



## Naked

By Megan Hart



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*No strings. No regrets. And no going back.*

I didn't think he wanted me. And I wasn't about to get involved with him, not after what I'd heard. Alex Kennedy was tall, dark and unbearably hot, but I've been burned before. Maybe it was stupid of me to offer, but he needed a place to crash and I needed to pay the rent, but now he's my tenant...with benefits. And now that we've crossed that line, I can't seem to find my way back.

But I can't give my heart to a man who's so...unconventional. His last relationship was with a married *couple*. It's enough that my ex-fiancé preferred men—I won't take that chance again no matter how much my body thrives on Alex's touch. I can't risk it, but I can't resist it, either.

Alex can be very convincing when he wants something.

And he wants me.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Megan Hart is the award-winning and multi-published author of more than thirty novels, novellas and short stories. Her work has been published in almost every genre, including contemporary women's fiction, historical romance, romantic suspense and erotica. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods of Pennsylvania with her husband and children, and is currently working on her next novel for MIRA Books. You can contact Megan through her website at [www.MeganHart.com](http://www.MeganHart.com).

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"Alex doesn't like girls." Patrick said this like a warning.

I'd been staring at the man from the corner of my eye, framing him as part of the overall picture here at Patrick's annual Chrismukkah party. Alex was prettier than the bunches of Martha Stewart-inspired poinsettias and twinkling fairy lights, but so were all the men here. Patrick had the hottest friends I'd ever seen. Seriously, it was like a convention of hot men. After Patrick's admonishment I looked Alex over again more closely, mostly just to jerk Patrick's chain. He was so easy that way.

"Is that his name?"

Patrick gave a low snort of disapproval. "Yes, that's his name."

"Alex what?"

"Kennedy," Patrick said. "But he doesn't—"

"I heard you." I pressed my lips to the rim of my wineglass, warming it. The rich, strong scent of red wine wafted under my nostrils. I could taste the aroma on the back of my tongue, but I didn't sip. "He doesn't like girls, huh?"

Patrick pursed his mouth and crossed his arms. "No. Jesus, Olivia, stop ogling his ass."

I raised an eyebrow, mirroring Patrick's earlier expression. An old habit and one I knew irritated the shit out of him. It seemed like that kind of night. "Why do you invite me to your parties if it's not to ogle men's asses?"

Patrick huffed and puffed and frowned briefly before he must've remembered what that did to the lines around his mouth, and he forced his face to neutral smoothness. His gaze followed mine across the dining room and through the archway. Alex had his back to us, one arm on the mantelpiece of the living-room fireplace. He had a glass of Guinness. He'd been holding it for as long as I'd been watching, but I hadn't seen him drink from it even once.

"And you feel an especial need to point this out to me...why?" I sipped more wine and stared him down.

Patrick shrugged. "Just thought I'd make sure you knew."

I looked around at the half-dozen men helping themselves to the buffet, and then through the arch to the living room where another dozen men chatted or danced or flirted. Ninety-nine percent of them were gay and the other one percent was thinking about it. "I think I know better than to expect to get laid at one of your parties, Patrick."

Before I could comment further, a pair of thick, muscled arms gripped my waist from behind and a tight belly pressed along my back. "Run away with me and see how long it takes before he notices we're gone," said a deep voice directly into my ear.

I twisted, giving in to laughter at the tickling touch of a beard on my earlobe, and turned. "Patrick, you didn't tell me you were inviting Billy Dee Williams to your party! Oh, wait...Billy Dee would never wear that sweater. Hey, Teddy."

"Girl, don't you be making fun of this sweater. Mama McDonald sent me this sweater and her boy Patrick got one just like it." Teddy dropped Patrick a wink. "Difference is, I'm man enough to wear it."

I got a hug, a squeeze, a kiss and a pat on the ass all within the span of seconds before Teddy moved on to provide the same for Patrick. Patrick, still pouting, swatted at the bigger man and pushed him away while Teddy laughed and swiped a hand over Patrick's hair. Patrick scowled and smoothed his ruffled feathers, but allowed Teddy to kiss his cheek a moment later.

I gestured with my wineglass. "He's trying to tell me not to ogle an ass."

"What? I thought we were all here to ogle men's asses."

Teddy shook his, I shook mine; we did The Bump and dissolved into the sort of laughter helped along by a liberal helping of holiday cheer. Patrick watched us with his arms crossed and eyebrow lifted. Then he shook his head.

"Pardon me for trying to be a friend," he said.

Patrick and I had been friends for a long time. Once, long ago, we'd been more than that. Patrick thought that gave him the right to be my aunt Nancy and I let him because...well, because I loved him. And because there was never been too much love in my life to turn any small bit of it away.

This, though, seemed a little excessive even for Patrick. Teddy and I shared a glance. I shrugged.

"I'm making a run to the kitchen for some more wine, loves," Teddy said. "Do you want any?"

"I'm good." I held up my glass, still halffull.

Patrick shook his head. We both watched Teddy make his way through the crowd. Only when he was out of earshot did I turn back to my ex-boyfriend.

"Patrick, if you're trying to tell me in a not-so-subtle way that you fucked that guy—"

Patrick's short, sharp bark was so different from his normal laughter it startled me to silence. He shook his

head. "Oh, no. Not *him*."

I didn't miss the way he cut his gaze from mine. That more than anything told me an entire story that needed no words. Hell. It didn't even need a picture to make it clear.

My grin faded. Patrick had never made a secret of his private life, and I'd heard more stories about the men he'd slept with than I ever wanted to. Patrick didn't get turned down, at least not often. I watched the red flush creep up his perfect, high cheekbones.

I looked again across the room at Alex Kennedy. "He turned you down?"

"Shh!" Patrick hissed, though the music and conversation was so loud nobody could've overheard us.

"Wow."

His mouth clamped tighter. "Not another word."

I looked again across the room at Alex Kennedy, still standing with one arm on the mantel. Now I paid attention to the crease in his black trousers and the way the soft black knit of his sweater clung to his broad shoulders and lean waist. He wore the clothes well, but so did all the other men here. From this distance I could see darkish eyes and longish medium-brown hair that looked as though he'd run a hand through it one too many times—or just rolled out of bed. Hair like that took lots of product and effort to look good, and his did. I had an impression of handsome features more than an actual view, and some of that was assumption. Alex was very pretty, there was no doubt about it, but if Patrick hadn't gone all "don'tcha dare" on me, I probably would've looked once, maybe twice, and never again.

"How come I've never met him?"

"He's not from around here," Patrick said.

I looked back at the man Patrick seemed so desperate for me to ignore. Alex appeared to be locked in deep conversation with another of Patrick's friends, their faces intense and serious. Not flirting. The man across from Alex drank angrily, his throat working.

I didn't need to lift my hands, thumb to thumb and pointer to pointer, to make a frame for the picture I was composing. My mind did that automatically at the same time it filled in the details of their story. *Snap, click*. I didn't have my camera, but I could imagine the shot, just the same. I framed Alex in my head, slightly off center and a little out of focus.

Patrick muttered and poked me in the side. "Olivia!"

I looked at him again. "Stop being such a mother hen, Patrick. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

He frowned. "No. I don't think you're an idiot. I just don't want."

Teddy came back just then, so whatever Patrick wanted got swallowed behind a tight, hard smile. I recognized it, along with the look in his eyes. I hadn't seen it for a long time, but I knew it. Patrick was hiding something.

Teddy slung an arm over Patrick's shoulders and pulled him close to nuzzle at his cheek. "Come on. The cheese tray's been decimated and we're almost out of wine. Come to the kitchen with me, love, and I'll give you a little treat."

Until Teddy, Patrick had never stayed with anyone longer than he'd been with me. I adored Teddy despite this, or maybe because of it. I knew Patrick loved him, though he hardly ever said so, and because I loved Patrick I wanted him to be happy.

Patrick's hard glance cut across the room again, to Alex and back to me. I thought he might say something more, but instead he shook his head and let Teddy lead him away. Me, I took another ogle at Alex Kennedy's very, very fine ass.

"Livvy! Merry holidays!" This came from Jerald, another of Patrick's friends, and a man who'd done some modeling for me more than once. I traded him some nice head shots for his portfolio in exchange for using him in some stock photos I needed for my graphic design business. "When are you going to take more pictures of me, huh?"

"When can you come in?"

Jerald grinned with perfect white teeth and a smile as straight as he was not. "Whenever you need me."

We chatted for a few minutes about when and where, and for what, and then Jerald gave me a hug and a squeeze and a kiss before abandoning me in search of someone with a penis. That was all right. I didn't need Patrick to hover over me to make me feel at home. I knew most of his friends. The ones of recent acquaintance viewed me as a curiosity, a relic, the woman who'd been with Patrick before he came out, but they were friendly enough. Liquor helped, of course. Friends who'd known Patrick and me since college, on the other hand, could all still laugh about the good times that had happened when Patrick and I were a couple without the half-disguised gleam of pity his newer, gay friends often gave me. Booze helped that, too.

Wineglass in hand, I made my way over to the buffet to load my plate with all sorts of delicacies. Squares of Indian naan bread paired with spicy hummus, cubes of cheese dipped in cranberry honey mustard, a few purple grapes still clinging to their stem. Patrick and Teddy knew how to throw a party, and even the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I still had room for food as good as they served. I was debating about sampling the slices of rare roast beef settled next to the crusty French rolls or the waistline-conscious strawberry walnut salad when a tap on my shoulder turned me.

"Hey, girl!"

I stopped with a roll in my hand, halfway to my plate. I knew Patrick's neighbor, Nadia. She'd always gone out of her way to be friendly to me, not that she had any reason not to be. I'd always thought Nadia's overtures of friendship had less to do with me and more with her, and tonight was proving that suspicion correct.

"I want you to meet Carlos. My boyfriend." Nadia had a pretty smile in an otherwise unremarkable face, but when she used it I wanted to take her picture. It transformed her.

"Meetcha," Carlos mumbled, his eyes on the food, though Nadia's hand held him in such a tight grip he couldn't actually grab any.

"Nice to meet you, Carlos."

Nadia gave us both an expectant look. Carlos and I gave each other the once-over, his dark eyes traveling over my entire face before meeting my gaze. He glanced at Nadia, whose fingers were curled into the crook of his elbow. Her skin was very white against his. I think we both knew what she wanted, but neither of us was going to give it.

I didn't know I was black until second grade. Oh, sure, I'd always known my skin was darker than my parents' and brothers'. My features not the same. They'd never hidden the fact that I was adopted, and we celebrated not only my birthday but the date I became part of their family. I never felt anything less than loved completely. Cherished. Spoiled, even, by two much older brothers, and parents I'd know later were trying to overcompensate for the cesspool their marriage had become.

I'd always believed I was special, but until second grade I'd never understood I was...different.

Desiree Johnson moved to my school in Ardmore from someplace closer to inner-city Philadelphia. She wore her hair in hundreds of tiny braids close to her scalp and clipped at the ends with plastic barrettes. She wore T-shirts with gold shiny lettering, and soft velour track pants, her sneakers star-tingly white and huge for the size of her feet. She was different, and we all stared when she came into our classroom.

The teacher, Miss Dippold, had told us only that morning we'd be getting a new student. She'd taken care to mention how important it was to be kind to new students, especially those who weren't "the same." She'd read us a story about Zeke, the pony with stripes who'd turned out not to be a pony at all but a zebra. Even in second grade, I'd seen the end of that one coming from a mile away.

What I hadn't seen coming was Miss Dippold's command to me to shift my desk so Desiree could sit beside me. I obeyed, of course, atingle with delight at being chosen to befriend the new girl. Was it because I was the class's top speller for that week, with my name on the board and first-in-line privileges for recess? Or had Miss Dippold noticed how I'd lent Billy Miller my best pencil, since he'd left his at home again? My desk scraped along the floor, curling small shavings of polish off the wood as I moved it aside so Randall, the janitor, could fit in another desk and chair for Desiree.

It was none of those reasons, but one I'd never have guessed.

"There," Miss Dippold said when Desiree had settled herself into the new desk and chair. "Desiree, this is Olivia. I'm sure you'll be best friends."

Desiree's barrettes clacked against one another as she turned her head to look up and down at my pleated skirt, knee-high socks and buckled Mary Janes. My hair, twisted into tight curls and held back with a matching headband. My cardigan sweater.

For a second-grader, Desiree already had a lot of attitude. "You *got* to be kidding me."

Miss Dippold blinked behind her huge tortoiseshell glasses. "Desiree? Is there a problem?"

She gave a world-weary sigh. "No, Miss Dippold. Nothing wrong with me."

Later, just before lunch, I leaned to take a peek at the drawings she was making on her notepad. Mostly swirls and circles, shaded with pencil. I showed her my own doodles, which weren't as elaborate.

"I like to draw, too," I said.

Desiree checked out my drawings and snorted. "Uh-huh."

"Maybe that's why Miss Dippold thought we'd be friends," I explained patiently, still trying. "Because we both like to draw."

Desiree's brows rose up to meet her hairline. She looked around at the others, classmates who were getting restless in anticipation of sloppy joes and afternoon recess. She looked back at me, then took my hand and laid it next to hers. Against the pale gray desktops, our fingers stood out like shadows.

"Miss Dippold didn't know anything about my drawing," Desiree said. "She meant it's cuz we're both, you know."

"Both what?"

Now she gave an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes at me. Her whole tone changed. "Because we're both black."

It was my turn to blink rapidly, trying to take all of this in. I looked around the room, at a sea of white faces. Caitlyn Caruso was adopted, too, from China, and she looked different than the other kids. But Desiree was right. She'd pointed it out as if I should've known all along.

## **Users Review**

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This Naked book is not really ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you receive by reading this book is information inside this guide incredible fresh, you will get data which is getting deeper a person read a lot of information you will get. That Naked without we comprehend teach the one who examining it become critical in pondering and analyzing. Don't end up being worry Naked can bring any time you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' turn into full because you can have it in your lovely laptop even cell phone. This Naked having very good arrangement in word and layout, so you will not really feel uninterested in reading.

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