meet Luke and talk about it. Al had other plans for the evening, so I took Brett up on the offer. He said he'd pick me up at my hotel and meet Luke at a bar on Bourbon Street. It appeared I might start exploring the city early. I turned down the ride, took the bar's name and address, and said I'd take a taxi.

Back at my hotel, I changed into casual clothes and took a cab to the bar. We met Luke, a blond one year older than me. Luke was slender and very fit at an even six feet. His blue eyes sparkled, and he had dimples that showed up when he smiled. I noticed that they showed up a lot. He was somebody Cathy would have called "masculine cute."

We spoke for a few minutes and got along well. Luke's a graphic artist with a thriving solo practice. His roommate, Lazarus, was gone and never coming back. I asked if they had parted on bad terms, and Luke explained that Lazarus had been summarily

deported. Long story, save it for another time. As we were starting to talk about money, the PA system came to life.

“Order your drinks now, the entertainment starts in ten minutes. Be prepared to be amazed!”

We ordered another round of drinks, and learned that it was a stage hypnotist. I groaned audibly. “That stuff is all fake,” I announced. “They put plants in the audience to come up and pretend they’re hypnotized. I don’t believe any of it.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Brett said. “I did my degree in psych and studied hypnosis a bit. It can be real.” His brother said that he, too, believed it was real; I dismissed them both.

“All fake,” I announced.

“If you’re so sure it’s fake,” Luke said, “volunteer.”

Well, why not? When they asked for volunteers, my hand went up and I joined the group on a small stage. This will prove to Brett and Luke that it’s fake, I thought to myself.

The hypnotist started with some sort of mumbo jumbo, and had us hold our arms in the air. What seemed like a few seconds later I opened my eyes. I was on stage, wearing only my white briefs, and slow-dancing with a guy who was in his blue-checked boxers. What had happened?

The audience laughed and applauded while I looked around for my clothes. They were nowhere to be seen. The hypnotist said that our clothes were back at our tables. I must have made a fool of myself. More humiliated than I had been since my fraternity initiation, I walked through the audience to our table.

“You guys were right,” I announced. “It’s real. By the way, where are my clothes?”

Luke handed me my cargo shorts, T-shirt and sandals. “There’s one thing you need to know,” Luke said. “I’m gay. If that makes a difference in our living situation, I’ll understand.”

“Why should it make a difference?” I asked him. “I’m planning to share a house with you, not marry you. I’m straight. Does that give *you* a problem?”

“Hardly,” replied Luke. “Some of my best friends are straight.” I saw the wide grin, the sparkle in the eyes and the really deep dimples. I got the joke. I think I’m going to like him.

“Now, that was \$450 a month plus half the utilities, right? And it’s furnished, I get a bedroom with its own bath and an office?” I slipped into my cargo shorts and sandals while he replied.

“That’s right,” Luke said. “You’ll want to see the place first of course. Brett and I are headed from here to a gay dance club. Brett’s straight, but so are quite a few girls there. The music’s great and Brett picks up a girl there at least once a week – not much competition. You want to join us?”

“Well, I want to explore and enjoy the French Quarter,” I replied. “Sure.” I reached for my T-shirt, and Luke cut me off.

“I assume you’ve never been to a gay dance club.” That was Brett, and it wasn’t a question. “Don’t bother, almost none of the guys wears shirts anyway.” Brett looked at his brother, who nodded his head.

“Keep your pants on, you don’t want to be mobbed,” Luke added. “Some of the guys get a little aggressive after a few drinks.”

“If there are any decent looking girls, I make sure they know my pants aren’t glued on, and can come off in private,” Brett said.

So we walked two blocks to a club called Dorothy. Nearly half the people on the street were actually wearing less than I was. The French Quarter is going to be fun.

The doorman greeted Luke by name and they kissed on the cheek. “Who’s the new piece of ass?” the doorman asked.

Luke was indignant. “He’s not a piece of ass, he may be my new roommate. And he’s straight, so hands off.” We walked into the bar and I felt a slap on my ass. Nothing different than my college lacrosse locker room. At least I think it’s nothing different.

I looked around and realized I was in a new universe. Several guys were dancing on the bar in their underwear, dollar bills hanging from their waistbands. Two guys were holding hands in front of me. To my left two girls were making out. I went to my left.

The girls never came up for air. I stood and watched for a few minutes until Brett came by and handed me a beer. I followed him and Luke toward the dance floor.

About half of the discernible couples (who was dancing with whom was far from obvious) were guy-guy, half of them shirtless. The rest were split evenly girl-guy and girl-girl. Except it wasn’t really couples, people were dancing and lost in their own

universes. Bodies were rubbing against one another in ways I'd never seen in a dance club before.

Brett saw a gaggle of girls looking at guys near the stage, and climbed up to start dancing. He whipped off his shirt and tossed it aside. Brett moved to the front of the stage and began thrusting his hips at the girls. He grinned and locked his hands behind his head.

One of the girls took the obvious invitation and reached up to unbuckle his belt. That's when I felt a hand on my arm. She was stunningly beautiful.

"New here?" Dark hair, pale skin and an enormous rack that was probably hers because she had paid for it in full. Halter top, black jeans and heels. The heels were overkill, because without them she had to be three inches taller than my five-ten.

We sat and talked for a while. Andrea asked if I liked girls. "Absolutely. And, you're one stunning woman." She primped and preened for a few seconds. "How do you like my new outfit? It's difficult for a girl my size to find decent clothes." I told her it was gorgeous, and that her height helped her carry it off well. We chatted for a while. She was pleasant, there was just something not right. Brett had told me there were a lot of unattached women here, which drew a bunch of straight guys, which in turn probably drew a bunch of Andreas. Or not. I wasn't getting a sexual vibe from her. While I went up to get us both beers I made a note in the back of my mind to diagram that as a complex system. Then I promptly forgot all about complex systems. She was standing right behind me.

In the past I'd met some women who were pretty forward, but Andrea was in her own league. She kissed the top of my head, which I found strangely uncomfortable. We took our beers and hit the dance floor. For a woman, she danced a bit too aggressively for me

We danced for a few minutes then found a bench in the corner. Andrea put her hand on my thigh, and I removed it. She asked me how I liked her hair. God, she must be really insecure.

As I thought about this, a hand clasped me on the back. "Hey there, Andy!" It was a large shirtless black man a few years older than I.

"Marcus, can't you see I'm talking?" That was Andrea, who was anxious to get rid of this Marcus. I wondered why.

"Have you told him?" Marcus was looking at Andrea, who was staring daggers at him.

“Told me what?” It was probably time I joined the conversation if only to help get rid of the intruder.

“Let me make the introductions. I’m Marcus Delacroix, a friend of Luke’s. This is Mike Allison, Luke’s prospective new roommate. And this,” pointing at Andrea, “is Andrew Arthur, whose dick is probably bigger than yours. Oh, and when he dresses up real pretty he goes by Andrea.”

I was floored. I’d actually been considering taking things further with Andrea. Who turned out to be Andrew. Whose dick was probably bigger than mine. Christ.

I stared at him. “You should have told me. I’m straight, I don’t fool around with guys.” I felt more insulted than anything. Any blue balls that might have been developing were gone.

“You can’t blame a girl for trying,” Andrea said coyly. I stood and followed Marcus over to where Luke was sitting.

“Sorry about that, Mike, I should have kept a closer eye on you. There are quite a few drag queens on Bourbon and some of them frequent Dorothy, some frequent Whiskey Festival across the street. Almost every one of them is just trying to get compliments on their looks. Almost none of them is looking to trap a straight guy. Unfortunately, Andrea is pretty stupid.” Luke seemed genuinely contrite.

“I’m a big boy, Luke, not your responsibility to look out for me.” I smiled at him and he smiled back. Yeah, the dimples were genuinely masculine cute. I bet the girls were all over him. Then I remembered it was probably a futile quest.

“You want to dance?” Luke asked. I told him I’m straight and don’t dance with guys. He pointed to the dance floor. “Nobody here’s dancing with guys. In fact, nobody here’s dancing with anybody.”

It was true. Nobody there was really dancing with anybody. I guess I just hadn’t gotten out much lately.

“Sure, why not?” I replied with a grin. He tossed his shirt on a chair and we hit the dance floor.

In under ten minutes we were part of a swaying throng of shirtless bodies. It was impossible to move without bumping into somebody.

Soon I was part of a sandwich, with a white guy in front of me and a black guy behind me. The white guy pinched one of my nipples, and I swatted his hand away. "I'm straight. Keep your hands to yourself."

Then the black guy's hands were on my chest. I brushed him off and turned around. "I'm straight. Keep your fucking hands to yourself. While I know I'm not dancing with them, I have no intention of playing petting zoo just the same."

I felt something hard pressed against my ass. I was unsettled by the fact I knew what it was. I stopped dead in my tracks and stalked off the dance floor to sit at the bar and order a beer.

"Here you are, honey." That was the bartender. I'm going to need to find some straight people in this town. There are probably plenty somewhere, just not here. I looked up to see Brett exiting the club with a girl in tow. He was zipping his pants back up. I was glad I hadn't accepted his offer of a lift because I would need to find my own way home after this anyway.

Luke and Marcus joined me a few minutes later. "Are all the gay guys in New Orleans this forward? I just had a guy try to dry hump me on the dance floor." Luke and Marcus looked at each other.

At the same time they said, "The straight guy gets lucky!" Then they burst out laughing.

I ordered beers for both of them. I finally saw the humor in the situation. If I ever come back, I'm going to need to wear a T-shirt with "I'm STRAIGHT" in big neon letters.

Luke put his arm companionably on my shoulder. I liked that. It wasn't sexual, it was friendly. I liked physical contact, and the part where I had been dancing with Andrea had felt good. Not the part about learning that he was actually Andrew. I don't mind people touching me, I just want to know what the rules are.

"Mike, we're going to get ready and go. Do you want to share a taxi? They're a bitch to get on Bourbon." Luke had come with his brother, and I had no idea whether Marcus had walked, ridden or flown in on fairy dust. I caught myself with that thought. It was needlessly homophobic. I thought about apologizing to Marcus, but then realized he hadn't read my thoughts. At least I hoped so.

"Sure," I said. We all slipped on our shirts and headed for the door.

There were a lot of taxis on Bourbon, of course, but they were either occupied or off-duty. We walked up a side street about five or six blocks and came to something called Rampart. Taxis were plentiful, and within less than a minute we were on our way.

I was sandwiched in the back between two shirtless sweaty guys. Luke's arm was around my shoulder, just like a straight buddy's would have been in the same circumstances. I think I'm going to really like Luke. I could use a buddy.

"You want to stop and see the room?" That was Luke. I hadn't given it any consideration.

"Yeah, if it's no bother." Might as well. Either the taxi could wait or I could get another one.

We pulled up in front of a house with a double driveway and a small front yard. The house was constructed of stone (I learned later about Louisiana termites and wood) and quite attractive. There was no way to judge its size because it abutted the houses on both sides.

We dismounted, and Luke and Marcus started toward the door holding hands. Damned cobblestone walkway got me and I tripped. Marcus caught me on my way down before anything broke. No damage except to anything but my dignity.

Marcus took Luke's keys and Luke took my hand. I enjoyed having somebody holding my hand, even if it was a guy who was a friend I had just met. I did feel a bit self-conscious, though, about holding a guy's hand. I'm straight. Once inside Luke let go of my hand, turned, and gave Marcus a deep open-mouthed kiss. I'd never been this close to two guys being this physical and my jaw dropped.

Luke turned and saw my expression. He took my face in both hands and leaned close. "Do you want to stay here tonight?"

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