

THE FRIENDSHIP LIST

Two best friends jump-start their lives in a summer that will change them forever in a story filled with humor, heartache and maybe even some regrettable tattoos from #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Mallery!

Chapter 1

“I should have married money,” Ellen Fox said glumly. “That would have solved all my problems.”

Unity Leandre, her best friend, practically since birth, raised her eyebrows. “Because that was an option so many times and you kept saying no?”

“It could have been. Maybe. If I’d ever, you know, met a rich guy I liked and wanted to marry.”

“Wouldn’t having him want to marry you be an equally important part of the equation?”

Ellen groaned. “This is not a good time for logic. This is a good time for sympathy. Or giving me a winning lottery ticket. We’ve been friends for years and you’ve never once given me a winning lottery ticket.”

Unity picked up her coffee and smiled. “True, but I did give you my pony rides when we celebrated our eighth birthdays.”

A point she would have to concede, Ellen thought. With their birthdays so close together, they’d often had shared parties. The summer they’d turned eight, Unity’s mom had arranged for pony rides at a nearby farm. Unity had enjoyed herself, but Ellen had fallen in love with scruffy Mr. Peepers, the crabby old pony who carried them around the paddock. At Ellen’s declaration of affection for the pony, Unity had handed over the rest of her ride tickets, content to watch Ellen on Mr. Peepers’s wide back.

“You were wonderful about the pony rides,” Ellen said earnestly, “And I love that you were so generous. But right now I really need a small fortune. Nothing overwhelming. Just a tasteful million or so. In return, I’ll give back the rides on Mr. Peepers.”

Unity reached across the kitchen table and touched Ellen’s arm. “He really wants to go to UCLA?”

Ellen nodded, afraid if she spoke, she would whimper. After sucking in a breath, she managed to say, “He does. Even with a partial scholarship, the price is going to kill me.” She braced herself for the ugly reality. “Out-of-state costs, including room and board, are about sixty-four thousand dollars.” Ellen felt her heart skip a beat and not out of excitement. “A year. A year! I don’t even bring home that much after taxes. Who has that kind of money? It might as well be a million dollars.”

Unity nodded. “Okay, now marrying money makes sense.”

“I don’t have a lot of options.” Ellen pressed her hand to her chest and told herself she wasn’t having a heart attack. “You know I’d do anything for Coop and I’ll figure this out, but those numbers are terrifying. I have to start buying lottery scratchers and get a second job.” She looked at Unity. “How much do you think they make at Starbucks? I could work nights.”

Unity, five inches taller, with long straight blond hair, grabbed her hands. “Last month it was University of Oklahoma and the month before that, he wanted to go to Notre Dame. Cooper has changed his mind a dozen times. Wait until you go look at colleges this summer and he figures out what he really wants, then see who offers the best financial aid before you panic.” Her mouth curved up in a smile. “No offense, Ellen, but I’ve tasted your coffee. You shouldn’t be working anywhere near a Starbucks.”

“Very funny.” Ellen squeezed her hands. “You’re right. He’s barely seventeen. He won’t be a senior until September. I have time. And I’m saving money every month.”

It was how she’d been raised, she thought. To be practical, to take responsibility. If only her parents had thought to mention marrying for money.

“After our road trip, he may decide he wants to go to the University of Washington after all, and that would solve all my problems.”

Not just the money ones, but the loneliness ones, she thought wistfully. Because after eighteen years of them being a team, her nearly grown-up baby boy was going to leave her.

“Stop,” Unity said. “You’re getting sad. I can see it.”

“I hate that you know me so well.”

“No, you don’t.”

Ellen sighed. “No, I don’t, but you’re annoying.”

“You’re more annoying.”

They smiled at each other.

Unity stood, all five feet ten of her, and stretched. “I have to get going. You have young minds to mold and I have a backed-up kitchen sink to deal with, followed by a gate repair and something with a vacuum. The message wasn’t clear.” She looked at Ellen. “You going to be okay?”

Ellen nodded. “I’m fine. You’re right. Coop will change his mind fifteen more times. I’ll wait until it’s a sure thing, then have my breakdown.”

“See. You always have a plan.”

They walked to the front door. Ellen’s mind slid back to the ridiculous cost of college.

“Any of those old people you help have money?” she asked. “For the right price, I could be a trophy wife.”

Unity shook her head. “You’re thirty-four. The average resident of Silver Pines is in his seventies.”

“Marrying money would still solve all my problems.”

Unity hugged her, hanging on tight for an extra second. “You’re a freak.”

“I’m a momma bear with a cub.”

“Your cub is six foot three. It’s time to stop worrying.”

“That will never happen.”

“Which is why I love you. Talk later.”

Ellen smiled. “Have a good one. Avoid spiders.”

“Always.”

When Unity had driven away, Ellen returned to the kitchen where she quickly loaded the dishwasher, then packed her lunch. Cooper had left before six. He was doing some end-of-school-year fitness challenge. Something about running and Ellen wasn’t sure what. To be honest, when he went on about his workouts, it was really hard not to tune him out. Especially when she had things like tuition to worry about.

“Not anymore today,” she said out loud. She would worry again in the morning. Unity was right—Cooper was going to keep changing his mind. Their road trip to look at colleges was only a few weeks away. After that they would narrow the list and he would start to apply. Only then would she know the final number and have to figure out how to pay for it.

Until then she had plenty to keep her busy. She was giving pop quizzes in both fourth and sixth periods and she wanted to update her year-end tests for her two algebra classes. She needed to buy groceries and put gas in the car and go by the library to get all her summer reading on the reserve list.

As she finished her morning routine and drove to the high school where she taught, Ellen thought about Cooper and the college issue. While she was afraid she couldn’t afford the tuition, she had to admit it was a great problem to have. Seventeen years ago, she’d been a terrified teenager, about to be a single mom, with nothing between her and living on the streets except incredibly disappointed and angry parents who had been determined to make her see the error of her ways.

Through hard work and determination, she’d managed to pull herself together—raise Cooper, go to college, get a good job, buy a duplex and save money for her kid’s education. Yay her.

But it sure would have been a lot easier if she’d simply married someone with money.

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“How is it possible to get a C- in Spanish?” Coach Keith Kinne asked, not bothering to keep his voice down. “Half the population in town speaks Spanish. Hell, your sister’s husband is Hispanic.” He glared at the strapping football player standing in front of him. “Luka, you’re an idiot.”

Luka hung his head. “Yes, Coach.”

“Don’t ‘yes, Coach’ me. You knew this was happening—you’ve known for weeks. And did you ask for help? Did you tell me?”

“No, Coach.”

Keith thought about strangling the kid but he wasn’t sure he could physically wrap his hands around the teen’s thick neck. He swore silently, knowing they were where they were and now he had to fix things—like he always did with his students.

“You know the rules,” he pointed out. “To play on any varsity team you have to get a C+ or better in every class. Did you think the rules didn’t apply to you?”

Luka, nearly six-five and two hundred and fifty pounds, slumped even more. “I thought I was doing okay.”

“Really? So you’d been getting better grades on your tests?”

“Not exactly.” He raised his head, his expression miserable. “I thought I could pull up my grade at the last minute.”

“How did that plan work out?”

“*No bueno.*”

Keith glared at him. “You think this is funny?”

“No, Coach.”

Keith shook his head. “You know there’s not a Spanish summer school class. That means we’re going to have to find an alternative.”

Despite his dark skin, Luka went pale. “Coach, don’t send me away.”

“No one gets sent away.” Sometimes athletes went to other districts that had a different summer curriculum. They stayed with families and focused on their studies.

“I need to stay with my family. My mom understands me.”

“It would be better for all of us if she understood Spanish.” Keith glared at the kid. “I’ll arrange for an online class. You’ll get a tutor. You will report to me twice a week, bringing me updates until you pass the class.” He sharpened his gaze. “With an A.”

Luka took a step back. “Coach, no! An A? I can’t.”

“Not with that attitude.”

“But, Coach.”

“You knew the rules and you broke them. You could have come to me for help early on. You know I’m always here for any of my students, but did you think about that or did you decide you were fine on your own?”

“I decided I was fine on my own,” Luka mumbled.

“Exactly. And deciding on your own is not how teams work. You go it alone and you fail.”

Tears filled Luka’s eyes. “Yes, Coach.”

Keith pointed to the door. Luka shuffled out. Keith sank into his chair. He’d been hard on the kid, but he needed to get the message across. Grades mattered. He was willing to help whenever he could, but he had to be told what was going on. He had a feeling Luka thought because he was a star athlete he was going to get special treatment. Maybe somewhere else, but not here. Forcing Luka to get an A sent a message to everyone who wanted to play varsity sports.

He'd barely turned to his computer when one of the freshman boys stuck his head in the office. "Coach Kinne! Coach Kinne! There's a girl crying in the weight room."

Keith silently groaned as he got up and jogged to the weight room, hoping he was about to deal with something simple like a broken arm or a concussion. He knew what to do for those kinds of things. Anything that was more emotional, honest to God, terrified him.

He walked into the weight room and found a group of guys huddled together. A petite, dark-haired girl he didn't know sat on a bench at the far end, her hands covering her face, her sobs audible in the uneasy silence.

He looked at the guys. "She hurt?"

They shifted their weight and shook their heads. Damn. So it wasn't physical. Why didn't things ever go his way?

"Any of you responsible for whatever it is?" he asked.

More shaken heads with a couple of guys ducking out.

Keith pointed to the door so the rest of them left, then returned his attention to the crying girl. She was small and looked young. Maybe fifteen. Not one of his daughter's friends or a school athlete—he knew all of them.

He approached the teen, trying to look friendly rather than menacing, then sat on a nearby bench.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm Coach Kinne."

She sniffed. Her eyes were red, her skin pale. "I know who you are."

"What's going on?" *Don't be pregnant, don't be pregnant*, he chanted silently.

More tears spilled over. "I'm pregnant. The father is Dylan, only he says he's not, and I can't tell my mom because she'll be so mad and he said he l-loved me."

And just like that Keith watched his Monday fall directly into the crapper.

*

Keith left work exactly at three fifteen. He would be returning to his office to finish up paperwork, supervise a couple of workouts and review final grades for athletes hovering on the edge of academic problems. But first, he had pressing personal business.

He drove the two short miles to his house, walked inside and headed directly for his seventeen-year-old daughter's room.

Lissa looked up from her laptop when he entered, her smile fading as she figured out he was in a mood. Despite the attitude, she was a beauty. Long dark hair, big brown eyes. Dammit all to hell—why couldn't he have an ugly daughter who no guy would look at twice?

"Hi, Dad," she said, sounding wary. "What's up?"

"Spot check."

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously? There is something wrong with you. I heard what happened at school today. I’m not dumb enough to date a guy like Dylan who would tell a tree stump he loved it if it would have sex with him. I’m not sleeping with anyone and I’m not pregnant. I told you—I’m not ready to have sex, as in I’m still a virgin. You’re obsessed. Would you feel better if I wore a chastity belt?”

“Yes, but you won’t. I’ve asked.”

“Da-ad. Why are you like this? Pregnancy isn’t the worst thing that could happen. I could be sick and dying. Wouldn’t that be terrible?”

“You can’t win this argument with logic. I’m irrational. I accept that. But I’m also the parent, so you have to deal with me being irrational.”

He pointed to her bathroom. She sighed the long-suffering sigh of those cursed with impossible fathers and got up. He followed her to the doorway and watched as she pulled the small plastic container out of the bathroom drawer and opened it.

Relief eased the tension in his body. Pills were missing. The right number of pills.

“You are a nightmare father,” his daughter said, shoving the pills back in the drawer. “I can’t wait until I’m eighteen and I can get the shot instead of having to take birth control pills. Then you’ll only bug me every few months.”

“I can’t wait, either.”

“It’s not like I even have a boyfriend.”

“You could be talking to someone online.”

Her annoyance faded as she smiled at him. “Dad, only one of us in this house does the online dating thing and it’s not me.”

“I don’t online date.”

“Fine. You pick up women online, then go off and have sex with them for the weekend. It’s gross. You should fall in love with someone you’re not embarrassed to bring home to meet me.”

“I’m not embarrassed. I just don’t want complications.”

“But you do want to have sex. It’s yucky.”

“Then why are we talking about it?” He pulled her close and hugged her, then kissed the top of her head. “Sorry, Lissa. I can’t help worrying about you.”

She looked up at him. “Dad, I’m taking my pills every day, not that it matters because I’m not having sex. *I’m not*. I’ve barely kissed a guy. Having you as my father makes it really difficult to date. Guys don’t want to mess with you and risk being beat up.”

“Good.”

She smiled even as she hit him in the arm. “You’re repressing my emotional growth.”

“Just don’t get pregnant.”

“You need to find a more positive message. How about ‘be your best self?’”

“That, too. Gotta go.”

“I’m having dinner with Jessie tonight. Remember?”

“No problem. Be home by ten.”

He got back in his truck but before starting the engine, he quickly texted Ellen. I need a couple of beers and a friendly ear. You around tonight?

The response came quickly. Only if you bring fried chicken. I have beer and ice cream. You’re on. See you at six.

*

Ellen couldn’t figure out why a six-foot-five-inch, seventeen-year-old guy crying bothered her more than pretty much any teenage girl crying. Was it reverse sexual discrimination? Because boys cried less often, their tears had more value? Was it the sheer size of Luka juxtaposed with the implied vulnerability of tears? As she was unlikely to figure out an answer, she decided to ignore the question.

“Luka, you’re going to be fine,” she said, reaching up to pat the teen on his shoulder as Cooper hovered nearby. “You’ll take the online Spanish class and you’ll do great. You’re plenty smart. You just got complacent.”

“He thought because he’s such a hotshot on the field, his shit didn’t stink,” Coop said, then groaned. “Sorry, Mom. Um, I meant to say, ah, poop.”

She turned to her son and raised her eyebrows. She was pleased that, despite his age and size, he took a step back and swallowed.

“I’m really sorry,” he added.

“As you should be. Luka, Coach isn’t throwing you off the bus.”

“You didn’t see him. He was really mad. He said I was an idiot.”

Not exactly the word she would have chosen, but then she didn’t spend much time in the jock/jockette world.

“You’re a leader, so he expects better of you.”

More tears filled Luka’s eyes. Next to him, Coop winced.

“What if I can’t get an A?”

“You won’t with that attitude.”

Luka sniffed. “That’s what Coach said.”

Cooper leaned close. “It’s a teacher thing. They think alike. Welcome to my world.”

She did her best not to smile. Her boys, she thought fondly. Cooper and his friends had been running in and out of her life since he’d been old enough to invite kids back to play. Luka had been a staple in her life

for nearly a decade. He and his family had moved here from Yap (a tiny island in Micronesia—she'd had to look it up). Luka and Coop had met the first day of second grade and been best friends ever since.

“Luka, I forbid you to think about this anymore today. Your mom is waiting for you. Go have a nice dinner and relax this evening. Tomorrow, get your butt in gear and get going on the Spanish studies.” She hesitated. “I’ll talk to Coach and make sure you’re still on the college trip.”

His dark eyes brightened. “You will? Thanks, Ms. F. That would be great.”

Before she could step back, Luka grabbed her and lifted her up in the air. It was not a comfortable feeling, but all of Coop’s friends seemed to do it. He swung her around twice before setting her down. Both teens headed for the door.

“I’ll be back by ten,” Coop yelled over his shoulder.

“Have fun.”

Ellen gave herself a little shake to make sure nothing had been crushed, then stepped out on her small deck to check out the heat level. The front of the house faced south, leaving the backyard in shade in the early evening. The temperature was close to eighty, but bearable.

The deck overlooked a small patch of lawn edged by fencing. Nothing fancy, but it was hers and she loved it. She quickly wiped off the metal table and dusted the chairs before putting out placemats, plenty of paper napkins and a cut-up lime. She’d already made a green salad to counteract the calories from the fried chicken. Shortly after six, she heard a knock on the front door, followed by a familiar voice calling, “It’s me.”

“In the kitchen,” she yelled as she opened the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of beer. Dos Equis for him and a Corona for herself. She glared when she saw the extra to-go container in his hand.

“What?” she demanded. “We agreed on chicken.”

He held up the KFC bucket. “I brought chicken. Original, because you like it.”

“Don’t distract me. Are those potatoes? I can’t eat those.”

“Actually you can. I’ve seen you. You have no trouble using a fork.”

She set his beer on the table. “Do you know how many calories are in those mashed potatoes? I’m not some macho athletic guy.”

Keith gave her an unapologetic smile. “I’d still be friends with you if you were.” He set down the food. “Stop worrying about it. You look fine.” He glanced at her. “As far as anyone can tell.”

She ignored that and refused to look down at her oversize tunic and baggy pants. “I like to be comfortable. Loose clothing allows me to move freely on the job.” She ducked back into the house to get the salad, then joined him at the table.

He’d already taken his usual seat and opened both to-go containers. The smell of fried chicken reminded her she hadn’t eaten since lunch, which felt like two days ago. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered.

Keith put a chicken breast on her plate, then handed her the mashed potatoes. She put slices of lime in both their beers. Their movements were familiar. Comfortable.

Coach Keith Kinne and his daughter had moved to Willowbrook five years ago. He'd joined the faculty of Birchly High as the football coach and athletic director. Washington State might not have the religious fever of Texas when it came to high school football, but there was still a lot of enthusiasm and the six-foot-two-inch, good-looking, dark-haired former NFL player had caught a lot of ladies' attention.

Not hers, though. Mostly because she didn't date—there wasn't time and no one she met was ever that interesting. So when she'd found him cornered by a slightly aggressive novice teacher from the English department, Ellen had stepped in to save him and their friendship had been born. They hung out together because it was easy and they complemented each other. He'd helped her when she'd bought a new-to-her car a couple of years ago and she went Christmas shopping with him for his daughter.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked, picking up his beer.

"Just thinking that it's nice we're friends. Imagine how awkward things would have been if I'd gone after you when you first moved here."

He frowned. "Don't say that. If you had, we might not be friends now. I was fresh off a divorce and I wasn't looking for trouble."

"I'm not trouble."

"You would have been if we'd dated."

What on earth did he mean? "Trouble how?"

"You know. Boy-girl trouble." He put down his beer. "Speaking of dating, Lissa got on me about my internet relationships."

"You don't have internet relationships. You find women to have sex with."

He winced. "That's what she said. Have you two been talking about me behind my back?"

"Oh, please. We have so many more interesting things to talk about." She'd never understood the appeal of casual sex. It seemed so impersonal. Shouldn't that level of intimacy be part of a relationship? Otherwise sex was just as romantic as passing gas.

"She told me to find someone I wasn't embarrassed by so she could meet her."

"That's nice."

"It freaked me out."

Ellen grinned. "That's because there are emotions attached to relationships and you don't like emotions."

"I like some of them. I like winning."

"Winning isn't an emotion."

"Fine. I like how winning makes me feel." His expression turned smug. "I get emotions."

"You're faking it." She let her smile fade. "Cooper wants to go to UCLA."

“Are you sure? He told me Stanford.”

She heard a ringing in her ears as her whole world tilted. “W-what? Stanford? No. He can’t.”

“Why not? They have a better wrestling program. I’ve spoken to the coach there and he’s really interested. I’m working on getting Coop a one-on-one meeting when we visit the school. With his skills and grades, he’s got a good shot at getting in.”

“I’m going to faint.”

“Why? You should be happy.”

She glared at him. “Happy? Are you insane? I can’t afford UCLA and it’s a state school. How on earth would I pay for Stanford? Plus, why isn’t Cooper telling me about things like meeting a coach? I should know that.”

“Breathe,” Keith told her. “If he goes to Stanford, you’ll be fine. With what you make, his tuition will be covered. If he gets a partial scholarship, it could go toward room and board. Stanford would be a lot cheaper for you than UCLA.”

Her panic faded. “Are you sure?”

He looked at her. “You have to ask me that?”

“Sorry. Of course you’re sure. You do this all the time.” She picked up her chicken. “Yay, Stanford. Go team.”

“You don’t have any contact with his dad, do you? Because his income would count.”

“No contact,” she said cheerfully. “Jeremy disappeared before Coop was born. I hear from him every five or six years for five seconds and then he’s gone again. He signed his rights away and he’s never given me a penny.” She smiled. “I say that without bitterness because I’m loving the Stanford dream.”

Keith grinned. “You’re saying you can be bought for the price of tuition?”

She smiled back at him. “I can be bought for a whole lot less than that. So why didn’t he tell me about wanting to go to Stanford? Why is he keeping secrets?”

“He’s becoming a man. He needs his own dreams and plans.”

“But I’m his mom and he’s my baby boy. Make him stop growing up.”

“Sorry. Not my superpower.”

She remembered what it had been like when Coop had been younger. It had been the two of them against the world. “I miss being the most important person in his life, but you’re right. He needs to make his own way. What are the Stanford colors? Will they look good on me?”

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