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BOYS & SEX

YOUNG MEN ON HOOKUPS, LOVE, PORN, CONSENT AND NAVIGATING THE NEW MASCULINITY

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INTRODUCTION

What About the Boys?

I never imagined I'd write about boys. As a journalist, I have spent a quarter of a century chronicling *girls'* lives. That has been my passion, my calling. But traveling the country in the wake of publishing my book *Girls & Sex* (which exposed the contradictions young women face in their intimate encounters), I was urged at every stop—by parents, by girls, by guys themselves—to turn my attention to young men. Still, I resisted. Girls' lives, after all, were the ones that had been transformed by feminism; their parents were the ones driven to demand further change. Our expectations of boys had modified some, but not nearly as much.

Then came #MeToo. And Harvey Weinstein. And Bill Cosby. And Louis C.K. And Kevin Spacey. And Matt Lauer. And Shitty Media Men. And Travis Kalanick. And Roy Moore. And a pussy-grabbing president. And the nude photo–sharing scandal in the US Marines. And Brock Turner. And Owen Labrie. And, for that matter, Aziz Ansari. And the viral *New Yorker* story "Cat Person." The pervasiveness, the sheer magnitude of sexual

misconduct across every sector of society by men young and old became glaringly, disturbingly obvious. Masculinity was declared to be "broken" and "toxic." The parents of boys I met, the ones who when I described my work with girls used to shake their heads ruefully and say they were "relieved to have sons," suddenly realized that their job may actually be harder: they had to raise good men. Perhaps, I thought, this moment would be a breakthrough, offering not only a mandate to reduce sexual violence, but an opportunity to engage young men in authentic, long-overdue conversations about gender and intimacy.

Now I was interested, so I did a little digging. I already knew that Americans talk precious little to their daughters about sex, but I'd soon learn they talk even less to their sons. True, boys may now more likely be warned to "respect women," but what, precisely, does that mean? Which women, under what circumstances, and how? What's more, despite the growing insistence that only "yes" means "yes," boys (like girls) are bombarded by incessant images—on TV, in movies, games, social media, music videos—of female objectification and sexual availability, which are reinforced by unprecedented exposure to pornography. How were they navigating that dissonance? I had read lots of hand-wringing think pieces *about* boys but heard very little *from* them—their own voices were absent from discussions of their behavior in a way that girls', whose activism has pushed social change, were not. I'd told a crucial story in talking to young women, but I realized it wasn't enough. If I truly wanted to help promote safer, more enjoyable, more egalitarian, more *humane* sexual relationships among young people, I needed to go back into their world and have the other half of the conversation.

My biggest fear when I started my reporting was that guys wouldn't talk to me. Unlike girls, they don't exactly have a reputation for chattiness. Plus, I look like I could be their mom. But if anything, they were *more* forthcoming, talking extensively, honestly, bluntly, eagerly, including—perhaps especially—about the very thing boys are supposedly loath to discuss: their feelings. They confided their insecurities, pressures, and pain; their anxieties about sexual performance; their desire to connect and their fears about doing so. They talked about sexual pleasure—their own as well as their partners', and when they cared (or didn't) about the latter. They wrestled over the influence of porn; their feelings about casual hookups; how their race, sexuality, and gender identity affected their perceptions of masculinity. They struggled with the social cost of challenging "locker room talk." They chafed against the assumption that "guys only want sex."

Many of the boys I met treated our sessions as a protected space in which to reflect, to unburden themselves, sometimes to ask if they were "normal." Often, they paused during a conversation, drew a deep breath, and said, "I've never told anybody, but . . ." Or, "Fuck it, I'm just going to tell you this. . . ." That usually preceded an anecdote about a time they toppled from the "good guy" pedestal, a fall that didn't fit—and threatened to undermine—their self-image. Other times they disclosed worrisome high-risk behavior or their own sexual abuse. I was surprised by how raw our conversations could be, but boys so rarely feel permission to speak candidly, from the heart, about their interior lives.

I spent over two years talking to young men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, engaging in in-depth, hours-long conversations about masculinity as well as their attitudes, expectations, and early experiences with sex and intimacy. I recruited

my subjects through high school teachers, counselors, and college professors I'd met while working on *Girls & Sex*; on campuses where I was asked to speak; and through girls whom I'd interviewed over the years. After we met, boys themselves sometimes introduced me to friends or roommates who had differing perspectives. To protect their privacy, I have changed their names and other identifying details.

I do not in these pages claim to reflect the experience of all young men. That would be unrealistic. The girls I wrote about in *Girls & Sex* were either in college or college bound: to ensure equivalency, so were the boys. The young men of color, in particular, were a distinct group: attending predominantly white schools, conducting their social lives in that world, subject to its specific forms of gendered racism. Also, since my interest lies in the mainstream, I did not wade deep into the muck of the manosphere: I believe, however, that we can learn something about the rage of the incels, MGTOW, Jordan Peterson fans, mass shooters, and other extremists by listening to the ideas, assumptions, and pressures of ordinary boys. Beyond that, though, I cast my net wide, talking to guys from every region of the country, from big cities and small towns, attending both public and private high schools and colleges. They spanned a spectrum of race, religion, and, to a degree, class. They were gay, straight, bisexual, and transgender (an identity I did not explore in *Girls & Sex* but was more conscious of this round). Although they leaned toward the politically progressive, they were not exclusively so. Many were athletes. Some were in fraternities; some had disaffiliated over the treatment of women by their "brothers." Some watched porn daily; a few renounced it entirely. Plenty admitted to having treated girls shabbily. Some acknowledged engaging in sex-

ual misconduct—even if they had not, though, they all knew a guy (usually more than one) in high school or college who had: sometimes that person had been a close friend. They grappled with how to demand accountability from those boys, how to take it on themselves.

All in all, I spoke with far more boys than I had girls: well over one hundred. That was, in part, intentional—I wanted to be thorough, given that I hadn't previously written about young men—but it was also significantly easier to obtain permission to talk to them, notably from parents of those who were underage. Maybe adults were simply less protective of their sons, but I suspect some were also hoping that I would not only interview their boys about sexual behavior, but educate them as well, saving parents the awkwardness of doing so themselves.

Would I have gotten a different story from these young men had I been male? I can't say. I came to believe, though, that being a woman had its advantages. I don't know that boys would have been as emotionally open with a man. At the very least, I'd say that for anything they withheld because I was female, there was something else they expressed for that precise reason. They often commented on the disconnect between our discussions and the ways they'd learned to talk with other guys about sexual encounters—mainly as a means to shore up masculinity. Away from that pressure, they could acknowledge its negative impact on their mental health without seeming weak or feeling judged. Perhaps that's why some young men would *insist* I interview them, emailing me out of the blue ("I heard you say on the radio you were writing a book about boys. . . ."), corralling me after a speaking engagement, or checking in multiple times to set a date if I didn't respond quickly. More stayed in touch than I would

have imagined, too, texting or emailing for advice on complicated situations in which they found themselves. For a few, those relationships continue; at this point, as unlikely as it seems, we have become friends.

Had I encountered these guys in their daily lives—had I been their mother, their aunt, their teacher—I would never have been privy to their innermost thoughts. They trusted me with that access because, as much as I did, they wanted me to get it right. The good news is, there was a deep desire among many of them for something different: a more expansive, holistic version of masculinity; a hunger for more guidance about growing up, hooking up, and finding love in a new era. In order to provide that, though, the first step is to listen to what they have to say.

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Dick School

I knew nothing about Cole before meeting him; his was just a name on a list of boys who'd volunteered to talk to me (or perhaps had their arms twisted a bit) through a counselor at an independent high school outside of Boston. The afternoon of our first interview I was running late. As I rushed down a hallway I noticed a boy sitting outside the library waiting—it had to be him—staring impassively ahead, both feet planted on the floor, hands resting loosely on his thighs.

My first reaction was, *Oh no.*

It was totally unfair, a breach of journalistic objectivity, a scarlet letter of personal bias. Cole, eighteen, would later describe himself to me as a "typical tall, white athlete guy," and that is exactly what I saw: he topped six feet, with broad shoulders and short-clipped, dirty blond hair. His neck was so thick that it seemed to merge right into his jawline. His friends, he would tell me, were "the jock group. They're what you'd expect, I guess. Let's leave it at that." What's more, he was planning to enter a

military academy for college the following fall. If I had closed my eyes and described the boy I imagined would *never* open up to me, it would have been him.

But Cole surprised me. He pulled up a picture on his phone of his girlfriend, whom he'd dated for the past eighteen months, describing her proudly as "way smarter than I am," a feminist, and a bedrock of emotional support. He also confided how he'd worried four years ago, during his first weeks as a freshman on scholarship in a new community, that he wouldn't know how to act with other guys, wouldn't be able to make friends. "I could talk to *girls* platonically," he said. "That was easy. But being around guys was different. Because I needed to be a 'bro,' and I didn't know how to do that."

Whenever Cole uttered the word "bro," he shifted his weight to take up more space, rocked back in his chair, spoke low in his throat like he'd inhaled a lungful of weed. He grinned when I pointed that out. "Yeah," he said, "that's part of it: seeming relaxed and never intrusive, yet somehow bringing out that aggression on the sports field. Because a 'bro'"—he rocked back again—"is always, always an athlete."

Cole eventually found his people on the crew team, though it hadn't always been an easy fit. He recalled an incident two years prior when a senior was bragging in the locker room that he'd convinced one of Cole's female classmates—a *young* sophomore, Cole emphasized—that they were an item, then started hooking up with other girls behind her back. And he wasn't shy about sharing the details. Cole and another sophomore told the guy to knock it off. "I started to explain why it wasn't appropriate," Cole said, "but he just laughed."

The following day, a second senior started talking about

"getting back at" a "bitch" who'd dumped him. Cole's friend spoke up again, but this time Cole stayed silent. "And as this continued to happen," Cole said, "as I continued to step back and the other sophomore continued to step up, you could tell that the guys on the team stopped liking him as much. And they stopped listening to him, too. It's almost as if he spent all his social currency trying to get them to stop making sexist comments. And meanwhile, I was sitting there"—Cole thumped his chest—"too afraid to spend any of mine, and I just had buckets left.

"I don't know what to do," he continued earnestly. "Once I'm in the military, and I'm a part of that culture, I don't want to have to choose between my own dignity and my relationship with others that I'm serving with. But"—he looked me straight in the eye—"how do I make it so I don't have to choose?"

You're a Bitch If You Talk About Feelings

Lightning Round: Boys, describe the ideal guy!

"Reserved. You can't flaunt your emotions. You have to be strong. Emotionally and physically. If I have issues, if I have something wrong, that's my problem. I have to deal with it."

—Tristan, eighteen, Los Angeles

"You've got to look ripped, be tall, have fair skin, talk to a lot of girls. Your basic stuff, pretty much. I don't fit into it at all, because for one, I'm Latino. And I'm short. And I'm not ripped."

—Marcos, sixteen, Hoboken

"Definitely a business major. Involved in Greek life. Graduating and getting a job at Morgan Stanley. Making, like, $250,000 a year. Working eighty hours. I mean, that's probably the goal."

—Chris, twenty, Raleigh

"You have to be smart but also 'hood,' or whatever you want to call it. Combine them just right and you're the perfect black guy."

—Taye, seventeen, Washington, DC

"The biggest single determining factor is assertiveness. If I am dominating other people, I am being masculine."

—Ryan, eighteen, San Francisco

"Competitive. Definitely competitive."

—Jason, twenty-one, Seattle

"Chill. You gotta be chill. Not take things too seriously."

—Zach, twenty, Portland

"You can handle yourself, you don't take disrespect."

—Jaylen, eighteen, Baltimore

"If you want to get girls, you've got to be mean. You've gotta be an asshole."

—James, sixteen, San Jose

"Stamina. You want to be able to say, 'Dude, I fucked her for hours.*'"*

—Michael, eighteen, San Francisco

"Sports is a big deal. If you're good at sports, you're okay as a guy. And hooking up with a lot of girls, definitely. Commitment is a sign of weakness."

—Oscar, seventeen, Boston

"Athletic. You're at every party, but not partying too *much. You're hooking up with multiple girls, but not* every *girl. You're smooth. You're social. You've got game."*

—Connor, twenty-one, Philadelphia

"Athletic."

"Athletic."

"Athletic. Definitely, athletic."

For over two years, I talked to boys—dozens of boys—from cities and towns across America. Nearly all of them held relatively egalitarian views about girls, at least in the public sphere: they considered their female classmates to be smart and competent; entitled to their place on the sports field and in school leadership; deserving of their admissions to college and of professional opportunities. They all had platonic female friends. That was a huge shift from what you might have seen fifty, forty, maybe even twenty years ago. Yet, when I asked them to describe the ideal guy, those same boys, who were coming of age in the 2000s, appeared to be channeling 1955; their definition of masculinity had barely budged. Emotional detachment. Rugged good looks (with an emphasis on height). Sexual prowess. Athleticism. Wealth (at least someday . . .). Dominance. Aggression. Like the girls I had interviewed a few years before, they were in a constant state of negotiation, trying to live out more modern ideas about gender yet unwilling or unable to let go of the old ones. And, also as with girls, the most insidious aspects of the "ideal" were reinforced or glamorized for them at every turn: on athletic teams, in media, even in the home. Nearly 60 percent of American

boys in an international 2017 survey said that their parents (usually their dads) were the primary source of restrictive messages about masculinity. Rob, an eighteen-year-old from New Jersey in his freshman year at a North Carolina college, said his father would tell him to "man up" if he was struggling in school or on the baseball field. "That's why I never talk to anybody about any problems I'm having," he said. "Because I always think, *If you can't handle this on your own, then you aren't a man, you aren't trying hard enough, you're being a bitch.*" Rob's roommate, Ely, who grew up in the suburbs of Washington, DC, got a similar message, though in a subtler form. "My dad wasn't sexist," he said. "I didn't learn 'toxic' or homophobic behavior from him. But I certainly learned the emotionally stunted side of masculinity. He never showed emotion: he was more of a sigh-and-walk-away guy than someone who would talk to you about what was going on."

A 2018 national survey of over a thousand adolescents found that although girls believed there were "many ways to be a girl" (the big, honkin' caveat being they still felt valued primarily for their appearance), boys felt there was only one narrow pathway to successful manhood. They still equated the display of most emotions, as well as vulnerability, crying, or appearing sensitive or moody, with "acting like a girl"—which, in case you were wondering, is not a good thing. A third of the boys surveyed agreed that they should hide or suppress their feelings when they were sad or scared. Another third, like Rob, had felt pressure to "be a man" and "suck it up." Over 40 percent agreed that when they were angry, society expected them to be aggressive; the next most common response was that they should do nothing, keep quiet, and, again, "suck it up." Only 2 percent associated maleness with qualities such as honesty or morality, and only 8 percent with leadership—traits that are, of course, admirable in anyone but

have traditionally been ascribed to masculinity. Young American men also report more social pressure than other nationalities to be ever ready for sex and have as many partners as possible; feel a stronger stigma against homosexuality; and receive more messages that they should conform to rigid gender roles in the home and control their female partners, even to the point of violence.

Feminism may have afforded girls an escape from the constraints of conventional femininity, offered them alternative identities as women and a language with which to express the myriad problems-that-have-no-name, but it has made few inroads with boys. Whether you label it the "mask of masculinity," "toxic masculinity," or "the man box," the traditional conception of manhood still holds sway, dictating how boys think, feel, and behave. Young men who most internalize masculine norms (though which, at least to some extent, do not?) are six times more likely than others both to report having sexually harassed girls and to have bullied other guys. They are also more likely to have *themselves* been victims of verbal or physical violence (including murder). They are more prone to binge-drinking and risky sexual behavior, and more likely than other boys to be in car accidents. They are also painfully lonely: less happy than other guys, with fewer close friends; more prone to depression and suicide. Whatever comfort, status, or privilege is conferred by the "real man" mantle, then—and clearly those exist—comes at tremendous potential cost to boys' physical and mental health, as well as that of the young women around them.

At its core, what psychologist William Pollack calls "the boy code" trains guys to see masculinity in opposition to, and adversarial toward, femininity: a tenuous, ever-shifting position that must be continuously policed. Anything that smacks of "girlieness"—in oneself, in other boys, and, of course, as embodied

by actual girls—must be concealed, ridiculed, or rejected. Love, connection, and vulnerability are signs of weakness; aggression is celebrated and eroticized; conquest is everything. That fear of appearing subordinate to other guys, according to Cole, the boy I met outside the high school library near Boston, was one of the reasons he preferred to partner with girls on school projects. "There's more risk involved with working with another guy," he explained. "With a guy, I need to act as unapproachable as possible. It's like, if I come off as too communicative, I'll be the underling. When I'm working with a girl, it feels safer to talk and ask questions, to work together, or to admit that I did something wrong and that I want help."

For Cole, as for many boys, the rules and constraints of masculinity were a constant presence, a yardstick against which all their choices were measured. Once, during his junior year, he suggested that his teammates go vegan for a while, just to show that athletes could. "And everybody was like, 'Cole, that is the dumbest idea ever. We'd be the slowest in any race.' And that's somewhat true: we do need protein. We do need fats and salts and carbs that we get from meat. But another reason why they all thought it was stupid is because being vegans would make us *pussies*."

Cole was raised mostly around his mother, grandmother, and two younger sisters—his parents divorced when he was ten, and his dad, who was in the army and then the National Guard, was often away on active duty. Cole spoke of his mom with unequivocal love and respect. His father was another matter. On one hand, the older man was a caring and present dad, even after the split with Cole's mom. But the stoic expression that had made me leery? Cole got that from him. "I find it hard to be emotionally expressive," he said. "Especially

around my father. He's a nice guy. But I can't be myself around him. I feel like I need to keep everything that's in here"—Cole thumped his chest again—"behind a wall, where he can't see it. It's a taboo, like . . . not as bad as incest, but I feel like that's a part of me that I'm not supposed to show."

It may seem extreme to equate a discomfort with emotions to incest, but I understood what Cole meant. He wasn't the first boy to use the phrase "behind a wall" when referring to feelings. Noah, a sophomore at a Los Angeles–area college, said he, too, built "a wall" to conceal any emotional vulnerability: "I felt it happen starting in high school," he recalled. "And it's not like my dad is some alcoholic, emotionally unavailable asshole-with-a-pulse. He's a normal, loving, charismatic guy who's not at all intimidating. And my group of friends—I don't mean to put it on these guys because they're still my best friends, the best people I've met in my life. Maybe they would say they had to act that way as much because of me as I say I did because of them. But there's a block there. There's a hesitation that I don't like to admit. A hesitation to talk about . . . anything, really. We learn to confide in *nobody*. So you sort of train yourself not to feel."

There is no difference at birth between boys' and girls' need for connection, nor, neurologically, in their capacity for empathy—there's actually some evidence that infant boys are the more expressive sex. Yet, from the get-go, they are relegated to a more restrictive emotional landscape. In a classic study, adults shown a video of an infant startled by a jack-in-the-box were more likely to presume the baby's response was "angry" if first told the child was a male. Mothers of young children have repeatedly been found to talk more to their daughters and to employ a broader, richer emotional vocabulary. With sons, again, they focus primarily on one emotion: anger. (Fathers

speak with less emotional range than mothers regardless of their child's gender, though they do sing to and smile at their daughters more often, as well as more readily acknowledge girls' sadness.) Despite that, according to Judy Y. Chu, who studies early gender socialization, preschool boys retain a keen understanding of feelings and a desire for close relationships. But by midway through kindergarten—that's age five or six—they've learned from their peers to knock that stuff off, at least in public: to disconnect from feelings, shun intimacy, and become more hierarchical in their behavior. The lifelong physical and mental health consequences of that gender performance are ingrained as early as age ten. By fourteen, boys become convinced that other guys will "lose respect" for them if they talk about problems (early adolescence, incidentally, is both critically important to boys' development and vastly understudied). They suspect girls won't be attracted to them, either, and, frankly, they may be right: in a Canadian study, college-aged women found men who used shorter words and spoke less to be more appealing than others. And Brené Brown, who calls vulnerability the special sauce that holds relationships together, has noted that even women who *claim* to want guys who are emotionally transparent may grow uncomfortable around, or even reject, men who respond.

"Emodiversity"—being able to experience a broad sweep of emotions, positive as well as negative—is crucial to adults' emotional and physical health. Yet, in our conversations, boys routinely confided that they felt denied—by parents, male peers, girlfriends, media, teachers, coaches—the full gamut of human expression, especially anything related to sorrow or fear. For Rob, the college freshman in North Carolina, as for many of the guys I spoke with, our interview was a unique opportunity to grapple