



the
**SIXTY/
FORTY
RULE**

a novel

*Hating him never
tasted so good.*
♡♡♡♡♡

ELLIE K. WILDE

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The Sixty/Forty Rule

OceanofPDF.com

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[*I never intended to let this book see the light of day.*](#)

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The Sixty/Forty Rule

Sunset Landing Series Book 1

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Prologue

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Jude

I think about this night a lot.

I mean, I try not to. I tried to erase it from my brain the second it happened three years ago. Tried to scratch at it like a stubborn sticker on the bottom of a new pair of shoes, only all it did was leave behind an unsightly, sticky grey film. When I do revisit it, it's mostly to figure out what possessed me to lose my mind in such a spectacular fashion.

I only had five hours to go. Five measly little hours before leaving behind my career as Dime Design's longest-reigning design assistant to become its youngest commercial designer. Before I got to bring to life my own visions of low-lit restaurants and enigmatic nightclubs, a significant upgrade to my current job description: covering the asses of designers of questionable competence.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my job, I really did. When I moved to the city fresh out of college to chase a career designing some of the city's most exquisite restaurants, this job was everything I'd hoped for.

There I was, ready to take on the world in my first ever job interview. And then my second interview, and sixth, and eighth until I realized that a resume consisting of small-town bake sales and cat rescue fundraisers didn't quite hold the same caché out in the real world.

On my ninth interview attempt and umpteenth application I landed at Dime, a five-month-old commercial design firm trying to make a name for itself. Its CEO, Diana Dharjan, a woman who takes your breath away with

just the sound of her calm, melodic voice, had just struck out on her own after slugging it at one of the city's top firms for three decades. She took a chance on me, the girl on the verge of packing up her dreams to punch in behind the bar at her local coffee shop.

This new job, this promotion, it was the culmination of years of hard work and a six-month sprint to this very night.

The dining room at Nivoli's was loud that night. There was a DJ in the lounge playing a hopped-up version of an Elton John song among the leather seating and its boisterous occupants. It was the night of its opening party, the much-anticipated start of what was sure to be a restaurant empire for Theo Jordan, already a culinary star at twenty-nine.

The enormous front windows were open to a cool evening breeze, the last remnant of spring before the heavy heat of summer took over. That breeze made me snap out of it then, made me realize that someone had been calling my name over all the noise.

"Jude!"

It was Valeria, one of Dime's designers and the lead on the Jordan account. I'd been assisting her on the project and she'd been the one to encourage me to apply for the job opening, who'd put in a good word for me with Diana.

That night, she weaved through the crowd with a pained look on her face, emerald green dress billowing behind her.

"You forgot to put out the tealights," she muttered under her breath. "On the dining tables. Theo Jordan just asked about them."

My heart sank.

Of *course* Theo Jordan had noticed some missing tea lights. Why wouldn't he? It turned out he was an alarmingly high-strung person, deeply

consumed by the most mundane details of the project. I'd watched awkwardly from the back of the room one day as he undressed a delivery driver for shipping over the wrong tiles for the bathroom floors – a semi-matte finish instead of the matte version we'd looked at weeks before. He didn't shout, or raise his voice or anything. That wasn't his speed. His brand of contempt manifested in the way he looked at you, like you were a leech on the underbelly of a pig covered in mud.

Valeria chalked it up to it being his first project. I chalked it up to a personality disorder. Everyone spent the rest of the project tip-toeing around him and his sensibilities, which gave me the sense made him even more irritable.

“*Crap*. The tea lights. I totally forgot.”

“Slipped my mind too,” Valeria said, grinning manically at someone walking past us, in a look that clearly told them to *please leave us to our silent panic*. “Thank goodness Diana isn't here. I wouldn't put it past him to go to her. I don't want this to trip you up before your interview.”

“You think she wouldn't give me the job because of some tealights?” I asked anxiously.

“I think she wouldn't give you the job if Theo Jordan complained about you personally.” She caught the panic in my eyes then, because she placed a soothing hand on my arm. “Don't worry, I'll take care of it. Just wash your hands of it. You've got this.”

Those stupid tea lights. They were the first mistake I made that night. So, I was already a little on edge by the time the second one happened.

I was heading for the washroom, tucked down a dim hall that seemed to magnify the sounds coming from the DJ booth, so that they bounced and

echoed deafeningly around me. It was loud in there, but I heard it anyway. A heated conversation between Theo Jordan and his business partner.

The man had Theo backed up against a wall, likely the only intimidation tactic he could come up with, given Theo dwarfed him by a good foot. He was barking at him, gesturing wildly, and though Theo didn't say a word, though not a single one of the loose curls on top of his head fell out of place, I knew something was seriously wrong.

He was pissed – the muscles pulsing as he clenched his hands into fists told me so. But his chest was moving at an unnatural rate. And then he loosened a hand and I caught it – a subtle, tiny little tremor in his fingers before he stuffed them deep in his pocket.

I think seeing him like that had something to do with my outburst. I was used to the deadpan, haughty expression he wore almost exclusively. What I saw in that moment was a young guy, preyed on by a man twice his age who shouted in his face so loudly there was spit spraying from his mouth.

I debated turning back. Debated holding my bladder until I got home later that night. But I was in a couple large chardonnays and on the verge of bursting. So I kept going, the man's voice becoming more clear as I went.

“You listen to me carefully. Just because the world bows at your feet like you shit gold doesn't mean I will. You're going to say whatever you need to say to make it happen. Whatever you need to do to get it done. And you're going to do it with a fucking smile on your face and your tail between your legs. And if you don't, I am going to do everything in my power to make sure this restaurant goes to shit. You won't make it here three months after I'm done with you.”

That there. That's when I snapped.

I had spent the better part of six months working on this project. Painstakingly combing through the details. Putting out fires. Dodging Theo Jordan's bullet glare. All for this red-faced prick to threaten to tear it down?

Theo saw me first. I don't know what my face looked like, but whatever he saw made him raise his eyebrows as though to say, *what are you doing?*

Turns out, the answer to his question was that I was effectively ruining my chances for promotion.

It was a bit of a blur. I could barely hear myself speak over the music, and years later I don't remember what it was that I said, how it was that I threatened this business partner, why it was that his face turned such a deep red that it was practically purple.

Well, whatever it was, it was an empty threat. I sure as hell didn't wield that much power. But I must have been pretty convincing because the man threw us a look like he wished fire and ash would rain down on us both, before storming away.

What I do remember, clear as day, was Theo's face before I hurried off into the washroom. He didn't seem angry. He didn't seem insulted, or irritated that I'd stepped in.

His brows lifted over those blinding green eyes. He tugged at a single corner of his mouth, and looked at me in a way that trapped the breath at the back of my throat, made my heart thump in my chest, made my knees bounce against each other. In that moment, I thought an understanding had passed between us. One where he got that I was immediately embarrassed for losing my cool in front of a client, and said client immediately decided he was going to let it slide.

So, I thought we were good.

We weren't, of course. And neither was Diana, the next day. And neither were my chances of being promoted.

I think about this night a lot. Now that my career is again riding on the one person who almost ruined it all.

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Chapter 1

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Jude

There's a certain psychology to it, designing the perfect restaurant.

Think about it. That feeling you get when you step into a space for the night. When the lighting is just right and you immediately feel like a million bucks, as if a soft, smoothing filter just fell over you. When the music kicks in and you feel a buzz in your chest that spreads through your limbs until you're melting back into your seat without a care in the world. When the design is so breathtaking you feel like you're somewhere, or sometime, completely different.

There was this place we used to go to, me and my brother and my parents, back before things fell apart. I grew up in the country, the kind of place with shoddy internet and where the corner diner was your best bet when you wanted a meal out. Fluorescent lighting beating down on you, red walls agitating you, and smells of fried chicken and waffles assaulting your senses. But on special occasions, like my birthday or Dave's birthday or my parents' anniversary when they let us tag along as kids, we'd make the hour drive into the city, up to the forty-sixth floor of a gleaming glass building across the street from my father's office.

I was stunned, the first time I set foot there. The restaurant took up the entire floor, tables arranged all the way around bright floor-to-ceiling windows. It was impossible to sit somewhere without a perfect view of the Hubart River down below, or the city skyline up ahead. It felt like an entirely different world to me up there, so far removed – literally – from my

pre-teen worries down on the streets below. It's an addictive thing, cultivating that feeling.

Assuming you're the one to cultivate it.

I burst out of the elevator onto Dime's fifteenth-floor office space, hoping the momentum will help me propel this godforsaken, one-million-pound roll of wallpaper down the hall. But it does the job a little too well and I stumble forward, the sheer weight of it overtaking me and bringing me down onto my knees, hard.

I manage to break my fall with a forearm, inches away from smashing my face onto the pearlescent marble floor.

"Jude, what in god's name are you doing?"

I look around and it's Diana, looking perfect and unflappable as always in a houndstooth blazer and a dark bob styled so perfectly it could be a helmet. She does this thing, Diana, where she peers at you from over the rim of her tortoiseshell glasses like she's scanning you with a built-in x-ray system. Except instead of seeing into your insides, she catalogs the minute details of your life: the way you're feeling that day, whether you've got your act together or you're about to gravely disappoint her.

Currently, what she must be registering on me is:

Name: Jude Holland, 27

Position: Design Assistant

Current project: The Vasquez account, cocktail lounge in the west end

Current state: Sweaty, bonafide project gofer

Rating: Teetering on the edge of disappointment

Gingerly, I lift myself off the ground, smoothing my hair down, trying to look as dignified as possible despite the hard throbbing at my knees and the

harsh realization that my blouse flapped open and very likely exposed my ancient, faded bra to Diana, who very likely wears shimmery, solidly colored bras. And now I am looking my boss dead in the eye while thinking about her underwear. Good.

Diana's next question beats my answer to the first: "What on earth is that?"

"It's for the Vasquez project," I tell her, gritting my teeth as I swoop down to grip the massive roll by its end, trying to heave it up completely. "We're doing wallpaper in the main space."

"But what is it doing *here*?" She turns on her heel and walks to the great glass doors of our office, clearly meaning for me to keep pace with her. Her pointy pumps echo around us.

"It's this pattern Jerry pitched," I pant. I give up trying to carry the roll and drag it behind me instead. "Completely impossible to find anywhere. I've been driving all over the place and this is the one roll I came up with. I couldn't let it sit there. I'm thinking we can have someone replicate it."

Jerry Bickett, the designer on the Vasquez account, is known among the Dime associates as Wing It Bickett in honor of his lifelong commitment to flying by the seat of his pants. He treats it as though it's some kind of charming character trait. Once, he laughingly announced to the office – on the eve of his wedding, no less – that he had to take the rest of the day off to find an officiant for tomorrow's ceremony, before his fiancé figured out he had so spectacularly dropped the ball and left him to deal with the wreckage (the last part was my assessment of the situation. He didn't seem overly concerned about it). At work, it usually means whichever poor assistant he pulls onto his projects is left scrambling to cobble together a plan ahead of a client pitch, only for it to be promptly discarded once the project kicks off.

In this particular instant, Wing It Bickett had pitched a wallpaper pattern he spotted on the internet the night before our presentation. In typical fashion, he sold the idea to our client without taking half a second to figure out whether it was one we could easily source. As the unlucky assistant on his project, I was left to determine that it, in fact, was not.

Diana swings into the office. “Jenna!” She calls at the receptionist out front, who hastily puts down her phone and comes rushing around the oversized white marble desk. “Come help get this monstrosity into the supply closet. Hurry,” she adds, turning to me. “Staff meeting in five.”

Jenna totters over to me, bless her, in the towering heels she wore to work today. She picks up the other end of the roll and we shuffle into the open office of Dime, a perfect encapsulation of Diana’s personality with its immaculate white walls and rows of glass-topped desks and glass-walled boardrooms. No where to hide.

“Let me guess,” Jenna says under her breath. “Wing It Bickett strikes again?”

I give her a knowing look, and she sets down her end of the roll to swing open the supply closet.

“How are you the one working for *him*, when you’re constantly saving his ass?” she adds, with the door safely shut.

Jenna Carling joined Dime about four years ago, right around the time it officially transformed from the little engine that could into one of the city’s fastest growing commercial design firms. We were hiring new staff at such a breakneck speed that I hadn’t thought much about her, our new receptionist who looked uncannily like a sugarplum fairy with her bubble-gum pink hair. And then I heard her in the lunchroom one day, coining the

name Wing It Bickett under her breath after one of Jerry's horrifying stories.

We heave the wallpaper up against the back of the supply closet, over some ancient, soggy-looking cardboard boxes I doubt anyone's opened since they were stuffed in here.

"You talk like I have options," I tell her, dabbing at the sweat on my forehead with the back of my sleeve. "I'm doing my job."

She hesitates by the door, twiddling a strand of pink hair and eyeing me carefully before making a snap decision. "Look. I could get in a lot of shit for telling you this before Diana announces it. But one of the designers handed in their resignation last night." She looks at me meaningfully.

"Jerry's leaving?" I ask hopefully.

She tisks. "This isn't about Jerry. This is about you. You have to apply. This place would fall apart without you."

I file past her into the office, and she trails me past a row of desks over to mine. "Jenna, no. It was catastrophic enough on the first try. She'd have given me the job by now if she thought I was ready."

"But that was years ago," she whispers, grimacing as Carly, another assistant, turns around to look at us curiously. "There's no way Diana's still holding that against you. Besides, look at you, you're dying alive in this job. You're way too good to be assisting!"

Carly definitely hears this time and throws Jenna a death glare over her laptop. She gets up and hurries down the hall towards the boardroom.

"I love my job," I say a little too defiantly as I sort through a drawer for a pen. "I'm not dying alive."

I know she'll call out my lie the second it leaves my mouth. She's right, of course. Five years in, the allure of my job has all but evaporated. I've

maintained project plans, sorted through budgets, picked up samples and swatches. I've sat quietly at the back of boardrooms, pitching ideas here and there until I became the firm's most sought-after assistant whenever project teams came together.

But the events of That Night and its aftermath still linger uncomfortably in my brain, a painful reminder of my failure. I've been working at an obscene level since then, hoping that someday, maybe, it would erase That Night from Diana's mind and make me a viable option again.

I throw on the blazer hanging over the back of my swivel chair. There's a small tuft of cat hair stuck by the cuff, and Jenna reaches over to pluck it off.

"Bullshit. You're a walking zombie. You are!" She insists, when I give her a look. We take off for the boardroom, the final stragglers in the now empty office. "And frankly, it's turning me into one too, watching you patch together another one of those stupid mood boards, or – or wrestle with the printer again, trying to get it to spit out some designer's proposal. Besides, I wouldn't put it past Carly to apply. And then you'd work for her."

I shoot her a disturbed look. Carly started at Dime around the same time as Jenna. And even though we're technically equals, she's spent her entire existence here acting like she's got something over me, without ever letting me in on what it is, exactly.

But the true root of my distaste happened last year, when we were both assisting Valeria on a nightclub project. The club owner was insisting on a centerpiece for his dancefloor, something to set it apart from the smattering of nightclubs on the same strip, and Valeria challenged us to pitch our ideas. I knew for a fact that Carly's proposal involved some kind of hanging dance cage.

The day of the meeting, when I presented my proposal to Valeria – a floor-to-ceiling fire geyser enclosed in glass – Carly jumped in as though we'd been partners and added that we would have the flames alternate purple and blue, to match the club's brand colors. It was a good idea, to be fair. But Valeria looked at her like she was design's answer to god, and so I went along with Carly's story as she shot me smug looks over her shoulder the rest of the meeting.

I try to shake off my unease. "Do you think she'd get the job?"

We slip into the boardroom, finding seats towards the back. Jenna nudges me and nods towards the head of the table, where Carly has perched herself right next to Diana, making conversation through an overbearing smile.

I go cold. I cannot, *cannot* live in a world where I do Carly's bidding. She'd pull me onto all of her projects strictly to help design the bathroom stalls, or something equally humiliating.

The meeting kicks off. We go around the table listening to updates from each of our twelve designers. There's Valeria, running a new design for Theo Jordan, opening his second restaurant in the city after the immediate success of Nivoli's. There's a terrace expansion for Oz, one of the city's longest-standing restaurants trying to claw back its way to the glory days. Jerry polls the room on booth fabric swatches he's considering for the Vasquez project, a sprawling rooftop lounge overlooking the Hubbart River. Warily, I wonder from which obscure basement out in the city limits I'll have to dig up heaps of the chosen fabric.

I take quick notes throughout the meeting until finally we land on Diana at the head of the large glass table. Unlike me, Diana's made precisely zero

notes throughout the meeting, though she'll remember every single detail months later.

"Thank you everyone," Diana calls to the room. "Great work going on, as usual. Well, I have to start off on a bittersweet note, which is to share that Valeria will be leaving us in two weeks' time to fulfill her life-long dream of moving abroad with her family."

Diana pauses and there's a murmur of congratulations around the room. Valeria grins awkwardly.

"That's amazing," I add to their chorus, feeling more than a little let down that it's Valeria leaving. I really did have my heart set on Jerry.

"That said," Diana's voice is loud as it recalls our attention. "She will be leaving a vacancy on the design team. We'll be searching for her replacement immediately."

Jenna presses her foot over mine. I glance back at Valeria, who raises her eyebrows at me indicatively. I notice some of the other designers shooting looks my way too.

Jude Holland, Designer.

I hadn't thought about it, not seriously, since the time three years ago where I came within arm's length before having it snatched away from me. I look over to Diana. Carly is sitting at full attention and perfect posture, like she's got a rod stapled to her back. There's no way she won't apply. And there's no way I can risk a world in which Carly Cobbler becomes my boss.

I barely register any more of Diana's update, spending the next ten minutes giving myself a fervent pep talk.

Here's the plan: I'm going to corner Diana. Throw myself at her feet. Beg her to promote me.

Or, maybe something less dramatic.

“Coming?” says Jenna, when the meeting ends.

But I shake my head and glance indicatively in Diana’s direction. Jenna mimes a standing ovation and files out of the room with everyone else, until it’s just me and Diana left. She looks up from her phone.

“Everything alright, Jude?”

I smooth out my hair and try to make myself as tall as my five-foot-five frame will allow. Think big. Think, Jude Holland, Designer.

“Diana,” I say in my most self-assured, you-should-promote-me-because-I-know-what-I’m-doing voice. I grip the back of the chair tucked into the table in front of me to stop my hands from shaking. “I would like to be formally considered to take on Valeria’s spot on the design team.”

Diana slowly puts down her phone and rests her chin in both palms, studying me closely. “That’s an idea.”

My cheeks prickle. She looks like she’s considering it, at least, and hasn’t laughed me out of the room. I’m in good shape, I’d say.

I go for broke. “I think I’ve earned it. And I think you know that too.”

Her brows shoot up. Okay. That was probably a bit much.

“What I mean to say,” I add quickly. “Is that I know this company and our clients like the back of my hand. I’ve worked on some of our highest-revenue projects. And I think everyone would agree I come through every single time.” I’m gaining momentum now. I draw myself up even taller. “And I genuinely love this work, and this company, and working for you. And if I got this opportunity, I would treasure it and work night and day, put my blood, sweat and tears into making sure that Dime Designs remains the premiere partner in commercial design for years – no, decades to come, until the end of time.”

Amen.

I find I'm breathing rather heavily, and try to calm my heart rate as Diana studies me. She's smiling, but I can't for the life of me tell what kind of smile it is.

It could be: wow, give this girl her promotion!

Or it could be: poor, silly little Jude, in over her head.

Or else: keep smiling so the lunatic can't tell you're hitting the panic button under the desk.

She speaks at last. "There's a lot in there I agree with, I'll give you that. Don't think I don't notice how hard you work, how well you do. But here's my problem: I had every intention to hire someone from outside. Dime's a different company now, Jude, much different than it was three years ago. We count on our designers to bring in contacts and new business. And I'm not sure how much of that we'd get from you."

"Try me," I say quickly. I don't care how desperate I sound. "I'll do anything. I'll prove anything. I really want this."

Diana taps her red acrylic nails on the table, thinking. For a minute it's the only sound surrounding us. She stops abruptly.

"Okay. How about this. You know Valeria's been working on the Jordan account. What you don't know is that six weeks ago, we learned that Theo Jordan is planning to move back into town permanently, to be closer to family – he moved away to the West Coast after opening Nivoli's, I don't know if you know. He's planning to grow his business in this city, and we hear the next design contract he'll sign will be a big one. Ten years, full exclusivity with the design firm. I don't have to tell you what an opportunity that is for Dime. The revenue on the account would surpass

anything we have on the books. It sounds like he's just starting to put it out for bids."

I frown. "Why would he put the contract out for bids if he's already a client here?"

Diana shrugs a padded shoulder. "He's only ever signed one-off contracts in the past. And as much as I would love for him to simply give it to us, it makes sense that he would shop around. It's a large, long-term contract. There'll be pressure from his partners to make sure the firm they work with is the right fit. That said, given he's already a client with us, I'm sure you realize we have a unique opportunity to show him how well we can work together."

She studies me closely, and I try to relax the death grip I have on the back of the chair.

"Okay, Jude. Here's what we'll do: you take over the Jordan account from Valeria. Knock it out of the park. Bag us the new contract. And the job is yours. Deal?"

Oh, is that all? I say silently, heart pounding uncomfortably fast.

Instead, I say: "Deal."

Chapter 2

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Jude

So, the thing is, I've worked with Theo Jordan before. And it's an experience I try to forget.

I'm back at my desk with my fourth cup of coffee of the day, poring over an internet search.

YOUNG KINGPIN HOMEWARD BOUND

Dynamo restaurateur Theo Jordan is heading home after a three-year stint conquering the West Coast dining scene. Jordan, 32, who heads up soon-to-be four restaurants ranked among the top in the country, is now looking to continue building his empire in his hometown.

Jordan quickly rose the ranks after starting his career in some of the city's most renowned kitchens. He has already made a name for himself at home with the launch of his flagship restaurant, Nivoli's, which remains consistently on Time to Dine's list of Top 10 Restaurants on the East Coast.

His newest venture, Sunset Landing, ranks among the city's most anticipated restaurants of the year.

I notice I'm aggressively clicking my pen only when Carly shoots me a look. The caffeine has properly kicked in.

I scroll the length of the article. There's a recent photo of Theo Jordan, holding a fiery cooking pan and looking intent with his signature scowl.

Even through the screen, in this photo that was taken miles and miles away, several months ago, he's hard to look away from.

His dark curls are a little longer than the last time I saw him, shorter on the sides and tumbling down his forehead above the brows that almost exclusively live in the pull of his scowl. But the rest of it is how I remember: the unsmiling mouth, plump and pouty in a way no man's mouth has any business being. The hard line of his jaw and the muscle there I'd seen pulsing far more often than relaxed.

He's bigger than I remember, too. All rounded shoulders and solid forearms. Fleetinglly, I wonder how he manages to work out while running all these businesses. He dwarfs the line cook standing in the photo next to him, and I remember on the single occasion I'd been in his close proximity how far back I had to tip my head to look him in the eye. He's not looking at the camera in this picture, but with an uncomfortable pang I remember his shocking green eyes, and the way they last looked at me.

He looks like the kind of guy who'd get you into a dark corner and do unspeakable things with you. Things that you'd think about for the rest of your life while lying in bed, ruin you for another man because you'd never get your one night with him out of your head. And it's all so unfair, all so unfortunate that he would look like that without an ounce of charm to go with it. Or, no charm that I ever witnessed, anyway.

It was the weirdest thing three years ago, watching people dance around him, agree with his every whim or idea, good or bad. At one point early in the Nivoli's project, he suggested hanging taxidermy fish across a feature wall in the dining room, and the entire room started oh-ing and ah-ing at the brilliance of the idea. I was shocked.

When they all started brainstorming exactly *how* to taxidermy a fish, he caught my eye. I hadn't spoken a single word to him at that point, but, somehow, I could read his expression like a book. That muscle was pulsing steadily at his jaw, mouth in a near perfect frown.

These idiots have no idea what they're doing, do they? He was silently asking me.

He was messing with them. Testing them. And they'd brutally failed.

I rolled my eyes in reply so he'd know I wasn't one of them and he walked off with a shake of his head. Jerry, who'd been the lead on the account at the time, was off the project the next day. And even though we didn't interact much for the rest of the project, he'd often cut people off in meetings to ask for my opinion. I thought we'd developed a decent rapport, he and I.

Until the launch party.

Diana really let me have it, in that scary way of hers where her voice drops down to a barely-there whisper as she tells you all the ways in which you've disappointed her. I love Diana. I really do. She's been a brilliant mentor and took a shot hiring me when so many others didn't. But the tone of her voice that next day still haunts me. It pops into my nightmares from time to time, a voiceover whenever I'm being chased by an ax murderer.

Jude Holland trips, skitters across the floor, losing precious seconds of purchase on her pursuer. Of course, she does. She's a clumsy, clunky, silly little girl. She couldn't get her legs to function if her life depended on it. Which, incidentally, it does. Goodbye, Jude.

I left that meeting terrified for my job, devastated that I was denied the promotion, and viscerally humiliated that Theo Jordan had reported me.

It's nine o'clock by the time I make it home.

There wasn't anything altogether pressing to get done at the office, but I stayed back anyway knowing the best I'd do tonight is sit in silent panic over the demise of my career. The apartment is pitch black and glacial from the A/C coursing through the place.

"Petunia," I call into the apartment. I flick on the lights and jab at the thermostat.

In the kitchen, I dump some kibble into a dish and the sound of it blasts the silence around me. Petunia shows up, purring a figure eight around my legs and leaving a trace of long white fur around my ankles. She leaps onto the counter and starts dabbling with her food.

"Boop!" I give her a little flick on the forehead, and she gives me a baleful look in return.

Leave me, peasant, she's telling me. But it's a game we've played since the day she snuck into my apartment building at my heel and decided my home was now hers. She gives my hand a quick lick before turning back to her food.

My phone buzzes as I pull a half empty box of Honey Nut Cheerios from the cupboard, my dinner of choice most nights. Tonight, I skip the milk entirely and pour myself a heaping bowl of dry loops, swiping at my phone on the way to the living room.

JENNA: *Update please.*

I hadn't been able to catch her at work for the rest of the day, mostly because I'd spent it spiraling deep into an internet rabbit hole. When I keyed in the words *how to make someone forget you pissed them off*, I knew it was time to go home.

ME: *Well, I'm up for the promotion (again). But guess who I have to win over to get it?*

I settle into the sofa and flick on the television. Home with Jones is on, and I sink comfortably into the well-worn floral cushions. Jeremy Jones is this primped and polished guy with teeth five shades too white and sandy blond hair perfectly combed and parted. I have this theory that he really just strolls on set, sprinkles sawdust on his otherwise perfect plaid shirt only to staple one piece of drywall before the cameras stop rolling and the real reno crew takes over. Still, I'm a total sucker for him. Today, he's claiming to renovate an oversized shed into a rental property.

My phone goes off and JENNA CARLING flashes on screen.

There's some kind of party happening at the other end of the line, but somehow Jenna's voice is completely clear.

"I cannot believe your promotion hinges on that prick!"

God, I love Jenna. She's always been the type of friend to go toe-to-toe with your energy, and then some. She'll laugh with you, cry with you, slash tires with you. You know, if it ever got to that.

Well, there was one time where it got *almost* to that. Four months ago, when Jenna showed up to her stunning penthouse apartment – paid for by her rich father – to find her deadbeat, live-in boyfriend in bed with a girl from a couple floors down.

I wasn't there, obviously. But Hurricane Jenna came out full force that night. She snatched up the girl's clothes and chucked them over the railing of her balcony. Then did the same with armful after armful of her ex's clothes that she ripped from the closet as he shouted in the background. Apparently, when she marched onto her balcony with the Rolex she'd bought him for his birthday (paid for with her healthy trust fund) and

unceremoniously threw it into the night's sky, he let out a blood-curdling scream. Jenna woke up the next morning refreshed and renewed, and embarked on a whirlwind of dates and casual lays.

"Can't she put you on another project?" She asks me now, over the pulsing music.

I watch Jeremy Jones shovel precisely one load of dirt on screen and shake my head even though she can't see. "There's nothing else worth its weight. Ten years as Theo Jordan's exclusive design firm... I need to be the one to bring this in. I'm just going to have to hope he's over what happened. Or find a way to impress him anyway."

"Or you could poison his coffee."

I chuckle. "Theo Jordan's cold carcass for a promotion. I'm not sure Diana would go for that. Not exactly the deal she bargained for."

"Worth a shot. You'd probably have a long line of people thanking you for it, too."

"I'll keep it in my back pocket." I hear someone in the background calling for a round of shots. "Who's that?"

"Oh, you should see this guy, Jude. I met him just walking through the farmer's market yesterday."

Petunia rounds the sofa and I scoop her up into my lap before she can get away. "What in god's name were *you* doing at a farmer's market?"

"Fishing."

I laugh. "What species is he?"

"*He* is a Yiannis. Barely speaks a lick of English, but our connection is more physical, anyway."

Jeremy Jones strolls on screen wearing an immaculate white hard hat and starts tape measuring a wall.

“What are you doing tonight?” Jenna asks abruptly. “You should come out. He’s got some cute friends.”

I toss a couple of Cheerios into my mouth. “Can’t. I’ve got a date with —”

“Jeremy Jones over a bowl of Cheerios,” Jenna groans over the music. “It’s time to end this man hiatus. This is just getting sad now.”

“It’s not a *hiatus* —”

“It is,” she says promptly. “You’ve barely looked at a man since what’s-his-name broke up with you three years ago.”

What’s-his-name, as Jenna calls him, had been my boyfriend just coming up on a year until my world fell apart. It turned out that, while he was decent guy in the good times of the relationship, sticking with me through the bad just wasn’t in his wheelhouse. I’d been so deep in my dark hole by then, his void barely made a dent in me anyway.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Jenna adds, sympathetically. “You two were absolutely wrong for each other, and he was a total ass for dropping you in the middle of everything you were going through. But don’t you think it’s about time to get back at it? Or at least join me in the land of casual sex. It’s great here.”

I force a laugh. “I imagine it is. But it would significantly cut into the time I have to sit here and obsess over the impending end of my career. We’re meeting with Theo Jordan tomorrow and to say I’m freaking out would be putting it mildly. I’ve scripted about ten different Please Stop Hating Me speeches, all varying in degrees of begging depending on his mood.”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the phone. “I’m on my way.”

“No, don’t do that,” I say quickly. “I’m only kidding —”

“So you *don’t* have ten different speeches figured out?”

“To be fair, I’m still working on the tenth,” I joke. “And I won’t be able to finish if you’re here distracting me –”

“Too late. I’m leaving, see you in twenty!”

And true to her word, true to the way she’s made it her duty in life to look after me since the day my parents stopped taking my calls, Jenna arrives twenty minutes later, in a mini skirt and sky-high heels and arms laden with pizza and wine.

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Chapter 3

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Theo

“I wholeheartedly advise against it, Theo.”

Of course, you do. You're watching dollar signs float away from your pockets.

I resent the warning and the tone of his voice. But most of all, I resent Hurley for insisting on a call during the only gap I had for my morning run. Nothing sounded worse than sitting around my place listening to business managers try to tell me where to put my time and money. And so, I did myself an even greater disservice and brought them on the run with me.

I press the left earbud into my ear and pick up speed as I near a hill up ahead.

A second voice pipes in: “I have to agree with Hurley here, Theo. Expanding on the East Coast just doesn't make sense, whichever way I slice it. Believe me, I've tried to make the numbers work.” It's Brenda this time, a woman I respected until this very moment when she proved herself to be as thick as the rest of them.

The Hubbart River is pushing forward alongside me with steel stanchions guarding the path between us like they know I'd rather be at the bottom of the river than listening to this. Brenda and Hurley, two people I explicitly pay to be in my corner, working together to back me into one instead. Contrary to the way they're speaking to me slowly and carefully, I'm not an idiot. I know full well there's a ton of money to be made out West, as proven by the way the two restaurants I opened there have

bankrolled us recently. They've got other clients, but even they wouldn't disagree that Cove and Angler were directly responsible for Hurley's recent two-month sojourn to Nice, and the gaudy new McMansion where Brenda keeps trying to invite me for dinner.

Hurley seems to emerge onto a new plane of conviction with Brenda at his back. I sense they've been rehearsing this conversation and my resentment grows tenfold. "I'm all for it if you want to spend time at home or take a little break –"

I need to revisit my sanity for hiring a business manager with the name Hurley.

"I don't need a break," I try to keep my breathing steady as my feet hit the pavement. "I need you to hear me. I've done the West Coast thing for three years. Like I said, I'm done. I want to be back here for good. And you can't suddenly tell me there's no money to be made on this side of the country, with Nivoli's turning that kind of profit since it opened."

"Fair enough," Brenda presses after an awkward pause in which I side step a couple walking their dog, and charge up the hill. "What we're saying is that you can do both. It wouldn't hurt to expand your footprint out West, on top of that. And, while we're on the subject, I'd advise you look at signing with a design firm there. I've just sent you a list of options..."

I tune her out. It's blistering hot out and the hill I'm running almost does me in today. I slow my pace to a light jog at the top, trying to push back the darkening edges of my vision.

"Your business partner for Cove says you've been neglecting him," Hurley adds suddenly, when I still haven't spoken.

"Have you booked a trip back?" Brenda asks. "You should be dropping in once a month. I know you're stretched thin –"

Jesus. These two never let up.

“And what part of all that sounds like I’m equipped to expand out West, too?” My panting is bad now. “Look, I’m just about done with this. If you’re not willing to back me up, I’ll find people who will.”

There’s silence on the line and I imagine them exchanging frantic texts from across town.

He’ll no doubt send her something about me being a stubborn prick.

She’ll no doubt reply wondering why they even bothered to try, anyway.

Typical outcome of any business discussion these days, whenever I don’t immediately agree. Which is never, considering the way I operate. If they aren’t able to back up their own opinion, I sure as hell won’t. I didn’t get to this point in my career blindly following other people’s whims.

Brenda’s the one between them with enough guts to cut the silence. “There’s really no need to go there, Theo,” she says tightly. “We’ll run the numbers again. See if there’s a way to expand here that’ll make you the same kind of cash as out there.”

“That’s the spirit.”

I come to the end of the path, and taper off to a standstill by a tree with leaves so wilted they’re begging for the rainfall that’s abstained for the past month.

I pull off my baseball cap, wiping my face with the hem of my shirt. The pair of them might be money-hungry leeches, but this news about my business partner puts me on edge. I’ve done what I can to stay as on top of Cove and Angler since I’ve been home. But when you go from spending damn near every hour of the day over-seeing both places to phone calls from thousands of miles away, someone’s bound to notice the difference.

Briefly, I wonder whether I royally fucked up, moving back here. I thought I'd be able to handle it, seeing as I fled the city only a week after Nivoli's opened and it seemed to work out fine. But if my partner's thinking of pulling out, selling off his share because he doesn't think I'm committed...

My heart rate picks up. Which is saying something considering my heart was already about ready to burst out of my skin.

Hurley starts to say something but I cut him off, having had more than enough for a day. I need to get home, do some damage control.

"Good meeting, everyone," I announce. "Keep at it, I know we'll get there."

I have no idea what *it* is or where *there* is, but it sends the right signal and they both mumble thankses and goodbyes and I swipe the phone call off my phone, sending Guns N' Roses streaming through my earbuds instead, curving back down the path to home.

~

I'm already in enough of a mood by the time I get to the construction zone called Sunset Landing.

It's that point in a project where I'm still so far from the end I wonder what the fuck possessed me to put myself through it all again, while simultaneously being in way too deep to crawl my way out.

Me in the kitchen, it's easy. As simple as putting up your feet at the end of the day. Culinary school was a breeze, mostly because I left myself no margin of error. There's never a margin of error, not when you come from nothing. Not when you're responsible for your mom and your sister, though they'd tear me up if they heard they factored in so heavily.

If I had a semblance of forethought back when I was ten, cooking my first meal and effectively ruining the first bit of protein Mom was able to bring home in weeks, I'd say this was always the dream. The opening of Nivoli's and the subsequent restaurants out West. Ramping up to open my fourth, which, despite the fact that I've lived and breathed this work for years, still all feels like a delusional pipedream.

I head through the restaurant's bare lobby and into the open space that'll eventually be the lounge. We wrapped up the retrofit a few days ago, but it's still nothing but clean drywall and plywood to signal this isn't just some dilapidated building I've broken into and named a home.

The first time I brought my investor John to see the place, he almost shit himself. To be fair, it's on him to have signed up for this project based alone on my so-called good reputation, without first vetting that I wasn't taking his money to build a personal bowling alley.

He didn't get it at first, not when he saw the place was off in a quiet part of town, miles away from the pedestrian appeal of Nivoli's. And he was even less impressed when he saw it faced out into a parking lot. But it was just before dusk when I first brought him here. I walked him through the space that was still down to the studs then, towards the massive floor-to-ceiling windows lining the back of the place.

Then the clouds parted in the kind of way you just can't make up, and the sun streamed in through the murky windows and lit up the place with the blinding sunset. At that point, I'd say he caught on to the name. He caught on to the rest of it when he walked right up to the windows and saw that it backed right onto the Hubbart River, as in, literally onto the Hubbart River. The property was built on an overhang over the water.

I go through a pair of swinging doors to the right, across from the shell of a bar that's been installed in the lounge. I had them put in the kitchen first, knowing having it here would be just about the only thing keeping me sane over the next couple months.

The room is huge and bright, covered almost entirely in stainless steel. The perimeter is lined with counters and built-in shelves, with two large workstations decked out with massive stove tops, dotting the middle of the room. There's not much else going on in here, not that there needs to be at this point. But just standing under the fluorescent lights releases some tension in my shoulders.

I'm waiting for the people from Dime to show, Valeria and whoever it is they're foisting on me now that she's leaving the company. Plus the blonde one who's name I forget, who shrinks into herself every time I look at her. Like she's waiting for me to bite her head off or something.

I hike myself up on the counter, legs dangling over the edge. Trying to stop my left foot from shaking, laces from my sneaker bouncing erratically against the hem of my jeans.

That boy of mine has ants in his pants, Mom would say when we were kids, like I couldn't hear her. She said it kindly, tone dripping with love. But I knew she always meant for me to get that I should take it easy, slow my pace, build my patience.

My watch tells me they're seven minutes late. Six minutes longer than I'd be willing to forgive, on a good day. I'd pushed back a call to make time for this walk-through.

Finally.

I hear the doors swing open out front and I hop off the counter, listening to the voices as I make for the kitchen doors.

“I hope we can make this quick.” It’s that blonde what’s-her-name talking. I recognize the drawn-out sound of her voice. “Jim, my boyfriend – he’s an investment banker, you know – he’s taking me out to dinner on the rooftop terrace at the King George Hotel. Have you been? Probably not. It’s impossible to get a reservation, they book out months in advance.”

There’s a reply but it’s so low I can’t make it out and what’s-her-name goes on, voice growing louder as they make it into the lounge. I pause by the kitchen doors hoping to avoid acknowledging this conversation altogether.

“I was putting away his laundry the other day and I saw a Tiffany box in one of his drawers. A *Tiffany* box!”

“That’s great.” The reply is dry, unenthused. It’s clear that its owner, like me, couldn’t care less about this investment banker with a Tiffany box.

What’s-her-name doesn’t take the hint. “You’re single, aren’t you? *Still*? Do you think you’ll ever find anyone?”

Harsh.

And it seems like the ruthless interrogation lands because the clipped response comes clear as day: “Don’t worry about me. I’m doing just fine.”

Shit. *Shit*.

I’d know that voice anywhere. Its last speech has only been playing over and over in my head for three years, pulling up whenever I needed a laugh or felt too homesick. The sound of it gut punches me so hard I almost fold over. But I keep myself upright because that would be supremely pathetic, like some dumbstruck kid hearing his crush skip down the hall at school.

Because it’s *her*.

Their conversation goes on, oblivious to the meltdown happening on the other side of the wall. The last time I saw her, deep in that dark hallway at the opening party for Nivoli's... She'd torn down towards us, me and my investor – an asshole I regretted going into business with the second I signed on the dotted line – and tore him a new one with quiet words and this look on her face that must leave behind a trail of disintegrated corpses every time she employs it.

After he left, I remember this insane urge came over me to reach out, to know how her skin feels, to push her up against the wall and do things together we'd have no business doing in a restaurant packed with a good hundred people I barely knew. I didn't, obviously. She hurried away from me like she could read my mind. Like she was afraid that if she stuck around another second, every one of those depraved thoughts would come to life.

Jude Holland has sat at the back of my mind for three years. And now she's here. *Here*. Why?

"Aren't you almost thirty?" What's-her-name is now asking her.

My heart is pounding.

"This really isn't your business."

Get a grip, I tell myself. *Get a fucking grip*.

"I'm only looking out for you. You're getting a bit old to waste another minute, don't you think?"

Go out there and do your job. Go. Now.

I shove the doors open with a bit too much force.

"As fascinating as I find this conversation," I say loudly. "Do you think we can turn our attention to something a little more productive?"

She whips around and finally, I come face-to-face with her.

Not literally face-to-face. I'm just about a foot taller than her. But she's almost exactly how I remember. Brown eyes shaped like oversized almonds, so expressive they always clued me in whenever she was holding her tongue on our last project together. Hair like dark chocolate now down by her ribcage, all thick and straight and tucked behind an ear. There's a small row of earrings crawling up her ear I don't think she had three years ago. It looks sexy as hell. I force my eyes on her face, refusing the temptation to take in more of her, not sure I could withstand knowing that the curve of her waist is the same as I remember it.

"Hi, I'm Jude," she says brightly, coming closer. "I was on the team that launched Nivoli's. You probably don't remember me."

I could laugh. But I'm too busy deciding if this is a dream or a nightmare.

She sticks out a hand and I look down at it like a complete dipshit, not making a move to shake it. I'm not sure I can stand to touch her without succumbing to visible heart palpitations.

"Where's Valeria?" I ask idiotically.

I've offended her. She tucks her hand into the back pocket of her jeans and I can feel color creep up my neck. There's no doubt now that what they say about me is true: I'm an absolute dick.

"I'm here, I'm here." Valeria sweeps into the room like clockwork. "Sorry I'm late. I got stuck at a train crossing. Theo, do you know Jude? I'm pleased to share that she'll be taking over for me. The project will be in her very capable hands."

I decide I'm in a nightmare.

"I look forward to working with you again," Jude tells me, gaining back a bit of confidence from Valeria's words.

Speak. Say something, I yell internally.

But nothing comes out because, evidently, I've become a mute. I stand there staring at her like I've seen death. She smiles at me again, bigger than the last. Her nose scrunches up a bit when she does and it's a look so fucking endearing my insides curdle.

Say literally. Fucking. Anything.

At last, I muster a curt nod in Valeria's direction. "Let's get this done."

Great. Great effort.

For the next twenty minutes I walk them around the drywall lounge, show them the kitchen. Back out and through an oversized archway into the drywall dining room, saying as little as humanly possible. I'm just short of throwing on a beret and miming it altogether.

Valeria carries most of the conversation, pointing things out to Jude and what's-her-name – who I figured out is called Carly. Back when I had vocal cords, we had discussed giving the place an industrial look. So they spit ball ideas, talk measurements and peer out the windows down to the river.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't pictured it, what it would be like to see Jude again after all this time. But none of the feverish scenarios I'd come up with involved getting caught off guard, hearing her voice out of nowhere. When I moved back, I decided I'd come up with a way to bump into her. To see if I'd built up this false deity in my brain after the last time I saw her. Never once did I anticipate she'd find me first or render my tongue completely useless.

She's standing alone in the middle of the dining room now, so still it looks like she's somehow managed to fall asleep standing up. But her head is shifting around incrementally, like she's taking in the space, seeing things that aren't there. Like she's in some kind of daydream.

Maybe she's as nuts as I've become.

I go over to her, resolving to get a minimum of one sentence out before she goes and I despise myself forever. But my momentum derails the second I get close, because damn it she smells incredible. What is that? Mandarin orange and lime, maybe? In her shampoo or something –

She glances at me, maybe waiting for me to say something. When I don't, she says: "It's a beautiful space. I can't wait to get started."

My tongue has decided to forgo me completely and her face falls a little. She clears her throat.

"Listen," she says gently, and after a second I make myself look her in the eye. And because my body is just mocking me now, my throat goes completely dry. "I know it's long overdue, but I want to formally apologize for the last time we saw each other. I just... I didn't appreciate what that man was saying about Nivoli's, and about you, and I felt compelled to say something. But I overstepped, and I can assure you it won't happen again. I'm confident we'll make a great team on this project."

And I'm confident I will self-implode if I have to spend another second next to you.

She gives me this look then, eyes going all round like she's quietly pleading with me to be normal. Under a look like that, I'd jump off a bridge if she asked.

So, I give it a shot. My mouth opens like it's finally decided to speak, but before I can register what it is I want to say Valeria calls out to her, beckoning her to the windows.

~

I've been staring at the same email for several minutes without absorbing a single word of it. I flick to another one hoping for better luck,

but I'm staring at words that don't seem to make sense together. It appears my brain is too scrambled to comprehend a line as plain as *Hi Theo*.

You're a joke, I tell myself, snapping shut my laptop. *What's it going to take to get over her?*

I'm home in this oversized apartment no single person has any business living in. It feels cold and clammy in here tonight, or more cold and clammy than usual. I consider turning down the A/C but instead I peel myself off the low sofa, throw a log into the fireplace and light it up.

There's nothing normal about making a fire indoor in the middle of summer, but I've done it for warmth all my life. Since it was just me and Mom and Pen, and we got used to supplementing my childhood home's weak radiators in the winter. Burning wood ranks high on my list of favorite smells, after buttermilk pancakes and damp grass in the spring.

My foot is shaking again. Scenes from that half-hour at Sunset Landing pour into my brain. I shove them away, before the humiliation starts raining down again.

I couldn't even make it half an hour without turning into a blustering idiot. A puddle at her feet. There's no way I can afford to lose it that badly again, with two months left on this project. I need to be on top of my game. Need to make it count, for every single person who depends on the place for a living. For Mom and for Pen.

I stand, pace around the coffee table. Make a bigger loop and pace around the entire open living room and kitchen. Expand the loop to pace around the dining table too. On the fourth loop I veer offtrack past the open staircase and through to the third bedroom I turned into a gym, thinking I should burn some energy on the treadmill. Then I remember I'm still wearing jeans, and I give up on the entire thing.

I slip my phone out of my pocket and dial.

As it rings, I second guess myself. Triple guess myself. Give myself the long seconds to change my mind. To decide I can take it after all, having her around. That I'll be able to focus, ignore how badly I'd rather comb my fingers through her hair or at least beg her for a date.

By the fifth unanswered ring I cave, ready to give up on the instinct. But then the sound stops abruptly and Diana's distant voice is in my ear.

"You've reached Diana Dharjan at Dime Designs. Please leave me a message and I will get back to you as soon as possible."

I hesitate. Am I really about to do this?

And then I do.

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Chapter 4

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Jude

Bastard. *Bastard.*

Diana hits the repeat button on her answering machine, filling her office with his dry voice.

“Hi Diana, it’s Theo Jordan. Look, I appreciate you might be short-changed with Valeria leaving, but I think it’s best if you find me someone else to lead this project. I’m not sure I can work with her replacement. Call me back if you want to talk further.” *Click.*

He’s awful. He’s a monster. Awful, *awful* monster.

Even on the second listen the voicemail makes no sense. I parse through every second of that meeting at Sunset Landing, from the moment he burst from the kitchen to the second he disappeared from the dining room after Valeria called me over. I’m fairly certain – I’m *completely* certain I hadn’t done anything to offend him. How could I have, when we only exchanged – *I* only exchanged – a measly handful of words. No, I’d gone in there with a clear and focused plan. To apologize for That Night. And to make it clear I was excited and ready to lead his new project. Not a single thing I did deviated from that plan.

“Well?” Diana’s eyebrows are raised so high up they disappear under her bangs. My only consolation is that her voice is still in its regular octave. “Would you care to explain?”

My hands are shaking. What explanation could I possibly come up with?

I'm sorry Diana, Theo Jordan's just a smug, hideous, miserable prick who's probably never known joy in his life. He was ripped from his mother's breast at a very young age and raised by feral wolves deep in the woods, and so he never learned to be a decent human being.

I force myself to take a deep, calming breath. It doesn't work. My stomach is a swirling tornado of fear and fury. If I get fired over this –

Diana slides off her glasses, and pinches the top of her nose. “Jude, was I not clear enough the other day? Do I need to spell it out for you, how important this project is to the future of this company? How seriously I expect you to take this account?”

I wipe my damp palms up and down my thighs. “I promise you, I'm taking this very seriously –”

“I am fifty-six years old Jude. Fifty-six. Sometime soon, I'd like to retire and actually see my husband on a regular basis, before he leaves me for some younger, bouncier chippy with fake tits and no career and all the time in the world to spend on him. Theo Jordan's new contract is my retirement plan. If I wake up one day to a note from my husband saying he's moved away to live on an island with some gold-digging hussy, I will hold you personally responsible. Do we understand each other?”

I force out a strangled laugh. “Well, if it's that you're worried about I'll help you hunt down the hussy myself.”

Her eyes are laser beams carving through me and the sad laugh dies in my throat. “I'm sorry, Diana. I swear, I have no idea why he left you that message. It must be a mistake. I'm telling you, I can handle Theo Jordan.”

“You seem to have done a bang-up job of that so far. Believe me, I knew I put a challenge in front of you. I'm not delusional enough to think he's an easy client. But I made you this deal because I thought you could handle it.”

She purses her lips, studying me from across her desk. She shakes her head.
“Jude –”

My heartbeat pummels my throat. No. Not again. *Not again.*

“Diana, please,” I say quickly. I stuff my trembling fingers under my thighs, and wrangle the most reassuring smile I can muster. “Trust me, *I have this*. Call him back, tell him there’s no one else. I can handle him. I’m a professional.”

~

But I’m feeling anything but professional sitting across from Jenna at the café across the street, which mercifully starts serving alcohol when the clock strikes five, as though beckoning us in, all the downtrodden professionals in the area.

She heard about it before I even told her, sending me a hurried text that she’d meet me here after work, knowing better than to come right to me where Carly could eavesdrop on my failures.

The server looked vaguely alarmed when I plopped myself down at a table and announced that she should bring me the cheapest bottle of white they have the second it was five o’clock. Now, I’m precisely three glasses deep into merlot. The wine is sweet and egging me on.

“At least Diana’s giving you another chance,” Jenna is saying soothingly, patting my hand.

“Barely. She sent me out of her office saying she expects daily status reports. No other designer has to give daily reports,” I say between gulps of wine. “How’d you hear about it, anyway? Does everyone know?”

Jenna’s always the most informed person at Dime. People treat receptionists like their hairdressers, she told me once when I asked, shocked, how she knew about the affair someone in business development

was carrying on every Wednesday night. She admitted she'd heard it from someone in accounting, who heard it from someone in IT, who had spotted a rendezvous in a parking lot across the street.

She pouts her lips sympathetically. "Carly walked past Diana's office while you were in there. You know how it is here – news travels fast."

"Clearly," I set my glass down on the tiled table top with a bit too much force, and the wine sloshes threateningly around the edges. "I don't know what good another chance'll do me. He didn't even say a word to me when we were there. He barely *looked* at me. I don't get it."

Jenna trails a finger through the condensation the wine bottle has left on the table top, thinking deeply. "Power trip, maybe? Or – wait. New theory." She swipes at her phone and types furiously for a moment. Whatever she sees makes her shoulders slump. "Never mind."

"What?" I crane my head to have a look, and she sets her phone down on the table between us. I recoil in my chair. Theo Jordan's unsmiling face stares out from the screen, a photo I saw last year in an article about one of his new restaurants. He's leaning forward on his elbows behind a stainless-steel kitchen island, curls spilling casually onto his forehead, the sleeves of his plaid shirt pushed up his forearms.

"I thought maybe he was over compensating," Jenna says, eyeing the picture with interest. "It's a shame he's such an ass."

I swallow hard as another sip of wine struggles in my throat, pressing my fingers to my lips as though it helps get it down. I know what she's thinking. It's the same thing I thought when I saw him for the first time, years ago. Your eyes land on him and you wonder what kind of psychedelics the great maker was taking when he created him, because it seems impossible someone could look like this. The loose curls you want to

wrap around your fingers and jaw so perfectly defined I found myself wondering whether he scowls so hard because he knows how tempting he looks with that muscle pulsing in his cheek.

I was a little shaken when we first met, and spent more time than I'd care to admit trying not to stare during the Nivoli's project, an exercise I noticed more than a few other people were failing at too. Sure, maybe he'd been a hard ass to work for. But at least he was pretty to look at.

Now as I stare down at his picture, feeling it poison me slowly, I realize something. There is nothing, *nothing* redeemable about Theo Jordan. Nothing redeemable about a person who would toy with someone's career for no discernable reason.

I'm good at what I do. I know I am. I've practically run projects myself any time I've been pulled to assist Jerry. Under regular circumstances – read: if I were dealing with an actual human being – I'd have nothing to worry about. My presentations are always solid. I think through every tiny little detail and my mock ups are always so carefully drawn up they're completely lifelike. Like you could jump into the pages and live in them. My fabric and paint swatches get neatly categorized, proposed vendors alphabetized and project plans perfectly itemized. I should have this whole thing in the bag.

So where the hell did I go wrong, before I could even get started?

"I think I might hate him," I say suddenly. I stare at my wine glass, in disbelief all over again. "Actually *hate* him – I don't know if I've ever hated someone before."

"Sweet girl like you? You don't have it in you to really hate someone," teases Jenna over the rim of her wineglass. "You've let people like Carly and Jerry push you around for years with zero consequences."

“Well, it ends now. He tried to fire me off his project, Jenna. Like, *actually* fire me, for no reason whatsoever. Who *does* that? Does he get to walk all over people just because someone anointed him the patron saint of mediocre food?”

“Ouch. I like this side of you,” Jenna grins. “Is the food really mediocre?”

“No,” I say grudgingly, shifting in my chair. “It’s freaking delicious. There’s this fish burger at Nivoli’s that – okay, *not* the point. I’m serious – I’m through being nice. I apologized. I’ve been polite and professional and where did that get me exactly? Barely employed and half drunk on a Thursday! He probably expects me to bend over for him.” Jenna opens her mouth. “Oh, don’t even joke about that. I wouldn’t fuck him if my life depended on it.”

Jenna throws back her head in a laugh. “God, I haven’t seen you this fired up in a long time. I kind of love it.”

I haven’t *felt* this fired up in a long time.

Not since before my brother – I stop the thought in its tracks.

After the worst happened, I was so focused on surviving I had no room for excess emotion. It was just about keeping myself intact, going through the motions of day-to-day life. And then my parents walked out on me, and it rocked my world so badly that I built a protective layer over every bit of myself. There was no way I was going to open myself up to that kind of loss again, and yeah, I can admit that part of that meant working overtime to make sure people liked me enough to stick around. Keeping my mouth shut about Carly and covering Jerry’s ass so that I didn’t rock the boat at work.

The person I was four years ago never would have stood for it. I feel like I've just woken up from a long, disorienting sleep.

"I've worked too hard to let some total prick ruin my career," I say at last, nodding to help my words properly sink in, to build my resolve. "If he wants me off this project, he's going to have to try harder."

The server materializes at our table and pours the last dribble of wine into my glass, probably sensing I need it most. Jenna's barely made a dent in hers, but she takes a sip along with me.

"Give him hell, Saint Jude."

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Chapter 5

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Theo

I hike up the volume on my phone, letting the voicemail blare into my ear. “Hi Theo, this is Diana from Dime Designs calling you back. I’m not sure whether there is something in particular you would like to address, but I want to assure you that I personally selected Jude Holland for the project. I have the utmost confidence that she is the best fit. This is quite an important project for Dime, and I made sure to staff it with our best people. Please feel free to give me a call back if you have any questions.”

What is it that I’ve done, exactly, to deserve this brand of torture?

My phone goes down on the kitchen island with so much force I’m inclined to check for cracks to the screen.

I grab tongs out of a drawer and toss a mixing bowl of chicken wings in some sauce. It’s Wednesday night which means family dinner, a tradition we’ve kept up since we were kids and Wednesdays were the only nights Mom had off between the two jobs she worked to support the family. I’d been the one to cook for Mom and Pen back then, and despite their best efforts to repay the favor I’ve managed to keep that particular tradition alive too.

My fingers itch to pick up my phone, muster up the guts to tell Diana point blank she owes me a new Designer. But Jude’s face pops into my head like it’s done more times than it should have since that hallway at Nivoli’s. And my guts abandon me completely. What is it about this girl that throws me off like this?

Fine, maybe she's alarmingly beautiful. Rounded face that would make her seem completely innocent, if I hadn't been a first-hand witness to her backbone. And there's the scrunching thing her nose does when she grins that gives my bones a gelatinous quality. But there are plenty of attractive women out there who don't make my vocal cords go soft. So, what the hell is it? And how the hell am I supposed to open a restaurant with a distraction like that lurking around me?

I shove the pan of chicken wings into the oven as the door out in the hall bounces open. Instantly the place is roaring with footsteps and voices.

"We're here!" Pen's voice echoes down the hall.

I hear a haphazard clang of metal and picture the spare keys to my place hitting the table by the door. I flick on the tap and wash the chicken off my hands before the inevitable onslaught.

It's like clockwork. There's a rush of frantic steps and shouting, and my twin niece and nephew Gabby and Evan emerge from the hall.

"Feeoh!" They shriek when they see me, and there's something in getting my legs mauled by hyper three-year-olds that has me almost instantly forget the shitty mood I'm in.

"Hi, Teddy." Mom leads the rest of them in, Pen and her husband Marcus. She drops a flat white box on the counter as Pen hops up on one of the stools lining the island.

I toss the hand towel I'd been using on the counter. "Okay, who got into the donuts?"

I crouch and throw Gabby over my shoulder, earning a shriek straight to the eardrum. It's become our standard greeting, me and Gabby, since the first time I did it months ago.

“We don’t had any donuts,” Evan says, even with a sticky blue smear across his chin.

“Oh, really?” I duck down and wipe his face with the back of my hand. Gabby flails her legs and almost kicks him in the face. “Then I’ll sneak you one.”

“Donuts! Donuts!”

I round the island, Gabby spreading her arms out like she’s at the front of the Titanic and making whooshing sounds as I walk.

“No. No more donuts,” Pen says firmly. “I swear, you’ve ruined them both. We’re going to have to start supervising your visits.”

“Don’t talk crazy, Penny,” calls Marcus, who’s already settled into the sofa and flicked on the TV. “There’s no way we’re giving up the free babysitting.”

I chuckle and hoist Gabby firmly up my shoulder. She lets out a loud mechanical sound when I come to a halt by Mom.

“Screech!” I echo, and Gabby cackles. I pull Mom into a half hug. “Hey, Mom. Dinner’s almost done.”

She looks over my shoulder at the kitchen, wringing her hands. “Anything I can help with?”

“Nope,” I reach around her to flip open the box of donuts. Predictably, there are two vacancies in the rows of frosted dough. I grab one decked in sprinkles and shove it in my mouth. “Wine’s in the fridge. Want me to get it?”

But Mom’s already sidestepped me and headed for the fridge, typically determined not to let me lift a finger if she can help it. I can tell her it’s fine until I’m blue in the face, but Mom’s never really got over how much I had to pitch in to help her as a kid.

She settles with a glass into the stool next to Pen and instantly they start arguing about something I can't keep up with. Marcus yelps from the sofa. I watch him struggle to hike Evan off his lap and out of the line of sight to the game playing on TV. Gabby is singing something in an ear-numbing key from up on my shoulder.

The tension I didn't realize I'd been carrying in my shoulders eases completely. It doesn't get any better than Wednesday nights.

The timer on the oven goes off and I round back to the other side of the island. Dropping Gabby down on her feet, I flick away the dark lock of hair stuck to her mouth, sneaking her the other half of my donut with a shushing finger across my lips. She giggles and sinks to the floor to stuff her face.

I'm flipping the wings piled on the hot pan when Pen clears her throat behind me. My back stiffens instantly. That sound's usually a clear sign I'm about to suffer in some way.

"Theo?"

"Pen?"

Mom's being suspiciously quiet and I sense they've rehearsed whatever's about to hit me. I keep my eyes trained on the pan in front of me.

"So, there's this friend of a friend —"

"Oh, come on," I groan and the tongs slip my grip so fast a chicken wing drops to the floor.

"Shut up," Pen snaps as I clean up my mess. "There's this friend of a friend I think you should meet. Her name is Christina and she works in real estate and she's very attractive and single. She got out of a relationship three months ago."

She gets it out at warp speed like she rightfully expects me to cut her off.

“Pen, this has to stop –”

“Oh, you stop. I already told her about you and she’s expecting your call. She’s free next Friday.”

I throw my handful of paper towel in the trash, rubbing my face and scraping my hair back. I need to find something to do next Friday.

This would be Pen’s sixth attempt at a set-up, clearly at the point where she’s scraping the bottom of the barrel. There isn’t a chance in hell this person’s a friend of a friend. It’s like the time she insisted I go out with her barista from across the street, who, aside from being a nice enough person, ended up being the dullest date of my adult life. Pen has a type, and it’s definitely not mine. Her dates are always a bit too quiet, a bit too warm and fuzzy.

I turn to Mom. “Are you in on this?”

She gives me a sheepish look. “We all want to see you happy, Teddy –”

“I *am* happy,” I say firmly, dropping the pan of wings back into the oven and stabbing at the timer. “Who said I wasn’t happy? I’m busy, I have work –”

“Work isn’t everything,” Mom chides me. “And besides, honey, I don’t know why you have to go and keep opening these restaurants. You work too much as it is.”

“At least meet her,” adds Pen. “I’m not asking you to get married. She’s nice.”

Nice. Great.

I lean a hip against the island, matching the glare she’s giving me. “I’m busy. Can’t get away until this project’s over.” She opens her mouth to

argue but I cut her off, lifting my hands up as though in surrender. “I’m not bullshitting you, Pen. I can show you my calendar. I’m getting the first round of design proposals tomorrow and then it’s back-to-back until end of August. I already told you this is the last one of these dinners I can host until September.”

Pen narrows her eyes and I give her a shrug.

Mom eyes me. “Is it the same girl from Nivoli’s, Teddy? The decorator?”

“Designer,” I correct, without thinking.

Fuck. Rookie mistake. Mom throws me a triumphant look and I turn to grab a beer out of the fridge, pulling out the bottle of Pinot Grigio to top up her glass while I’m at it.

The last thing I need is more Jude Holland on the brain. Hard enough to stop thinking about her as it is, with the prospect of her constant company over the next two months looming over me.

But Pen’s ears have perked up and she eyes me with interest. “Who’s this, now?”

“No one,” I tell her flatly. “She means the person designing the restaurant.”

“The one who did the decorating for Nivoli’s,” Mom stage whispers, and Pen’s face dawns with recognition.

I don’t know why. I couldn’t have mentioned her more than a couple of times, and only when Mom had asked about progress on Nivoli’s, three years back.

And anyway, Did the Decorating’s putting it lightly. Jude was the only one, it turned out, who had a semblance of common sense while we were

trying to get Nivoli's beyond studs and plywood. But I don't say that to Mom.

Pen opens her mouth.

"Don't," I cut her off sharply. "Just don't."

"Fine. Though I think in a minute you'll regret not wanting to talk about it," Pen says briskly. She clears her throat, fiddling with her phone on the counter. "Not to make things awkward, but Ted emailed me today."

And she's right, it is awkward. Mom clenches her teeth like she always does whenever someone brings up our father. She takes a long sip of wine.

"What does he want?" I ask tightly.

Pen shrugs. "Just saying hi. He asked how you are."

Pen's always been the unlucky one to hear from Theodore Jordan Senior, whenever the wind blows in a certain direction and he remembers he has a family outside of the new one he somehow patched together twenty-two years ago. Pen managed to retain a level of kindness towards him that transcends humanity, after what he pulled. And so, when he showed up on my doorstep three years ago and did what he did, I never had the heart to tell her about it. Never had the heart to tell Mom the full story either, knowing how bad it would upset her.

"Right." I lose interest in the conversation altogether, tapping at my phone and flicking away emails from Hurley littering the screen.

Evan comes up to tug at Pen's sleeve and I make my escape, sinking down on the floor next to Gabby, who's sitting against the island and singing off-key.

"Hey, Gabs." Her voice gets louder when I tuck her under my arm. A new text message pops up. My investor on Sunset Landing.

JOHN: *11 AM at Dime tomorrow, yeah?*

Cold dread hits me again. I eye my phone. If I pushed the issue, Diana would have to do something about it. She'd have to. It's not like I'm some nobody client. My finger hovers over the screen.

I don't notice Gabby's stopped singing until she pokes at my cheek. Her eyes have gone so round I wonder what my face must look like. "What wrong Feeoh?"

I sigh. "Nothing, Gabs."

"You look scared."

"I do?"

"Uh-huh."

Am I? I think of Sunset Landing and the intensity of those make-or-break last couple months on a project. How many times I've heard of other projects going down the drain just before they hit the finish line. And how much rides on my ability to get it across that finish line. Not getting it done terrifies me.

And then I think of Jude, and the way my heart fucking faltered whenever her eyes hit me in that restaurant. Whatever it is she does to me definitely terrifies me.

I lean my head back on the counter. "I think you're right, Gabs. Guess I'm a bit of a wimp."

"Mom have a trick for getting scared," she tells me, pushing up onto her knees.

"Yeah? What's that?"

Gabby stands, planting her small hands on my shoulder and bringing her face within a couple inches of mine, breathing out the scent of donuts. "Count one, two, three and do what you scared of."

Life lessons from a three-year-old. This is what it's come to.

But that's it though, isn't it? The only option I have is to get my shit together. To figure out a way to manage the next months of my life opening a business without bursting into flames in Jude's presence.

"You're pretty smart, Gabs, you know that?"

"I know!" She throws at me, bouncing away.

There's a silver lining here, I realize, as the timer goes off on the oven.

It's that, like almost everyone else who meets me, last I saw her Jude Holland seemed fully engaged in the Tip-Toe Around Theo Game. The rules are simple. They involve losing all semblance of interesting or challenging conversation for pure ass-kissing and over-compensation.

It's been that way since I was inducted as Head Chef at the last restaurant I worked before opening my own. People started slotting me into one of two categories:

1. I'm an asshole they're too afraid of to challenge.
2. I'm a saint they'd never dream to challenge.

I can admit I don't help matters much. After years of Mom and Pen pointing out the arctic chill I supposedly impose on a room of strangers, I have to start self-reflecting.

I grab the tongs and start piling the chicken wings onto a serving dish. If it's the Tip-Toe Game Jude's playing, I can handle it. Nothing turns me off more than people who cower in my presence, try too hard to get an in with me. I can let her fall from grace on her own.

I wonder if she knows I made that call.

Chapter 6

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Theo

John throws me a grin from his side of the elevator. He bounces from heel to toe, barely able to contain his good humor as we head up the elevators to Dime. I could probably learn a few things from John. Instead, I stare straight at the steel doors, trying to relax the fists that have bunched in the pockets of my jeans.

I don't think I've ever been here while the reception desk's been occupied. But this morning, a woman with pink hair twisted on top of her head sizes up John as he walks up ahead of me.

"Morning! Who are you here to see?"

John does that bouncing thing again. "Good morning to you too! We're John Harrold and Theo Jordan here for Jude Holland."

The receptionist tilts her head to look at me from around John, and I think I see something spark in her eye.

"Straight down the hall to the boardroom," she says. There's ice in her tone that wasn't there a minute ago and she dismisses us from the conversation before we're even gone, quickly keying something into her phone.

John looks affronted by the lackluster welcome.

The office is almost dead quiet, other than the solid heel from his dress shoes hitting the marble floor as we approach the boardroom. My sneakers make barely a sound in contrast. We just manage to touch down into our seats when Carly barges into the room.

“Good morning!” Her voice is loud, showy and irritating.

John doesn’t seem to agree. “Good morning!” He matches her energy, probably relieved that someone seems to be in a good mood in this place.

But Carly’s in full-on Ass-Kiss Mode. She directs an over-zealous smile my way. “It’s fantastic to see you again.”

“Right. Sure.”

I crane my head towards the door both hoping for and dreading a glimpse of Jude, until I realize how badly my leg is shaking under the table. I force it to stop.

Carly catches my eye and leans in over the table like she’s about to spill some secret I have no interest in hearing.

“I wanted to check in with you before Jude arrives.” There’s something off in the way she says ‘Jude.’ Like she’s talking about a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe, or something. “She’s very new to this project, as you’re aware. And I’m rather concerned she’s in over her head. So, you let me know when you need me to step in and right the ship, if you will.”

She bores her eyes into me and it takes just about everything I have not to let the disgust that’s perked up in my stomach manifest across my face.

I don’t bother keeping it out of my voice, though. “Isn’t she your boss?”

Carly’s face sours but she lifts her chin, defiant. “Technically. But I’ll do whatever it takes to get this project done right.”

Whatever it takes, which in this instant means throwing a colleague under the bus. Nothing pisses me off more than bullshit office politics, especially when they’re being played behind the scenes on my projects. Even worse when only one person knows there’s a game being played. Despite my best efforts, the image of Jude with her nose scrunched up pops into my head.

The strain I'm putting on my jaw is audible. I eye Carly. "You know what I think...?"

But I trail off as Jude floats into the room.

"Good morning," she says to the room at large. She doesn't look at me at all, just places a spiral-bound booklet in front of each of us. Mine goes skidding off the table and smacks me in the stomach before I can react fast enough to stop it.

I slide it back onto the table, trying to keep myself from staring too obviously. She's wearing this black dress today, all tight around her waist and showing off a pair of legs I'd gladly lick up and down. And I'd think she was trying to kill me if she had any idea I'd become the kind of guy who pines.

I run a rough hand over my face, trying to sober up as she turns to John. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Jude Holland, the designer on this project."

Her energy is off today – there's something different in her voice I can't pin down. And she still hasn't looked at me.

John takes her hand. "John. Pleasure to meet you. Theo's business partner on Sunset Landing."

She gives him this look then, eyes rounding a bit, pulling the corner of her lips down a fraction.

Poor you, I think she's telling him.

I frown right when she finally looks over, but it's nothing more than a blank, passing glance.

Safe to say she knows about the phone call.

That'll be Category Number One, in this round of the Tip-Toe Game. It's familiar footing, and I feel myself start to relax. She'll slap on a fake as

fuck smile and talk shit about me behind closed doors, just like the rest of them. It's gonna be fine. I was worried for nothing.

Jude smooths down her dress and sits directly across from me.

“So! Sunset Landing,” she starts. I look down at the booklet in front of me for something to do. “Before we dive in, I wanted to take a moment to share my impression of the space – thank you again for the wonderful tour last week, Theodore.”

My head snaps up. Hair slaps at my forehead from the sheer force of the move.

What the hell?

She gives me this innocent little look that feels dangerously like a trap.

I've been called Theodore only a handful of times my entire life, and certainly not as an adult. I have no idea where she's pulled it out of. I eye her carefully, not sure where this is going.

She continues like nothing happened. “It's remarkable, truly inspired in its architecture and its use of space overlooking the Hubbart. It feels very much part of the natural ecosystem around it. And so, it's my proposal that we carry the flow of nature inwards, into the restaurant itself. If you can flip to page three...”

I tear my eyes away and flick open my booklet, studying the renderings in front of me. Forcing myself to focus, letting her voice guide me through the details.

“Notice the use of cool blue tones, which flow from the great windows as a continuation of the river, up onto the far wall using the oversized backings of the built-in bench seating. Water meets land as you look up. We would commission a living wall that carries all the way to the dark ceiling that mimics the sky at dusk, adding to the intimate feel.”

She's flying through the presentation with confident ease, paying me no mind at all. I decide I must have imagined the intent behind her words.

"On page ten you'll see what I propose to be the major focal point of the lounge space. I envision an oversized light installation that spans approximately fifty percent of the room. As the first room when you enter the restaurant, I suggest we invest the majority of our budget into the lounge. You'll see on pages fifteen and sixteen that, while we're certainly carrying over the drama from the lounge through to the dining room, it's much more understated. I'll pause here to take any questions before walking you through the project plan and budget breakdown."

I leaf back and forth between pages, deliberating. It's a bit rough around the edges, but there's something there. Definitely nothing I'd have settled on, on my own. But she's pulled together a design somehow both breathable and intimate. Exactly what we'd been going for while looking nothing like what we'd originally discussed, when Valeria led the project.

The room's silent. I'm aware they're all looking at me, waiting, deferring as always.

"It's a departure. From earlier discussions," I say at last, addressing the room.

But she meets my eye head on and there's definitely something different in them today. A razor-sharp edge, pointed right at me.

"It is a departure," she agrees smoothly. "But I'm sure you'll see the merit. This space deserves as unique an interior as its exterior."

She flicks an eyebrow. It's lightning quick, only there for a fraction of a second, but I see it.

Try me, I think she's telling me.

It catches me right off guard. It's a far cry from the kid gloves I'd used with her on Nivoli's. She'd been passive, quiet, tentative. The girl I had to push and prod into voicing a point of view, because I could tell she had it in her. And I'd have been more annoyed about it had the alternative not been a pack of blustering yes-men I couldn't shake.

I study her now, debating whether or not to take her up on it.

I throw her a soft ball. "It's a bit feminine, isn't it?"

Her eyes narrow. She took it personally. But when she answers, her tone is calm, measured. "She's called Mother Nature for a reason. It gives the place a certain warmth. Like a comforting cocoon."

"A cocoon?" I echo mildly.

"A cocoon."

The analogy is so insane it takes me a second to register she's fucking with me. She watches it dawn on me and sucks in her cheeks, trying not to laugh.

She doesn't give me a second to react. "To clarify, I was especially inspired by the work of John Garrison. I'm aware you brought him on as your mixologist. His color palettes tend to be a little ethereal."

She's got a point.

"And given the location and overall feel of the restaurant's exterior, you're probably looking at a clientele of mostly couples and women in the age range of twenty-five to forty. Which you already know, of course."

Her expression is completely level, tone completely calm. And then she raises her eyebrows.

Is she – is she *snarking* me?

Her lips twitch, seeing she's caught me off-guard. She's snarking me. She's actually snarking me and fuck if it doesn't send a hot thrill right

through me.

“We talked about industrialism,” I push, mostly because I’m curious what she’ll throw at me next.

“Overdone.”

My eyebrows shoot upwards. I lean in. “Is that right?”

“That’s right.” She leans in too, hair swinging forward onto the table. And shit, my arm actually twitched. Badly wanting to go in for a handful of hair and pull her to me.

“I like it!” Tom interjects, breaking our pace. I shoot him an irritated look.

“Thank you, Tom,” Jude says to him. Her voice is so cajolingly sweet I know she’s trying to get a rise out of me.

She looks at me expectantly. I have no fucking clue where this Jude’s come from, or why she decided to come out to play. But it’s a shot of adrenaline straight into my veins.

“So, you’re saying no to industrialism? Just so we’re clear.”

“I don’t recommend it,” she says firmly. “There’s no sense investing in such a stunning property only to make it look like half the restaurants in this city. But I can pull some steel detailing into the design. If it makes you feel better.”

She’s got a fucking point.

I see John and Carly exchange looks out of the corner of my eye. “It does make me feel better, actually. And I want to spend more on the dining room. It’s where guests spend the most time. We’ll do a wall fixture, similar to the hanging piece in the lounge.”

I think I land a blow that time. She purses her lips. Like she likes the idea but doesn’t want to admit it.

“I’ll come up with something,” she concedes.

We stare at each other for a long, quiet minute. On the rare occasion where someone deigns to have a meaningful business discussion with me, this is usually about the time they drop their eyes. Like I’m some kind of Medusa and holding my gaze risks turning them to stone. But Jude keeps those brown eyes trained on me, jaw set, full lips pressed firm together.

Seems Diana was right about her. It would have been a mistake to take her off the project.

“You can deliver this on budget?” I ask finally.

Triumph flashes in her eyes. “And ahead of schedule.”

She hates me, like just about everyone else.

But the Tip-Toe Game has a Category Number Three, it seems. One where I rile her up just to see what she’ll say next. One where she actually has enough grit to give it right back to me.

And there’s no way in hell I can stay away from her now.

Chapter 7

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Jude

I'm still on top of the world when I surface from the subway station on Wednesday, wedges pounding the hot pavement under me.

Jude Holland, Designer. It's going to happen this time. I'm so convinced of it I start to envision myself walking into the office, hair blowing like I'm in an over-the-top shampoo commercial, heels echoing around the office, heads turning in awe. I'll stroll past Carly's desk and flash her a smile over my shoulder, leaving her behind on my way to my gleaming corner office.

Well, maybe not the *corner* office. I doubt Diana will give it up. But I will have an office, anyway.

I stayed at work late on Friday, reworking my mock ups and sending them off to Theo Jordan before he could change his mind and claw back his approval. His reply came back quickly, a simple *Thanks*. – *TJ*, and I imagined him alone on a Friday night sitting in a winged armchair in the middle of a cavernous mansion, lights dimmed save for a single floor lamp next to him.

More than once, I've wondered what Theo Jordan does for fun. Only to then decide he couldn't possibly have a clue how to have fun, rather staring at the walls with dead eyes until the sun rises and it's time to take his miserable personality out into the world again.

There's a familiar clomping on the sidewalk behind me as I near the Dime building. I pick up speed hoping to avoid her, but Carly's legs are quite a bit longer than mine and she catches up anyway.

“Keeping up with the project alright?” She asks by way of hello. “That was a pretty tough meeting last week. I hope he didn’t scare you off – I know how he can be intimidating for some people.”

I peel the hair sticking to the sweaty back of my neck, somewhere between cursing the heatwave gripping the city and knowing I’ll long for it come winter. Carly’s full of crap. I’ve seen the way she recoils whenever he enters a room, and how hard she works for his approval. A fruitless exercise considering who she’s dealing with.

“He doesn’t seem to like you very much,” she adds to fill my silence. “I heard about the call he made to Diana.”

We make it to the elevators and I jab at the button, knowing any kind of useful conversation is impossible when Carly gets on a roll like this. My silence seems to aggravate her fury.

“You know what? Go ahead, run the whole project, *little Jude*. And when you inevitably fail, I’ll be waiting to pick up the pieces.”

I lift my chin. “There won’t be any pieces to pick up.”

“Oh, there’ll be pieces. And when I get that promotion... Well, let’s just say you better brush up on your bathroom design skills.”

I whip around. “You will never get that job. Mark my words.”

“Consider your words marked and discarded. I’m meeting with Diana today to make my pitch.”

I’m so instantly relieved that I laugh. She hasn’t even met with Diana. I turn away, giving her my shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

The elevator pings open and I stride in, repeatedly hitting the *close* button before she can follow. She sticks her arm in and the doors retract. It’s a quiet ride up.

The doors open again and we're horses on a track, racing to the boardroom. She beats me in but Diana's there, already having claimed the seat at the head of the table.

"Good morning, you two," Diana peers up from over her glasses. She frowns. "Jude, why are you panting? You have sweat dripping down your face."

I try to force my breathing to slow, damning Carly and her long legs as I dab my forehead. "It's a bit hot in here, don't you think?"

Diana blinks. She's wearing a heavy wool shawl over a cardigan, probably because the A/C is blasting at male temperatures. She starts to x-ray me, then snaps to. "You know what, I don't want to know. Let's get to the update. Fill me in."

I flip open the lid of my laptop and click open a document with a flourish. "Right. Well, the general contractor just signed off on our agreement. We're going with Larry Hughes. He just had a job fall through and can be ready to start installation on Friday."

"Excellent."

"We're still working against an aggressive timeline – the client is aiming for an end of August opening. But we're pretty well on schedule. We'll be scouting materials as early as tomorrow. We're looking at flooring, paint, seating fabric, table tops... Given the accelerated pace of the project, we'll be scouting it all in one go."

"And you're bringing him along for this, correct?"

I nod grimly.

"After materials I'll be tackling the living wall. I found a plant nursery that specializes in this kind of thing, but it's about four hours out of town.

I'll be making the trip on Friday. They're already working on some samples for us. I'll bring back photos for you and the client."

"That's not going to fly." Diana gives me an odd look. "This is Theo Jordan we're dealing with. You know how involved he likes to be. He won't be satisfied with pictures."

"I'll take some videos, then. Or I can get them to courier the samples? But it'll have to come out of his budget."

She taps her pen against the table. "Aren't you already stretching the budget?"

"I can try to shuffle things around –"

"And that's a conversation you're willing to have with him? That you've shuffled things around for a courier fee?"

She's right. I may as well walk myself into a grave.

"You'll go together." She writes something down in her notebook.

"Together? Like, with Carly?"

"You and Theo. Whyever would you need Carly?"

I'm so shocked at the suggestion I can't even properly savor the insult to Carly.

I picture an out-of-town road trip with Theo Jordan. There is nothing in this world I'd rather do less. Truly. I would rather move to Antarctica with only a denim jacket for warmth than spend a single second longer than I have to with that man.

"D-do we really feel that's necessary? I mean, video quality these days is just fantastic. So life-like! Or else, he can go on his own. I can introduce him to my contact over email."

Diana shoots me a withering look.

“Carly can take him. Weren’t you just saying, Carly, that you have some extra time on your hands?”

I look desperately at Carly, willing her to invite herself. But it seems *she* was able to process Diana’s insult – I can practically see the steam bursting out of her ears.

I cast around urgently. There has to be another option. There has to. My stomach is sinking.

“You’ll go together,” Diana says again.

And her tone is final, closing the matter.

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Chapter 8

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Jude

O k, this is fine. It's fine.

Because the second I inform Theo Jordan that he has to be trapped in a car with me for eight hours tomorrow, he'll kybosh the whole thing himself. This is a certified hate-hate relationship.

He hates me enough to try to get me fired. I hate him for doing it. Simple. Clear cut. End of story, roll the credits.

We're scouting materials today for Sunset Landing. Normally, this is one of my favorite parts of a project, visiting showrooms. Spending hours on hours flipping through paints and fabric swatches, sorting through flooring options. I can already smell the musky hardwood, feel the glossy tiles.

But normally, my clients aren't moody, impatient, overly demanding and wholly unpleasant. Which, it turns out, really makes a difference, job satisfaction-wise.

I surface from the subway station, marching quickly up the four blocks to the showroom tucked between a mom-and-pop pharmacy and a grubby-looking dental office that may as well have the words *come here to die* painted on its windows. Painfully aware that I'm already five minutes late, I dash towards the door just as a car pulls up at the curb, a massive SUV with windows tinted so dark you can't see inside.

"Lose something?"

It's my least favorite sound in the world: Theo Jordan's dry, dead voice.

I consider pretending I didn't hear him. But my bag feels lighter than it should and I'm pretty sure my notebook is now sitting on the pavement behind me. I stop abruptly, cursing to myself. I'm sure now I was a mass murderer in a past life. It's the only explanation for whatever karmic justice is raining down on me, in the form of this incessant prick.

But if I really was a killer back then, maybe I can manage to dispose of him for good and get away with it. The thought cheers me up considerably.

"Good morning, Theodore."

"You know, there isn't a person on earth who calls me that."

He slams the door on his black-on-black-on-black car. It suits him, to be fair. The car is basically an oversized hearse. Exactly what I'd picture the Grim Reaper rides on his way to collect his victims.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I feign a frown, touching my chest. "Do you not like it?"

Theo saunters towards me, tucking his keys into the pocket of faded black jeans. He's wearing a baseball cap low over his face today and it's a nice respite, being able to avoid the usual disdain in his eyes.

I can see his smirk just fine, though.

He leans in, ever so slightly breaching my personal space. Not enough to cause me to move back, but just enough to set off a cherry bomb in my stomach. God, he's tall.

"No," he murmurs. "I *love* it."

My mouth twists at the thought I might have done something that appeals to him. But his smirk drops into a hard line and I realize he's messing with me. I've annoyed him and I'm instantly pleased.

I duck down to grab my notebook. By the time I'm up again he's holding open the showroom door, checking a watch he isn't wearing. "By

all means.”

I hate him.

I slide my notebook slowly into my bag, clasping it shut carefully. Smooth down my shirt. Fluff the pleats of my skirt. When I look up, my smile says: *I hope you drown in your shower tonight.*

I can sense his eyes roll as I step past him through the door.

Crate & Co. is my personal wonderland. I don't mean the space itself. It's stark and sterile and hideously overcast in fluorescent lighting. But the stuff gets me every time – the colors, the textures. I've been doing this long enough that the smell of fresh sawdust soothes me when I start to feel anxious.

“Hi, Omar,” I call to a clerk punching keys at a computer behind the check-out counter.

“Jude! It's always a happy day when you walk in!”

I grin. “That's because I'm your number one money maker.”

Omar has worked at Crate & Co. for as long as I've come here, and he's my favorite clerk by far. He's about seventy-five years old and once told me he truly believed the day he stops working is the day he'll go to sleep, for good.

“That, and you're cute as a button!”

I shake my head at him as I walk off into the showroom, heavily aware of Theo Jordan's presence somewhere behind me. A demon lurking over my shoulder.

“A special friend of yours?”

“He's a sweetheart. You should take notes.”

We're looking at paint swatches first, though I don't bother to give him a rundown of our itinerary for the afternoon. Instead, I force him to follow

behind me as I weave through various aisles to arrive at a large, battered table stained with colorful splotches as though someone had been brandishing a loaded paintbrush in its vicinity.

I haul three massive swatch books off a bookcase and drop them on the table. “You can start looking through these.”

“Care to share what I’m looking for?”

I turn to the display wall and start plucking paint swatches.

“The starting point should be the ceiling color and we can go maybe two shades lighter in the same tone for the walls. Something dark enough to feel intimate but soft enough not to swallow up the design.”

“That’s not as helpful as you think it is.”

He pulls out a stool tucked under the table and plants himself down, letting his head fall into the palm of his hand. He flips through a swatch book, the picture of boredom. I don’t blame him. It’s not typical for clients to show up searching for paint swatches. Normally, we’d choose a few options ourselves and allow the client the final pick. It’s a delicate dance between making them feel involved and knowing exactly what’s needed. But Theo Jordan’s not a typical client. He’s a greedy little octopus, dipping his slimy tentacles everywhere they don’t belong.

I wait a couple more minutes, let him turn a couple more pages, then slide two swatches across the table. One’s a sequence of charcoal tones, the other steel blues.

“I’m thinking one of these two,” I say, careful to sound just casual enough to make him think he has a say.

“Are you?” The brim of his hat is obscuring his face. I can’t tell what he’s thinking.

“Either one would be ideal. Both cool-toned, both naturally occurring. They would mimic the sky transitioning at dusk.”

He shuts the book he’s been leafing through and pulls the two swatches closer. “Are you just humoring me with these books?”

Yes.

He flicks his chin upwards to look at me from under his hat. If I didn’t know he was dead on the inside, I’d think he looks a little amused. “You know exactly which color you want, don’t you?”

Steel blue, obviously.

I look at him innocently. “It’s your decision. You’re the client.”

Theo makes a clicking sound with his tongue. “In that case,” he flips open the swatch book. “I’m thinking this one.”

He jabs at a color at the bottom of the page and I come around next to him to get a closer look. I feel his eyes on me as I lean over the book, lifting the page to get rid of the glare from the harsh lights above us. It’s a slimy-looking brown.

“That one?” I say skeptically.

“That one,” he echoes curtly.

With his index finger, he pushes up the brim of his hat so it sits a little higher on his forehead, giving me a full view of his eyes and the way they seem to look at me like there’s a riddle printed on my forehead he’s trying very hard to decipher. A strange awareness zips through me, dotting my arms with goosebumps.

Why is he looking at me like that? I dab tentatively at my chin, as though I’ll find leftovers from breakfast. But Cheerios don’t tend to leave any crumbs, and then he rolls his jaw with an intensity that makes me aware of how close to him I’m standing. I drop the swatch book.

“I had a dog once,” I tell him, going back to my side of the table. “He got a stomach bug and his poop was exactly that color.”

He tips his head. “See? It’s naturally occurring.”

“Trust me, there was nothing natural about it.”

“It’s client’s pick, isn’t it?”

I lean across the table to slam the book shut. “I’m sorry, but I cannot in good conscience let you humiliate yourself with fecal walls.”

He sits back in his stool with a smirk playing at his lips. “Yeah? Is that part of your oath as a commercial designer? Thou shall never permit fecal walls. If you *do* permit fecal walls –”

“If I were you I’d stop saying the word *fecal*, before –”

He lifts a finger. “Careful. You talk to all your clients like this?”

“Only the pricks,” I retort before I can stop myself, and his jaw drops open with an audible *pop*. I clap a hand over my mouth.

Crap.

That got away from me quickly. Insulting his choice of paint color, I can live with. Calling him names? Might be a step too far, regardless of how many times he’s tried to get me fired.

I stare at him, frozen, watching carefully for signs that I should cobble together an apology, desperate not to have to. But I swear I see a little twitch to his lips before he sets his jaw, presses his mouth into a flat line, rearranges his face into his usual expressionless mask. Letting me get away with my loose lips.

I tap at the paint swatches in front of him, trying to hurry past the moment. “Pick one. Please.”

After another eternal second, he picks up the steel blue swatch. “There. Now what?”

~

I've been a total wimp.

We've spent hours touring this showroom, and I still haven't brought up the trip to the nursery. Mostly because, despite our unspoken agreement that we'd both rather plunge into the heart of an active volcano than be working together, I'm not entirely sure I can predict his reaction to the idea. He's been his usual self – argumentative for the sake of it and frustratingly over-involved – but he seems to have developed some kind of sick, sadistic delight in tormenting people since I last had the unfortunate honor of working with him. Which is completely on brand for him, to be fair, so those little self-satisfied smirks he gives when he doesn't think I'm looking shouldn't be a surprise.

At this point, I wouldn't put it past him to agree to the trip just to watch me squirm. And that can't happen. I'm not altogether certain I can make it an entire car ride with him without needing to scream into a void.

We're sorting through the counter top section now – our last stop before I can blessedly absolve myself of his company – and I sweep a hand across a slab of concrete, buying time. It's becoming glaring that I'm going to have to make a big play, here. Tick him off so bad he'll laugh off any thought of a road trip.

"This one is a good choice for the table tops," I tell him of a soft, slate grey concrete with tiny flecks of shimmer throughout. "It'll pick up the light nicely."

He hoists himself up to sit on a sample table. His biceps tense against his t-shirt, and I hate myself for noticing. "Aren't we doing wooden tops?"

"You wanted *industrialism*, remember? We're incorporating concrete. We'll use it for the bar top, too."

“You’re very demanding, today.”

I jab my pen in his direction. “And *you’re* –”

“Prickly?” He offers, determined, after all, to make me pay for the earlier slip up. “You know, I’ve never had a designer fight me on so many little details before. I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Deciding between polyester and satin for booth seating is hardly a little detail. Your clients will be sitting on it for hours at a time. And if you’re trying to launch an upscale restaurant –”

He reaches over to snatch the pen from my fingers as I gesture with it, tucking it behind his ear with a smirk. “Like I said, satin is expensive to replace and I think settling on velvet was a decent compromise. Take the win, Holland, we don’t need to rehash it. Besides, I let you have your way with the floors, didn’t I? I still don’t see the point of paying extra to make some fancy pattern with the hardwood –”

“Speaking of rehashing,” I mutter under my breath.

“Sorry, what was that?”

I swivel to face him. “*Like I said*, the herringbone pattern will add dimension. For your benefit, dimension is the concept of adding qualities to a design in an effort to create visual appeal –”

“I know,” he nods, suddenly solemn. He tugs at a near-black curl on this head. “It’s why the guy who cuts my hair keeps suggesting I get highlights.”

“*High* –” I stop myself, pursing my lips when I come dangerously close to letting out a laugh. There’s definitely more than a twinge of amusement to him as he watches me collect myself. “You should do it,” I tell him. “Get the highlights. Some nice icy tips to help shake off the dark cloud that can’t seem to quit you.”

His eyes round in mock-earnestness. “You promise it’ll make me more appealing?”

I snort. “That would require something a little more intensive.”

“You’re dealing some serious blows to my ego today, Holland,” he says, perfectly deadpan again as he studies the display wall of stone surfaces to his right.

“My condolences to your ego. But, strictly speaking, I’m not even a designer. So you can rest easy knowing your streak of badgering them into submission stands strong.”

He frowns. “What does that mean, you aren’t a designer?”

Crap. What in the hell possessed me to give him that kind of ammunition?

I busy myself with the concrete display, ignoring the narrowed eyes in my direction. “It means I’m an assistant. And before you get all in a tizzy about having an assistant lead your project –”

“A *tizzy*?”

“– I’ll have you know that I’ve worked on several large-scale projects before this one. I have years’ worth of qualifications, and I already have experience with your working style –”

He lifts a dubious eyebrow. “And you’re still just an assistant? What the hell’s up with that?”

I sputter my words. Because this – *this* is truly the icing on the prick-ish cake, isn’t it? Pointing out the stagnation in my career as though he doesn’t full-well know he’d had a hand in derailing it.

It’s low, even for him.

“Have I lost you?”

I force calm into my voice, but the glare I give him is a total lost cause.
“What’s your game, here?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“This game you’re playing,” I say, enunciating carefully, as though to make him understand. “You’ve always been combative, but this is different. Antagonizing me for the sake of it. Is it a new hobby you picked up on the West Coast, or are you trying to get something out of it?”

“I have no idea what –”

I scoff. “Look, I know how this goes, okay? You enjoy making people dance over hot coals, like to give people a hard time and frankly, I can’t even fault you for it. You’re paying for me to be here, walk around this showroom with you, do everything I can to make you look good once this restaurant opens. You’re perfectly entitled to challenge me on my recommendations, and to dislike me as a person –”

Theo lifts two lofty eyebrows. “It was a serious question, Holland.”

I lift my chin. “Then here’s your serious answer: I don’t owe you, of all people, a single career-related conversation.”

His mouth opens over a syllable that he quickly discards, clamping his jaw instead. He drops his eyes.

Coward.

I busy myself with the display, hauling plausible counter top options onto the table next to him. Limestone, weathered grey concrete... I sneak a peek at him. He’s on his phone now, scrolling quickly through what looks like a novel of an email. His shoulders are tensed up, pulling towards his ears.

Now’s as good a time as any.

I pretend to study more concrete. “I narrowed down a nursery for the living wall, by the way. We have an appointment there tomorrow. If you can make it.”

He runs a rough hand over his face, knocking his hat a little askew in the process. “I’ll make myself available.”

“It’s out of town, about a four-hour drive. Is that too far?” I raise my brows innocently when he looks up from his phone. “You’re right. It’s far. Forget I mentioned it. I’ll take a ton of videos. It’ll be like you were there.” I gesture at the concrete options. “Here, which do you prefer?”

It’s there again, that subtle flair of amusement deep past the greens of his eyes. And then they cut to the way I’m white-knuckling the small square of concrete in my hands. Dread blooms in the pit of my stomach.

You’re not saying yes to this, I command him silently.

He cocks his head to one side as though reading me, and shrugs obnoxiously. “Four hours is nothing.”

My voice is calm and steady on the outside, but I’ll be honest, it’s taking a real effort not to let the terror seep through. “Eight hours, really. Total. It’s a lot of driving.”

“A quick jaunt.”

“My car only seats one person.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You drive a unicycle?”

I grit my teeth. “It’s eco-friendly.”

He shakes his head, exasperated. “As much as I’d love to tell you what you so clearly want to hear –”

“Come on, now. You can do it. Dig deep.”

He rolls his eyes. “John will want to see it for himself. And frankly, so would I. We’re sinking a decent chunk of the budget into it.”

Relief floods me so quickly I almost laugh. “John!” I exclaim, a little too enthusiastically. How could I forget about John? Business partner John. Sweet, sweet John, a beautiful buffer of a man.

“Try to look happier. I beg you.”

He’s properly irritated. I congratulate myself.

“Alright then. Me, you and John. That’s perfect. I’ll let them know it’ll be three of us coming. Are you driving?”

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Chapter 9

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Theo

Ten minutes.

That's how long it took me to start the car this morning. Because as much as I got a kick out of fucking with Jude yesterday, the prospect of spending the day with her has got me turned around. So on edge you'd think she was the first woman I've ever laid eyes on.

It doesn't help that she's the one person in recent memory who seems capable of putting me in my place, following through on any kind of opinion when I show a hint of disagreement. So, yeah. I've got a bit of a crush.

At least I've figured out how to articulate around her, even if bickering's the only thing I've been able to muster. And even though I can see the smoke come out her ears every time I push her buttons, I don't believe for a second she doesn't enjoy it as much as I do. I see that spark in her eye every time she lands a jab, scores a point.

It's a start.

And because the world's decided to make things even harder, today's the day the heatwave snapped. The sky's greyed over and it's colder than it should be for a day in July. The wind blows so hard my car shudders whenever I idle at a stoplight. Which is saying something, considering the size of this thing.

I find Jude as soon as I pull into a spot in front of the Dime building, leaning her shoulder against the glass wall in the lobby, looking down at her

phone. Did she really wear a dress today, of all days? She must be freezing.

I turn on the heat and flick on the passenger seat warmer for good measure.

It's an incredible dress, to be fair. Red, ties up around her waist, comes in at all the right places and cuts off just at the mid-point of her thighs. I shove my hair off my face, trying to coach myself out of staring.

It's a woman in a dress. Get your shit together.

She still doesn't look up when I get out of the car and come up to the glass. I tap it lightly and watch her face morph into a look of pure irritation when she sees it's me. I don't know which other reaction I expected. She wasn't wrong yesterday, when she called me a prick. I've heard it said enough times to believe it, mostly when people think I'm out of earshot. At least she had the guts to say it to my face.

"What?" She mouths at me through the glass. She lifts her eyebrows, faking a doe-eyed stare that does more to me than it should.

"Let's get this over with," I call through the window.

She takes her sweet time picking her bag up off the floor, sorts through it like she's looking for something. Pulls out this clear lipstick, swipes it on her lips, rolls them together. Throws me an innocent grin.

I'd give up a lot to be able to kiss it off, that smirk and the shiny stuff she just put on.

Instead, I shake my head and stuff my hands into my pockets. The wind picks up just as she comes through the lobby doors and she clamps her arms down against her dress when it starts to lift up. I beeline for the car before I see something I shouldn't and it incapacitates me the rest of the day. Jude stumbles against another gust of wind as she rushes to keep up with my

longer strides. My fists ball in my pockets, against the urge to reach out and steady her.

“Come on,” I lead her around to the passenger side and pull open the door. “Get in the car before you blow away.”

She makes a face. “Uh, *no*. I’ll sit in the back. Or else I’ll be begging you to run us off the road by hour two. John can have the front.”

I brace myself. “John’s not coming.”

Her hand freezes on the back seat door. “Yes, he is,” she says, eyebrows pulling together. “You said so.”

“And now I say he’s not. He called this morning to cancel.”

She stares at me, mouth gaping. There’s a sharp twist in my gut at the thought that she might talk herself out of going. I really did have my heart set on this, a whole day of her.

Quickly, I stuff back my panic and play the part. Roll my eyes at her. Indicate the passenger seat. “Get in.”

“We should reschedule – it’s not right seeing it without John. Like you said, it’s a big chunk of the budget.”

She makes to walk around me but I stick an arm in her way, cutting her off. “Get in the car, Holland. I moved a day’s worth of meetings for this. We’re going.”

Please, I add silently.

The wind blows heavy and she shivers. Eyes wide, she glances between me, the inside of my car and her office building, like she’s sorting through her options.

“Fine. We’ll go,” she mumbles, shoulders slumped. “Only because I’m due for a project update with Diana on Monday.”

And thank god for that.

“How do you expect me to get into this monster truck, anyway? Why does it sit so high?”

She plants on the footstep and completely undershoots the landing with her other foot, stumbling backwards. I can't help it this time. My arms shoot out to catch her at the waist, holding her just for a second. Just long enough to hoist her upright onto the footstep. But I may as well have gripped a hot pan with bare skin.

“Hey!” She swats a hand behind her back even though mine are long gone.

“Sorry. Forgot the step ladder at home.”

“You *cannot* be serious with the short jokes.”

She slides into the seat and I shut the door, buckling myself into the driver's seat a second later and getting us on the road.

“Who said it's a joke? You're short. You and your chicken legs.”

Jude smooths down her dress. “You've been admiring my legs. It's all coming together, now.”

Shit. “What, exactly?”

She bats her eyelashes and pouts her mouth at me. And even though I know she's just fucking with me, my stomach twists. This girl is lethal. Any more of that and I'll crash us into the median barrier.

“*You* canceled on John,” she continues. “To have my chicken legs to yourself.”

I punch at the touchscreen on the dash, filling the car with John's muffled voice.

“Hey Theo, it's John. I'm gonna have to cancel this morning. My kid's come down with something and Kelly can't get out of work. Go without me, I don't want to hold this up. Fill me in when you get back. Cheers.”

“Feel better?”

Truth is, I couldn't be happier about having her so-called chicken legs to myself. But I get an even bigger kick out of that sour look she throws me and the pink stain spreading over her cheeks. Barely anything these days thrills me as much as getting a rise out of her.

That's got to be a bit sad, doesn't it?

“I still don't buy it,” Jude mutters as she turns to stare out the window.

We get onto the freeway, picking up speed with a roar of the engine. After a while I realize we're sitting in dead silence. I consider putting on some music, but I have no idea what she likes to listen to so I keep my hands on the wheel instead. Trying to figure out how to ask without sounding desperate to know everything there is about her.

While you're at it, won't you tell me the thing you're most afraid of and the likelihood you'd ever let me touch you?

Fuck. Just ask, you headcase. It's music.

I look over to find her eyes already on me. She blinks away to the red hatchback in front of us the second she sees me notice.

“Who's admiring who, now?”

“I was trying to figure out how you made it out of the house without noticing the coffee dribble down your shirt.”

Shit. That just goes to show what a total mess I was on my way to pick her up – but the white t-shirt I've got on under my plaid flannel is pristine. She works hard to kill the twitch in her mouth. That little smart-ass.

“Question for you.”

“Pass.”

I ask anyway: “How'd you get your glowing opinion of me?”

In my peripheral vision I see her tear away from the hatchback and narrow her eyes at me. “Is that some kind of trap?”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyebrows curve. “I mean, are you really asking? Or are you looking for another way to get me kicked off this project?”

The words drop kick my stomach out of my body.

We got here sooner than I thought we would. Frankly, I wasn’t sure she’d ever call me out on it. I’ve been an ass more than a few times in my career – this job has a knack for ripping out your soul and replacing it with rock hard coal – but no one’s ever actually had the guts to call me on it.

I can feel heat creep up my neck. A quick look at Jude shows she’s staring at me utterly calm, like she’s just asked me for the weather. But her mouth’s set in a hard line that tells me she’s pissed and expects me to atone for my sins, now that I’ve opened the box.

Which I can’t do without admitting I go cross-eyed just looking at her.

Which I can’t do without disgusting her, considering she hates me.

“If you’re wondering what I’m referring to –”

“I know what you’re referring to.” My voice comes out harder than I mean it to.

I tear my eye from the road to see her staring at her hands now and *fuck*. Did her chin just quiver? She’s on the verge of tears and my stomach clenches so painfully I feel bile rise up my throat.

“Can you at least tell me why?” Her voice is so suddenly small I want to throw myself in front of a bucking bull and beg it to run me down. “Because if this was about what I did at Nivoli’s... I meant what I said at the walk-through. I’m sorry for what I said to your business partner. But it’s been years. How long do I have to keep paying for it?”

I frown as the hatchback slows down in front of us, signal left and pass it. It clicks now, why she apologized during the walk-through. My brain had been too busy short circuiting to make sense of it at the time. She thinks I'd been pissed she'd told off my business partner.

If only she knew what that night meant to me.

For the better part of my life, I've been a rock for Mom and Pen. Had this responsibility for them. Their well being, but their happiness too. It's what drove me for years, through culinary school and the bullshit I dealt with climbing the ranks after that. The dark underside of this career that no one tells you about, the parts not glamorous enough to broadcast on TV: the shitty grunt work, even worse pay and long hours only sudden death could get you out of. The coked-up, sociopathic bosses and ranting verbal abuse I'd been subjected to more times than I can remember. I'd once watched, fucking horrified, as a Head Chef launched a butcher knife at one of the other line cooks.

With Mom and Pen on my mind, I kept my mouth shut, head down, took the shit and saw the death of a social life that had already been a joke to begin with. What kept me going was knowing that, eventually, I would make life better for the three of us. Would repay Mom for how hard she worked for us after my father left.

And that sense of responsibility extended to my staff when they put me in charge of my first kitchen, even worse when I opened the restaurants and had teams of my own to look after. An obligation to suck it up and get it right. Do whatever needs doing for the restaurants, my team, my family, no matter how many feathers I ruffle.

Minus the coke and flying butcher knives.

Two weeks ago, after that walk-through, Jude was just a hurdle to get past. Just another feather to ruffle on my way to making sure I keep my head on long enough to finish the project.

But that night at Nivoli's, watching her tear down that hallway and light that asshole on fire the way I couldn't without jeopardizing my business, it meant the world to me. Felt like having someone in my corner. Backing me without ever being asked to, because god knows I'm shit at asking for help when I need it, anyway. That comes with the territory of having to become an adult at ten years old.

How do I tell Jude all that, without letting her in on the other part of it? That it also happened to be the night I lost my head for her. Made me want to sink to my knees and beg her to let me return the favor, any way she wanted. And I might have, too, if my father hadn't come back to blow up my life only a couple days later.

I've well and truly fucked myself, haven't I? Tried to put her at arm's length only to give her a solid reason to hate me. I killed any shot I could have had with her, before even realizing I *did* want a proper shot with her. The best I can do now is launch some kind of damage control mission.

Jude's turned around in her seat with her forehead pressed up against the window. We've been quiet for a good twenty minutes as I stewed in the mess of my reality.

"Did it get you in trouble? Me calling Diana?"

I only know she's frowning from her reflection in the glass. "Is that a serious question? A client asked my boss to have me removed from their project. The first project I've ever been allowed to run on my own. And it was *you* of all people – you're not exactly a nobody in the business. Of course, it got me in trouble."

Fuck. Nausea courses through me. I am a complete and total fucking prick.

“Well, that’s – that’s not what I intended.” The words are hollow to my own ears.

She turns in her seat and I flinch even without seeing the look on her face. “What *did* you intend?”

Another question I can’t answer. I twist my fists around the steering wheel. I told Diana I couldn’t work with her, and I mean it exactly how I said it. Stupidly, it didn’t occur to me that her boss would think *she* was the problem here, and not me.

I am an absolute. Fucking. Prick.

She’s still watching me, refusing to bail me out.

“I thought, you know, that we probably weren’t the right fit, working together.”

“But *why*? I do good work. I’ve never had a problem with a single client!”

“Look, it was an error in judgment. I did what I thought I needed to do at the time. And you’re still on the project. Is there even a problem here?”

Every word of that was bullshit, and I wait for the resulting onslaught. Out of the corner of my eye I see her square her shoulders, open her mouth... and close it again. I steal a glance and see she’s staring at her hands, this time with a frown.

“Alright, fine,” she says finally, looking at me steadily. “As much as I hate to agree with you, we really *aren’t* a good fit. You’ve got a problem with me and, honestly? I’m not a fan of yours, either. But I need this project to go well and I’m willing to set aside my issues for the sake of it. Just let me do my job, okay? Let’s finish this project, and go our separate ways.”

I don't... Shit, I don't want that. The idea of going our separate ways feels like seeing the world in color for the first time, only to blink it away the next second. I *like* having my ass handed to me when I earn it. I like the way she doesn't scramble to kiss my ass just because someone, somewhere decided I was a higher-than-average chef. I like those petulant looks she gives me, the smirk when she knows she's landed a jab.

But I still feel her eyes on me, expecting an answer. Imploring me to let this one-sided feud go. And what can I say, other than:

"Consider it done."

We sit in painful silence for a while after that, until eventually I veer the car towards a pit stop off the side of the freeway.

"I need to stretch my legs," I mumble. She doesn't look at me as I park the car and hand her my keys.

Outside, the violent wind fills my lungs and I let it punish me for a while, pacing up and down in front of the café. My phone tells me we're somehow already halfway to the nursery. I sink down onto a bench. Get up again when I can't get my leg to stop shaking.

She's a saint for wanting anything to do with me, after what I did. I barely want anything to do with myself, anymore. At this point, I'd consider it fair game if she used my keys to drive off without me.

Then it hits me. I didn't even fucking apologize. I let out a groan, ignoring the startled look from an elderly man walking by. When the hell did I become this person? What is *wrong* with me?

I don't know if I can live with myself, if I can't find a way to make this up to her.

~

We drive another twenty minutes before I manage to break the silence.

“There’s a coffee there for you. If you want it.”

I know she noticed both cups when I came back into the car with them. But they sat there untouched because I couldn’t come up with the words to extend this inadequate peace offering.

When she doesn’t make a move for her cup, I add: “I promise I didn’t spit in it. Oh and –” I dip my hand into a compartment on the door and hand her a brown paper bag. “I don’t know how you take it. It’s a bit of everything.”

She frowns at the bag. “Did they sell you a lobotomy too?”

“Gave myself one with a rusty nail I found in a back alley.” I attempt a smile, but smiling at her when I’m used to playing up a scowl feels so foreign that it falters halfway there. “Look, Jude. I’m very sorry. For what I did.”

Even with my eyes on the road, I know she watches me a long time. So long my ears start to burn. When, finally, she flips off one of the coffee lids and tips in a packet of sugar, I let out a small breath.

“Fine. It’s fine. It’s...” She runs the rim of her cup back and forth along her lips. It looks completely subconscious, like it’s helping her think or something. But then she parts her lips and licks at a trail of coffee that’s spilled out from the side, and fucking hell she’s got the perfect mouth. Plump and soft, with the top lip a bit fuller than the bottom –

“What are you – *look out!*”

Shit. By the time my eyes are back on the road we’ve almost drifted into the next lane. I swing us back so abruptly Jude jostles in her seat.

“Are you trying to kill me?” She cries, holding her coffee out so that it doesn’t spill all over her. “Did we not just call a truce?”

“Sorry! Sorry. I don’t – sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s try to get through a minute without requiring an apology, shall we?” Jude dabs a napkin down her leg and tosses it into her empty cup holder. “In fact, why don’t we stop talking altogether. It’s probably safer.”

And she jabs at the car’s touchscreen before I can stop her. It searches for something on Bluetooth for a second, and I remember too late how loud I’d had the music on my way to pick her up this morning. Michael Sembello erupts through the speakers.

“He’s a maniac, maniac...”

She chokes on her coffee. I dart out to turn it down.

“Wow, even your car thinks so. That’s brilliant.” She pats the dash, giving a little laugh. “Good car.”

“You’re hysterical,” I deadpan. But the breathy sound of her laugh lifts whatever tension I had left in my body. I don’t know what I did to deserve hearing that laugh. But I want it again, running in my ears on an endless loop.

I hit another button and the track changes. Take on Me starts blaring around us.

Jude swats my hand away from the skip button. “Is this your playlist? Really? I had you pegged for a death metal kinda guy. Death grind when you’re feeling chipper.”

“Joke’s on you. I never feel chipper.”

“At least you can self-reflect.”

She bobs her head along with the music, sipping her coffee. With my eyes on the road, I pick up the other cup and wince on a bitter sip, even though I’ve been drinking it black since Mom let me have my first coffee.

We drive for a few seconds before I realize she's humming with the music without paying me any attention. Humming louder and louder, until the chorus kicks in and she sings along full out. Her voice cracks on the high note and I'm glad she's facing away because I don't manage to kill the grin before it properly takes over my face. She laughs to herself, this light, self-deprecating thing, and something weird happens in my chest. It goes all tight, sizzles in the nicest way.

"Voice of an angel," I say over the music. I duck my head and pretend to look up at the sky. "I think the clouds just parted, calling you home."

"I didn't think your kind could see heaven," she says, sipping her coffee with a glance in my direction. "I'm so used to taking the subway everywhere, I forgot how therapeutic it is to sing in the car," she tells me as the song trails back towards the chorus. She shifts in her seat. "You might consider trying it. I've never met someone so committed to brooding."

I grimace. "You want me to *sing*? You have to be joking –"

"Come on. One note and our beef is squashed. I'll call you Mr. Jordan and tell you how clever you are at least six times today. No – seven."

"That's deranged –"

"I'll laugh at all your bad jokes. That's asking a lot, too. I'll be laughing half the day."

"I'm not interested in bullshit –"

Jude kicks off her sneakers and tucks a foot up under her hip. "Fine. Sing me one line and I'll tell you what an incessant pain in the ass you are. How every day I pray a wormhole swallows me up or swallows *you* up, so we can be done with each other once and for all. You or me, doesn't matter. As long as it sucks one of us in, I'm golden. Come on – don't leave me hanging."

She brandishes her coffee cup in the air and starts belting out the chorus. And it's there again. That crazy pull to give her whatever she wants. She could ask me to charter a jet just to taste the water in Tahiti and I'd drop into a curtsy before doing it. *Hop on, sweetheart.*

So I let it happen, knowing I'll hate myself for it later. Knowing it'll be worth it, if I manage to wrangle another laugh out of her. Jude's singing cuts off on that last, final note and she whips around with her mouth gaping and eyes wide.

"Did you just...?"

I roll my eyes. Turn back to the road like it never happened.

And she laughs. It's a drawn-out gurgle at first, deepening until she emits no sound at all. She's a mime, doubled over, clutching her stomach. And I bank on the intensity of her laugh to cave in to the grin begging for release without her seeing.

Fuck, that laugh. I could be on fire from head to toe and it would soothe my skin.

Jude wipes tears of laughter with shaking fingers. "Oh my god," she says, breathless. "I can't believe that just happened. I think Aha might bring peace to the Middle East."

"Do me a favor," I tell her between sips of coffee. "When your wormhole shows up, send it my way."

Chapter 10

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Jude

The sky is dark and menacing rain by the time we arrive.

If I said Marshall and Marshall Nursery was a small, family-run business, no one would believe me. We drive into the country and down a mile-long, tree-lined gravel road, and just when I decide we made a wrong turn and that there couldn't possibly be any signs of human life up ahead, the trees give way to vast acres of lusciously green land.

There's a smallish, sweet-looking cottage up on the left, with yellow siding and jewel-toned green shutters, and a slightly weathered but gorgeous wrap-around porch out front. It sits in the shadow of two colossal greenhouses a little further back, dewy windows picking up the threatening grey of the sky.

The wind sweeps my dress the second I leave the car, and I grip it before it flies all the way up. I'm grateful I had the good sense to wear sneakers, at least. The dark fabric is already picking up dirt as we make our way towards the greenhouses. Theo's wearing stylishly beat-up Chuck Taylors, white toes scuffed, laces lived in, tan fabric washed out.

"We're meeting with Peter Marshall, presumably of Marshall and Marshall fame," I tell Theo, who's walking half a step behind me despite the length of his legs. I'm having to raise my voice a little, so it picks up over the wind. Another great gust accosts us, and I shiver like I've been electrocuted.

"Hey."

There's a nudge on my arm and he thrusts some plaid fabric at me. I stop in my tracks so abruptly he passes me by a few strides before stopping too.

"What is this?" I hold it out at arm's length.

"It's a shirt with sleeves. You put it on when you're cold."

And when I notice he's now only standing in a t-shirt, goosebumps up his arms visible even from here, I understand where it's come from.

"Why are you giving this to me?"

Theo gives an exaggerated shrug and shoves his hands in his pockets. "Consider it part of the apology tour. Not a big deal."

I've never been one to hold grudges past their expiry date. But even after his apology and the tentative conversation he seemed determined to keep up for the rest of the car ride, I can't bring myself to trust this man – or readily serve him up gracious smiles with a side of apple pie. Fool me three times, and all that.

Besides, annoying him is just too much fun to give up.

I hold the button-down up by the shoulders, turning it around in my hands. "Will my skin melt off if I put it on?"

"Don't make it weird, Holland."

"Oh, it's far too late for that." I throw the shirt over my shoulders, and it swallows me up so badly I have to roll the sleeves three times to free my hands. It smells faintly like him, a woodsy, musky scent that I don't think I properly registered until now. I spread out my arms. "Well? How do I look?"

For a moment, Theo's eyes flare with something that – if I didn't know better – might look like quiet possession. But he blinks it away the next. "You look like a toddler. It's practically at your ankles."

He turns away so quickly he doesn't catch me flipping him off.

"I have no idea which greenhouse it is, by the way," I say when I catch up. "Let's try the one on the right." Theo pushes the door open and ushers me in ahead.

In a second, I'm transported to the southern tropics. It's hot and sticky and humid, and I'm immediately grateful I'd thrown my hair into a bun before it got the chance to expand into a frizzy, unmanageable bush. The greenhouse is filled to the brim. Rows and rows of worktables entirely covered in potted flowers, small trees and greenery. There are dozens of hanging twine pots carrying ferns, philodendrons and ivy, spilling from the sky like emerald waterfalls. We're surrounded by the most delicious green rainbow.

I lead Theo in a little deeper. It smells of damp dirt and wet leaves, like a rainy day late in the spring, and it reminds me so much of growing up with my mom in her garden that goosebumps prickle up my arms. It's the kind of smell I wish I could bottle and douse myself with.

"Heads up!" A voice calls out at us though I hadn't noticed anyone around, and a second later a mist erupts from above, raining onto the indoor oasis. The mist is fine and practically evaporates when it meets the air, but after a moment it manages to dampen my hair and leave small droplets hanging from my lashes.

"Do you think this is them telling us to leave?" The top layer of Theo's hair is shiny and he scrapes back ringlets that have plastered wetly onto his forehead.

The mist quits as suddenly as it started and I see a man sauntering towards us. "Sorry about that, folks. Didn't expect you for another few

minutes. Are you Jude? The name's Peter." He shakes my hand. Peter has a jovial, sun beaten face, with shoulder length hair streaked with grey.

"Pleasure to meet you." I smooth back my hair, take his calloused hand in mine. "I'd like to introduce you to my client, Theo Jordan."

Peter takes Theo's hand. "Ah! You're the one cutting the cheques. I like you already. Follow me." He turns on his heel, taking off down a row of plants. "Any trouble finding us?"

I'm about to answer but Theo beats me to it. "No, it was easy enough. It's a great place you have, here. Do you own it?"

"Yes sir!" Peter tells him. "Started this place with my dad when I was eighteen. Been here ever since."

We pass a break in work benches where bags of soil are stacked up taller than me.

"Is that his home out front?" Theo asks. He sounds genuinely interested and I'm floored at how perfectly pleasant he sounds.

"Nah, he passed away a few years back."

"I'm sorry to hear that," says Theo, and I mumble the same.

Peter waves a hand. "Ah, it's alright. That's life, you know. Me and my old lady are living there now. Makes it a lot easier to manage the land. Here we are."

We come to the end of the row and he rounds a large table clad with potted succulents, varying in size, height and greens.

"Your living walls. As you can see, we prepared a couple options for you folks." With a grunt, Peter hauls two three-foot-by-three-foot boards onto the table. They're covered in succulents, pale and emerald greens, and reddish purples, interspersed with dark moss.

I run a finger across one of them, feeling the tight, rubbery petals and spongy moss. Diana was right. Pictures wouldn't have done this justice.

"How do these work, exactly?" Theo asks, tugging at one of the plants.

Peter lifts one of the boards so it sits vertically on the table top. "Here – if you look close, you see we have them stacked in small pots in there, and there's wire holding it all in place. See, there? They grow slow, so this look might last you a few years. We've got a couple of partners in the city who can service it for you."

"And we can customize the frame?" I ask. "Something dark, so it blends into the wall?"

Peter nods and to Theo he says: "So, what do you think? Got a preference between the two?"

"Looks alright to me." He turns to me expectantly.

It's so reminiscent of how we'd worked on Nivoli's, with Theo calling for my opinion as though mine was the only one he trusted. Whatever his problems are with me, it feels damn good to be respected by someone like him. But there's a small lump in my throat, warning me not to rock the boat just as things are starting to look up between us.

So, I shrug. "They're both great."

Theo frowns. "Is this what you pictured?"

"Yup," I double down, avoiding his eye. "They're beautiful. Which do you like?"

"Holland," he says sharply.

"What?" I fiddle with the leaf of a succulent.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" I raise my brows and give Peter an awkward laugh. He looks back and forth between us, unsure of where this is going

and not looking entirely convinced he wants to find out.

“Hey.”

It’s all Theo says, sounding so annoyed I finally feel obligated to face him.

“If you have an opinion, give it. And don’t give me any of this ‘you’re the client’ bullshit. *Holland*,” he pushes again when I don’t open my mouth. “Speak the hell up.”

“Alright, fine!” I exclaim, and Peter gives a start. “There’s too much moss.”

Theo tips his head to one side, eyeing the boards.

Peter seems like he’s about five steps behind. He looks from me to Theo, back to me again. He blinks. “Moss?”

“Yes, the moss. Do you see, how it kind of undercuts the design? It takes over the eye.”

“So, nix the moss? All of it?” Theo asks. “Isn’t the point to mimic nature? Water meets land, and all that other tree-hugger crap you sold me?”

Prick.

“Not at the expense of design,” I bite back. “Nobody likes moss. Everyone loves succulents.”

“Do they?”

“They’re clean and minimalistic. And they brighten a room. Let me guess: you’re the only living thing in your home. Or, wait – you live down with the mole people, don’t you?”

“No mole people, and I have some firewood. Does that count?”

“Dead things don’t count. So, I guess –”

“That counts me out, too?”

He rubs his mouth, and I swear it's an attempt to fight off a laugh. I can see it permeate his eyes – they brighten and crinkle a little at the corners and *ugh*. It's so irritatingly charming, when he slips into that easy self-deprecation.

I tear my eyes away from the faint hint of dimples poking from his cheeks as he presses his lips together. Because you have *got* to be kidding me. *Dimples?*

No. Absolutely not.

“My apologies,” I tell Peter. “Your samples are beautiful. If we can just swap out the moss on the first design with some more aeonium, it'll be perfect.”

Peter glances uncertainly at Theo, who shrugs. “Picky. What can you do?”

~

He could not get rid of us faster.

After talking measurements, payment and installation, Peter ushers us out but not before telling us to take a tour of the gardens behind the greenhouses.

It feels twice as cold outside after standing in a tropical jungle, and I'm thankful for the extra warmth from Theo's shirt. He starts back towards his car, but I linger by the back path. The thing is, I can never resist a garden, after growing up knees-deep in soil.

“Did your legs stop working?” Theo calls from several steps away.

I shake my head, indicating the path. “Go. I'll be quick.”

But he catches up with a look like he's not sure what he's exactly in for. Wordlessly we walk down the path towards a vine-wrapped iron gate, flanked by high, perfectly trimmed hedges.

“You don’t have to come,” I tell him. “Really.”

He gives me that infamous eye roll and swings open the gate for me. The gravel transforms into a beautiful path, perfectly trimmed green grass lining each stepping stone. There are rose bushes in every color imaginable, sunshine yellow, brilliant blue, dreamy mauve. There’s a great big willow tree at the far end, its branches swaying over a pond with a flowing waterfall. Every inch of it is rich with life, the floral smell so thick in the air I wouldn’t be surprised to see scent diffusers tucked away in the hedges.

I swoop down to smell a hyacinth, brushing its petals with my forefinger. Theo is silent, studying his surroundings. I’m about to tell him again that he doesn’t have to wait for me, when thunder erupts above us.

I stare up at the sky. “That doesn’t look good,” I say, loud enough for him to hear over the wind, but my voice is overtaken by another thunderous clap.

“We should go.” He’s almost shouting now, and I’m slapped in the arm by a flutter of rose petals blowing off a bush. “Come on.”

He ushers me ahead of him with a light hand at my back as I totter against the wind, back towards the wrought iron gate.

Above us, a clap of thunder, a flash of lightning, silence again.

And the sky makes do with its threat at last, opening up, a drop here, a drop there, and suddenly torrential downpour hits and we’re instantly drenched.

Chapter 11

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Jude

“Oh my god!” I squeal, but the rain is so loud around us I don’t even hear myself.

We take off running. Back up the garden path, through the gate and past the greenhouses. Theo beats me into the car but only by a second, and we sit staring at each other in shocked silence.

He’s wet from head to toe, white t-shirt plastered to his broad shoulders and gripping the lean muscles over his torso. His hair is a mess of perfectly formed, overgrown curls dripping rainwater down his face and clumping together his lashes. I’m panting heavily from our mad dash to the car, but the sprint seems to have barely fazed him. He takes me in a little wide-eyed, and I become vaguely aware of the way my dress is stuck to my body and the rush of raindrops running down my neck from my soaking hair. My eyes catch on the droplet rolling a path down the slope of his nose.

What is it about the rain that makes you want to tear someone’s clothes off?

I give a violent shiver, and I’m not exactly sure whether it’s from cold or the intensity of his gaze. Theo interprets it as cold, though. He snaps out of it and turns on the car, blasting the heat and flicking all the vents in my direction. I mumble a thanks rendered inaudible by the rain pummeling the car, and I hold my fingers up to regain some warmth.

I jump at a knock on the passenger window.

It's Peter, huddled under a large umbrella that looks about a minute away from caving onto his head under the heavy rain.

"Hey folks – are you taking the 419 back into the city?" He shouts into the car and we nod. "They just shut it down on this end because of flooding. It's all over the news. Might want to try Road 6 North. But I have to warn you, it's unpaved for a few miles. Don't know how far you'll get and I doubt you'd get a tow truck out any time soon."

He raises a hand in farewell and dashes back to his cottage, like the Ghost of Christmas Future casually breaking the news you're headed for your grave only to disappear into thin air and leave you to it.

I shut the window and dive into my purse.

Theo beats me to it. "This says the rain won't let up until about midnight." He looks up from his phone. "Should we chance it?"

"How good a driver are you?"

He buckles himself in. "We're about to find out."

We pull onto the long driveway out of the nursery, the rain so thick against the windshield I can't see the trees on either side of us. The wipers are flicking back and forth so fast I think they're about to fly off. Theo's driving at a snail's pace, but still I'm gripping the armrest as if my life depends on it.

"How bad do you want to get home tonight?" He asks me without a look, eyes glued carefully on a road he can't see.

"Not bad enough to end up in a ditch."

He eases the car to a stop and punches at his phone again. The rain has weighed down my bun so severely it's pulling at my scalp. I unwrap the tie and shake out my hair, water spraying all over the cabin and hitting Theo in the face.

“Oops. Sorry.”

He doesn’t look up. “Not like I can get much wetter. Okay, there’s a hotel in a town about twelve miles away. I think it’s the best we can do.”

The windows are waterfalls.

“Will we make it twelve miles?”

He puts the car in drive. “Let’s see.”

~

We make the twelve-mile drive in about forty-five minutes, driving several paces under the speed limit and passing only a handful of cars along the way.

The weatherman wasn’t lying. The rain hasn’t let up one bit as we park the car and run for the front doors, slip sliding a little as we hit the waxy tiles in the lobby.

This hotel is what you’d expect from a town out in the country. It’s got this weird, patched up Frankenstein look to it, with a newer paint job and updated lounge furniture. But the check-in desk still has that dark plywood paneling from the eighties and the floors are old pebbled tile I haven’t seen since my high school graduation. Off in the corner, there’s a strange brass sculpture of a bull bucking its hind legs. The space is dead silent save for the sounds of rain and thunder outside.

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” I mutter, taking in the beamed, vaulted ceiling.

Unprompted, a man dressed in an ancient maroon suit emerges from a door behind the check-in desk.

“Here’s Johnny,” Theo says quietly.

Our eyes clash, his amused when he sees the reluctant enjoyment in mine. We’re bouncing off movie quotes together. This is... weird.

It's freaking weird.

We drip pools of rainwater at the check-in desk, watching the clerk clap at his keyboard for a long moment. "Unfortunately, the only rooms we have available are spread out. Rooms 302 and 426."

There's no way this place only has two vacancies. I decide its rooms must be occupied by ghosts.

"Not a problem," Theo says smoothly, and the man gives us an odd look before typing away at his computer.

I look over to Theo trying to figure out what that look was about, and realize I'm standing a little too close to him in my attempt to absorb extra body heat. I take a step back.

"And how will you be paying?"

Theo slides a card across the counter.

I reach into my purse. "I should get my own –"

He shakes his head. The clerk collects the credit card, typing and swiping for another minute. At last, he raises two key cards. Theo grabs the one closest to him. I grab the other.

"The restaurant remains open for dinner until eleven o'clock. You can find it through the hall to my left," the man gestures the way like a flight attendant, flashing his fingers this way and that. "Elevators are just past the door to your right. And, if I may, our gift shop offers a few clothing options. You can find it by the elevators. I ask that you kindly do not soak through our dining room chairs. Please, do call down if you need anything at all."

I peek at Theo out of the corner of my eye. His shoulders are shaking, suppressing a laugh.

~

Room 302 is pitch black when the door swings shut.

I feel around, my back flat to the door in a fruitless search for a light switch until a flash of lightning through the curtains illuminates a floor lamp a few feet away. The room is covered floor to ceiling in forest green wallpaper, with thick, worn floral carpet covering the floor. It smells damp and uninhabited. I go around turning on every single lamp, and flick on the fluorescent light in the bathroom. I recoil violently when I catch myself in the mirror.

My cheeks are pink with cold, and there's a layer of mascara that's trailed down under my eyes. Hair is a complete mess, wet in the middle while the ends have started to frizz up. My dress is still so soaked it's several shades darker than its original red making my skin look pale and sickly underneath.

I look like The Joker.

I load up the toothbrush I picked up at the gift shop and turn on the shower, checking my phone as I scrub my teeth.

JENNA: *Anyone dead yet?*

ME: *Alive, but barely. We had it out in the car.*

ME: *They shut down the 419. You should see the hotel where we're staying. Actually had to check under the bed for a body.*

I peel off my dress and jump in the shower, giving a fierce shiver as the hot water hits my skin, and stand there for a few minutes just regaining warmth before running shampoo through my hair. It smells like lavender, and I inhale it deeply wondering if Theo's doing the same in his room. And then I realize I'm thinking of Theo Jordan in the shower, and it sours my taste buds and I make myself stop so I don't throw up.

I come out twenty minutes later, skin beaten red from the scalding hot water, just as my phone lights up.

JENNA: *You're still stuck with him??*

JENNA: *I'm sorry. I laughed. Like, a really, really big laugh.*

JENNA: *With very bad timing. The guy I'm with stripped off his pants while I was reading this.*

ME: *Besides the laugh, how is he not kicking you out for a) checking texts while he got naked and b) responding to texts while he got naked?*

JENNA: *I'm THAT good, honey.*

JENNA: *Now YOU? You must be very very bad to deserve the kind of karma you're getting.*

JENNA: *Don't do anything I wouldn't do.*

ME: *That's not saying much, Jenna.*

~

I tread noiselessly across the hotel lobby.

Noiselessly, because I was on my way out the door when I realized my socks and sneakers were still soaked right through. I sat there debating whether or not to wear them anyway before sticking them in front of the wall heater and going out barefoot, deciding dirty feet are the least of my problems while the prospect of a dinner with Theo Jordan hangs over my head.

I pause for a moment, fishing the tiny red boy shorts out from my butt cheeks. They were the only option of bottoms in my size in that gift shop, which was stocked with such outdated magazines that for a moment I second-guessed whether I hallucinated Michael Jackson's passing in 2009. The shorts ride up so high it looks like I'm just wearing an oversized neon yellow t-shirt out and about.

I'm shocked to see a few tables occupied when I cross into the restaurant. It's a single, dim room lined with rickety tables and worn-out

rattan chairs. I dodge past a suspicious stain on the carpet, spotting Theo huddled over his phone in the far back, wearing his gift-shop outfit of a lime green t-shirt and unfortunate cargo shorts. I notice he's elected to go barefoot, too. It helps settle my nerves.

"Sorry I'm late," I tell him, dropping down in the opposite chair. He sits up and the words Live, Laugh, Love flash obnoxiously from the front of his shirt. "Jesus. Your top glows in the dark. People are staring."

An elderly couple to my left averts their eyes as I shoot them a smile.

He pulls a face. "Speak for yourself. You're scorching my eyeballs."

"Oh, but that's perfect. Remind me to wear this whenever I see you." I flip open the worn menu in front of me. "Did you order? Anything good?"

He drops his phone onto the table and does the same. "I'd say the liver and onions is the highlight, which tells you everything you need to know."

I grimace just as a server materializes at our table and I'm taken aback to see she's younger, maybe in her early twenties. She slips a little coiled notebook from her apron.

"Can I get a drink started for you?" She's angled herself entirely towards Theo, smiling at him sweetly, and I suspect she'd been eyeing him for a while from across the restaurant.

To his credit, he doesn't seem to have noticed. He nods at me. "What would you like?"

The server turns to me reluctantly. Her eyes narrow, sizing me up. I know what she's seeing. I look like a bumpkin next to her and her perfect skinny jeans. "Uh... A whiskey sour. And the biggest plate of fries you're allowed to give us."

Theo snaps his menu shut. "Good idea. And I'll have whatever beer you have back there."

He tips his head towards the bar, a mini carbon copy of the check-in desk with its plywood panels, except it's backlit in a reddish color that bounces sinisterly off the mirror hanging behind it.

"Are the fries to share?" The server asks Theo.

"Yes."

She gives me a sour look before leaving with our menus. Theo's phone lights up and a text alert from MOM flashes.

"Sorry, one sec. She missed my call earlier," he mutters, immediately picking up his phone. I watch him type away, noticing the corner of his mouth curve up a fraction as he goes, then drop all the way down again.

I clasp my hands on the table. "Look, I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. You having a mom comes as a shock. Weren't you that kid who lived in the jungle a while back, raised by apes and surviving on crickets and worms until you re-entered civilization?"

"No, that was my cousin Alby," he says, not missing a beat. He sets down his phone again. "I was raised by lions in the Sahara, and I survived on cactus water and beetles."

He smirks when he sees me stuffing back a traitorous smile. I do have to hand it to him. Despite his well-earned reputation for being rigid and unforgiving, the guy knows how to take a ribbing.

Our server reappears, unceremoniously dropping my drink in front of me before placing a pale-yellow beer in front of Theo with a gracious smile and a toss of her hair.

"Your fries will be out in a minute," she tells Theo. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I think she's unbuttoned her shirt a little since she took our order. She leans ever so slightly forward and I see the edge of a lacy bra poke through.

I make a face she can't see, because in this instant I do not exist.

I can't help but feel a little insulted. Somewhere between seeing Theo and sizing me up, she's decided we couldn't possibly be *together* together. Which we're not, obviously. But is he really *that* far out of my league? I mean, sure, he's blisteringly attractive. And yeah, he's somehow managed to make that tourist trap t-shirt look like something I want to wrap around myself. But I have my own merits, surely?

Not that I care. At all.

It's only the principle of it.

I toss my hair over my shoulder just to show her I can. The smell of lavender wafts over the table.

"Thanks," Theo says absently, frowning in my direction.

The server throws me a dirty look as though blaming me for the entire affair, before walking off in a definite huff.

"You do realize you were just offered a warm bed mate," I tell him, gathering my glass. "We could each probably use one in this place. Someone to stand watch while we sleep."

Theo pulls his pint closer, pressing finger marks in the condensation. "By all means, if you want to make a play for a bed mate, go for it. I'm sure you saw the up and down the guy at the bar gave you when you walked in."

"I did not." I turn to the bar, where a man with a mop of auburn hair watches our server as she walks by. "Hey, he's kind of cute. Consider me flattered."

Theo's eye flick up over the rim of his pint, giving the man a once over. "Cute? Is that what you go for?"

"Huh?"

"Your food."

Our server, my saint and savior, chooses this moment to reappear with a heaping pile of fries. She doesn't linger this time but has blessedly done enough to absolve me of an answer to the question. There's got to be some reason he's asking but I spend the next moment sweeping the entire thing under the rug, and shoveling a couple of fries in my mouth. I'm not touching that one with a ten-foot pole.

Speaking of ten-foot poles, something has lodged itself up Theo's butt sometime in the last thirty seconds. He dumps a bunch of ketchup on his side of the plate with a touch too much force, and some sauce backsplashes onto the table. We eat silently for a while, making next to no eye contact until the silence starts to feel unbearable.

I clear my throat. "So. Your mom must be happy to have you back in town. Are you close?"

He doesn't look up from the pile of fries. "Yes."

I wait a beat to see if he'll add anything. He doesn't.

"Okay, I'll go again. Did you enjoy living out west?"

He shrugs, jaw set.

"Alright, you're going to have to work with me here. Give me something. A syllable, a soliloquy. Anything. *Theo*."

He jolts a little at the sound of his name, clearing his throat a little sheepishly. "Sorry. Yeah. The West Coast was fine. I didn't like being away."

Okay. Not great, but I can work with it. "Do you have a big family?"

"No." He says it with finality, but I sigh and so he adds: "It's a touchy subject. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Fair enough. I know a little about that."

I swallow more fries, picking out all the crispy ones before it occurs to me how annoying that might be, if he likes the crispy ones too. But he's staring at the table, biting the inside of his cheek as though thinking very hard.

"The West Coast never really got to feel like home," he offers abruptly, and I wonder whether he'd been thinking through the words, or whether to say them out loud. "The people, my house there. Even down to my running route. I run by the Hubbart every morning. You know, near the marina just south of downtown?"

I nod, and it's my turn to sink into silence, a little mesmerized by the rare, prolonged sound of his voice.

"It's the perfect stretch. Hilly enough for a challenge and the river kind of keeps you going, like you're trying to keep pace with the water. I could never really replicate it there. Never felt right."

"I kind of get that," I sip my drink. "I used to run track in school. There was a trail near my parents' house with a stable farm halfway down. Nothing ever really got me going like knowing I'd get to run by these horses, racing each other in a field."

"Yeah. Yeah, exactly."

I don't know if it's the low light or the alcohol on his tongue, or what, but I think I see a sliver of a crack forming in the mystery that is Theo Jordan. I want to push it, but it feels very precarious. I'm an explorer, up close and personal with a deep-sea creature like no one before. One wrong breath and it'll realize I'm there and scurry off. Or rip my head off.

I study him. Stir the straw around my drink, letting the ice cubes clink off the glass. "So, you just up and left?"

"Pretty much."

“No human attachments, or anything like that?” I say it lightly, casually, but he only raises his brows. I snort, hating him. “I don’t know why I bother with subtlety. There were some pictures, once, in *Time to Dine*. Last year, about one of your openings.”

He blinks. A slow smirk spreads on his face. “Oh, but this is interesting, Holland. You’ve been reading up on me.”

Now I’m hating me. Heat rises in my cheeks. “Do you ever get tired of your own narcissism? Personally, I find it exhausting.”

“Is there a point in here somewhere?”

I pull the hair off my neck, trying to encourage the flush off my face. I twist it up into a bun and hold it there. “The *point* is, there was a very leggy, very blonde woman hovering around you in all of them.”

I spend the seconds between my statement and his answer contemplating why it is I let the words come out of my mouth. I will never live them down.

Predictably, he sits back with eyes shining smugly under thick dark lashes. “Well, well. You’re letting slip some interesting things tonight.”

“What, now?” I say, exasperated.

“You seem very fascinated by my social life. *Interesting.*”

I drop my hair and pick up my glass instead, swirling the amber liquid before taking a sip. “You misunderstood me. I’m interested in *her* social life. And how dire it must be if she had to settle for you. Are they all ugly on the West Coast?”

He snorts. “Yeah, that must be it. That, and she liked driving my cars.”

“Gold digger?”

He shrugs, and I can tell he isn’t bothered by the accusation. “Kind of. It was casual, and only for a couple months. Broke it off when I moved back.”

“She didn’t want to come?”

“I didn’t ask her to.”

I bulge my eyes. “Traded in Malibu Barbie for the big city equivalent, huh? Someone local to flutter their lashes at you.”

He chuckles into his beer. “There’s no fluttering in sight, believe me.”

I indicate the bar, where the server is chatting away with auburn hair guy. “Are we not sitting in the same room? Bed mate, remember? You can’t be that oblivious.”

“There’s a difference between oblivious and uninterested.” He pauses with his eyes on me. “Want another drink?”

I look down at my empty glass without a sliver of recollection as to how it got that way or when the plate of fries ceased to hold any actual fries. I should be half way back to my room by now.

Instead, I say: “Okay.”

Theo motions to the server and points at our drinks, gifting her an approximation of a smile. The one she returns could light up the cold side of the moon.

I clear my throat. “To be fair, I *am* a little fascinated.”

“By...?” He jabs a thumb at his chest.

I give him a half-shrug and his brows shoot up under the thick curls spilling over his forehead.

“You’re kind of a man of mystery in the local food scene.”

“Man of mystery?” He asks against the lip of his glass. “That’s a bit dramatic, isn’t it?”

“Is it? I mean, you’re practically a household name in our industry but until today I don’t think I could have listed one thing about you, beyond the generic stuff.”

“Such as?”

“You know. The usual stuff people say about you.” I shrug again when he only looks at me blankly, and count off on my fingers. “You’re talented, you’re a hard ass, you’re...”

He lifts his brows expectantly.

Damn it.

“You’re... you know.” I wave my hand in his direction.

“Is there an end to that sentence, or...”

I sigh. “You’re – people seem to think you’re... rather attractive. Or something.”

Theo chokes on his beer. “I’m *known* for this?” He asks between coughs, wiping his eyes with the back of his arm. “Fucking hell, something’s gone seriously wrong if that’s true. I’ve been named Chef to Watch in Time to Dine six times, for fuck’s sake. And *this* is what people retain?”

And he looks so appalled that a laugh bursts out of me. The sound seems to startle him. He freezes, brows shooting up again, probably realizing like I just have that this is the first time I’ve laughed at his joke and not his expense.

I clear my throat awkwardly just as our server drops fresh drinks on the table, collecting our empty glasses.

“Thanks,” Theo tells her, grabbing his new pint with his eyes still on me. He chews on his cheek for a second. “Why is it you hate me, again?”

The question is so out of the blue it gives me whiplash.

“Have we forgotten about a certain voicemail –”

He has the grace to flinch at the mention. “Right, that’s fair. But is that it?”

The look he gives me says there's nothing rhetorical about the question.

"Again, I'm compelled to ask: Is this a trap?"

"No, it's not a trap. I'm curious. Tell me what you think of me, voicemail aside."

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. "Look, I'm sure you can be nice enough –"

But he cuts me off with an impatient wave of his hand. "Don't bullshit me. If there's one thing about you, Holland, it's that you don't seem to live with an incessant need to sugarcoat like ninety-nine percent of the population. Don't start now."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is a compliment. Come on," he motions at his chest. "Hit me with your worst."

I sit back in my chair with a hard look at him, wary of the direction we're going but a little emboldened by the whiskey sour running through my veins. "Okay, I'll play. For one, there's this thing you do when you walk. This kind of strut with a perma-scowl like you own every inch of the floor you're crossing."

He frowns. "What else?"

"There's the fourth thing people tend to say about you. That you're... generally unpleasant. And I've seen you tear into people for simple mistakes."

"Such as?"

"There was the tile issue with Nivoli's. And then a few weeks later, when we realized they screwed up the plumbing for the bar."

He presses his elbows onto the table. "Both mistakes cost us weeks against our launch date. If anyone expected a pat on the head after that, it's

their problem, not mine.”

I purse my lips. “I suppose that’s fair. But you didn’t have to be so harsh about it. We had to fight tooth and nail to keep the relationship with that tile vendor, after that day. They agreed to stay on so long as we never had them back on one of your projects.”

He looked like he had a retort building in his throat, but it seems to catch on the way out. It’s clear he’d never been informed of that particular detail.

“All I’m saying is maybe they were wrong to screw up, but what good does it do to scare the shit out of people?”

Theo watches me quietly. After a moment he sighs, taking a deep drink of his beer. “Fair enough. So, is that it, then? My walk and the fact that I’m a dick sometimes?”

I shrug. “Plus, the whole almost got me fired thing.”

“Plus, the whole almost got you fired thing,” he concedes, with a head tilt. “It’s a pretty short list, for hating someone. You sure you don’t like me?”

I offer him a masterful eye roll, wide and round. “Short list, good reasons.”

“Yeah, I’m not buying the whole *walk* one. It’s a bit thin.” He sips his drink without losing eye contact. “So how much do you wish you weren’t sitting here, exactly? On a scale of It’s Fine to Would Rather Blow My Brains Out?”

Another laugh escapes me before I can stop it, and he tugs at the corner of his mouth. “I’m sitting at a solid Would Rather Get My Teeth Pulled.”

“So I’m in good shape, all things considered.”

I run a finger through the condensation on my glass, watching the moisture pool where it meets the table. “Why do you care what I think, anyway?”

A moment passes in silence. And when I lift my eyes, Theo has his on me. He doesn’t seem entirely alert and I’m not altogether certain he realizes how intently he’s staring, or that I’m looking back, that I’ve caught him unabashedly devouring me. Because there’s really no other way to describe a look like that. The sudden, inexplicable heat in his eyes. I don’t know where a look like that’s come from. But I start to feel unbearably hot, chest feels unbearably tight. And I can’t take it a second longer.

“Theo?”

My voice comes out like a plea. But it hits the mark and it’s as though a zipper runs up his back, stuffing his attention back into place inside his body. He gives an abrupt shake of his head and the air rushes into my lungs, audible to my ears, like it was the weight of his gaze keeping the oxygen at bay.

What *was* that?

Theo sweeps his beer off the table, taking another long drink. “Morbidity,” he says, as though the conversation hadn’t lapsed at all. “Nothing more.”

He shifts in his chair and his knee ends up pressed against mine under the table. Our eyes tick up, meet again, and simultaneously we move only to send our legs in the same direction, bumping together again, and again, and on a third attempt to create distance.

“Sorry,” we say together, and Theo’s chuckle falters when I reach down to catch his knee, holding it in place as I move mine away. There’s a sudden slack in his jaw that sends color flooding to my cheeks.

What the hell is happening?

I slide the offending hand back onto the table, clearing my throat. "Sorry. Must remember that thing about personal space."

"Are we suddenly concerned about personal space?"

I look down. I've managed to lean forward about as far as I can go in my chair, forearms pressed onto the little table. He's leaned in too and, somehow, we've ended up with only a handful of inches between our noses.

"Oh."

"And you're not moving away. Interesting."

Why *aren't* I moving away? I'm close enough to see thin laugh lines carving around his eyes. Which is enough alone to shock me, considering I've never seen a real laugh come out of him.

I set my jaw. "I'm standing my ground."

He shifts forward, notching us another inch closer. "Against what, exactly?"

I catch a whiff of that same woodsy scent from his shirt and it swirls into my lungs, makes me a little foggy. There's something cutting through his expression, now. Something strangely playful. Is he...?

Wait. Is he flirting with me?

Something crashes to the ground somewhere to our left, but we don't turn to look. I narrow my eyes but he gazes back steadily, squinting through dark lashes with his jaw set under lightly curved lips. Good god, *this* is his smolder? My knees bounce together under the table. How does anyone manage to stay upright? I feel the air seep out of my lungs again.

A strand of hair slips from behind my ear and swings onto my face. Theo zeroes in on the offending strand. His lips part by the smallest fraction and the tip of his tongue runs a single line along the corner of his mouth.

It snaps me out of my daze.

“What was that?” I ask sharply.

“What was what?” His voice is low.

“Licking your lips, really? You’re *flirting!*”

“*I’m* flirting?” He drops his eyes to my mouth. “What’s that?”

“What’s *what?*”

“You were just biting your lip.”

I scoff. “You’re dreaming.”

“Trust me, if I were asleep this would be a nightmare.” He lets out a sharp exhale and sweeps the errant strand of hair off my face, tucking it back behind my ear.

“What was *that?*”

“You’re leaning towards me with hair in your face.”

“*And?*”

“And I got tired of looking at it.”

“I’m sorry – did you hit your head sometime in the last two minutes? This is highly unprofessional.”

“You talk like *this*,” he gestures between us with his index finger. “Has been a bastion of professionalism up to this point.”

“What are you implying, exactly?”

“I’m only pointing out the bickering.”

“You give it back just as hard.”

“I do. And we’re staying overnight at a hotel. Having dinner together. Maybe it’s working relationship-type stuff, for the most part. Except that right now, I can count the freckles on your nose. You’re telling me we’re suddenly shooting for straight professionalism?”

I squint up at him. “What are you getting at?”

His gaze dips down to my lips. Just for a second but somehow an entire year has passed.

“*Oh*,” I nod grimly. “I see what’s happening here. You’ve lost your mind.”

Theo moves in another inch. “Have I? Because you *still haven’t moved away*, Holland.”

My mouth opens around an unformed syllable. We’re sitting so close I’d barely have to hitch forward to press my lips to his. He looks at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking, probably because I’m now unabashedly staring at his mouth.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Go for it.”

“*What?*”

“Looks to me like you want to.”

“You’re deranged!”

To be fair, I suspect I am also deranged. Every uneven thump of my heart urges me to do it. *Thump, thump, thump. Kiss him, kiss him, kiss him.*

I knew this place was haunted. I’m seconds away from burying an ax into a door.

I watch his mouth stretch into another smirk and for a moment I truly consider doing it for the sake of seeing that stupid cocky grin slide right off his face. *Careful what you ask for, buddy.*

God, what am I *thinking*?

My chair scrapes back against the floor. “There. I’m going to bed.” I tug my shirt to get it to sit lower on my thighs. It springs back up, offering the restaurant a view of the undersized shorts. “Where do I pay for this?”

Theo moves past me towards the lobby. “You don’t. It’s on the room tab.”

We stand in silence waiting an entire lifetime for the elevator to arrive. I tuck my room key out from the tight waistband of my shorts and hold it deliberately high.

Make no mistake about it, I'm saying in case he's watching. Whatever the hell that was, it ends here.

He's staring at the wall, completely unperturbed.

Which blip in the space-time continuum did I just stumble into?

The elevator pings open and he hits the button for floor four as I go to hit the one for floor three. Because we are indeed in a nightmare, our hands brush against each other, his on top and mine on the bottom. I drop my arm lamely to my side. It feels like it's on fire.

Ping.

The doors open on the third floor. A look over my shoulder shows Theo leaning against the wall of the elevator, looking like something out of a movie with his little smirk and hair spiraling casually onto his face. He flicks his eyebrows. "Night, Holland."

The doors close on my reply.

I need another shower.

But when I cross back into room 302, I learn just how haunted this hotel is.

~

Water. Water everywhere.

Drenching the furniture, soaking puddles across the carpet, and a large split in the ceiling right above the bed.

"No other rooms?" I give a small laugh at the absurdity of the statement. "Please, work with me here. Check again, there must be something."

The silence of the lobby was deafening when I came down after salvaging my clothes from the flooded room. But the maroon-clad clerk had popped out of the back door as though he'd been waiting for me to arrive.

"There is nothing. I told you earlier: they were the last rooms. We have been affected by flooding."

"I can see that!" I tell him, shrilly. My voice echoes around the lobby. "So, what are my options?"

"You have paid for two rooms," he tells me curtly.

Like hell I did. There are lasers beaming coming from my eyes, as though carving through him will make this nightmare dissipate. He doesn't notice.

Crap. I eye the narrow armchairs behind me, deciding whether I can fall asleep sitting up, but my dear friend the clerk seems determined to make this night as bad as it can get.

"Unfortunately, I cannot permit that. We simply cannot have guests sleeping in the lobby." He types at his keyboard with a flourish. "Now excuse me, I must check on the flooding. I so apologize for the inconvenience."

Inconvenience? *Crap crap crap.* I should have gone to sleep in the bathtub. There's a clap of thunder outside and it echoes around the empty, clammy lobby. This place is cursed. There's really no other way about it.

I let out a frustrated growl and it bounces off the walls around me, transforming my voice into something truly grotesque. I need to get out of here.

Up on the fourth floor, it takes me a full minute to gather the courage to knock, and even then I do it lightly, giving him the option to ignore it or sleep through it if he's already passed out. I could probably get away with

lying down on the questionable carpet outside his door. I'm sure that stain there is merlot and not from a man bleeding out. Absolutely sure.

I'm about to plop myself down on the ground when the door swings open. Theo's eyes are slits against the light in the hallway, and his hair completely disheveled on top of his head.

"*Holland?* What the hell are you doing here?"

Theo takes a small step off to the side, gaining more coverage from the door. Not that I blame him. I'm very much aware of how this looks, made even more questionable after whatever *that* was during dinner.

"That's not much of a warm welcome," I say as breezily as I can muster, trying to cut through the tension. "Where's your sense of hospitality?"

His brows pull together. "Are you *looking* for a warm welcome? You bolted like a bat out of hell half an hour ago. What the fuck is going on here?" He sticks his head through the crack in the door and searches either side of me as though expecting someone to jump out and yell *gotcha!*

"There was a flood in my room. And trust me, I've tried thinking of every option under the sun to avoid coming here. It came down to this or breaking into your car to sleep in the backseat. I didn't think you'd appreciate the smashed windshield."

He stares at me some more with his mouth ajar, struggling to understand.

"Look," I tell him, shoulders slumping. "I know this is weird. I swear I'll make myself so small you won't notice I'm there."

His eyes saucer. "You want – you're asking to *sleep* here?" His face flashes with something I can't place, something that makes my stomach squeeze. "That's... not a good idea."

“God, you’re going to make me beg, aren’t you? Okay. *Please* let me in. I’m exhausted. I can sleep in the armchair.”

I can see the debate clear in his face, and for a second I think he really is going to make me sleep out here on the floor. But then he grits his teeth, jaw visibly pulsing as he swings the door open. And the sight of him sends me rearing. He’s standing there with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

Well, then.

It shouldn’t be a surprise that he looks like this, what with the way those t-shirts of his seem to fit.

But. Still.

“Good. God.”

His skin has a soft golden hue to it under the dim light of the hallway, shadows casting over the lean ridges on his stomach and the hip bones framing the light trail of dark hair disappearing under his towel. With the bedhead curls he looks so utterly delectable I feel a pang of regret that our circumstances are what they are. In another life, one where I didn’t know he was a total career-ruining jerk, I might have flashed him my most brilliant smile and tried out some terrible pick-up line that would have sounded completely wrong but hopefully just goofy enough to endear.

“Chin off the floor, Holland.”

My mouth snaps shut so quickly you’d think my body decided it answers to him, now. I drag my eyes back up, knowing without a doubt that my cheeks are the color of that dead body stain on the carpet behind me.

“I’m sorry. I’m aware this is strange. But I feel it’s my civic duty to tell you that you shouldn’t be allowed to walk around like this. It’s criminal.”

Theo's brows shoot up his forehead. He runs his fingers through his hair while I try to avert my eyes from the way his shoulder ripples when he moves. He mutters something that sounds vaguely like *you're exaggerating*. The way the tips of his ears have turned red incites an involuntary pinch in my chest.

"You're kidding, right? Which pagan god did you make a deal with to look like this *and* be Time to Dine's Chef to Watch for five years running? It's just not fair." I gesture down at myself. "Seriously. Share the wealth."

"Six years running, and what the hell are you talking about?" He runs his eyes over me, head to toe and back again with narrowed eyes. He looks deeply offended though I can't fathom why, considering there's metaphorical drool running down my chin.

I clear my throat. "Never mind. So, are you going to let me in or are you hiding that server up here after all?" I hop onto my toes and pretend to look over his shoulder.

"What? No." Theo joins me in the realm of flaming red faces, clearly missing the joke. He tucks himself off to the side to let me in. "I was almost asleep two minutes ago. I'm not exactly firing at all cylinders."

I slide into the room before he can change his mind. Without the light coming in from outside, the short hall leading into the barely-lit room feels illicitly dark. Were it not for the narrow walls crowding us together, I'd barely be able to make out the shape of his eyes as they look down at me not from three feet away.

I am a grown woman. I should not be this dumbstruck at the sight of a half-naked man, let alone *this* half-naked man. He's a client, for one. I don't like him, for two. In addition –

"You okay?"

Has his voice always been so low and gravelly?

“Uh-huh.”

Has mine always been so high and breathless?

I swallow the offending lump in my throat. “I think you should probably...” I gesture at his towel.

God, *stop looking at his body.*

“Right.”

Theo slips past me and grabs at the Live, Laugh, Love shirt and boxer briefs hanging over the back of a chair. I follow him into the room and sink down at the foot of the bed. He does a double take over his shoulder when he sees me sitting there, and swivels around to look at me with an unreadable expression.

“Sorry,” I tell him, feeling very much stupid. “I swear I tried getting another room.”

He backs into the bathroom. “I believe you. Just make yourself... I don’t know. Fucking hell,” he mutters to himself as the door shuts behind him.

Forcing my oversized t-shirt down my thighs, I try to block out the sound of fabric stretching and rustling coming from the bathroom. Half-dressed in a client’s room. On the list of questionable decisions I’ve made over the course of my life, this has to take the cake.

The door squeals open and Theo sticks his head out of the bathroom, scanning the room as though hoping he’d imagined the entire scene.

“Still here,” I tell him.

His mouth is a hard line as he slips from the bathroom. He comes up to the bed looking like he’s about to sit next to me, only to back track and lean against the dresser on the opposite wall with his arms crossed tight across

his chest. I force my eyes away from his legs, the muscles there telling me he wasn't lying about being a runner.

"You don't have to sleep in the armchair," he says after a moment.

I glance at the minuscule chair in the corner. Thank god.

"Okay. Thanks," I smile. Why am I smiling at him, half-dressed? It fades into a possible scowl. "I suppose we should come up with some ground rules."

"Ground rules," he echoes, biceps twitching against the sleeves of his t-shirt. "Such as?"

I clasp my hands on my lap. "Well, for example, we sleep at the very opposite edges of the bed. And when I mean edges, I mean one sudden move in the middle of the night and we topple overboard."

"Not a problem," he nods briskly. "What else?"

"I get the right side of the bed."

"You do realize I was sleeping on that side?"

I look over my shoulder. Of course. That would be why it's the side with the covers pulled back. From when he got up from where he was sleeping. Naked.

"Right," I lick my lips nervously. "Point taken. I officially concede the right side of the bed."

I look back in time to see his eyes flick away from my mouth. "Thanks. What else?"

"Don't you have any?"

"Mm?"

"Rules. To contribute."

Theo's eyes snap to mine, magnet to pole. "We should play by yours."

I should really take a moment to unpack the meaning behind his words, or why the sound of them sparked a hot flash in the pit of my stomach, made my lungs seize. But then he runs a rough hand through his hair and instead I try to unpack how it is I never noticed the breadth of his palms, and the length of his fingers. I rub my lips together.

“Okay.” I steel myself as the next words come out. Feeling like I have to say them mostly to myself. “We avoid touching. In any... sexual manner.”

Did I seriously just utter a variation of the word ‘sex’ in his presence? How humiliating.

“Sexual manner. As opposed to?”

“I don’t know. Hand holding, and things like that.”

“And things like that,” he nods. He tilts his head, gracing me with his signature smirk. “You saying you wanna hold my hand, Holland?”

I lift my chin. “No. Simply that no one ever had to make a rule around holding hands. And I don’t think anyone’s blushed from a pat on the knee since the seventeen hundreds.”

“Pat on the knee,” he says quietly. His eyes travel back up from where they wandered on my legs.

I roll my eyes. “Is this the part where you thump your chest and claim to have brought women to their knees from a pat on the... knee?”

The next second lasts an eternity.

An eternity because somehow I manage to swallow, move to grasp the sheets, watch him unfurl his arms and take exactly two steps until he’s nothing but a foot away from where I’m sitting. All within that second.

Surely he can hear my heart from where it’s lodged itself in my throat?

He's chewing on his cheek. Choosing his next words as he gazes down at me through hard, heavily lashed eyes. But he seems to decide against words. He puts out his hand instead.

My traitorous fingers twitch on the bedsheets. I double my grip, sinking my nails deep into the cotton. "What for?"

"Testing out your theory. If you're willing." Someone has gone and put sandpaper in his throat. The sound waves from his husky voice travel straight between my legs.

I mean to speak first, but my hand lifts off the bed before the words line up in my mouth. It drops into his after a quivering second. I catch the flash of surprise in his face before he smooths it over. There's a barely-there tremor in my fingers at the feel of the heat from his palm.

"Why does it matter?" The belated words come out so low I barely hear them myself.

Either he's missed them entirely or decided not to answer. He trails his gaze down to our hands, open palms resting together, his long fingers pressing down on the underside of my wrist where my pulse jumps furiously. I expect him to cup my hand in his, fork our fingers together.

Instead, Theo slides his hand slowly along the underside of my forearm. The touch is so light my skin tickles before the sensation twists abruptly into something heavy and lush that settles in my chest. His hand travels up, turns so that his grip closes with his thumb in the crook of my elbow. He brushes the skin with a firm swipe that rouses a fury of goosebumps from pinky to shoulder.

"How..." The rest of my sentence doesn't make it out.

Because this is treason.

My body is betraying me, without a care for the consequence of showing this man what he's doing to me with his hand on my arm. The ammunition it's giving him. The satisfaction he must feel.

Theo stands there, towering over me. Lower lashes brushing his skin as he sweeps my face.

"This okay?"

My lungs fail me, so I nod instead. His mouth quirks into a semblance of a smile.

"I still don't like you. So we're clear."

His mouth stretches another fraction. "Okay."

He runs his hand back down my arm, so soft and deft and precise my next breath hitches in my throat. It's the dry spell, right? That must be why my hips squirm and thighs tighten when our palms meet again. He lifts my hand so that it sits finger to finger against his before he slides his firmly between mine.

There's not a trace of the smirk left on his face. He meets my eye again and there's a loud whoosh of air out of my lungs when he comes down on his knees in front of me.

My mouth has dropped open. He moves closer, and for a wild moment I consider lifting my other hand, desperate to know what it would feel like to grip his hair.

I'm teetering on the edge of heart failure. My tongue longs to throw a jab but my body inches forward. He's so close I can smell the woodsy scent mixing with a touch of lavender from the shampoo he must have used earlier. My breathing has gone humiliatingly ragged, waiting to see what he does next.

Theo lifts his chin, looking up at me. And I'm humming. My body is humming at the sheer appeal of this man on his knees, inches from my body.

"A pat on the knee, you said?"

I take him in properly and see something in his face, something so different it takes a second to decipher. A quiet hunger there in the dark, dilated pupils of his eyes. Whether it's for me or he's just playing a part towards the theory he's working on, I don't know. But he looks like a man ready to gorge.

My hips slide forward. Involuntarily. I think. I push my calves back against the bed so he doesn't notice them shaking. There's no air left in this room. I'm surviving on wood and lavender.

"Not since the seventeen hundreds," I manage.

His jaw pulses. "That a challenge or an invitation?"

Both.

He shakes his head. "I'm gonna need words, Holland. You want my hands on you?"

"Where?" I breathe.

He doesn't lose my gaze for a second from his place on his knees. "Anywhere you want them."

Someone lets out a strangled groan. His mouth hasn't moved, though, so I can only assume it's another act of self-treason. I drop my eyes to our hands, still hovering mere inches above my leg. Knowing the second the truth crosses my lips he'll be teeming with self-satisfaction. But the thick, languid pulse between my thighs vibrates through every one of my limbs now, overwhelming the gut reaction to argue.

I'm going to hate myself tomorrow.

My eyes flick to his. “Yes. I want them.”

He stays still for another beat and I get the feeling he’s studying me for any hint of contradiction. And then he drops our intertwined hands to my thigh, running them down to the bed beside me before extricating his fingers. His eyes don’t leave mine as he lays his palms on the outsides of my thighs, holding me in a firm grasp. Fingers pulsing before he slides down my skin, slowly, until they hook under the bend of my legs. The pads of his thumbs brush my knees.

And he yanks me.

My hips hitch forward, and he earns himself a gasp I’ll despise myself for later. The tug carves a hot flash through my flesh, meeting in the middle between my legs. I’m all but straddling him now. And I do the unthinkable. I lean in and lay my hands on his shoulders, trying to stifle a groan in my throat when my fingers feel firm muscle. Hating every thread of the fabric of his t-shirt for barricading his skin from mine as I slide my hands over him, down his upper arms and back again.

God. It’s been so long. It’s been so long and he looks so good –

“Still don’t like me?”

Theo’s face is the epitome of calm. But he gives away the accelerated pace of his breathing with every rise and fall of solid, rounded shoulders pushing against my hands.

“Still don’t like you.”

His eyes drop when I squirm against the bed, my t-shirt barely skimming the top of my thighs anymore. The tiny red boy shorts are riding so far up and pressing so hard against me, god knows what he must be seeing from that angle. He slides rough hands back up my outer thighs, slow and purposeful, like he wants to memorize the way my body ripples

under his grip. He reaches the edge of my shirt and my erratic nod tells him to keep going, to slide his fingers underneath and settle his hands at my hips. He holds me there, and I stare down at the way the hem of my shirt drapes over his wrists. His thumbs stretch out in the space between his hands, graze up and down my shorts.

“Holland.”

Theo’s voice has dropped to an octave so filthy my clothes threaten to melt off. His eyes are searching, waiting for permission or denial. Mine search back. Trying to quantify this feeling, what this man is doing to me. But I don’t find my answer. Don’t find anything but irreversible longing in the pit of my stomach. Needing to know what this next thing feels like.

My voice is a breath. “Touch me.”

Something low rumbles in his throat. His eyes hit me hard. Threatening something I’m suddenly desperate to have.

Every muscle below my waist contracts when he slides his right hand to my inner thigh, sweeping the soft skin as he travels down, back up. My legs are properly shaking, aching for the contact. I gasp, sink my nails into his shoulders when his thumb runs along the damp seam of my shorts, up, down. Barely there at first, just enough to cause my breath to shudder out of my lungs. Building pressure with every stroke.

“Fucking hell,” he murmurs, eyes trained on my lap.

There’s something in the way he says *fucking hell* that makes my stomach flip. Like he’s both burning alive and floating among the clouds. His thumb presses hard against me and I give a closed-mouthed whimper. The fingers of his other hand curl into the waistband of my shorts.

“You want these off?”

I should say no. Should say no, pull away his hand, tell him thank you for your contribution to the closest thing to sex this woman has had in a couple of years, since her life fell apart and boyfriend dumped her unceremoniously and she stopped caring much about sex. I should also stop referring to myself in the third person but his fingers hit me with more pressure and I lose my head. I brace against his shoulders and lift my hips off the bed.

Theo lets out a long breath that sounds vaguely like the word ‘fuck.’ In one smooth movement my shorts hit the floor, rain-soaked panties still tucked in my purse, shirt bunched up my hips. His eyes drink me in, hands curled into fists by my thighs.

“Rules,” he says gruffly, rubbing his lips together. “I need rules. Now.”

My body is buzzing to have him throw me back onto the bed and crawl on top of me. But I manage to retain a semblance of sense. We’re crossing a line. And if we are, better to keep it as close to that line as possible.

“Hands only.”

“Hands only,” he nods, dragging one along his jaw. “Can I...”

I only register what he means when he tucks a hand under the loose front of his t-shirt, presumably adjusting himself. Oh god. Am I really doing this? Are we really doing this?

Yeah. Suddenly I’m desperate to see what he’s got under there. Caught somewhere between hoping it’s good and knowing it can’t be, that no one can have it like that. Have his looks and his success and also happen to pack good heat.

I nod. “And I still don’t like you.”

“Whatever you say, Holland.”

He untucks himself from his briefs and I clamp my teeth into my bottom lip, stifling a mournful groan. Every throb below the waist is punishing me for that rule. Sticking to a couple of fingers with this in front of me? Agony.

And then Theo gives simultaneous strokes. One for me, one for him.

My teeth sink deeper into my lip with his every move, breath comes out in ragged spurts, whimpers catching in my throat. Not at all missing the barrier between his fingers and my skin as he touches me slowly. Exploring. Eyes stuck to me like he's clocking my every expression, adjusting his touch as he goes. Already getting that I like it firm, fast. My nails are properly sinking into him now, but if he's in pain he doesn't show it. I bite back a moan, still refusing to give him that kind of satisfaction as though I hadn't just asked him to undress me. As though he weren't kneeling between my thighs, my hands weren't braced against his shoulders, our faces barely a foot apart.

"I have a rule, now."

I blink hurriedly, try to clear the fog from my sight line, try to pay attention. But his hand doesn't let up on me, or on himself and I can't quite get a handle on myself, can't look away from the pulsing muscle at his forearm as he gives his cock long, firm strokes. Can't quite remember why I decided I wouldn't touch him, couldn't play with him myself.

"Rule?"

His touch turns lusciously rough, just short of painful and I bite down on my lip hard, stifling a cry.

"Drop that lip, sweetheart. Let me hear what I do to you."

My stomach squeezes at the words and the command in his tone. Had he asked a few minutes from now, I might have let him have it, too lost in it to keep holding back. But I'm still hanging on, just by a thread.

“You can’t always get what you want.”

He isn’t pleased. Rolling his jaw, he brushes me one more time and pulls away. A low sob escapes me, my body protesting the lapse in contact.

“Better.”

He slips a finger inside me, adds another, out and in again. He’s got me so wet I watch his fingers glisten a little more every time they slide out of me, and god, I can’t help it. My hands leave his shoulders, prop me up on the bed behind me with proper moan.

A corner of his mouth ticks up. “There you are.”

He doesn’t hold back after that. And I can’t make sense of it, how I managed to go without this for so long when I used to love it. The way his fingers push into me, the pressure he’s giving me, the way my hips take on a life of their own, angling to let him in deeper, moving in sync with his fingers until finally I grab his wrist and hold him still.

“Holy shit.”

His words come out low and drawn out. His jaw drops and he watches me fuck his fingers, the hand touching himself stuttering to a halt like he’s too captivated to function. And if I could muster words I’d tease him for it. *Baby, I’m no angel. Come put that jaw to better use.*

It turns out I can muster words because I hear some, in my voice, telling him to keep going, not to stop. And he looks blown away, almost faint, delirious when he realizes what I mean. That I want to watch him touch himself just as bad as he wants to watch me. He works himself at an erratic pace, breathing hard. Licks his lips, swaying toward my pussy and back like he’s having to remind himself to reel it in, that this is our limit, he can’t dive in. Looking dazed and completely wired at the same time.

I think about it. Think about reaching out, grabbing a fistful of hair and dragging him in. God, his mouth would feel like *heaven* –

But it's been so long I'm right there, almost there already and the last thing I see before my head falls back is the tortured, hungry look on his face. And then I give it to him. A broken cry into the room punctuated by a weak *fuck* out of his mouth. He takes over when my hips fail, pumping his fingers into my pussy to send a violent, drawn-out shudder through my body, not tearing his eyes away for even a second until my rush fades and every part of me throbs in triumph of the bliss it just endured. With a desperate groan, Theo buries his face into my thigh, hair tickling my skin strand by strand. His fingers falter inside me as he shifts focus on himself.

“Uh-uh. Nice try.”

My voice is deep and teasing, almost purring in a way that hasn't come out of me in a long time. I grip him by the shoulders, hands badly shaking from the aftershock of my orgasm, but I need to make my point. I wrench him away from the coverage of my leg. Because I haven't just opened myself up like this, come in front of him like that only for him to hide.

Theo raises wild eyes to mine and the second they connect, his face twists with such unbridled want and need that I almost start begging him for a round of the real thing. There's something so powerful in seeing the lapse in his usual control that I can't look away, not when he lets out a harsh groan that sends his shoulders shaking under my fingers.

I hold him until he steadies out, watch him pant his way back to reality. On pure impulse I lift my fingers to his lips, graze them, feel his breath hit my skin.

We sit in stunned silence, save for our labored breathing. Unable to break eye contact until finally my body nosedives off the adrenaline and I

collapse back onto the bed with an arm over my eyes, and Theo's head lands again on my thigh, breath shuddering against me.

"Fuck. That was..." He swallows so hard I can hear it.

After a moment he peels himself away. I hear him fumble around in the bathroom, muttering a string of words too low for me to fully make out but that sound vaguely like a stream of curses. And that's when they erupt. The alarm bells in my head.

Have you lost your mind? My brain is shouting. That was Theo fucking Jordan on his knees in front of you. You don't like him. He's a client. What the hell did you just do?

Oh my god. Oh my god. I gather the hem of my t-shirt and fist it down my thighs.

I just – with a client –

Theo's voice comes from the other side of the room. "Are you... You're freaking out."

I sit up slowly, pressing my knees together like he hadn't just seen it all, felt it all. He's hovering by the bathroom door, dressed neatly as though the last ten minutes only existed in my mind.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly, face twisting with regret. He shakes his head. "I didn't mean for it to go that far. I... I don't know what I was thinking."

My stomach sinks at the words. Because, despite the panic, it's taking everything to tamp down the feeling that's been building in me since the second I put my hand in his. This uncomfortable realization that there's some kind of... something. Between us. And god, I wanted that. Wanted his hands on me so badly.

I feel a scorching burn in my cheeks. Stupid to think he felt it too. Really stupid, considering he'd only been trying to prove some kind of point.

I stand so abruptly he jumps a little. "Right. Well, you win."

"Win?" His brows pinch together.

I pull at my shirt in a fruitless attempt to get it to lengthen about twenty feet. "You got me," I work to keep my voice steady. He sweeps my shorts off the floor and hands them to me. "Point proven, theory invalidated, and all that. I got hot and bothered holding your hand. I'll get started on the pillow wall."

I pull back the covers on the left side of the bed, trying to ignore the way he's standing with his mouth ajar and his brows furrowed.

"That's not... *Fuck*." His voice is low, so inaudible I wonder whether he's even talking to me. He clears his throat. "Holland —"

"It's fine. Just a stupid mistake," I tell him, hoping he can't tell how badly my fingers are shaking as I crawl under the duvet. "It's the alcohol. We should sleep it off."

He doesn't move. "I'm not drunk. Are you?"

I glance from a spot on the ceiling long enough to see the horror on his face.

"No, I'm not drunk," I tell the ceiling. "Though I'd give anything to change that, right about now."

After a long, quiet moment, Theo rounds the bed and drops into the spot he vacated before my unannounced visit. I'm laying so close to the edge I have to tuck my right hand under my hip so it doesn't hang over the side of the bed. I look at him from the corner of my eye. He's grimacing at the ceiling.

Way to go, me.

Like the next month wasn't going to be bad enough, running a project for a client who's already made it clear he has no interest in working with me. I really, *really* didn't need to fabricate some kind of mortifying school girl crush on the guy. Really didn't need to make those sounds when he touched me or give him a front row seat at how badly everything below the waist screamed for him. Really don't need these increasingly unlikely scenarios now running in my head, in which I somehow talk him into touching me again even after acting like a total freakshow tonight.

I am such an idiot. I sigh louder than I mean to.

Theo looks over. "Hey. I'm very sorry –"

I shake my head. "There's nothing to be sorry about. It was nothing. Let's forget it happened."

I think I catch his face falter a fraction before he returns his gaze to the ceiling. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Goodnight?"

I don't know whether there was really a question mark at the end of the word, or whether it's something I concocted on my own. But it makes a little pang erupt in my stomach.

"Night," I tell him quietly.

He plunges us into darkness.

Chapter 12

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Theo

My eyelids yank open to a foreign wall.

It takes a second to register where I am and why I'm here. I feel like I'm up after a night of heavy drinking. Wondering whether I'd said or done something I'll regret when it resurfaces in my memory later that day.

On cue, it floods from the back of my brain. Jude on my bed, my hands on her, the look on her face as she watched me, the sounds that came out of her mouth, the way she moved into my fingers. And then the sickening guilt. The absolute punch in the gut afterwards, watching her panic over it. The near-instant regret on her face.

I shift onto my back to see her sleeping there, facing away from me, long hair strewn across the bed between us.

What did I do? *What did I do?*

For half a second in that restaurant, I thought I'd started to win her over. Started to lead her away from the sick reality where I'm the villain in her story. I thought maybe I could get her to see me differently, after the bullshit I pulled with that voicemail. That maybe one day she could be interested in me, too.

Instead, I had to go and think with my dick. Take it so far she had to make it clear she wasn't interested.

It was nothing.

Then why did it feel like everything, from where I was kneeling?

Before last night, there'd been part of me that thought this thing with her was just about fucking. I've been thinking about this girl for so long, it's occurred to me more than once that maybe it was only a matter of getting her out of my system.

But it turns out that touching her, even her hand, her elbow, her knee, felt like coming into contact with the sun. Scorched me down to my core. Realigned the cells in my body around a single purpose. To feel her again. To learn every little thing that makes her laugh and do it over and over until I've got nothing left to give.

A stupid mistake. Let's forget it happened.

Her words were a kick to the sternum. How the hell do I forget something like that? It was just about the hottest thing I'd ever seen. Whatever I expected her to be like, it sure as fuck wasn't that. Shy, maybe. Sexy, absolutely. But for her to take control like that? Looking up at her, watching her drop her walls, the need in her eyes... She'd looked like the kind of god I'd willingly worship. I couldn't have watched that any other way but on my knees. And I'm not sure I'd survive the full treatment, if she ever blessed me with it.

A stupid mistake.

I stare up at the ceiling, trying to talk myself off the ledge. Maybe this is fine. So, I slipped a little last night. It was just a little finger action. Could have been worse. Maybe I can get it back on track, salvage this somehow –

Jude lets out a small gasp in her sleep.

I need out of this bed.

I heave myself up carefully, making sure she's still out cold when I adjust the hard-on that's manifested in my sleep. My body is screwing with me. Punishing me for this misguided crush. That's it, isn't it?

It's seven o'clock and my legs are itching for a run, my equivalent of a caffeine addiction. Instead, I slip into the bathroom and stand in the shower. I think about her, think about what it would be like to have her in there with me. But I make myself stop so I can at least attempt to look her in the eye later.

When I come out, she's sitting on her side of the bed with her back to me. She's piled her hair on top of her head and off that ridiculous yellow shirt.

I hesitate by the bathroom door. "Hey."

"Hi." Jude looks over her shoulder, but doesn't catch my eye. She gets up and grabs her purse off the floor, passing me into the bathroom without a look.

And that's how the rest of the morning goes.

We don't say anything when she comes back into the room wearing that unfair red dress. Or on the elevator ride down. Or when we get into the car.

I drive for a good half hour and we haven't said a word. I'm gripping the steering wheel, trying to come up with something. Glance over and do a double take when I see she's already looking at me. There's a deep tilt to her head and there's such intensity in her stare that I feel instantly self-conscious.

I mean to ask *are you okay?*, but I'm on a singular mission to make the situation as terrible as possible and so I say: "What are you doing?"

She jumps like I stung her. "Nothing!"

It's all running through my mind again at breakneck speed. Faster than the blur of cars around us. Every moment after the bedroom door closed behind her. I shouldn't have done that. Any of that. I shouldn't have lost control like that.

She doesn't look at me the rest of the drive. We don't stop once in the four hours home. Her discomfort was palpable, and so was my desperation to get myself the hell out of that car.

By the time I drop her off, I'm fully humiliated.

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Chapter 13

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Jude

“**Y**ou did *what*?”

If I weren't wiping the droplets of iced coffee now covering my body, I guarantee I would see several curious pairs of eyes looking our way.

Jenna is perched on my desk, pleated mini skirt riding up high from the sheer force of expelling coffee from her cheeks. She looks at me with a gaping mouth, wide eyes framed by the gigantic baby pink glasses she likes to wear only for show.

“Jenna,” I hiss. I launch out of my chair so fast it goes skittering into the wall of filing cabinet behind me, causing another scene as the sound echoes around the office. If people weren't staring before, they sure are now.

I take her arm and trail her behind me into the supply closet. We are nothing if not conspicuous.

Jenna hasn't recovered. Strands from her cheerleader-high ponytail are caught in her lip gloss, and she's got coffee trailing down her chin.

I plop myself onto some cardboard boxes that sag threateningly under my weight. Jenna's staring at the wall mouthing inaudible words, still digesting, so I swipe at my phone and check my emails. With a pang, I see two fresh emails from TJ Companies near the top of my inbox, one from an assistant named Mary and one from Theo himself. My thumb hovers over his name, and a fresh trickle of humiliation runs down my spine. I jump when another email comes through.

Monday, July 23, 5:35 PM

From: tjordan@tjcompanies.com

Subject: re: SL change of plan?

That's weird. I go to tap it open just as Jenna defrosts. She spins in a circle looking for somewhere to sit and, giving up, sinks to the floor, wiping her chin with the back of her sleeve.

"Oh my *god*, Jude. I can't tell if I'm on the verge of an orgasm or a mental breakdown. How did that *happen*?"

I hunch over, elbows to knees, and force out the confession. "Jenna, I lost my mind. Things got totally weird over dinner and then I went up there and he looked so good, and... What is it about hotel rooms that turn people into rabid sex monsters?"

Jenna nods, over and over as though the act will make it make sense. "You were scratching an itch?"

I'd love nothing more than to say that yes, it was an itch I needed scratching, any man would have done. But it was him, wasn't it? The way he trapped the air from my body at dinner. The way my skin woke up at the feel of his hand.

Jenna takes pity on me. She heaves herself onto her knees, smoothing down the pleats of her skirt. "Okay, hear me out. Maybe, just *maybe*, this was the best thing that could have happened. You've always had this weird energy with the guy. Maybe this is all you needed. To get it out of your system."

If only that were true. It feels anything but out of my system. The sight of him on his knees is burned into my eyelids.

“Or not,” Jenna adds, scanning me. She pauses thoughtfully. “Do you like him?”

“No – not like *that*, at least. And that’s not really the point, is it?”

“It is if you want to carry on with this.”

“Wha – *do it again*? Jenna, I can’t even face him. I woke up totally mortified and barely looked him in the eye. They started installation work at the restaurant and I had to send Carly today to check in. And if Diana ever found out –”

Jenna shuffles forward on her knees and grips my calf. “How would she find out? I doubt he logs a status update with her every time he gets someone in bed. And *you’re* not going to tell her. And I’d never say a word. So... if you want to, maybe you go for it. It’s been forever since you had a fling.”

Could I? If those ten minutes were any indication, turning myself over to Theo Jordan would probably be spectacular. Sure, he’d probably see it as another notch on our scoreboard. But maybe I can live with that, if the sex between us is how I think it would be.

I shake my head abruptly. “That would never work. I’ve never been able to do casual sex. I’ll get attached, he’ll leave, and I’ll be right back where I started. I’ve had enough people walk out on me to last a lifetime.”

“What if he gets attached too?”

“He wouldn’t,” I say firmly. “And I can’t do that to myself. No, this isn’t happening – I have a job to do, and he’s a client, and I’m in line for a promotion I’ve been trying to land for three years.”

Jenna opens her mouth, but I cut her off with a look and the words fizzle on her tongue.

“Right.” It takes Jenna a second to gather back her sparkle. But she does, bouncing back as quickly as I deflated her. “Maybe I should make a move.”

I gasp. “Don’t you dare –”

But Jenna throws her head back in laughter. “Are you sure you don’t have a thing for him?”

I grimace at her as my phone buzzes in my lap.

DIANA: *Where are you? My office. Immediately.*

Oh no. Oh *no*.

I bounce off the sagging cardboard boxes and burst out of the supply closet, leaving Jenna’s shell-shocked look behind. She knows. Diana knows, doesn’t she? Of course she does, it’s probably written all over my face. There may as well be a neon sign with *I Got Fingered by Theo Jordan* pointing right at me.

I hurry down the hall, skittering to a halt outside Diana’s office. She’s sitting at her desk with her eyes already on me, looking like she’ll breathe fire the second her mouth drops open. I wipe my clammy palms down my jeans as I enter the room, not noticing Carly in one of the armchairs until she turns to bestow me glittering eyes reeking of malice.

Diana clasps her hands atop her desk. “Well?” She asks, without preamble. “Care to explain what happened?”

A firecracker goes off in the pit of my stomach. I swallow, trying to buy myself time to come up with a good reason for which Theo Jordan would find himself with his hands down my pants.

“W-what do you mean?”

“You aren’t *aware*?” Diana goggles. She glances between me and Carly. “I don’t understand, sometimes, why no one seems to get it. This is a

fucking *business*. Happy clients equal revenue. Unhappy clients equal clear out your desk. Would you care to share with the class, Carly?”

The tension in my chest snaps, setting free a wave of relief so intense I almost laugh. There’s no way she can be talking about Fondle-Gate. But Diana catches the renewed lightness in my face and glares it right out of me.

Carly lays her eyes on me, a slow, derisive smile spreading across her face. “Something happened. With the floors.”

Diana turns to me, expectantly.

I blink. “Which floors?”

“The ones being installed at Sunset Landing. As we speak.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, annoyed. Larry, my contractor, had confirmed in an earlier email that the floors started going in over the weekend. I give Diana an exasperated shake of my head.

But Carly looks at me, thrilled, relishing the moment. “The floors. I was there today, checking in. You know, because you were *too busy*? They’re putting in the wrong ones. Didn’t you read his emails? Theo Jordan is *livid*.”

“What?” I slap at my phone.

Monday, July 25, 4:16 PM

From: mbrown@tjcompanies.com

Subject: Flooring Delivery

Good afternoon, Jude – Theo is inquiring as to whether there was a change of plans with the flooring at Sunset Landing? They seem to be installing flagstone throughout – they’re adamant it’s according to plan? Please advise.

Mary

Monday, July 25, 4:38 PM

From: tjordan@tjcompanies.com

Subject: SL change of plan?

Hey. Are we doing tiles at SL? Did I miss an email?

Theo

Monday, July 25, 4:42 PM

From: tjordan@tjcompanies.com

Subject: re: SL change of plan?

Don't see an update in my inbox. Who fucked this up?

TJ

Monday, July 25, 5:35 PM

From: tjordan@tjcompanies.com

Subject: re: SL change of plan?

This looks like shit. Are you going to come deal with this?

~

I work myself into a silent fury on the way to Sunset Landing.

Fury at Carly, for her dramatic display in front of Diana. Fury at Larry, for making such a senseless mistake. Fury at myself, for letting a stupid, meaningless fondle screw with my future.

I burst through the doors now, and they bounce against the walls with a thundering clap. The place is bustling with activity, contractors everywhere, and there's the deafening sound of sawing coming from somewhere further

in. It smells heavily of sawdust and fresh chemicals, and the grand windows overlooking the Hubbart are covered in a solid film of dust and grime.

All things considered, the place is looking lightyears ahead of how it did last week. The walls and ceiling are a gorgeous matte steel blue, the bar off to the side of the lounge is paneled in rustic, weathered wood, with a smooth pale grey concrete bar top. And despite my panic, I feel a little thrill seeing my vision start coming to life.

But, inexplicably, the floor under my feet is tiled in beige flagstone. I can see it stretch all the way through the foyer, past the lounge and into the dining room, where contractors are on hands and knees plopping more stones down on the wet cement.

I spot Theo standing off by the bar, typing furiously at his phone. The tension in his shoulders tells me he's not in a good place.

This is going to get ugly.

I make a beeline for Larry, who's loitering by a workbench towards the back of the lounge. Theo looks up and I can see now he's properly pissed. He opens his mouth but I throw up a hand without a look and pass him by.

Larry does a double take, shoulders slumping a little when he sees me. He busies himself with his phone. "Oh, hello Jude."

"Larry," I say over the sawing. I'm damn near spiraling on the inside but I keep my voice calm, measured. Larry's been my favorite contractor since I started at Dime. He's a no-nonsense, hard-driving, altogether good-natured man, and I learned early on it takes a delicate touch for him to come around on something. I stare patiently until he sticks his phone in his pocket and meets my eye. "What is this?"

He ruffles his hair sheepishly. "Well, we're putting the floors in. As planned."

There's a bag on the work bench next to him and I see a printout of my renderings sticking out from the top. I stride over and pull it free.

"As planned? Larry, come on."

"Looks a bit different, I guess," he mumbles, eyeing the rendering. When I cross my arms, he adds: "Okay, it's possible we put in the wrong floors. We've been at it since Saturday. It's a shame no one noticed sooner."

I nod, slowly. "It really is a shame. Can we, oh, I don't know... ask your team to *stop* putting in the wrong floors?"

"You definitely don't want these ones?"

"No. No, thank you."

Larry sighs, turning to the crew in the dining room. "Hey fellas," he calls. "We're scratching the stone. Take five and meet me here for an update."

The sawing stops abruptly and I get more than a few curious looks from the contractors as they meander off towards the lobby.

"How did this happen? Where's the hardwood we ordered?"

"We found it all piled up in the back office this afternoon. The stone delivery came in late on Friday and we assumed there was a change."

This makes no sense. How does something like this just happen?

I look around the lounge. "How long will it be to take this out?"

Larry swipes the rendering from my hand and stuffs it back into his bag, like he can't stand to look at it. "Four weeks. We have another job lined up right after we were originally scheduled to finish here. I can't stick around longer than planned to replace this. I told him that, already."

Larry nods over my shoulder. I become aware of Theo out of the corner of my eye, who's moved within earshot. He opens his mouth but I cut him

off with a tiny shake of my head. I watch Larry fiddle with the straps of his work bag, as though the action will absolve him from further conversation.

“Okay. Four weeks. That would be great. And you’ll reimburse the entire installation cost? Since this wasn’t our mistake?”

Larry’s laugh is incredulous. “You know I can’t do that. I’ve got a business to run here –”

“Me too,” I tell him promptly. “And so does that really ticked off guy back there.” I jerk my head in Theo’s direction. “Between you and me, he’s really unpleasant when he’s pissed. And that’s saying something. I need you to do me a solid, Larry. Let’s work something out.”

Larry eyes Theo uncertainly, pressing his palms into the table between us. Now would be a very good time for Theo to wear that scowl he’s perfected. I don’t turn to find out, assuming he won’t disappoint me in this department.

Larry slides his eyes back to me. “What do you have in mind?”

Thank you, Theo.

I grin. “I think there’s a way we can all be happy. Get a bigger crew in here. Take this out and install the real deal. Our project wraps up on schedule, and you move on to your next job with another happy client. *And* you keep the installation fee. Win-win-win.”

“You’ll have to pay for a bigger crew, kid.”

Bingo. Larry also happens to have a very soft spot for me. He’s called me variations of *kid* since I started at Dime at twenty-two.

“I don’t have the budget for that,” I tell him, smiling wryly when he snorts. “But I promise you I won’t forget that kind of favor when I staff my next few projects.”

We stare at each other silently. He glares. I try to stuff back my panic and come up with a Plan B if this goes completely awry. And just as I'm about to promise him my first-born child, Larry lets out a monumental sigh, giving me a rueful shake of his head.

I break into a grateful smile. "This is why you're my favorite, Larry."

"Sure, I am," he rolls his eyes. "Why do I feel like you're getting more out of this deal than I am?"

"Because secretly, I'm your favorite, too."

"Right. That must be it," his tone drips in disdain, but he gives me a small affectionate smile. "Now get lost and let me figure this out."

I laugh, turning on my heel before he changes his mind, expecting to find Theo and his scowl lurking behind me. But the lounge is empty save for a couple of contractors chatting by the bar. I should consider this a gift from the heavens, being able to escape what's sure to be a classic Theo Jordan Smackdown. I've never once found myself on the receiving end of one, and I'd been badly hoping to keep the streak alive.

But there's heavy guilt and embarrassment running through me, squeezing my organs painfully. I should have been here. I should have been here to stop this stupid mistake before it even got started. The least I can do is apologize, make it clear I'm still committed to the project. That this won't happen again.

I poke my head through the swinging kitchen doors, looking for him. It's dark in here, with only a few pot lights lighting up the perimeter of the room. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust and when they do, I spot Theo only a few feet away at the island closest to the doors.

And then the guilt seeps out of my body, grows, solidifies, and hits me like a freight train.

Because I can tell instantly that there's something very, very wrong.

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Chapter 14

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Theo

Inhale slowly through your nose.

Hold for four, relax your shoulders. Exhale through your mouth for eight, and don't clench your jaw.

Too bad I've never had luck with any of these bullshit breathing exercises that should supposedly settle me down when I get hit with anxiety attacks. And forget about meditation, which only ever means that I focus on my problems cross-legged on the floor instead of hunched over the kitchen counter, like now.

I groan into the stainless-steel. Press my head deep into my forearm. Coach my leg to stop fucking shaking like it has a life of its own. It doesn't work. The pounding of my heart is so furious I can hear the blood rushing through me.

This wouldn't have happened if I'd managed to keep my dick in my pants the other night. I'd have been here. I'd have caught this mistake before –

The swinging doors creak open and somehow my shoulders clench harder. I keep my head tucked into my arm, stay hunched over the counter. I managed to keep this bottled up out there but if Larry's come in for some kind of chit chat after that shitshow, I can't make any promises.

"Theo?"

It's Jude. The tension in my shoulders reaches unbearable levels. Her voice is barely above a whisper and it takes every bit of courage I have to

lift my head and look her in the eyes.

She's standing by the edge of the workstation currently serving as my pillow. Running nervous fingers through the lengths of hair by her ribcage. I keep my head upright just long enough to see the concerned curve in her eyebrows before dropping back into my arm.

Fucking great. Don't need her to see me like this. Don't need to contend with her pity on top of the guilt that's been ravaging me since the moment I came back into that hotel room to see her freaking out. Don't need a reminder of the monumental apology I owe her for crossing a line like that. I should have known better.

All problems for another day.

"Can't. Not now." It's a struggle even getting the words out and christ, I sound like a wounded dog. I try the breathing thing again. In, out, in, out –

This shit doesn't work.

"What can I do?" Her voice is a kind of soft I've never heard out of her and frankly I need a second to make sure I heard her right. I did, though. That's Jude, asking to help me out even after I lost my mind the other night.

I shake my head, though. *Nothing.*

"Do you want me to leave?"

My stomach clenches. I should tell her yes. Get out of here so I can pull myself together long enough to find you tomorrow and beg for forgiveness. But I can't. There's a strange kind of comfort in having her there, breathing in the same air struggling to make its way into my own lungs.

I shake my head again.

"I don't know how much you heard out there," she says slowly. "But they're going to fix the floors within our timeline. And the budget won't take a hit."

I nod into my arm, beat back the instinct to ask her to keep talking. To keep wrapping me up in that warm, gentle voice. “I heard. I’m fine. Last leg of a project always gets to me. It’ll pass.”

Another eternal pause until finally she lets out a breath, shuffles even closer. “Okay. I’m going to do something a little... different. And you can tell me to stop, but –”

Her hand lands on me and I jolt. Almost come right out of my own skin as she runs it up and down my back. I’ve felt her hands on me, sure. The memory of her nails digging into me as I touched her is burned into my brain. But this is completely different. Soothing. Nurturing in a way I never allow. In a way that makes my knees buckle.

“Theo, you’re shaking.”

“I’m fine.”

I’m not.

Everything in me wants to dive at her headfirst, wrap myself around her waist, breathe her in, let her carry some of my weight. I don’t, though. I limit myself to rolling my shoulders. She takes it as direction and runs her hand along the top of my shoulder blades.

What kind of fantasy world is this?

There’s a good chance I’m really passed out cold. This can’t be real. I’ve never been this lucky in my life.

“That’s better,” she says after a while, and it takes a second to realize she means that my breathing’s slowed down. Mercifully, she doesn’t take her hand away. “How often does this happen?”

Not a question I can answer without provoking an avalanche of pity. It’s happened regularly since my father left us, though until now I’ve managed to keep this particular character trait under wraps from everyone, even

Mom. It happens a lot less often lately, to be fair. Maybe once or twice towards the end of a project, when the stakes start to feel so high one wrong move knocks me on my ass.

“I’m usually better at managing it,” I tell her, and it’s the truth. I’d been so wrapped up in the events of Friday night, this one caught me off guard. “Four weeks behind is a lifetime when people depend on this place for a living. I just hired the kitchen staff. The serving staff. My Head Chef just put in his notice where he is now.”

The pressure from Jude’s hand becomes heavier. Like she’s attempting to erase my misery. I don’t know what’s possessed me to tell her any of this. She doesn’t owe me a thing. But she slows down the storm of thoughts in my brain with every stroke. Eases me open.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Everything’s on track.” Her voice is low, calming. In my fucked-up head space it even sounds like a purr. “You’ll get everyone in on time. And I’ll be here Monday to Friday keeping an eye on things until the project is done. I promise this won’t happen again.”

I give a meek nod. The tendons in my neck start to ease.

“But why... Why do you keep doing this if it gets to you this bad? You must have enough for one person.”

She doesn’t say it outright, but I get what she means. And she’s right. We passed the threshold of financial comfort several years ago. Still –

“I’m not one person. There’s my mom. And my sister.” Her hand falters. Only for a second, but it happens. “You’re surprised.”

“I’m surprised,” she agrees. Her voice sounds slow and distant, like she’s thinking hard. “In my head you were a Scrooge McDuck type. You count your pennies as a hobby and swim in dollar bills.”

A chuckle slips out and I realize my jaw has slacked, though it's still throbbing painfully after clenching for a solid ten minutes. "Sounds painful. Can I convert it to coins, at least?"

"I'll allow it." I hear a smile in her voice. I manage a full intake of oxygen. "You look after your mom and sister?"

"My sister less so these days, but yeah. Since I was ten."

"*Ten?*"

"One way or another. We didn't grow up with much and sometimes it got pretty bad. Trying not to get back anywhere near that."

Jude gives a sympathetic hum and I feel it deep in my chest.

Then the guilt hits. I don't mean to indicate in any kind of way that they expect it from me, take advantage of me. I lost count of how many times I caught Mom in tears growing up. She'd always felt guilty having to rely on me at home while she was out working two jobs. Guilty letting me and Pen help with the bills when we got old enough to work, even though there'd been no alternative. Guilty that she'd caved and let me move her out of the crumbling walk-up where we grew up and into a home with enough bedrooms to surround herself with Gabby and Evan whenever she wanted. Guilty I'd never let her pay me back for it.

So, she finds smaller ways to make up the difference. An extra gift at Christmas. Sneaking into my place to stock the fridge while I'm out. Never letting me pour her a glass of wine or pile food on her plate.

"It's not an obligation or anything. I'm happy to do it. But..."

"It's a lot of pressure."

I shrug. Self-imposed pressure, since the day my father pulled me out of bed at the crack of dawn to say goodbye. It feels like I haven't let myself stand still for a moment since then. Yeah, maybe it is enough, what I have

now. But the memories of scrapping for food in the earlier days still haunt me. Seeing my little sister cry because she was being teased over wearing my oversized hand-me-downs. I never want to see us back there.

Jude's voice has gone so quiet I almost have to strain to hear it. "Who looks after you?"

Her words punch me in the throat and leave behind a searing ache.

I don't need looking after, is my answer.

I don't say it. Suddenly, none of it seems like the truth. Every stroke along my back calls me on my bullshit.

"You hide this well, if it makes you feel any better." She runs a firm thumb through the space between my spine and shoulder blade. Does it on the other side when it earns her a sigh I don't mean to let out.

"Bet you love seeing me like this. Sad and crippled."

She curves her fingers and grazes her nails over my back. Heaven.

"Of course not," she says firmly. "The bickering is only fun if you give it right back. I really am sorry, Theo. I should have been here. I just..."

"Wanted to avoid me?"

I shift to rest my cheek on my forearm, careful not to indicate in any way that I want her hand to stop delivering bliss up and down my back. She'd been staring off at the wall but looks down at me now. Small sheepish smile. Sympathetic curve to her eyebrows. She's apprehensive, too. Understandable considering the way we'd left things. At least she doesn't look likely to kick me in the balls.

"Maybe," she says. "Maybe definitely."

"I get it. I timed being here thinking you'd be long gone. I assumed you didn't want to see me." I shudder when her nails graze a spot on my lower back. Fucking heaven. "I shouldn't be enjoying this."

“And I shouldn’t be doing it.” She runs over that spot again and I groan before I can help it. “I think a back scratch is the least of our worries, anyway.”

She takes away her hand and it feels like I’ve been untethered from safe ground. One day, I’ll understand what the hell it is this girl does to me.

I straighten, and Jude tucks her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. I feel a tug of envy, my eyes lingering a little too long on the curve of her hips. I can barely believe she’d let me hold her there just a couple days ago.

“Better?”

I nod, dragging my eyes up. “Hey, about Friday –”

She holds out a hand and it takes everything I have not to wrap it in one of my own. “Please. If I hear you apologize one more time for something I had you do –”

“Had me do? You talk like...” I shake my head, mostly to myself. Because the realization that’s dawning is too stupid, too insane for words. We seem to be existing in a reality where she doesn’t get that I wanted every second of what happened. Can’t comprehend how that’s possible, when I spent the entire time practically begging to feel more of her.

I shove my hands through my hair. Fucking maddening. If I’m interpreting this right, it’s the biggest travesty I’ve ever come across.

“Hey,” I say, recalling her eyes from where they floated off to. I draw myself up to my full height, taking up as much of her field of vision as possible without crowding her completely. I need her to hear this, and hear it good. “Apparently this needs saying. So I *will* say it, even though it could make this entire thing worse –”

She looks alarmed. “Then maybe you shouldn’t. We’ve done enough damage –”

My hand slices through the air, cutting her off. “I don’t care. Because you seem to be living under some kind of disturbing delusion, and frankly, it’s unacceptable. I wasn’t trying to prove a point and I wasn’t trying to win something. Touching you was completely selfish, make no mistake about it. Whatever it is you got out of it, multiply it by a hundred for me.”

Jude’s eyes go wide. Her hand flies to fidget with her hair. “Oh. Well, that’s... nice of you to say.”

“I’m not being nice. You were sexy as hell, Holland, and I’d do it all again in a heartbeat. Name the day.”

My heart’s pounding and I can’t tell whether it’s because I’m a bit ticked off or losing my mind waiting for a proper reaction. Even in the dim light I can see the red creep up her face. She’s biting her lip.

Is she... actually considering this?

“Look, it...” She glares at the ceiling like it just insulted her before settling on me with a resigned sigh. “Okay, there’s no point denying that I was into it. There’s obviously some kind of...”

She motions at the space between us. And because my body’s lost all semblance of cool, my heart picks up speed. If she tells me she’s into me too, I’ll pass out. My heart’s already taken enough strain for a day.

“Some kind of...” I prompt her.

“I don’t know,” she throws me an exasperated look, like I’m being dim on purpose. “A thing. A physical thing. Oh no, don’t you go looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

She jabs a finger at me. “Like *that*! The classic Theo Jordan Smug Face. You’re known for it. That stupid smirk and the squinty thing you do with your eyes.”

“Do I do that?” I try to fight off the smirk in question but she looks so sweet when she’s annoyed, I’m not sure I pull it off. Yeah, maybe I wish this *thing* between us had a bit more emotional bearing to it for her. But Jude Holland admitting she’s attracted to me doesn’t hurt one bit.

“Put that look away, immediately. Because either way, it *can’t* happen again and we shouldn’t have gone there to start with. You were right about the ‘bastion of professionalism,’ or however it is you put it.” Her mouth quirks, betraying the indignation in her voice. “We should keep everything completely...”

“Professional?”

“Yeah.”

Ah, rejection. It’s been a while since we met. Didn’t miss you at all.

I’d like nothing more than to throw myself from those windows out there and dive straight into the Hubbart. But she’s looking anxious now. Like she expects me to fight her on it or maybe take it out on her. It’s a sickening thought.

I lean back against the counter, give her as much of a smile as I can without completely giving away just how much I’m into her. “I have to say, the idea that I can no longer razz you for your terrible singing voice fucking devastates me.”

She laughs and the tension in her body snaps. She runs fingers through the roots of her hair. A move that screams self-conscious except this is Jude, and I can practically see the comeback build in her mouth.

“You’re one to talk. I still wake up in cold sweats to the sound of you on that high note.”

“And *that*, Holland, was a valuable lesson in be careful what you wish for. I know you think I’m an unbearable bore, but sometimes it’s for your

benefit.”

She laughs again. This breathy, low laugh that feels like velvet coating my insides. Top five favorite sounds, hands down.

“Not *completely* unbearable, it turns out.”

I cup my ear. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

I feel like I just won something. My chest swells about two sizes and I work hard to reel it in before she sees the hearts float out of my eyes.

“Don’t push it,” she grins. “But, alright. Maybe it’s not one hundred percent professional. Maybe we keep it to, like, eighty-five.”

Can’t help it. My eyes drop the length of her body. “Twenty.”

“*Fifty.*”

“Forty. That’s my best offer.”

“God, you’re terrible. Okay, fine. Forty percent professional. But zero... funny business.”

“Deal.” I wag my eyebrows, putting out my hand. “Should we shake on it?”

She jerks away so fast she almost stumbles on her feet. “*Absolutely not.*”

“Worth a shot,” I shrug as she wrestles the grin off her face.

We gaze at each other a beat, and I wonder whether there’s a rerun of those moments in our hotel room playing in her brain, too. I could be a hundred years old and I’d still get a rush thinking back to the way she sounds when she’s turned on.

“I’m going to get back out there,” she says finally, with a little smile. “There won’t be any more screw ups, okay? I swear I’ll keep everything on track.”

She's at the door before I voice the thought that's been nagging at me for weeks, perked up even worse a couple hours ago.

"Holland."

"Yeah?"

"I'm aware this isn't my place, but you should know... there's something off about Carly. I came in and she was just sitting there, watching them put in the wrong floors without a word. Didn't help me out when I tried reasoning with Larry. She *laughed* when he said it would put us weeks behind. Believe me, I know you can hold your own, but... be careful with that one."

Jude listens with her eyebrows pulled together. She gives a quick nod. "She won't set foot here again."

Minutes later, after I confirm that I am in fact awake and that our minutes together weren't part of a fever dream, I come out of the kitchen. Jude's sitting on the concrete bar top, probably because it's the only viable seating option in here. She's crunching on something out of a plastic baggie, and goes to toss in another mouthful. Cheerios? She's sitting on a bar top in a construction zone, eating Cheerios out of a zip lock bag. I don't know why my chest burns at the sight. But it does.

She salutes me when she sees me looking. "Jude Holland, reporting for duty."

Fuck, I'm into her.

So this is what it comes down to. A sixty percent window and a month to win her over. All without showing my hand because if Friday night was any indication, telling her I'm soft for her will send her away screaming.

Not sure I like my odds. But, fuck it. I'll go down trying.

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Chapter 15

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Jude

The early Tuesday sun cascades into Sunset Landing, diffused by the grime covering the windows.

My feet echo around me and the sound feels so jarring in the otherwise deserted space I tiptoe forward instead, attempting to blunt the sound of my shoes on the floor. It doesn't take much effort. The hideous flagstone is gone, neatly replaced with delicately weathered panels of faded-blue hardwood perfectly arranged in a zig-zag herringbone pattern. It looks like the undisturbed surface of a lake at dusk. Warm and inviting.

I perch myself back on top of the bar and open my laptop over folded legs. When I promised Theo I'd be here Monday to Friday until installation wrapped up, I really hadn't taken into account that this slab of concrete would serve as my seat while I did it.

But after the meltdown I witnessed in the kitchen, I can't in good conscience sit comfortably back at the office. Not with the knowledge that one wrong move could set off the kind of crippling reaction I walked in on yesterday.

This is what a good project lead does. Do whatever you need to do to keep the client happy, confident that you've got everything under control. They need you to sit on a concrete perch in a full-blown construction zone day in, day out for the next month? You show up with bells on.

Okay, so back rubs aren't strictly part of the service package. But I couldn't have walked away from that any easier than I could a kitten crying

in a dark alley. I am prime fodder for serial killers, and I can openly admit it.

I force my eyes away from the lobby doors and try to quell the reluctant anticipation in my gut. There's no reason to assume he'd even show up today, anyway.

I scroll through my unread emails.

Frankly, my life would be a lot easier without him hovering around. And do I really need any more distractions, when yesterday showed exactly what happens the second I take my eyes off the ball? No, he needs to stay away. In fact, if he *does* show up, I might politely remind him that I am here strictly for work, despite the absurd suggestion that our relationship be anything but one hundred percent professional from here on out.

I click open an email.

He just *had* to go and make it more complicated, though, didn't he? Pretty much made it impossible to look at him without wondering what the full Theo Jordan seduction feels like, when he managed all that with just a few fingers.

I delete a couple of spam emails.

He just *had* to go and talk about his mother like an unabashed momma's boy. Which would have done enough to melt me on its own if I didn't already have a soft spot whenever someone brings up their parents. Because the type of relationship Theo described, the kind where you orient your life around caring for the people you love, that's what we used to have, my family.

After Dave... My parents drowned in their loss so deep they couldn't muster enough for the kid they had left. I'd been suffering just as badly as them, when Dave went away. And still, they left me to my own devices, left

me to wallow in my grief, to dig up a deep hole and bury myself alone while they scrambled to find ways to forget. To rebuild new, happier lives free of the painful ghost of their old ones.

It wasn't only losing that kind of love that crippled me. It was the realization that I hadn't been worth keeping, worth taking with them. That I'm the kind of girl who's easy to walk away from, even by the people who should have loved me the most.

No, he needs to stay away, and things kept completely platonic, professional, for the next month of our co-existence. It would be catastrophic to become emotionally attached to someone who isn't in my life for keeps. I'm barely put together as it is.

A sudden gaggle of laughter fills the room and they arrive, the contractors with bags slung over their shoulders, worn work boots carving out footsteps across the dusty hardwood. They go a little quiet when they see me, and I wonder what kind of story Larry told to get them working late last night. One of them tips his hat at me as they trudge past.

"At ease, soldiers," I say lightly, turning back to my laptop. "I come in peace."

I feel the collective exhale.

"You drive a hard bargain, lady," one of them calls out.

I glance up, mouth curling in a half smile. "Sure do. Don't let me down, people."

"Yes ma'am." A few of them laugh.

The lobby doors crash shut and Larry's booming voice comes from behind the group. "Alright, alright, what's everyone standing around for?"

The crew shuffles off and Larry stops in his tracks when there's a break in the crowd. "Oh. It's you." He looks at me sternly. "Not here to cause a

ruckus again, are you?”

My grin is unrepentant. “Come on, Larry. You know how I love a good ruckus. It’s unfair to deprive me.”

“Do I ever.” He marches to his workbench and plops down his bag. He gestures around the room. “Well? How’s it looking? We’re finishing up the dining room tomorrow, and the rest by Thursday. Paying an arm and leg for it, out of my own pocket, but...”

“It looks amazing, Larry. Truly, I owe you.”

Larry grunts his assent but waves a contradictory hand. “Only for you, kid. You came a long way yesterday, you know. You’ve been quiet as a church mouse the past couple of years.”

“I still had a lot to learn.”

“Ah, that’s bull,” he says, propping his foot onto the workbench to retie his shoelace. “You wanted to stay on people’s good side. Saw it time and time again with those bosses you’ve been working for, even when anyone with half a brain could see you were better than any one of them. That Jerry still around? How you ever worked for him, I’ll never understand.” He studies me from across the room and even behind the thick grey beard I see his face soften. “You’re doing great, kid. Drove me up the wall yesterday, mind you, when you stormed in here making demands. But I got a real kick out of seeing you do it.”

My nose prickles as I take him in, this gruff, weathered man who’s given me some of the kindest words I’ve been offered in as long as I can remember.

“You’ve gone soft on me, Larry,” I sigh, because I know he’d rather inflict himself with a staple gun than receive the kind of gratitude I wish I could express for the gift he just gave me.

He allows just a flash of affection over his face before heading for the dining room. “Stay out of my way today, will you?”

I do.

Determined to salvage what little’s left of the likelihood of landing that promotion, I hang out on the bar top most of the morning, watching the crew fill out the space with hardwood, checking on deliveries of washroom tiles and light fixtures and confirming that the next set are running on schedule.

I’m poring over my budget spreadsheet around noon when a pair of denim-clad legs appear in my field of vision. And suddenly Theo is there, hair glistening in weighed-down curls, wearing his wet, forest green t-shirt like a second skin.

Unfair. Truly, it’s the only word worthy of describing the man. I can hardly believe he willingly put his hands on me.

“What happened to you?”

“What?” He looks down at himself. “Oh. It’s raining again.”

I peer out the windows lining the wall of the lounge. And so it is. I’ve been too busy existing in a bubble of drilling and sawdust to notice.

“Coffee?”

The word draws my eyes to the cup he’s holding. “Oh! For me?”

He thrusts the cup into my hand with a half-shrug and runs his fingers through his hair, dislodging some of the rain plastering it to his head.

“Thank you,” I say slowly, taking a tentative sip and expecting the bitter taste of black coffee. “Oh! You put some sugar in it.”

He shrugs again, cutting away to look out the windows, but I detect a light pink stain to the tips of his ears. I’ve only consumed coffee once in his company, on our road trip when he’d got me one as an apology and brought

a paper bag full of add-ins to choose from. Did he really catalog my coffee order within those two seconds?

I'm still trying to figure out what to make of this information when he hits me with more: "Will you come to the kitchen with me?"

My eyes narrow. "You should know you're being weird. You're not about to murder me, are you? Chop me up and store me in the fridge?"

"No, that's what the meat grinder is for." He bends to pick up my purse off the floor, unabashedly hanging it off his shoulder. "Come on. Bring your laptop."

The kitchen is well-lit this time, and it takes no time to figure out why he's brought me here. The island closest to the door is decked out with a large, sleek monitor and keyboard, and a cushioned barstool. The gesture is so out of place that I halt by the doors, feeling my guard crystalize over my skin. I stare between him and the makeshift desk.

"What's this?"

Hands still firmly in his pockets, Theo swings his elbow to nudge the back of the stool. "A chair."

"What's the catch here? Will said chair disintegrate when I sit?"

Theo drops into the barstool, making a show of bouncing around in it.

"Consider it a thank you for yesterday –"

"– you didn't have to do that –"

"– it was all sitting in boxes while the back office gets finished. I meant to come in and set you up earlier but my meetings ran long." He hops off the stool and shrugs as though to say *come on, play along*.

"Okay, I'll bite." The prospect of escaping even a minute of sitting on that concrete is just too good. I round the counter and set down my things,

sinking into the cushioned barstool with a half-groan-half-laugh. “God, thank *you*. Who knew a little back scratch would yield this good a return?”

Theo sorts through the computer cables sitting on the island. “It was a fucking great back scratch, to be fair.” He flips open my laptop and hits the trackpad. “Log into this for me.”

I tap in my password as he connects the monitor and hunches his hulking figure over my little laptop. I watch him fiddle around with the Bluetooth settings trying to connect the mouse and keyboard, and the entire thing is so unexpectedly sweet I start to feel oddly warm and fluttery in the belly region.

It’s been so long since I’ve been looked after in any capacity, I don’t quite know what to do with my hands. Probably the last thoughtful act a man performed in my honor was my ex-boyfriend offering me a ride home after dumping me. I did not take him up on it.

I realize I’ve been deeply inhaling the musky scent of summer rain coming off Theo’s shirt. I make myself stop, instead reaching into my bag for the zip lock bag of Cheerios making up my lunch.

“There,” he says, sliding the laptop over. “That should work.”

“Thanks. Want some?” I jiggle the bag at him.

He grimaces as though I was brandishing a bag of leeches in his direction, all clamoring for his blood. “What’s with that?”

“What’s with... cereal?” I lay a scandalized hand on my chest. “Has my lunch offended the great Theo Jordan?”

“You eat dry Cheerios for lunch? Every day?”

“And dinner. Though I do add milk when I’m feeling frisky,” I say, tossing a couple loops into my mouth. “And they’re *Honey Nut* Cheerios. It’s a world of difference.”

He blinks slowly. “Get up.”

“Huh?”

He swipes the bag from my hand and tosses it on the counter. “This is killing my street cred. Come on.” He takes off towards the back of the kitchen and I hop off my stool to follow him.

“You care about your street cred?”

He snorts. “No. But shut up and get in here, anyway.” He heaves open the stainless-steel door to the walk-in fridge and I follow him in. “We’re testing recipes when the construction crew clears out at night, so the place is stocked. What do you like?”

The fridge is lined with steel shelves, immaculately organized in clear bins that hold a full-on rainbow of fruit and vegetables, and food cartons. It’s so visually pleasing standing in here would completely soothe me were it not for the freezing temperature.

I plant a hand high on a shelf and pop my hip. “You’re angling for another back scratch, aren’t you?”

Theo comes up, mimics my pose. “I’m angling to save you from impending diabetes.”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” I blow on my knuckles and study my fingers. “I’m sorry Jordan, but these puppies are in retirement. That was a one-time event.”

He leans in close. “Focus, smart-ass. What’s it going to be? Chicken fingers? Pizza bites? PB and J with the crusts cut off?”

“Har-har.” I give him a playful shove. Or, try to. The push against his stomach barely makes him sway.

He presses his lips together against a smile. “Har-har. Pick something, Holland.”

“You don’t have to do that. If you insist on giving me your food, why don’t I make something for both of us?”

“Because I don’t want you burning the place down, that’s why. You eat cereal for lunch and dinner. And presumably breakfast. You’ll forgive me for assuming it means you couldn’t fry an egg if you tried.”

Prick.

I turn on the spot until I zero in on a stack of egg cartons. “What do you like in your omelets?”

He raises a brow. “Shaved broccoli, gruyere, maybe some pancetta –”

“Cheddar cheese. Great choice.” I pluck a brick of orange cheese off another shelf and stalk back into the kitchen with Theo at my heel.

He ducks under the counter and places a fork, grater and mixing bowl in front of me, and a pan on the burner to my left. I study the carton of eggs in front of me. Of course, I’ve made eggs before. Of course. Crack one into a pan and off you go.

Only, does one put milk in omelets? I think my mother used to do that with scrambled eggs. Is the concept the same?

Theo leans over the counter, watching me with fascination. “There a problem?”

I tap an egg onto the side of the mixing bowl and in it goes. There. “No problem at all.”

Theo eyes me curiously when I return from the fridge with a carton of milk, which should probably be a sign that this is wrong but I’ve committed to it now and so I dump a big glug of it into the mixing bowl. Followed by another two eggs, because this now just looks like a bowl of milk.

And another two eggs, because this is just a bowl of milk with a side of eggs.

“That’s a lot of eggs, don’t you think?”

“Trust the process, Chef Jordan.”

He gives a throaty laugh but by the time I swivel to witness it he’s completely deadpan again. He’s so weird about that, laughing in front of people. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more than a smirk out of him.

I dump in another egg for good measure and start grating cheese into the milky mixture, the orange chunks sinking down to the bottom of the bowl of milk and disappearing completely.

“And this is an omelet, yeah?”

“It’s a frittata,” I tell him, because whatever this goop is, it’s certainly no longer an omelet.

“Right.” He nods briskly. “A frittata. Stovetop or baked?”

“Um. Baked?”

He goes around me and swaps out the pan he’d given me, jabbing at the oven’s keypad. Only when I notice several intact yolks floating in the milk do I remember to stir the mixture.

“Well, that should do it.” I tip the bowl messily into the pan, splashing myself heartily with milk. It’s a globby, soupy mess.

“Yum.” Theo peers into the pan. “Is that all you’re putting in it?”

But I hip check him out of the way and throw the pan into the oven, yelping on the way down because *crap* this pan is heavy. I sit on the floor with my legs criss-crossed.

“And now we wait. Hope you’re ready to eat your words.”

Theo drops down beside me, stretching out his long legs next to mine. “Oh, I doubt I’ll be doing any kind of eating.”

Jerk.

The phone in Theo's hand lights up and he stares quietly at a stream of incoming texts. It's gradual, barely perceptible, but out of the corner of my eye I watch his shoulders tense up, rise higher towards his ears with every new message. He types up a reply then deletes it. Types another then deletes it, too. His foot starts jiggling in a way that screams such anxious energy I instantly start feeling on edge. He looks on the brink of another breakdown, and I'm not sure I can stand to witness that again.

Theo deletes a third reply and switches off his screen with a sigh, turning his phone in his hands over and over.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I nod at his phone when he gives me a questioning look.

"It's nothing. Getting updates from my business partners out West. They're feeling neglected."

I pick at the sole of my sneaker, tentatively seizing the opening. Talking about things seemed to have helped yesterday. Maybe if I ease him through a conversation, just casually, he might settle down a little?

"Do you fly out there a lot?"

"Not since I've been back. Haven't been able to. Or –" He shakes his head a little, as though he just caught himself in a lie. "I haven't wanted to."

"And they want you there more often?"

He looks at me uncertainly, almost like he's not used to saying these kinds of words out loud. "They're having to pick up the slack a bit more with me gone. Honestly..."

"Honestly..." I prompt when he loses steam.

He gives a tentative sidelong glance. "When I moved out there, I was expecting to stay. Not sure I would have opened up two spots if I knew I'd

want to be back here eventually. They prefer being hands-off. I prefer being hands-on.”

“Don’t I know it.” I bulge my eyes teasingly, and he suppresses a smile.

“It’s not that I *want* to be a control freak. I’m not sure what I’d do with myself if I weren’t.”

“Well, what do you want?” He frowns at the question and I chuckle. “Okay, that was a bit existential. How about this: what does Theo Jordan do for fun?”

He rubs his face, thinking a moment. “I don’t know. I don’t exactly have that much spare time.”

“Right. Try this, then: what would you rather be doing, if you weren’t sitting here babysitting your employee?”

“Is that why you think I’m here?”

The counter question hangs in the air, held up by small strings of incredulity in his voice.

“Isn’t it?”

He drops his eyes. “Right. Yeah. I hoped I was more subtle than that, I guess. Anyway, if I’m not babysitting my employee... I’d run, work out. See my mom, my sister. My friends.”

“Fascinating – Darth Vader has friends. Hang on, they are *real*, aren’t they? I’m not counting the ass-kissers you keep around to feed your ego.”

He rolls his eyes. “My best friend is a three-year-old named Gabby, and she’s as real as it gets. There’s nail polish on my toes to prove it.”

I sit up so abruptly the edges of my vision go dark.

“Take it off,” I command.

Perhaps I might have considered wording that differently.

“What an interesting turn of events. I thought you said no more funny business, but...” Theo starts fiddling with the zip of his pants, fighting off a laugh.

“Don’t you dare.” I swat his hand away from his jeans and nudge his foot with mine. “Your shoe, Theo. Take it off. I need to see.”

I don’t expect him to agree to it. But after a moment he lines his toes to the back of his left heel and pushes off his sneaker. He’s wearing socks.

He raises a single eyebrow. I raise a single eyebrow. He doesn’t think I’ll do it. Which, naturally, is exactly why I do. I reach and tug off the sock in one fluid motion.

Pink toes.

“I don’t have any acetone.”

If someone came in at this very second they’d come across a very weird scene, with me kneeling at his feet, sock in hand. Looking at the pink polish on his toes like it just professed its undying love to me. The sight of it is so sweet my nose starts to prickle.

It’s been niggling at me, since our trip to the nursery. That maybe I got him all wrong. Maybe he really thought he’d been doing the right thing, calling Diana about me. Maybe he had reasonable reservations about me after that night at Nivoli’s. Because how could this version of him be possible, otherwise? The version I saw yesterday, worried about his family, his staff? The one who set up a desk for me, who’d tried to feed me something other than cereal for lunch? Theo Jordan is the kind of guy who lets three-year-olds paint his nails pink.

Theo coughs once, pulling me into the present. He’s blushing. Actually freaking *blushing* and oh dear god there’s a flurry of butterflies bouncing around my stomach.

Damn it. I'm starting to like this guy.

"Don't tell me you have a foot fetish, Holland."

I toss him his sock, trying to swallow the feeling. Because this cannot happen. It can't. I can't have an *actual* crush on him. Just... No.

"Now, Theo," I patronize, sitting back against the island. "What did we say about kidnapping children and pretending they're your friends?"

He swoops down to dress his foot. He's either mercifully oblivious to the impact his toes have had on me, or willing to let it slide. "Gabby's my niece. She styles my hair and tells me which stuffed toy I have to spoon at night."

Oh, come *on*.

I have turned to mush. My body is seeping slowly on its way to becoming a puddle on the floor.

"You're a kid person?"

He tugs at the corner of his mouth. "I am a kid person. I know that must shock you." He gets up and disappears for a few seconds, coming back with two water bottles. He pauses, holding one out to me. "Are you a kid person?"

"Yeah. I am."

Theo nods as he sits, twisting open his bottle and looking terribly forlorn. I fiddle with the label on my mine. I'd always been a little ambivalent about it, having kids of my own. But a switch flipped at some point after the dissolution of my family. Wanting to build the kind I'd lost.

"Thanks, by the way," he says suddenly. When I lift my brows, he gives me a look that says *come on*. "For talking me down. You're not that subtle, Holland."

I try to stifle a smile. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“Fine. Does that mean I get a turn with the questions?”

I lift my chin and jab my bottle in his direction. “Oh no, this is totally non-reciprocal. Besides, I’m nowhere near as interesting.”

“I’m interested,” he says quickly, and I don’t reel in the flash of surprise on my face fast enough. The tips of his ears turn pink. “I mean... Not like – *that*, or anything.”

“No, of course not,” I brush the non-existent lint off my jeans and the uncomfortable pang of... something, from my gut. Disappointment? “That would be...”

“Yeah,” he says slowly, rubbing his forearm. “Right. Well. How about this, then? I ask, and you call ‘out of bounds’ whenever you want.”

I tear a strip off the bottle label. “That’s very accommodating.”

“This part of you I’ve managed to figure out. You spook easy.”

“I *spook* easy?”

He draws in his knees and scratches at something on his pants. “You do. I only have my own assumptions on why, obviously. So this might be completely off base. But you’re a walking dichotomy.”

“Using your big boy words, Theo. Look at you go.”

He nudges me. “See – that’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’re funny. You’ve got a sharp tongue and you’re not timid about going head-to-head with people, least of all me, which... not to sound full of myself or anything, but very few people actually have the guts to do that. You aren’t shy by any stretch... and then suddenly you are.”

I shift uncomfortably. “I’m private, I guess.”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t think you are. Not naturally, at least. I can see the gears shift sometimes, in your head. Like you’re biting your tongue, finding reasons to shut down. The only time I’ve ever seen you

really let yourself be is when we argue. I think you get a real kick out of bickering with me.”

I smile wryly. “Why do you think I agreed to the forty percent rule?”

I realize I’ve completely shredded the label off my water bottle. I bundle it up in my fist. He holds out his hand for the balled-up paper and tosses it into the waste bin under the counter.

“So, did I get it right?”

I knew I’d become closed off after my family imploded. It was completely premeditated, designed to protect myself from further loss. But I don’t think I ever realized I’d become bad enough for people to notice.

I let my head loll against the counter. “Bickering is easy. Most of all with people I don’t get along with. Didn’t get along with,” I amend as an afterthought.

“Sure,” he shrugs. “It’s low stakes. Nothing to lose.”

I nod. “So I guess you *did* get it right. I’ve been burned pretty badly by people who should have been the last to burn me. And I’m not really looking for a repeat. If that means being a little closed off, so be it.”

I feel Theo’s eyes on me even though I stare fixedly at the oven.

“Who burned you?”

His voice is soft, completely tentative and if I’m interpreting it right, it’s completely devoid of expectation. Like he knows he’s not getting an answer, but wants me to know he’s interested. That the way I feel is meaningful enough to probe. But we’re approaching dangerous territory now. And I’m not willing to share that part of me. Not here, not with him. The playfulness that’s developed between us is just too fresh.

“Out of bounds,” he supplies after a second. It’s a statement and not a question, and the look he gives me is entirely sympathetic.

“Out of bounds,” I nod, eyes drifting back to the oven, and I take in the smell and bubbling sounds of cooking eggs. “Oh, *fuck!*”

Theo jumps beside me. “What just happened?”

I shuffle to the oven on my knees and peer inside. “The frittata! I forgot to season it.” I hear a low laugh behind me. “You knew! Why didn’t you say anything?”

He fights off a smile. “You told me to trust the process.”

I give him a look of mock-outrage. “This is sabotage! Absolutely rotten sportsmanship. You wanted me to fail –”

“*Never.*”

“I expected so much better from you, the so-called Great Chef Jordan –”

“Who calls me that?”

“And what do you know, he turns out to be a total backstabbing schemer –”

“Am I?”

The timer goes off. By the time I’ve scrambled upright, Theo is dropping the sizzling pan onto the counter. We huddle over it.

Huh. Well, that’s interesting.

“Is it supposed to jiggle like that?” I ask.

“You tell me.”

“Then yes. It is supposed to jiggle.”

“Great. And what about that grey film on top?”

“Completely normal.”

“Good.” He walks off and returns with two forks. “After you.”

I pause with my fork over the pan. “Should we add salt?”

Theo’s snort turns into a cough when I give him a searing look. He returns with a pile of salt in the palm of his hand. When I take his wrist and

tip the handful into the pan, his look of horror is the only indication that I've done something wrong. I eye the Everest-sized mound of salt now sitting in the middle of the frittata.

Perhaps he meant for me to sprinkle a little bit in, like I've seen them do on cooking shows. I use my fork to spread the salt over the grey surface of the frittata. Why *is* it grey?

"Well." I nod at his fork. "Dig in."

"*Me?* You've got to be joking."

"I'm totally serious, you're the one with the trained palate –"

"Which you're about to destroy –"

"You are such a wimp –"

"Neither one of us should be eating this –"

"Oh my god. Fine!" I dig into the pan, Theo's look of terror the backdrop to the fork rising to my mouth.

"Wait!" His fingers close around my wrist. "Wait. I'll – fuck. If you insist on trying this thing, then I'll do it."

He plucks the fork from my hand and shoves the bite into his mouth. I hold my breath as I watch him chew. Partly because I'm secretly hoping it tastes good, and partly because I want to catch the early signs of projectile vomit so that I can move out of his way.

Theo nods as he swallows the bite. "Mm. Mhm."

My jaw drops. "It's *good?*"

I reach for the fork but he swats my hand, digging into the pan again to shovel in another mouthful. I watch, delighted, as he swallows and pauses to glance at me with the fork poised over the frittata. And his deadpan expression melts into a look of pure agony.

“Holland, I’m begging you. Quit looking at me like I’m making your day. I need to stop eating this.”

“What? It’s *bad*?”

Theo groans, hurrying to pull a waste bin from under the counter. He spits into it.

“I’m going to die of salmonella poisoning –”

“*Then why were you eating it?*”

“I’ll be a total fucking laughing stock –” He guzzles from his water bottle.

“If you’re dead, does that really matter?”

“‘Chef to Watch for Six Years Running Dies Because He Couldn’t Cook a Fucking Egg.’ You better take the fall for this –”

“I will not! It’ll serve you right for lying!”

He shakes his head ruefully. “Why is it *grey*, Holland? *Why?*”

And that does it. He looks so completely distraught I dissolve into laughter. Loud, can’t catch my breath, my ribs are hurting kind of laughter. Theo folds over the counter with his face in the crook of his elbow, and his shoulders start shaking.

He’s laughing, too. Theo Jordan is properly laughing, and the sound of it is so deep, and warm, and unexpected it sends another long, exhilarated peal out of me.

“Oh my god! You *can* laugh.” I grip the back of his shirt and tug. “Let me see!”

“Argh, get off!” His voice is hoarse, thick with laughter. He swats blindly with the hand not hiding his face. “You can’t fuck with me the rest of the day. You just tried to *poison* me.”

I heave at his shirt. When that doesn't work, I grip the back pockets of his jeans and pull. "Let me see! Come on, I earned that laugh. Give me the glory."

Theo pivots straight into my torso, and I yelp when he tosses me over his shoulder. "Give you the glory, huh? I think you got enough out of me for a day. You and your poison frittata."

There are tears of laughter streaking down my forehead by the time he rounds the island and drops me into the stool at my makeshift desk. He helps me sort through the hair that's tangled over my face and shakes his head when I surface from underneath.

"Bet you regret messing with my Cheerios now, huh?" I reach for the bag and pop a couple in my mouth.

Theo does the same, planting his hands on the back of the stool and enclosing me into my seat as he chews. "Look, contrary to popular belief, I happen to be a good person. So, despite the attempted murder I'm going to do you a favor. My Head Chef and I are here Monday and Wednesday nights testing recipes. Drop in whenever you want. Might learn a few things."

My reply catches when he hooks a finger around a strand of my hair and tucks it behind my ear. And suddenly he's standing too close. The look in his eyes just a little too scolding, too cocky. Too reminiscent of the moments before he slipped his fingers where he shouldn't. Before I watched him do things I shouldn't have seen, haven't been able to unsee when I'm laying in bed at night.

The smile fades off my face as my body starts buzzing. A delicate vibration gripping me from top to bottom, every bit of me going into overdrive trying to figure out how to even out the acute longing from my

body and the protest from my brain. I feel cold and unbearably hot at the same time. Awake and as though I'm dreaming.

Theo's brows twitch when he senses the shift in energy, gaze drops and it dawns on me that I'm biting my lip.

"No funny business," he reminds me quietly, without moving an inch away.

My next breath takes a whole lot of concentration. Likely because I'm simultaneously imagining the feel of his hair snagging between my fingers. "Did we ever define funny business?"

His eyes dart between both of mine, looking now as confused as I am conflicted. With one hand still planted on the backrest of my chair, he sweeps the hair off my shoulder, fingertips grazing my neck. I feel the touch everywhere.

"Holland –"

"Kiddo?"

We swivel. Larry is poking through the kitchen doors, eyes darting between Theo and me. It takes me a moment to wrap my head around the sight of him. I completely forgot there was a crew of twenty people on the other side of that door. Has that drilling sound been there the whole time?

Larry watches Theo retreat towards the mess I made on the island behind me. "Second coat of paint went on in the washrooms, kid. Want to give it a look?"

"Yes, please." The words come out breathlessly. I jump off the stool and follow him out into the lounge on unsteady legs, looking back in time to see Theo dump the remaining frittata into the trash.

"Everything alright in there?" Larry asks, when the doors swing shut behind us. We sidestep a couple of contractors hauling a stack of hardwood

towards the dining room.

“Yeah, just... trying out a new recipe.”

“He behaving himself?”

“Oh!” I say, grasping the undercurrent of his words and touched by his concern. “Yeah, he’s great. He’s... Yeah. I’m great.”

His frown clears. “Ah. I see,” he says knowingly and immediately my cheeks start to burn.

“No, it’s not – there’s nothing to see.”

But he shoots me a sidelong glance, chortling as he pushes open the washroom door.

“Sure, kid. Sure.”

Chapter 16

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Theo

“Hey boss, that thing’s starting to smoke.”
I start.

I couldn’t tell you how long I’ve been standing here, with what’s sure to be a real dumb look on my face. But by the looks of the blackened butter in front of me, I’d say it’s about three minutes too long.

I choose to ignore the way Finn’s looking at me and haul the pan onto the counter behind us. Duck down to grab a new one from under the workstation. Twist the knob on the stovetop so the flames shrink down a bit.

By some sheer act of god, Jude decided she’d drop by tonight while me and Finn, the restaurant’s Head Chef, attempt to finish off the menu before our first night of service. She’d shocked me today with the mere acknowledgment that she remembered the offer. We hadn’t talked about it since the first time I mentioned these kitchen sessions last week. But we’ve been at it for an hour now, and still no sign of her.

The past week has been something out of a dream. I’ve gotten away with dialing in for meetings or canceling them outright to work from the kitchen with her. And yeah, I’d caught a bit of her irritation as she first watched me set up shop across from her. Probably because she believed that shit about my being there to keep an eye on things, and not because I wake up every morning hungry for more of her. But a week in, it’s easy to see that something’s shifted.

For better or worse, Jude and I have become friends. And maybe it's not exactly what I want from her. Maybe the word *friends* is just devastating enough to kill me slowly and painfully over time. But I'll take whatever I can get at this point, if the alternative is not having her at all.

I slide my knife through a stick of butter, splitting it into cubes that I dump into the clean pan. It disintegrates into bubbles faster than it should. I jab at the knob again.

The only — the *only* — pitfall is that, quite frankly, I've never been this fucking rattled in my life.

You'd think my senses would've dulled by now. You'd think her smile wouldn't still turn me to rubble at her feet. Or that the way she flicks her hair when she's being snarky wouldn't still make me woozy with want. But I've officially spiraled into permanent headcase territory. Second guessing my every move, overthinking all of hers.

She told me she wants to keep things professional. A clear sign she's not interested, right?

But then she finds any excuse to touch me. Like today. She touched me a total of thirty-one times. Completely casual stuff. A little nudge or a playful shove. But... maybe she's into me?

And then it occurs to me that I've actually kept a tally of every time she made physical contact with me, and I wish someone would just put me out of my misery already.

The whole thing's got me so off kilter even my team's noticed I'm not all there. Brenda called me up last night, saying she's fielding rumors I'm distracted because I've contracted some kind of terminal illness.

“Should I take over?”

Shit. Maybe we scrap the recipe for a browned butter sauce instead. Seems it's all I can muster at this point. I dump the second burned pan on top of the first. When I turn back, Finn's jiggling a blond eyebrow at me.

"Careful, boss. Someone might see and think you're human."

"Shut up."

Finn's done a good job of the menu so far. I managed to talk him into leaving his gig at Brookwood, where he'd worked under me for a couple years before stepping in as Head Chef after I left to open Nivoli's. He's a good guy, if you can look past the non-stop optimism and careless disposition. Currently, he's fingers deep in a sea bass with its guts spilling over the edge of his cutting board in a way that makes me want to chuck a bar rag at him and tell him to get his shit together. But I'm very aware of the way Finn functions. At one point, you look over at him and wonder how the hell he's going to get himself out of the mess in front of him. Only to turn back minutes later to a pristine board and flawless filet.

I wipe my fingers on my apron and pull out my phone. Seven thirty-nine.

"This would be the fiftieth time you checked your phone in the last hour. I'm intrigued, boss."

I shove the phone into my back pocket. "Mind your own business," I snap. "And stop calling me that."

Finn snickers and tosses fish innards into the waste bin. Another point in favor of Finn: he's as used to me and my mood swings as I am to him.

I'm under the counter digging out pan number three when I hear the doors swing open. I move so fast I smash my head on the edge of the counter on the way up. Barely registering pain.

As much as I die a little whenever I see her in the likes of that red dress she wore on our road trip, this is the Jude that really does it for me. Faded jeans with the knees ripped up, scuffed up sneakers, tank top that hugs all the right places. Hair disheveled in this mind-blowing, windswept kind of way that makes my insides burn.

How does a woman like this exist, exactly? A hot as hell exterior that's just a cherry on top of a sharp tongue and the kind of unfettered compassion that makes me want to tuck her in my pocket and pull her out whenever I need a good hug. Not that we've ever hugged or anything. Wishful thinking.

Jude hovers by the door. Awkward like she hasn't spent the last week working in here, and looking a little like she's trying to come up with a reason to head right back out.

"Hey," I say, before she can slip away. "You made it."

She looks from me to Finn to me again. "Are you sure it's okay for me to be here?"

"Yes," I say too fast. I clear the non-existent phlegm in my throat. "You'll come in handy. We need a guinea pig."

Jude hesitates then comes around to her makeshift desk and sets down her bag. "I think of myself as more of a rabbit. Soft and cuddly."

Definitely soft. Probably gives good cuddles. Not that I'd know.

"No – you're a chipmunk. Small and squirrely."

What?

Did I – did I just call her a chipmunk?

Thank god she chuckles, or I'd have buried myself in a burning oven.

"So, what does that make you, if you're prickly and oversized?" She flashes me a grin before turning to Finn. "I'm sorry. He has no manners."

I'm Jude."

He puts up a hand. "Finn. I'd shake your hand but I doubt you came here looking to get covered in fish guts. Are you two..."

I cut him off with a look that says *shut your mouth or pack your apron*. "She does the design. For the – this place. Here. Out there."

God, I hate myself.

Jude gives me a funny look as she drags her stool over to where we're working, while Finn throws me that shit eating grin that's more than once made me want to slap it off his face.

"Shut up," I mutter to him under my breath.

Jude sits and folds her hands on top of the counter, like she's just been cast to judge a cooking competition. "So. I'm a guinea pig for what, exactly?"

~

"Yeah, so, put your hand flat here. And slide your fingers like... Just like that. And if you angle deep enough... Yeah, right there. Do you feel that?"

If looks could kill... Well, I'd be pretty fucking happy right now.

Finn pushes Jude's hand onto the gutted fish in front of her, stepping behind her to help guide her knife hand along its spine. From where I'm standing at the other end of the workstation, I hear the inconsistent scrape of bones. Not perfect, but the fact that she's even hitting bone like that on her first try is pretty impressive.

If only Finn would get his hands off her.

We've been at it for a couple of hours. Coming up with and dumping sauce after sauce until we narrow it down to two that I now douse over sea bass for us to decide between. Jude spent most of her time watching us, and

Finn took it upon himself to narrate our work. Mostly because I've never been good at focusing on much else other than cooking when I get into it. And also, because my vocal cords still seem to go soft whenever I look at her.

Jude stared at me, though, more than a couple times. I caught her once while I was chopping an onion, again when I took over the filleting from Finn. She got so into watching me cut through a sea bass that Finn suggested she try it when we finished cooking. I'm equal parts pissed off that I didn't think of it first, seeing how big the idea made her smile, and that I'm not the one with an excuse to stand as close to her as Finn is right now.

I run a clean rag along the rim of the six plates of sea bass we're trialing. The winning version'll make it to the menu, the last open slot before we lock it down and start training the rest of the kitchen staff.

"Bit choppy, but it works," Finn says of Jude's filet, when she cuts it clear. "Not bad for your first time, Guinea Pig."

"I can't believe I made this." Jude holds out the piece of fish like it's an Olympic gold, and it might be the most endearing thing I've ever seen. A prickle of pride makes it through my irritation.

"The second side's always trickier. Wanna give it a shot?"

"We're eating now. These are ready."

My voice comes out loud. Sullen. Because, yeah, I don't have a claim on her. But in my head, she's wrapped up in this delicate glass bubble. To be worshipped from afar, and not with my soon-to-be ex-Head Chef enclosing her into her counter.

Jude throws me a look of pure amusement and bumps me with her hip on her way to the sinks at the back of the kitchen, dirty hands held out in

front of her.

Thirty-two.

Finn scrapes the fish scraps into a waste bin. “Man, you’ve got it bad,” he mutters laughingly when she’s out of earshot. “How many ways have you pictured killing me by now?”

“Several.”

He shrugs. “I’m doing you a favor.”

“What favor is that, exactly? Feeling her up in front of me?”

He gives me an odd look. “Ah, take it easy. It was only her hand. You wanna know if she’s into you, don’t you? I don’t know what’s going on with you, but someone needs to do something about it. I’m throwing her my best stuff.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I stack the dirty pots and pans on the counter behind me and wipe down enough counter space for the three of us to eat.

“You know.” Finn flashes me a dumb grin. Settles his face and does something stupid with his eyebrow. “That. Among other things.”

I recoil. “*That’s* your best stuff? You’re lucky you’re pretty.”

He laughs, completely unfazed by my horror. “You aren’t the target demographic. And you’ve seen my success rate. If she doesn’t go for it, then you know.”

He’s a cocky idiot. But he isn’t wrong – I have seen his success rate. Finn had a not-so-subtle reputation around Brookwood for making his rounds with the women on the serving team. There wasn’t a single one of them he couldn’t pull, once he’d set his sights on them. Made easy, no doubt, by his golden retriever personality. And the fact that, as Pen put it, anyone with eyes could appreciate the look of him. The real art of it,

though, was that his reputation among the team never suffered. Not a single awkward moment between him and any of the women he'd slept with, and eventually spending a night with Finn became some kind of badge of honor among them.

I scrape the hair off my face, watching him tug free the ties of his apron. The last thing I need is Jude falling for a friend. I'd need hours of therapy just to figure out how to function around them.

"This stops now," I tell him. "Do you hear me?"

"You need all the help you can get, man. You're a wreck."

"You're a wreck?"

Jude hops into her stool, looking at me curiously. Maybe a bit anxiously, hanging onto Finn's words the same way she does whenever I show a hint of anxiety since the day she caught me melting down in the kitchen.

"I'm fine," I say, sounding completely not fine.

"Right," she says slowly. She's not buying my shit for a second. But she glances at Finn, and I know the only reason she's about to let it slide is because he's around, like letting me have it is something she'd rather do in private. The thought that there's even a single thing she'd want to handle with me in private cheers me up considerably. "Well, whatcha got for us, Chef Jordan?"

We dig into two plates each, weighing out our options. But I barely manage to taste what's in front of me, instead spending most of my time studying her reaction. Telling myself that she's the target clientele, like I'm not about to put her favorite on this menu just because I'm nuts about her.

"Okay, I'm definitely leaning towards the hibiscus."

"Hibiscus? You think?" Finn's watching her closely, leaning his elbows on the counter so that he stretches out towards her.

I want to grab him by the scruff and toss him into the dumpster. Instead, I lean my hip against the counter. Arms crossed tightly so I don't give into the urge to throttle him over the way he's looking at her.

Jude gives him a mock exasperated look. "You're not supposed to bias the guinea pig. You're totally skewing the findings!"

"I'm not skewing anything! It was just a question."

"Finley," she says, sternly.

"Guinea Pig," he matches her tone. He gives her that stupid lopsided grin and she grins back. An ugly jealousy roars in the pit of my stomach, hating that she isn't blessing me with that look.

Weeks. It took weeks to get to a point where she's playful with me that way. It took Finn about half a second to get there. Sure, he didn't almost get her fired. But is there something about him she's into?

She's attracted to me, this I know. But what good is that, now that I feel this way about her? I have no interest in a meaningless fling. None whatsoever.

Is *this* her type, then? The kind of guy she'd want to be with? The happy blond pretty boy type? She'd said something about liking 'cute' guys in that hotel restaurant, didn't she?

I don't think anyone's ever told me I was *cute*. Not that I cared much at the time, when the alternatives women have thrown at me sounded better. Cute. What does that mean, even?

Can I... How does one become *cute*? Do I cut my hair, maybe? Or – Jesus. What the ever-living fuck is wrong with me?

The rest of the kitchen is oblivious to my meltdown. Jude takes a bite of the second option, the lemon eucalyptus sauce, and rolls her eyes back into her head.

“See? Skewed. Now I like this one.”

“Here, try it like this.” Finn grabs the fork out of her hand and spears a potato, scraping on some fish and sauce to cap off the bite.

If he feeds that to her, I will fire him on the spot. But he hands it to her instead and she gives him another grin before swallowing the bite.

She groans. “Amazing.”

Finn turns to me, the stupid look on his face faltering when he sees my death stare. “Well, I think we’re done here, boss. Eucalyptus edges out.”

“I don’t think so.”

God, I’m a jealous prick.

But Jude only looks at me like I’ve done some kind of amusing dance. “So *grumpy* tonight, Theo. You know, I kind of lost hope for this dish after the way your third sauce turned out.”

She’s gazing at me, pretty much deadpan except that I’ve spent the better part of a month memorizing her, and nothing really gets me going like the barely-there crinkle in the corner of her eyes when she’s teasing me. It clears the fog in my head instantly.

“Are you really in a position to laugh about a sauce that maybe – *maybe* – looked a little too yellow?”

She bites back a laugh. “It looked like radioactive waste. My tongue is still a little tingly.”

“You put ghost pepper in the spaghetti you made us for lunch today.”

“So?”

“So, *my* tongue is still a little tingly. Not all green-colored peppers are created equal, Holland.”

“Yet you ate every bite,” she bats her eyelashes.

I did. Grey eggs, ghost pepper pasta, the rubbery chicken thighs from yesterday that were so overcooked each bite took a good five minutes to chew... Somewhere along the line I realized I'd probably eat a pile of dirt, if it made her smile. I'm a fucking goner for this girl.

Finn gives me a look like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. I gather up our plates, pushing the scraps into a bin behind me.

"Okay, Finn. Tell me you're single."

The plate slides straight out of my hand. It lands on something soft and fleshy at the bottom of the bin. Probably my heart. Finn does the stupid fucking laugh I've watched him pull on more than one woman at Brookwood as I root through the bin to retrieve the plate.

"I'll be whatever you want, baby."

I will kill him.

Then revive him so I can fire him. Then kill him again. Then –

Jude snorts. "Please. You couldn't handle me."

"Try me."

I try to decide between strangulation or impaling him with a fish knife.

"Actually, I'm asking for my friend Jenna. I think you two might be a match made in heaven."

Tonight has shaved a decade off my life. I don't know what I expected. She's probably beating men away with a stick every time she makes it out on her doorstep. I mean, *look* at her. I have no right to feel this possessive –

I turn back to catch Jude staring again. Her cheeks flush. Why are they flushing?

Finn grabs his phone off the counter behind him. "Oh yeah? Alright, give me her number. If she's anything like you, we'll end up married."

This shameless fucking flirt –

“No, she’s way better than me.”

Not possible.

“Besides, I don’t know who you’re trying to kid, talking about getting married.” She jumps off her stool and swipes at her phone, handing it to Finn. “You’ve got trouble stamped on your forehead.”

“You don’t like a little trouble?”

“Not your kind,” she tells him, gathering her things from the workstation behind her.

Everything. It takes everything I have not to sink to my knees and thank her for putting me out of that hell. I roll my shoulders, freeing the tension in my back.

“What’s your type, then?” Finn asks with a glance my way as he copies a number from her phone into his. “Maybe I know someone.”

It’s sad. How fast my heart picked up, waiting for her answer.

But Jude’s an expert deflector, and she never disappoints. She laughs, sidestepping the question completely as she hauls her bag over her shoulder.

My heart sinks. She’s leaving and I haven’t had a second alone with her. I have no idea what it is I’d say to her if I did, but I cast around for some excuse to keep her, anyway. I don’t come up with anything by the time she takes her phone back from Finn.

“Well, thanks for the full stomach,” she tells us. “And you should *definitely* go with the hibiscus.”

“The guinea pig has spoken. Thanks for the wife.” Finn waves his phone at her before hunching over it with a frown. Probably realizing he’ll have to string together a sentence since he can’t rely on that stupid face of his through text.

Jude gives me a long look before lifting and dropping a shoulder. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

My throat’s gone so dry I only manage a nod. Finn throws me a silent *what the hell is wrong with you?* as she makes for the door.

Shit.

“Do you want a ride home?” I blurt out. My voice echoes around the otherwise quiet kitchen and I wince.

Jude exchanges an uncertain look with Finn as she hitches up her bag. “Um. That’s okay. I’m taking the subway.”

“Like hell you are.”

“W-what?”

Finn closes his eyes and gives a pitying shake of his head.

What the *actual* fuck is wrong with me? Seriously. I need someone to dissect the last month of my life. Point out the exact moment I lost my mind, or any semblance of cool or charm I supposedly used to have.

I clear my throat. “I meant, it’s pretty late. Probably safer to get a ride.”

Finn drags a hand down his face.

“We can go now,” I say quickly, attempting a recovery. “Finn’ll clean this up. You’ve got this, right buddy? Lock up when you’re done.”

That clears the stupid grin off his face real fast. I strip off my apron, stopping by him on the way out.

“By the way,” I tell him quietly, with my back to Jude so she doesn’t hear. “You do anything to hurt that friend of hers and you’ll have a serious problem on your hands.” I clap him on the back. “We clear?”

But he only gives me his best shit eating grin. “You’ve got enough problems without thinking about mine, boss.”

I long for the days when I had fear on my side.

It's pitch black and quiet out, aside from the rush of the Hubbart on the other side of the restaurant. It's a nice night, though. Still warm and with barely a breeze, and if I'd had any kind of forethought, I might have come up with somewhere for us to go after we wrapped up here. Take advantage of the fact that it could be the middle of the night in this city and there'd still be about a thousand things to do.

As it is, I keep my mouth firmly shut until we get into the car because, frankly, I no longer trust myself to keep from saying something that'll freak her out of the drive home.

"You are so weird at night," Jude says suddenly.

And only then do I realize I've been sitting here hovering my finger over the car's start button for a good few seconds.

I grunt, for some reason. And turn on the car.

"Oh-kay," she drawls when I still haven't said anything. "Well, thanks for offering to drive me."

Get. Your shit. Together.

I cough, fiddle around with the rear-view mirror for no reason whatsoever. "Any time. I don't like... You shouldn't really be walking around this late by yourself. Actually – give me your phone."

She keys in her passcode and I put my number into her contacts.

"There. Whenever you need a ride, okay? I mean it."

Jude stares down at her phone with her eyebrows pinched together. "Thanks. Aren't you going to ask for my number too?"

"You don't owe me your number." I put the car in reverse. "So, where am I going?"

Jude types quietly and a second later my phone goes off from the cupholders between us. "There. I can't offer to chauffeur you around. But if

you ever want to talk, or something.”

I perform a full stop at a stop sign.

Talk? To her? So, like every minute of every day?

“I think you can drive now,” she teases when I zone out again.

She pokes me in the rib.

Thirty-three.

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Chapter 17

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Jude

“How’d it go?”

I drop into my bar stool, coffee sloshing out of the hole in the lid when the cup claps down onto the stainless-steel island. Theo looks up from his laptop, lined up across me where he’s taken residence for the past couple weeks.

I’ve just finished giving Diana a tour of the progress we’ve made on Sunset Landing, after she dropped in unannounced despite my daily status reports. Likely she’s still haunted by the flooring debacle, or maybe she wanted to make sure I truly was hunkered down on-site, and not vacationing in the Galapagos.

“It was hard to tell. She’s got a good poker face,” I tell Theo, flicking on my computer. “But I think she was happy.”

She couldn’t have come by at a better time, either. Sunset Landing has started coming to life. The plushy velvet bench seating is in, which we covered with tarps as the last of the construction work wraps up. I spent a long time yesterday just standing beneath the light installation, a gigantic swirl of wrought iron, wishing I could plunge the place into darkness just to see its full effect.

The place is still missing a last coat of paint, the living wall and furniture aren’t due for another week and overall, everything is in desperate need of a major cleaning job, but it’s nearly there. I’m actually pulling it

off. And with the project's end on the horizon – and with it, Theo's decision on the contract renewal – my promotion feels so close I can taste it.

Theo's eyes have dropped back to his screen. "'Course she's happy," he tells me over his typing. "It's looking great out there."

When I only stare, he adds: "What?"

I tuck my pen into my ponytail and push my computer monitor off to the side. "Come here," I tell him, stretching over the counter. I crook my finger when he only gives me a look. "Get over here, Jordan."

His expression is pure suspicion, but he leans towards my outstretched hand anyway. I sweep aside the curls over his forehead and press the back of my palm against his skin.

"Just as I suspected. You're coming down with something. And I bet it's terminal."

The lousy joke earns me a groan and a masterful eyeroll as I fall back into my seat.

"I can give credit where it's due, smart-ass. You happen to know what you're doing," he tells me, indicating his laptop. "The same can't be said about Erica Wilson."

"And why do I have a feeling Erica Wilson is on the verge of an old-fashioned Theo Jordan Smackdown?"

"Because Erica Wilson just had the audacity to tell me they're rethinking our marketing strategy for the restaurant, as if this place wasn't opening in two weeks." He starts to sort of vibrate in his chair, and without seeing it I know he's compulsively jiggling his leg.

And god, for a split second he looks on the verge of another downward spiral. He's been getting better, the past couple weeks, other than near misses here and there. I've gotten rather good at heading them off by

talking it through with him, whatever the issue is, or offering some distraction if the situation calls for it.

I clear my throat. “You gotta give it to her, though. She actually had the guts to say this to you knowing how you can get. Go easy on the girl, won’t you?”

Theo blows out a gust of air. “Think you can fit into my pocket? Might be safer for the greater population if you followed me around, doling out advice.”

“With these hips? Doubtful.”

His lips twitch, and he laces his fingers and cracks his knuckles before starting to type. “Erica –”

“Hi, Erica.”

He fights off a smile. “Hi, Erica. Thanks for bringing this to my attention.” He flicks up his eyes and I flash him a double thumbs up.

“I feel like I’m teaching a caveman basic human norms,” I say.

“Quiet, you. Hi, Erica. Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I can appreciate that there’s merit in this new approach. Look forward to seeing the full updated plan.” He looks up after a moment. “What do you think?”

“About the email or the problem?”

“Both.”

My stomach goes all fuzzy at the way he watches me expectantly. Because it’s one thing to humor me when I coax him into letting go a little, taking it easy. But asking me what I think about a business problem? Despite weeks of friendship, I can still barely believe we’re at a place where he confides in me. Trusts my judgment enough to give it the time of day.

“Do you think this new marketing plan is worth the last-minute switch?” I ask him.

His eyes drop down to his screen for a moment. “Yeah. It probably is.”

“And do you think they can get it all set up in time for launch?”

He shrugs. “I think so. They’re good at what they do, to be fair.”

“Then write: Cheers, Theo.”

“How about: Don’t fuck this up, TJ.”

“Blessings to you and yours, TJ.”

His lips twitch as he jabs at his keyboard. “TJ. There. Sent.” He claps shut his laptop and sends his arms up into a stretch, reclining back in his stool. “Let’s call it a day.”

“Was that really so mentally draining?”

Theo jumps off his stool, pocketing his car keys and phone, and comes around to close my laptop too. He plucks my bag off the ground.

“Let’s go do something. It’s Friday afternoon, you just had a good walk-through and I can’t spend another second stowed away in here.”

“You want to blow off work? *You?*”

The idea is totally absurd but I start to pack up my stuff anyway, because the thought of staying here without him suddenly feels unbearable. And he said *let’s go do something*, didn’t he? As in, me and him?

But, no. I probably misunderstood. He and I don’t see each other outside of working hours, unless we’re in here with Finn on Mondays and Wednesdays.

He flicks a strand of hair dangling in my face. “Yes, me. Now, get in the car, Holland. We’re hitting the water.”

~

“I thought you said this was your boat!”

How Theo talked me into even setting foot on this contraption with him at the helm, I'll never understand. But here we are, racing across the river splitting both sides of the city. The sun is out full force today, glinting off windows on shore like it's mocking me for leaving the safety of land.

The boat itself is fine. It's all plushy white leather seats and could probably take on four more passengers, if he'd wanted to invite another four people to their deaths.

The thing is, the way he's driving this thing, I'm not entirely sure we haven't just committed naval theft.

I clutch the handle by my seat like a woman trying to live out the rest of her life in one piece. My hand is starting to cramp from sheer exertion as the speedboat Theo claims to know how to drive soars through the wake of a passing boat.

"It is my boat!" Theo shouts over the roaring wind and engine, though the man clearly does not have a single clue what he's doing behind the wheel. He looks completely unconcerned, though. In fact, he looks absolutely elated with his hair flapping in the wind, and it's the only reason I'm not demanding he turn us around. "But I guess I should have mentioned I've never actually driven it?"

"A warning might have been nice!"

I yelp as we cut through another wave, letting my hair whip into a tornado around my head because I'm too busy hanging on for dear life. We speed past a couple sitting leisurely on their sailboat, and I envy their sense of peace down to my core right now. For a while I become afraid he has no idea where he's going, or that maybe he just wants to boat us around in circles for hours, but eventually I feel us slow down and gather enough courage to pry my claw from the handle to part the hair off my face.

We stop close to the tree-lined shore and I see that a few other boats are dotting the area too, their occupants floating in the water. I've never been out here, let alone known this place existed. Theo digs through a compartment under the boat's floor, pulling out an anchor tied to a bright yellow rope.

"How long have you had this boat?" I ask, watching him drop the anchor overboard and stare out at the water.

"Four years," he says, sitting back into his seat behind the wheel. "I got it on a whim, the same week I signed on with my investor for Nivoli's. And then I had no spare time to speak of, so Pen and her husband took it over."

"Well, I'm honored to be here for your first ride," I say, fanning myself under the beating sun.

Without the wind blowing in my face it's starting to feel blisteringly hot, despite the sundress I put on this morning. A quick look at Theo tells me he's doing worse than I am. He's wearing his usual uniform of sneakers, a t-shirt and jeans, a dark denim today I'm sure isn't helping at all. He's already sweating – his t-shirt grips the muscles of his shoulders a little more snugly than usual. A bead of sweat runs down his neck, and I get the sudden urge to lick it off him.

"Didn't really account for the weather," he says, tugging at the neck of his shirt and wafting the fabric. He kicks off his shoes, pulling off his socks, and my chest pinches when I see the faded, badly chipped pink nail polish is still there. I'll have to remember to bring him acetone on Monday. It really is too freaking adorable, though.

"You don't happen to have any water in your bag, do you?" He asks, wiping the sweat off his neck with the hem of his shirt, only for a fresh sheen to reappear immediately.

“Nope,” I say, tugging my sandals off, and dragging my dress up my thighs as far as acceptable. “And I bet you’re wishing I had Cheerios on me too.”

He groans, slumping back in his chair. “Food. How could we forget about *food*?”

“We? You’re the one who brought us out to sea without a plan.”

He sinks down to lie his head on the back of his seat and closes his eyes against the sun. “To sea? Where do you think we are, exactly?”

“Oh no, don’t you dare deflect. You brought me out here to perish. The least you can do is own it.”

“How long’s that going to take, by the way?” He turns his head. “The perishing thing. I’ve never eaten a person before, but it might come down to it.”

“This isn’t Castaway,” I laugh, swinging my foot out between us and clipping him playfully on the shin. He grabs my foot before I can draw it back. “We’re a mile from civilization. Turn this boat around and let’s go to lunch instead.”

“Nope. I think I have my heart set on this.” He pretends to examine my leg. “Looks tasty.”

“You wouldn’t have the guts.”

He hums. “Is that any way to talk to someone holding your life in their hands?” He locks his fingers around my ankle, and throws me a look of pure mischief.

“Theo Jordan, if you tickle me this friendship is over.”

He tilts his head, amused. “Friends now, are we? That’s interesting –”

“Not if you keep this up.”

“I seem to recall you calling me a prick –”

“Not much has changed, it turns out.”

I yank my leg hard, and send him slipping out of his seat and down onto his knees with a grunt.

He lets out a low, mirthless laugh. “Oh, you are so screwed.”

He grabs both my ankles this time and I barely manage to catch the skirt of my dress when he tugs me off my seat. I land on my butt with a loud yelp. He tugs again and slides me towards him, the momentum putting me flat on the ground.

“You said you weren’t a fan of mine.” Theo shuffles forward, eyes playful. “Called me Scrooge McDuck.” He drops onto his hands, crawling over me now and looking so deliciously predatory my mouth goes dry and limbs go heavy. “You *hated* me.” He narrows his eyes when he comes level with my face, hands planted on either side of my head, curls free falling above me. “Probably wished me dead.”

“Only once or twice.” I bat my lashes. “And it was nothing too painful, I promise,” I add, poking his chest.

The playful smirk slips off his face, leaving behind a faraway stare even though he’s looking right at me. “I hate that you hated me.”

I want to remind him that he hated me too, or else disliked me enough to try to kick me off his project. But I stare back quietly instead, watching him sway above me with the waves, feeling the inside of his knees where they touch my thighs. Weeks into our routine and I’m still not over it, how badly my body aches to flatten against his whenever we find ourselves standing too close. Touching him has all but become a compulsion now, like my skin can’t bear going too long without coming in contact with his.

It’s attraction, but...

Well, the honest truth is that there's a real comfort in being around Theo, one I never expected to feel given I'd spent the better part of a month revolted by the very thought of him. Now, in the evenings I find myself missing even the quiet parts of our companionship. Much as I adore Petunia, there's really something to be said for someone who can do more than wail for food or purr for belly rubs. Though Theo does his fair share of wailing when he starts to get hungry, and I've seen first hand evidence of his predisposition for back rubs.

Another bead of sweat trails down the curve of his neck and lands squarely on my chest. It echoes inside me, rumbling like I've been hit by an earthquake that sends shockwaves right through me. Theo zeroes in on the wet patch right above the scoop neckline of my dress. Slowly, he collects the trail of moisture with his thumb. His sweat, and a little bit of mine.

It's that ache again. I want his skin everywhere. On me, in me.

Theo trails another finger along the row of five tiny silver hoop earrings lining my ear. "I like this. You didn't have it the last time we worked together."

I can't tell what it is that rouses the goosebumps up my arms. His touch or that he remembers what I looked like three years ago. I feel like he's pumped me with lead. Everything feels heavier under his gaze.

Without looking altogether alert, he moves to softly touch my jaw. Stops the momentum of my lungs when his thumb sweeps my mouth, fingertips tickle my hairline, stroke my cheek. It feels almost reverent, what he's doing. Some kind of worship, a sweet ritual performed in my honor, making me feel wanted and adored and perfect. And I'm wishing he'd just kiss me already, wishing we were somewhere alone instead of –

Splash.

Theo's head snaps up, and I watch consciousness return to his body as he takes in our surroundings and the way he hovers above me.

"Shit. Sorry." He scrambles back on his heels and immediately I feel the loss of him, every single cell in my body protesting the loss in proximity. If he didn't look so sheepish, I'd say it was the heat coloring his cheeks. "That was... I don't know."

I've never needed an apology less. But he looks so uncomfortable now that I force a breezy smile. "Don't worry about it."

He helps me up just as someone in a nearby boat cannonballs into the water.

"Let's go in," he says abruptly.

For a moment I think he's joking – unless he happens to have a bathing suit tucked into his pocket. But he looks suddenly determined as we watch people splash around in the water, in that endearing way a kid might decide today was the day he'd learn to ride a bike. And in a seamless swipe of his arms, he tugs his shirt over his head.

I glimpse taut skin over chest before quickly turning to focus on a tree on shore as he goes for his zipper.

"I think I missed the part where we became the kind of friends who lose their clothes around each other," I say tightly, because listening to the sound of his pants drop to the ground kind of makes me feel like my legs are about to give out.

"You were there, sweetheart. And I seem to recall you lost yours first."

I'm still reeling from his offhand *sweetheart* – in that same quiet voice he delivered it kneeling at the foot of the hotel bed – when the boat sways violently as he takes a running jump ending in a loud, messy splash into the water that sprinkles droplets on my dress.

“Oh hell, that feels good,” he calls when he surfaces from the river, and I scramble to the end of the boat to have a look. He pushes the hair off his forehead as he treads water. “Get in here.”

I shake my head, letting out a laugh when he splashes water in my direction, missing me by inches.

“Get in here, Holland. I dragged my ass out of work early for the first time in years. We’re gonna make the most of it.”

“I can’t!” My cheeks ache under the strain of carrying my smile. The sheer satisfaction on his face downright melts me. “Losing my clothes again definitely counts as funny business.”

“Then wear my shirt and *get in here*.”

“You mean this very conveniently white t-shirt?” I say, scooping it off the ground, anyway. “Close your eyes.”

When I’m sure he isn’t looking, I peel off my sweat-damp dress and tug his shirt over my head. It falls low enough to cover up my black panties, and smells like him in the very best way, faint burning wood and clean sweat. Smells so good I resist the urge to hold it to my face for a deep sniff, in case he’s peeking from the water.

Instead, I jump into the river with a squeal and the cool water is instant relief from the beating sun. My mascara isn’t waterproof and his shirt is now effectively see-through and plastered to my skin as I surface. But Theo looks at me with a smile in his eyes, and for a while we tread water in silence, focused on each other.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask him.

He gives a small shake of his head, eyes drifting off to the side. “I’m wondering what it is people do when they go swimming.” He cups water in

his palm, then flattens it to let it spill between his fingers. “Is this it? Do we just float around?”

“I guess so?” Over my shoulder I watch a couple splash water at each other.

“You’re supposed to be my Get a Life Sherpa. Teach me how to have fun.”

I laugh. “If *I’m* your Sherpa, you’re in trouble – my social life might be even worse than yours. It’s what tends to happen when you’re such a mess you lose all your friends and family, and send your ex running for the hills.”

I regret the words instantly.

Theo gives me an odd look, the same one he gives whenever I let slip something that inevitably makes me seem pathetic and lonely. Like he’s wrestling with himself, talking himself out of giving me the third degree. Setting his jaw, he swims the couple of strokes to the boat and heaves himself out of the river to sit off the end, with his feet dangling into the water.

“Sit up here with me for a second,” he says, patting the spot next to him.

I take the hand he offers to help me out of the water. We sit side by side, knees touching, and I’m worried he’ll make me talk about it. Worried that he’s grown tired of my emotional boundaries, the frequent calls of *out of bounds* that stop his line of questioning. He’s let me in, almost easily, after all. I saw him at his most vulnerable, that afternoon in the dark kitchen. Maybe he’s finally decided that fair is fair. Share, or it’s the end of this unlikely friendship.

As if reading my mind – and I’ve suspected more than once that he’s got this mind-reading thing down pat – the first words out of his mouth curb my downward spiral of insecurity.

“I don’t want you to tell me,” he says slowly, staring at a spot off in the distance. “Not unless you absolutely want to. Though you should know that if you ever wanted to have it, that conversation would mean a lot to me. Because I know you don’t easily trust.” He turns his gaze on me. “But I do need you to get something, unequivocally. I like being around you, Jude. A lot. And I don’t mean that as in, if we have to spend time together, I’m fine with it. I mean it as in, ten out of ten times, I’d willingly choose to be with you.”

It’s at this exact moment that I realize it: how slowly, gently, he’s been chipping away at my armor since the moment he brought me that brown paper bag of coffee fixings on our road trip. Layer by layer until I’m as I am now, wearing his shirt and feeling more emotionally open than I have in years. Panic floods my chest, closing up my throat. Whatever this is, I haven’t let myself feel something like it in a long time.

It’s terrifying.

But it feels so good, too.

Theo’s mouth tugs into a minute smile. “Don’t spook.”

I chuckle at the words. I’ve opened the floodgates now because I feel them fluttering in my chest. The feelings for him I’ve been working hard to repress.

“Do you want to come over later?” I blurt out.

This time, it’s not the sun spreading heat over my cheeks. After an eternity Theo’s eyes drop, glazing my body with heavy eyes, from my mouth, down my neck, taking in his shirt plastered to my skin, the black of my bra so clear under the soaked white cotton. And I realize exactly how that just sounded.

“Just to – for dinner,” I amend quickly, fumbling with the hem of his shirt. “To hang out. You know, since you’re so keen on that.”

He swallows, running fingers in his hair, visibly working to regain his composure after my near come-on.

“That sounds great,” he says at last, tipping his head playfully. “As long as you’re not cooking.”

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Chapter 18

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Theo

I t's not lost on me how momentous an occasion this is.

I'm standing in Jude Holland's living room, still a bit shell-shocked she invited me here. We'd headed over after a couple more hours on the water, calling in an order of fried chicken to her apartment on the drive.

It's surreal. The water's running in the bathroom where she's jumped in the shower. And that alone is enough to throw me off. The thought that air and a slab of drywall are the only things separating me from a naked Jude.

On the other hand, I'm fascinated by my surroundings. Standing in Jude's place is like stepping into her head.

The pile of sneakers scattered in the front hall, ripe for tripping. The open box of Cheerios on the kitchen counter, probably half stale. Cozy, lived-in furniture, with a sofa so comfy-looking it might lull me straight to sleep the second I sit down. There's a tall stack of Architectural Digests on the window ledge, dangerously close to toppling.

I lift a slip of paper sitting on top of the magazine tower. It's a picture, two faces pressed cheek to cheek, staring at the camera. Jude's on the right, looking in her late teens, eyes fully shut, nose fully scrunched in a laugh. There's something about that nose scrunch that just wrecks me. The total joy and abandon that goes into laughing or smiling that hard.

My eyes linger on the guy to the left. Immediately I notice the same deep brown of her eyes. The same hair color and he's giving the camera that

snarky, lopsided grin she does whenever we bicker. Her brother, maybe, though she's never let on that she has one.

"Fuck!"

I start, feeling something hit my ankles. A white cat looks up at me, completely unconcerned by the years it shaved off my life. It twists around my ankles and sits on my foot.

"Theo? What was that?" Jude calls from the bathroom, where the water's stopped running.

I haul the cat up by the middle, mostly to distract myself from the fumbling coming from the other side of the wall as she gets dressed.

"Your cat scared the shit out of me."

The door creaks open and she comes into the living room, looking as sexy as I've ever seen her. Wet hair spilling over her shoulders, grey sweats low on her hips and a fitted tank top hugging her curves. Holy fuck. It's all I can do not to think about the bed hiding somewhere in this apartment.

"She likes you," Jude tells me, coming up to stroke the cat who's settled deep into the crook of my elbow. "This is Petunia. If she *didn't* like you, I'd have to ask you to leave. It's her way or the highway around here."

"Thanks, Petunia," I say, scratching the little white head and earning myself a purr. "You're not so bad yourself."

Jude is practically glowing as she watches us. "Oh!" She suddenly exclaims. "Your shirt's still damp. Let's get it in the dryer."

She takes away Petunia and drops her softly to the ground, leading me into the hall she just came from and swinging open double doors to reveal a small closet with a washer and dryer. There aren't any windows lining the hallway, and without any lights on it's almost intimate. It takes me back to

that quick moment in the hall of our hotel room. The way I badly wanted to press her into the wall and run my mouth all over her.

Jude bends to open the dryer and her shirt rises inches up the small of her back. It's getting harder and harder, these days, keeping myself together. I'm in so deep it's almost inevitable how often I forget myself. Staring too long. Standing too close. Touching her like she's mine to touch freely.

Jude puts out a hand. "Shirt off."

Her lips part a little when I take it off and drop it into her hand. This time, she allows her eyes to dip down my body, and I've never felt this timid about being shirtless in my life. Her gaze does that to me. Makes me feel naked, see-through. And not in a bad way, either.

I can't be the only one who feels this between us, can I? It can't only be me. Can't be.

With my shirt in the dryer, Jude pushes open another door and disappears inside. I stop abruptly in the doorframe. It's like there's a force field keeping me out of her bedroom. I'm some kind of vampire without an invitation to come in, so I take it in from the doorway. Clothes thrown over every surface, on top of the dresser, on the floor, hanging off the door. Unmade bed, piled with a thick comforter that dares you not to dive in. It's like stepping into the mind of someone who thinks at warp speed, enjoys a little chaos. It's her down to a tee, and I fucking love it.

She opens and slams shut a couple of drawers at her dresser, pausing when she sees me hover at the door.

"You can come in," she says, amused, resuming her rummaging when I sit at the foot of her bed.

All my senses seem to heighten when I touch down on the mattress. I'm painfully aware of her, and my arms ache as they struggle not to reach out

and pull her to me.

Because we don't do that. We're friends and we don't do that.

"Here we go." Jude comes towards me with quiet mischief in her eyes. And then I get why. She's holding out an oversized neon yellow t-shirt. "This should fit you."

And I nod slowly, engulfed by the memory of that shirt draped around her hips as she fucked my fingers.

Where's her head at?

Is she expecting me to laugh, crack a joke? Because all thirty scenarios running through my mind right now involve my mouth on her and her broken moans echoing around us. The fact that she'd even bring this shirt out tells me she's got her guard down. Maybe it's because we're here, in her safe space. Either way, it's such a rare thing I feel the need to tread carefully. Figure out exactly which limits she's put on this interaction, with me on her bed and the way she's looking at me from under her eyelashes.

"You ever think about that night?" I ask hoarsely.

And she nods. Completely unabashed. "Do you?"

"All the time."

That's the short answer. The long answer is that I've usually got a fist around my cock when I do.

Jude huffs out a breath, and it occurs to me that there's relief on her face. Like in her head there exists a scenario where I don't constantly ache for her. I can't help it – treading carefully be damned. She should never feel like I don't want her. I reach out, pull her in so that she stands between my knees. Don't even bother to reign in the longing as I look up at her.

"I'm so..." I falter, trying to articulate how lost in her I feel. How much I love it, the feeling of drowning in her. Needing her this badly. "You're so

fucking beautiful.”

My hands are shaking. They are, there on her hips, shaking under that look in her eyes. The way she’s devouring me now, the way her breath is picking up. God, I wish I knew. Whether she looks at me like that because she feels something for me or if it’s just about sex.

There’s some kind of debate in her eyes. And I don’t figure out what it’s about until she’s already decided. Until the t-shirt drops from her hand. Until she grips me by the shoulders, stares down at me as she hikes one knee up on the bed beside me and then the other as she straddles me, lands right in my lap.

Fucking. Hell.

She sweeps her fingers up my neck, holds my face. And I can’t fucking breathe. Afraid to move an inch in case it scares her off. My dick doesn’t cooperate, though. It swells underneath her weight and before I can manage to move myself away from her, she shifts her hips. Adjusts her angle. Notches forward. Drags herself along my cock, bites her lip when a weak moan leaks out of my mouth.

Fuck me. Fuck. Me. This is almost too much.

“Hi.” She blinks languidly. “Is this okay?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Fuck, yeah.”

Her lips are there. They’re right there and it’s insane, isn’t it? That I’ve fallen in love with a woman I’ve never kissed. Because I am. Of course, I’m in love. Of course, I am. There’s no other way about it. The realization hit me like a freight train earlier, watching her cannonball into the river.

Her thumb lifts off my cheek, grazes my lip like she’s thinking the same thing. I don’t dare move. Have no idea where this is coming from but I’ll be damned if I do anything to stop it.

And then she does it again. Grinds against my dick, once, and then again. I'm on the verge of a blackout, edges of my vision going dark, and she lets out a soft breath.

"Theo."

"Yeah?" I manage.

She rolls her hips again and fucking hell, if she's not careful we'll end up with a mess in my pants.

"You feel so good," she whispers.

"Then don't stop," I beg. "Fuck, Jude. Don't stop."

With hands at her hips I slide her forward and back again, slow at first, faster the more her eyebrows crinkle and jaw slacks. After a moment she takes over and I lean back, just a little, to adjust myself and give her better access. To let her use my body the way she needs.

And fuck, *fuck* I don't know how much longer I'll last like this. I don't know when it happened, me turning into a guy who can't keep it together over a fully clothed dry hump but *fuck*. The way she's looking at me, all heavy eyelids and those little breathy moans, I can barely believe I've lasted this long at all.

And I'm somewhere between being totally sucked into this moment and thinking – fucking *marveling* – about our potential. Because if it's like this with layers between us, fucking her would completely wreck me. And I'd make sure it wrecks her too, would do anything she asks – and that thought trails off the second I notice her tits bouncing under her tank top, and what I wouldn't give to shove down her bra and take her in my mouth. I'd wolf her down.

She whimpers and she's got that look on again, the one she showed me about a second before she came on my hand, all those weeks ago.

“I’m –”

“I know, sweetheart.” I scrape her hair back behind her ear. “Keep going.”

She has no idea – no fucking clue how many times I’ve replayed what she sounds like when she comes and how desperate I am to hear it again. But the best part – the *best part* in all this – is that she’s fully in it with me. Watching me dead in the eyes, so different than the last time when she fought herself, refused to give in completely to what we were doing. And I’m so close now, too –

And the worst happens.

A knock at the front door.

Jude stops mid-grind and it’s like someone’s running an electric current of realization through her body. She jumps off me so quickly my hands hang empty in mid-air, blushing furiously as she plucks the yellow shirt off the ground.

“Oh my god,” she says shakily, handing me the shirt. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t –”

“I don’t know what got into me –”

“Don’t take it back.”

She backs away and hits the opposite wall by the time I’m up and tugging the shirt over my head. She’s panting, shifting her hips uncomfortably and I’m right there with her. Trying to decide how obvious it would be if I locked myself in her bathroom to rub one out.

“I didn’t invite you here with any of those... expectations.”

She says it carefully, like she needs me to know she’s not trying to steal my virtue or something and it’s so fucking absurd that I snort.

“Jude,” I say wryly. “If you don’t think I’d jump at the chance to be with you in that way – well, forgive me for putting it so bluntly, but you’re totally, fucking delusional.”

A shocked laugh tinkles out of her as there’s another knock at the door, louder this time.

“I’m not convinced...” She hesitates. “I prefer to have sex within relationships –”

I slice the air with my hands. “Stop. You don’t have to justify it. Let’s leave it.”

And maybe I’ve said the wrong thing, because she drops her eyes. Why won’t she look at me? Why –

Was she trying to say –

The banging at the door shatters the delicate silence. And whatever it was, Jude recovers quickly. Squaring her shoulders, shutting off the emotion in that practiced way of hers.

“Okay, good. Let’s get our food,” she grins. “I can’t handle you when you’re hangry.”

~

A bucket of fried chicken later and we’re slumped on her sofa with bowls of cookie dough ice cream she dug out of her freezer. We’d spent the better part of an hour debating which movie to put on – she was in the mood for car crashes and shoot-offs and I was feeling a bit more sentimental than that – until we realized neither one of us planned on shutting up long enough to properly watch a movie and ended up trading song requests instead.

Close to Me by The Cure is blaring from a speaker somewhere behind us. And thank god, there isn’t a trace of awkwardness left over from those

catastrophic seconds in her bedroom. I couldn't have withstood it, if I felt she'd wanted me gone after that.

"Okay, embarrassing confession time," she tells me, looking around for a napkin when a glob of ice cream dribbles onto her sweat. "I only discovered this song a few months ago."

"What? How is that possible?" I grab a napkin off the coffee table and wipe off her knee.

"Thanks. Yeah, it was a gross oversight. I had it on repeat for a week when I did, though. Petunia wanted to kill me by the end. I found her in the kitchen, messing with the knife block."

"What, this menacing creature?" I ask, patting the cat curled up on the backrest behind us. "Why's she called Petunia, anyway?"

"I used to garden a lot before I moved to the city." She digs out two pieces of cookie dough from her bowl and dumps them into mine. I'd complained my portion was severely lacking in them. "I tried out all these articles when I moved in. You know, like *Ten Tips for Starting a Balcony Garden*? Turns out north-facing apartments aren't conducive to that kind of thing."

"Right, the illustrious south-facing apartment," I shake my head, eyeing her balcony beyond the stack of magazines at the window. "Everyone insisted I had to have all this natural light even though my place sits empty from eight AM to eleven PM. I think my mom hoped I'd spend more time at home if my place was nice enough. Mostly I can't stand being home unless Pen's twins are there, running wild."

She grins into her bowl. "You're so lucky you're close with your family. It's nice to listen to."

We land here again, this out of bounds topic we've danced around more than a few times over the weeks. It's funny. Doesn't seem to matter how easy it's gotten with us. It's a boundary she never seems willing to cross. Not that I'd ever push her on it. It's clearly a painful subject, this thing with her family. And I've suspected since the first time she mentioned it that maybe it wasn't too far off from what me and Pen lived through with our father.

But it occurs to me now how unfair it is. For me to wish she'd trust me enough to share something like that when I haven't exactly been forthcoming about my situation. When I haven't shown her how much I trust her with the extent of the pain I've had to endure at the hands of my father.

I watch her suck on her spoon. Lost in thought.

"It's not all pretty, you know. My family history," I add, when her eyebrows cinch. "My father walked out on us when I was ten."

Jude freezes mid-bite. And for a second I debate it, talking about it, in case it's too much of a trigger for her. But she stabs at her phone to cut off the opening bars of Toxic by Britney Spears – she'd been delighted when I requested it – and she tucks a foot under her hip, angling towards me on the sofa. I put my bowl down next to hers on the table, fiddle with my spoon. Because it's been twenty-three years and still, it's a pain to talk about.

"My father... You'd never have guessed it. He was always steady. Worked as an electrician. Always off hours, so he wasn't necessarily around all the time anyway. But he was dependable, showed up when it was important. And made enough that my mom could stay home with us when we were younger, cart us off to school when we were a bit older. Everything

seemed fine between them. No fights, no arguing. That we saw, anyway, me and Pen. And one day life turns into a fucking cliché.”

I look up from the spot on my knee I’ve been telling this to. Jude’s got a line carving between her eyebrows. God, I wish I could touch her. It would make saying all this a lot easier, even though I brought this conversation on myself.

She reads my mind. Pushes her leg out a bit so that her knee grazes my thigh. It’s small, barely anything. But it feels like everything.

“It was a Saturday. He got me out of bed, marched me downstairs into the kitchen. No one else had been awake. And the first second I realized something was off – other, you know, than the fact he ripped me from my sleep – I realized something was off when I saw the suitcase. Just a small one, like the carry-on kind you take on a weekend trip. But then he tells me this long-winded story about this woman he met on a job and how they were going to get married. Which made no sense to my ten-year-old brain. I mean, he was married to my mom, you know? Doesn’t let me get a single word out before saying it’s time for me to be a man. To take care of my mom, and of Pen. And he headed out, with his little suitcase. Like he didn’t care enough for his life to take more than a couple things with him.”

Jude’s mouth is twisted sympathetically. I hesitate. Stupid, really, considering how much has spewed out of me already. “Wanna know the real fun part?”

She must catch the bitterness in my voice. Her shoulders tense, like she’s getting ready for a blow. “What?”

“He gave me the joy of telling my mom. After it was clear he wasn’t coming back.”

She closes her eyes. “Fuck.”

“Fuck, indeed.” I stare at the blank television screen in front of us. “Well. You kind of know the rest. He disappeared off the face of the earth. Left us with nothing, other than a parting gift. Half the sale price of our childhood home, when we were forced to move out. My mom, there’s no one like her. She buried a lot for the sake of me and Pen. Did everything she could to make it as okay as possible for us. I did my best for them, too.”

“And you’re still trying to live up to it. What he asked you to do. What *he* should have been the one to do.”

I shrug. “Someone had to. Has to.”

“That’s too much, Theo,” she shakes her head. “That’s too much pressure for one person. When does it become enough?”

“I’d have looked after them regardless of whether he told me to –”

“Of course, you would have. But... when are you sufficiently worn down, before you let yourself off the hook?”

I frown. “Off the hook?”

“For letting him walk out that day. For hurting your mom and leaving your sister.”

And what do I say to that? She says it like a fact. Like it’s a story she’s known for years, something she’d listened to me talk about so often she sees it for what it is. Not like a person who’d only started to know me weeks ago, hated my guts months ago.

“I’ve felt a lot better lately. More...”

“I know,” she nods and gives me a playful bump on the shoulder. “More willing to ditch work to steal your sister’s boat.”

“It’s my boat, smart-ass,” I say, bumping her back.

Jude gives a half-hearted grin, stabbing her spoon into her ice cream. “Did you ever see him again?”

I rub my face, more rough than necessary. This confession takes some work. Pulling out the words I've never said out loud, not even to Mom.

"The day after we opened Nivoli's. He heard about it, I guess. I don't know how. But he found me there, said he needed money. Bills to pay, or something. I didn't really ask. Thing is, I hadn't missed him in a long time. Hadn't thought about him. I worked really hard to sort through my shit with him. Did therapy and all that, once I could afford it. But I saw him that day and I was ten again. He cut off contact when the check cleared. And I moved across the country a few days later. I needed something different."

"Theo," Jude groans. She glares at the ground like she's trying to open it up with laser beams from her eyes. "You are..."

"Stupid? Naïve? Pathetic?"

"No. None of the above. What you did was really brave, putting yourself out there like that. I just wish I knew a bad enough name to call him."

She startles a laugh out of me, and I expect her to do that thing she does, whip around to catch me in the act. But she lets me ride out the laughter with her eyes averted this time. It's a mark of such pure respect that it almost breaks me, wanting so badly to scoop her into my lap and nuzzle her until our limbs go stiff.

"You're the first person I've told that to," I tell her instead, hoping it makes her feel the same.

"That means a lot to me," she whispers.

We stare at each other. So long I almost start to feel sick with want. Wanting so badly to touch her. Say more to her. To read the parts of her mind I can't make sense of. Eventually, Jude shifts so she's facing the blank

TV. But she scoots closer, touches her head to my shoulder and a fist closes around my lungs. Squeezes hard.

Her hair slides off her shoulder and over her back, brushing my arm on the way down. And for a second I'm caught up in it, this sensory overload, of the scent off her hair and the warmth of her cheek. Until I feel it. Something wet soaking through my shirt, and a thick intake of air, and my insides solidify, grow cold and shatter when I realize she's crying.

I'm frozen, somewhere between not wanting to shift her if she's comfortable this way and needing to look at her, to figure out what's happened and how the hell I can make it stop because it kind of feels like to world is ending, dissolving at the edges, and I'm just sitting here letting it happen. After a moment she drops her head into her hands and I watch, horrified, as her shoulders shudder.

"Don't," I say, helpless. "Why are you crying?"

She gives a rough shake of her head, either an *I don't know* or an *I don't want to say*.

But I can't take it. She lets me pry her hands away, catching as many tears as she can on the way as though I haven't noticed them. It makes no difference. The second I lift her chin a fresh wave of them trickles down her cheeks.

"Please, Jude." I'm holding her face now, swiping at her tears myself. "Talk to me. What can I do?"

"It's nothing –"

"Please –"

"I'm okay, I promise. Just give me a second." She wipes her nose with the back of her hand, and I drop her face to offer her a pile of napkins like it'll solve everything.

The sight of her like this almost stuns me. She's always so measured, rarely lets slip any excess emotion. Least of all pain. This feels like some kind of incredible breakthrough, just as much as it's something catastrophic I need to fix. But I can't, not when she won't tell me what's going on in her head. And so I go for the next best thing I can come up with, the thing I know she needs whenever things get too heavy between us.

I cock an eyebrow, force out a little smirk. "And here we thought I was the headcase. You're setting a whole new bar for us tonight."

She laughs into a napkin. And I watch her do it. Stuff it all back in, safe and sound. Letting out a breath when she's pulled herself together, and going in for another spoonful of cookie dough. Somehow it cuts me worse than her tears.

Still, though. She gave me something tonight. Only a sliver of what I crave from her, the emotional rawness I still haven't earned. But I won't get greedy about it.

An hour later, after trading a stream of one-hit wonders sure to get stuck in my head for days, I drop a dead asleep Jude onto her bed, careful not to disturb the soft, peaceful look on her face. Very badly, I wish I could dive in next to her. Curl her into my side with this plush comforter cocooning us together.

I don't, though. We're friends. Just friends and so I tuck the blankets up to her chin, making a burrito out of her. Linger for a moment, debating whether I can allow myself this one thing, just this once. Deciding I should because I might combust without it, and dropping a kiss in the hollow of her cheek.

Jude's eyes flutter open out of nowhere, and I freeze as she takes me in, tries to place where she is and how she got there. After a moment the mild

panic eases up and she watches me under sleepy eyelids.

“You’re giving me that look again,” she mumbles.

I drop to my knees at the edge of her bed and cave in again, letting myself sweep flyaway hairs off her forehead. “Which look?”

“Like there’s nothing else around you.”

Shit. I’ve really become that obvious, haven’t I?

“I like it,” she sighs before I can muster anything.

She –

She likes it? As in, she’s not completely repulsed by the idea that...

“Are you leaving?” Her voice is fading, eyes barely open anymore.

“Yeah. I’m leaving.”

“Oh,” she breathes, before her eyes close completely.

I think I catch a hint of disappointment. Or maybe I imagine it, hear what I want to hear. Something selfish in me wants to wake her up and beg for answers, about the *oh* but everything else, too. Instead, I back out of her room. Make it to the front door before I realize I have no way of locking up behind me. And it doesn’t sit right, the idea of leaving her in here with an unlocked door all night and risking trouble, unlikely as it might be.

So I drop back down onto her sofa and set the alarm on my phone, tugging a throw blanket over myself.

I’ll sneak out of here before she’s up.

Chapter 19

OceanofPDF.com

Jude

“I still can’t believe you got us in here. This place is packed!”

Jenna leans over our high-top by the windows so that I can hear her over the music, and stares around the crowded bar.

“Perks of working at Dime!” I tell her, as though I regularly take advantage of said perks.

In this line of work, we’re lucky enough to personally know a decent chunk of restaurant and bar owners in the city. Though it’s the first time in years I’ve actually pulled these strings. She’d talked me into admitting I had thrilling Saturday night plans of leftover cookie dough ice cream and Petunia cuddles before blowing into my apartment in typical Hurricane Jenna style and coaxing me out of the door with her. Petunia wasn’t altogether pleased being left to her own devices, but I’ll make it up to her with belly rubs in bed soon enough. If I play my cards right, I think I can manage to escape this after an hour. I’ll be back in bed by ten sharp.

Jenna twirls a strand of bubble gum-colored hair around her finger, eyes still sweeping the large, dimly lit bar. She’s really leaning into the sugarplum fairy look tonight, wearing an icy blue dress that dangerously rides up her thighs when she moves. She turned about twenty heads when we came in. When she dials it up, Jenna wields the kind of magic that knocks men on their asses.

“Hey, he’s cute – over there by the bar.” She nods at a guy across the room but I barely spare him a glance.

I knew what this was the second I agreed to come out tonight. She's hellbent on setting me up with someone.

I take a sip of my whiskey sour. "Blonds are more your speed, aren't they?"

She hums. "You're right – I'll get back to him later. One for me, one for you. I leave no woman behind," she winks, turning in her seat to look around the bar some more. "One soulmate, coming right up."

My phone buzzes against the table.

THEO: *Close to Me just came on for the second time today. I'll never figure out how you made it 27 years without hearing it.*

ME: *Happy to say I was 26 at the time. Will you sleep peacefully, now?*

THEO: *Do I strike you as someone who sleeps peacefully, ever? Did a real number on my neck last night.*

My thumbs hover over the screen as I mull over this new information. The thing is, I could have sworn I heard a phone go off in my living room this morning. It surfaced me out of one of the deepest sleeps in recent memory, only for a second, before I succumbed again only to wake up to a disappointingly empty apartment sometime later.

THEO: *What are you up to?*

"Oh, look over there," Jenna jerks her chin at a pair of men sitting a few tables away. "The one facing us looks like trouble in bed. He's blond, too, though..."

My eyes snag on the man with his back turned. There's something so intensely familiar in the way the black t-shirt grips his shoulders. He bows his head and rakes back a pile of dark curls. And then I hear it. The upbeat keyboard tune pounding around me.

Oh –

“Oh my god.”

“What? What is it?” Jenna turns to see what I’m looking at. “Have you picked one of them? Yes, Jude! Let’s go –”

She starts to stand but I grip her hand to keep her in place. “That’s... Don’t look, *don’t look*. That’s Theo. In the black shirt.”

She peeks out of the corner of her eye. “Wow, you’ve been spending way too much time with the guy if you can tell from behind.”

“He came over last night.” I take in a breath, waiting for the onslaught once the words sink in. Jenna’s eyes bug out of her head.

“I’m sorry, *what?* Are you sleeping together?” She stares uncomprehendingly when I only shake my head, eyes darting from my face to my shoulder to my hands on the table as though they’ll offer her clues. It seems they do, because after a beat she sags in her chair. “Oh, *Jujube*. You like him?”

The words feel like a total cop-out, a complete understatement for the leafy vines that have bloomed in the pit of my stomach, wrapped themselves around each one of my organs and squeeze whenever I think about him.

And it seems like Jenna catches on quickly because she amends her own question, eyes rounding, looking suddenly on the verge of tears. “You’re in love with him?”

I take a long sip of my drink. “I’m pretty damn close, I think. Please don’t get all emotional. I’m already freaking out over it.”

Jenna eyes him again. “Honestly Jude, this is kind of a miracle. I’ve never seen you remotely close to *in love*.”

“And believe me, I’ve worked hard to keep it that way,” I mutter, and Jenna gives my confession a reproachful look. “I don’t know how it

happened. It's only been a couple months, and I spent a good chunk of that hating his guts."

"Don't they say something about thin lines between love and hate? Besides, you spend five out of seven days a week with him. It's not inconceivable that your feelings would change so fast. Why are you fighting this?"

I shake my head, not knowing how to articulate it. "The whole thing has gotten... Everything's just so easy and comfortable with us. We're friends, and I like it that way. But then..."

But then moments like last night happen. Sitting there on my sofa, feeling so close to him we might as well have been sharing skin. The weight of it caught me so off guard I'd cried before I could stop myself. Realizing my feelings and the shock and fear and relief that came with knowing I still *could* feel these things, after years of emotional firewalls.

"Do you two ever talk about it? Whatever it is that you have going on?"

I fiddle with my sleeve. "No. We're both one bad decision away from screwing each other's brains out, but I couldn't tell you with certainty that it goes any deeper for him."

"You know, a worse friend than me would kick your ass for not telling me any of this."

I wince. "Sorry. It's not that I didn't want to. I've been in denial, I think."

"Do you want to be with him?"

"I want to know whether he's interested. Beyond telling me I'm pretty and how much he wants to sleep with me."

We turn just as he peeks at the phone sitting by his elbow. Under the table, his leg starts jiggling.

Definitely him.

“Well, let’s find out. Do you want to go over there?”

“Maybe? I just got nervous.” I run my fingers through my hair, suddenly wishing I’d done something nicer with it than letting it hang limply around my shoulders.

“I get it. You’re not used to seeing him out.” Jenna reaches over the table and fiddles with the hair on top of my head, smoothing it down. “Okay, hear me out. Say the word and we’ll leave. But I think we should go over and see what happens. If it’s too weird, I’ll get us out of there. I promise you I’ll put on the best theatrical performance of my life since I assured my grandmother that of *course* I’m still a virgin, because I wouldn’t want to spoil my prospects at marital bliss.”

“God, Jenna,” I laugh. “Okay. Okay, let’s do it.”

Jenna takes off excitedly, and by the time I’ve downed the rest of my drink and drag my feet behind her, she’s already got a hand on the back of his friend’s chair, and popped her hip so that her dress lifts casually up her thigh. She turns her gaze to Theo.

“... and you know Jude, don’t you?”

I’d almost been hoping I was wrong. That it wasn’t him sitting there and that I wouldn’t feel the sudden surge of nerves as he turns his frown over his shoulder. Wouldn’t suddenly thank everything that’s holy for having put a little effort into getting ready tonight. For picking out the dark jeans that make my very average legs look very not average, and the silky top that dips down at the front just enough to catch the eye.

Theo blinks. And then the frown melts off his face and suddenly he’s standing. I’m vaguely aware of Jenna’s look of glee. Only vaguely, because I’m wrestling a breath into my lungs as I take him in. His effect is

magnified by a thousand tonight, in the way it does when someone had enough good sense to design proper mood lighting in a bar. His hair looks thicker, unruly in that just-got-out-of-bed way. Lashes darker, impossibly longer, eyes greener. He's got a light brush of stubble over his jaw today, and suddenly I wonder what it would feel like against the inside of my thighs.

Seeing him now, I realize how much I've languished all day. He's a shot of espresso straight to the bloodstream. I feel completely jittery.

We've officially been staring at each other too long. Way too long. Jenna bulges her eyes at me in a way that says *get your act together*. She decides I can't. She turns to the other guy. "So, you guys gonna make room for us, or what?"

Theo snaps out of it and there's a sudden cacophony of scraping chairs and shuffling.

"Here," he offers me his chair and returns with another two for Jenna and himself.

The table is small, only made for two, and with four of us huddled around it we're sitting close. Still, Theo leans in, voice low and smooth, like warm honey dripping down the edge of a jar.

"You want a drink?"

"Please. Yes."

He motions at a server and mouths *whiskey sour* at her. He remembers my drink order. That shouldn't feel as good as it does, but it feels like I'm floating.

"Hey, Guinea Pig," I hear from across the table, and finally I tear my eyes away from Theo, taking a proper look at the other man.

I perk up. "Oh, Finn!"

Finn gives me his signature beam, a wide, crooked grin that, coupled with the bright blue eyes, full lips and blond scruff, makes him look like an angel on the very verge of corruption. Even though I know full well he's several stops past corruption – completely unsurprising given his looks and infectious personality. He has a way of making you feel like you're the most interesting person in the world.

I've become fond of Finn after the four kitchen sessions I've crashed over the past couple of weeks. I knew about five minutes into meeting him that he and Jenna run off of the same kind of energy. Thoughtful and kind, hiding behind flirtation, sex and bravado. I've spent enough time around Jenna to pick out their type in a crowd. Besides, I doubt Theo would put up with anyone who wasn't a decent person.

"So, *you're* Finn," Jenna says, eyeing him with interest. "The one who never called me."

Oh, crap.

She's not pissed. It's that look she gets when she's about to take a bite out of a man. She gets a thrill out of making them blush.

Finn gives her a sweeping up and down like he's just realized she's there, and turns to me. "*This* is your friend?"

"Her friend's name is Jenna," she says, leaning over the table. "And she's wondering what you have to say about your radio silence."

Finn blinks. "I can now say with total certainty it's the biggest mistake of my life." Turning to me he adds: "I'd get up and kiss you right now if I didn't think lover boy here would cave in my face for doing it."

"Why? What do you mean?" Theo says quickly, shooting Finn a wide-eyed look I can't quite decipher. "She can kiss whoever she wants. We only work together."

It's a knife in the heart.

Immediately Theo turns to me with enough grace to look appalled by his own words. Beside him, Finn winces into his beer.

"Jude –" Theo starts. Thankfully, the server hands me my drink at this very moment. He tries again: "Jude. Look at me."

But I can't face him, not yet, and so I take a sip of my drink, trying to drown the burning disappointment and the prickle in my eyes. I don't know what it is I expected him to say. But I absolutely hated that.

So did Jenna.

"Kiss whoever she wants, huh? Okay, then." She turns to scan the bar with feigned interest. "Well Finn, we're looking to break Jude's man hiatus tonight. Who should it be?"

After a beat, Finn drops his beer and makes a show of looking around, too. "What's her type? Broody, full of shit, won't crack a smile even if his life depends on it?"

"Definitely not. She likes them sweet but with enough guts to own up to how he feels about her." She leans onto her elbows, drops her voice conspiratorially, eyes shining and calculated. It's a trademark look of Hurricane Jenna and suddenly I know she's about to drop a real cherry on top of the payback pie. "Oh, and they have to be good with their tongue. Our girl likes it really dirty –"

Theo's beer comes down on the table with a clap. I can't bear to turn to him. But Jenna throws him a look that's so sickly sweet, it's possible his teeth are aching as we speak.

"That is *very* helpful information. Thank you for the visual," Finn nods briskly, completely deadpan save for the twitch of his mouth. "I can't speak for the tongue thing, but that guy by the window looks alright."

“He’s hit on about ten women since we got here,” Theo says tightly. He stares at his pint glass like it’s personally offended him, fists balled on the table.

Finn claps a hand to his forehead. “You’re right. Don’t know what got into me.” He turns Jenna. “We’re not shooting for *alright*. We need running off into the sunset material.”

“Bend her over in a dark alley material.”

“Father of her fifteen children, all conceived in a dark alley material.”

Jenna and Finn lock eyes, struggling not to dissolve into laughter when Theo mutters something that sounds vaguely like *fuck’s sake* under his breath.

“Actually,” Finn says, brightly. “We just hired this new line cook –”

“No.” Theo’s voice is flat, his back rod straight.

Jenna’s mouth curls into a triumphant smile as Finn chuckles into his beer, throwing me a wink.

I love these two. Absolutely adore them. But I need this game to end, so that I can lick my wounds in peace.

“Speaking of line cooks. Finn, are you ready for the grand opening?”

“Oh, he’s ready,” Jenna says casually. “Your place or mine, babe?”

Finn chokes on a sip of beer, dissolving into a coughing fit.

“I’m so sorry,” I hear in my ear, as Jenna moves to tap Finn on the back. Theo shuffles forward in his seat. “I shouldn’t have said that. I got in my head and totally fumbled it.”

“Forget it,” I shrug, setting my jaw against the ache in my throat. “You weren’t wrong.”

He takes my elbow, turning me so I’m forced to look at him. “Yes, I was wrong. In fact, I’m an absolute idiot. The kind of stupid that shouldn’t be

allowed out into the world. Not sure how you manage to put up with me, frankly. You're a saint." He gets an unintentional smile out of me. "You're a lot more to me than someone I work with, Jude. I can tell you that much." He lays a soft punch on my arm. "Come on, say you believe me. Please."

His expression is so grim, so sincere I feel the hurt start to ebb.

"Please, Jude."

"Alright. *Alright*. I believe you."

"Thank you," he says heavily. His eyes narrow as they travel back and forth between both of mine. "Is she serious about the dirty thing, or is she just fucking with me?"

The laugh bursts from my mouth. "You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?"

"No. Don't really need you to, either." He lifts a brow, coming in closer. "And if you need a good tongue, Holland, you know where to find one." I choke on my sip of whiskey. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Careful."

He's got that look on. That mischievous cocky as hell look, which has somehow become the calling card for the warm pulse between my legs. I can't figure out how that look used to make me want to scream into a void. I'm a second away from assuming a horizontal position.

But two can play at this game. I drop my glass on the table and lean in close, gripping high up his thigh and giving his ear the lightest, barely-there brush with my lips. This close up, I can make out the low groan in his throat. "In your dreams, Theo."

He gives a throaty, mirthless laugh. "Guess I deserved that."

"You did," I tell him, giving his jaw a playful brush with my thumb. "I like this stubble though."

“Yeah?” He rubs a hand over the same spot.

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s part of this whole laid-back thing I’m trying out.”

“It suits you.” I drop my chin into my palm. He nudges my knee with his, and after a moment’s hesitation, he slots his thigh between mine, and shuffles even closer.

I don’t ever want him to stop looking at me like that. With the same reverence as on the boat, the same look I caught on his face when I’d woken up to him at my bedside last night. I let my hand rest casually on his knee.

“And he says they only work together.”

Finn wins himself an over-the-shoulder scowl from Theo.

~

I don’t make it to bed by ten.

I couldn’t, not with Finn gifting us stories about his escapades working under Theo at Brookwood, particularly delighted to share Theo’s role as the overbearing headmaster over those three years.

“When I come back,” Jenna is saying to Finn, rising to get another round of drinks from the bar. “I need a detailed explanation of how you managed not to get fired after the lobster incident.”

Finn indicates Theo’s empty chair. “Think that’s more of a question for him when he gets back from the washroom.” He offers Jenna a lopsided grin. “Now get lost, Jude and I have a few things to go over.”

Jenna blows me a kiss over her shoulder, and it’s clear whatever’s about to happen, it’s been agreed upon prior. I’m not sure I like it, these two conspiring against me.

“If this is about getting into Jenna’s good graces, I don’t think you need my help,” I tell him, draining the rest of my drink. “Though I *will* take the undying gratitude. I told you this was the perfect set up. I don’t get why you never called her.”

“I have my reasons,” he says lightly, crossing his arms and propping them on the table between us. “But this conversation is about you, Guinea Pig. Are you ever gonna put that poor guy out of his misery?”

I roll my eyes. “Are you seriously asking me whether I’m going to sleep with your friend?”

Finn’s face screws up in confusion. “No? Why would you think... Oh, hell,” he says suddenly, dragging a hand down his face. “This is worse than I thought. And that’s saying something considering what I’ve already witnessed.”

“What are you talking about?”

Finn shakes his head, exasperated. “He’s not trying to *fuck* you – well, he probably is, but it’s not *about* that.” He takes in my confusion. “Christ, you’re as bad as he is, aren’t you? Look, he’s a mess over you. I’ve never seen him stumble his way around a woman like this in all the years I’ve known him.”

Stumble? Whatever Finn sees, I don’t. Flirting between Theo and me comes easy, and it’s becoming damn near impossible to keep my hands off him.

“Shit, he’s coming back. I’m gonna go see if Jenna needs a hand, give you a couple minutes alone,” Finn says, with a glance over my shoulder. “But listen, if you still need a nudge in the right direction... I was a culinary school dropout. Did he tell you that? I had a rough go of it for a while and school didn’t cut it for me. But he took me on, anyway. Hired me, taught

me just about everything I know. He can be moody as anything but he's as good a guy as they come. Give him a shot."

He flashes me a smile as he takes in the flush spreading on my face. It must be bad, because Theo eyes Finn's retreating figure suspiciously when he drops into his seat.

He hesitates around a word, then shakes his head. "You know, what? Don't tell me. I don't want to kill a man tonight."

"Don't worry," I laugh. "He talks very highly of you."

Theo shrugs. "He's a good guy. Despite the act he puts on whenever a woman over the age of twenty enters the room."

I watch him fiddle with a bar napkin, thinking back to Finn's words. Theo's always been abundantly clear about his attraction to me. But the idea that there could be something more to how he feels... My relief is so acute I could almost laugh, if it didn't make my inside wring out in terror.

I don't want a relationship. There's too much risk involved, too much riding on another person to keep from getting hurt.

And yet –

"What can I get ya?"

A server appears beside us and I almost jump out of my skin. Suddenly, the din of the bar is unbearable. I crave a moment alone with him. To make sense of where his head is, and what I want to do about these feelings for him.

Theo nods to me. "Another?"

"I..." I glance over my shoulder, seeing Jenna make her way back through the crowd with Finn at her heels. "Actually, I think I'm going to head out."

Theo's face falls. But he regroups quickly and gives me a tight smile. I slide my elbow an inch to the right, closing the gap between our arms. "Walk me home?"

His lackluster smile falls away. And the initial surprise melts into a look that can only be described as pure delight as he helps me up. "Yeah. Yes. I'll go pay off our tabs."

Jenna appears at my shoulder, face lit up in excitement. "Juju, this guy is so smitten with you, I could scream. You left the table earlier and I swear he looked like a lost puppy. He got all fidgety like he couldn't figure out what to do with himself."

I'm melting. Melting into a puddle, right here in the middle of this bar.

"We're going to head out. Do you want to come?"

"Sorry, no," Finn cuts in, throwing an arm over Jenna's shoulders. "Our work is done. You need to take it from here, Guinea Pig."

"Go," agrees Jenna. "Have *fun*. And don't overthink it, okay?" She nudges me towards where Theo now waits by the door.

It's a warm night. And as we take off down the busy sidewalk, going at such a leisurely pace you'd think we weren't going anywhere at all, I'm grateful I talked myself out of the heels I briefly debated before slipping on a pair of sandals.

"Hey, so are you hungry?" Theo asks after a few minutes of silence. "There's a pizza place kind of near your apartment that does the best slices in the city, hands down. And... we could go down to the waterfront to eat? If you want. It'll probably add another twenty minutes to the walk, but I –"

He's rambling. Hearing him sound so unsure of himself is a tidal wave of pain to my chest. Am I really so cold he'd still think I'd say no to

spending time with him? When the reality is that I crave his company almost constantly.

“– but you’re probably tired. It’s kind of late, anyway. And you probably have things to do tomorrow –”

“Theo, yes,” I say firmly. “I definitely want to.”

The effect is instant. He stands a little taller as he veers us up a side street. Meanwhile, I’m weighed down with guilt as I watch him out of the corner of my eye. Have I done this to him? Turned him into an overthinking mess, too?

“Can I ask you about something?” He says after another quiet minute, and when I nod he tucks his hands in his pockets. “Jenna said something about a man hiatus earlier. What’s that about?”

I’ve been so blind.

He’s asking about the so-called man hiatus, and I’ve refused to see what’s probably been in front of me long enough to have noticed.

I fiddle with the lengths of my hair. “She’s the only one who calls it that, I assure you. I had a string of letdowns a few years ago and I haven’t really recovered.”

Theo guides me down a street to my right. “Your parents?”

I take in a long breath, hearing in his tone that he wouldn’t hold it against me if I shut down the question. He never does, does he? Suddenly, I feel it down to my bones. That I can trust him with it, to pick me up when the story inevitably drags me under the tide.

“Yes. My parents.” His reaction is minute. Just a barely there turn of his head, like he senses something’s changed and he doesn’t want to disturb my momentum. “It’s... My older brother passed away. Dave. Three years ago, a car accident on his way to a camping trip.”

I don't intend to pause there, because Dave's death isn't the point and the last thing I want to do is dwell too long on the lack of him. But the words hang in the air, their follow up caught in my throat. Theo's elbow brushes against my arm. So light and fleeting it could have been an accident, had it been anyone but him. But he is him, and he always seems to know what to do, how to ease me when a conversation gets to be too much. A well-placed joke, a touch of self-deprecation, a brush of an elbow.

"Everything kind of snowballed after it happened. My parents never figured out how to cope with losing him. They barely spoke to each other for months, and when they did it was like they were strangers who couldn't stand the sight of each other. So, they split up a year later and then... I don't know. I guess they were both trying to figure themselves out, but I became a total stranger to them in the process. I moved to the city for work and they sold the house. And they answered fewer of my texts and phone calls until finally there was nothing."

"They cut you off? Both of them?"

I nod. "You know, I'm not even sure either of them knows the other did it. Part of me has always wondered whether they're both out there, thinking I still have one of them around. I wouldn't know. After a while it got too hard, checking my phone just waiting for one of them to reach out. So, I changed my number. I got a new email. I figured... they know where I live. They could come find me if they wanted to."

"And the ex?"

At that, I muster a chuckle. "Oh, he was just an ass. We'd only been together a few months before Dave passed, and I guess hanging around a sad girl wasn't worth his while."

“Jesus,” he breathes. There’s revulsion in every line of his face. “God, Jude. I’m sorry. Give me his name and last known address. I’ll do the rest.”

I laugh, bumping his shoulder. “Seriously, I couldn’t care less about him. It was more just... another thing piling on.”

“Were you close with your parents?”

I clear my throat of the growing lump. “My uh... My mom and I were. It all sucks, but summers are the hardest. She was obsessed with gardening – still is, maybe – and growing up it became our thing. At first, she’d only let me help her with the weeding. She’d point out the ones I could pluck out of the ground, and those that meant more butterflies in the yard, if we kept them. And eventually all that was left of it for her was sitting in the grass, telling me stories while I worked.”

“You stopped by that garden,” Theo says slowly. “At the nursery. Does it help?”

“It does, in a weird way. She taught me everything I know about it. It’s like... proof that she really did exist. That I didn’t make her up, because I wouldn’t know any of it otherwise.” I managed to make it this far without letting out a single tear. But they threaten me now, and I saw my teeth back and forth a moment, holding my breath, stuffing back the feeling.

“D’you ever think about reaching out to her?”

“Sometimes. After a bad day. Around the holidays,” I admit. Utter horror flashes on his face, and I’m sure now he’s picturing me alone around a Christmas tree so quickly, I add: “Don’t worry. Jenna would never let it get to that. She has me tag along with her when she goes back home. I get a front row seat to her family circus, instead.”

“Good. That’s good,” he says quietly.

“Honestly, I try not to think about any of it too much. Them cutting me off, moving on without me. It’s kind of a hard pill to swallow, realizing you aren’t worth a damn.”

I make it a couple of steps before realizing Theo has stopped in his tracks. But by the time I look around he’s moving again, coming straight at me with his eyes blazing. He grips me firmly by the shoulders.

“Jude. You are absolutely worth a damn,” he says fervently. “Maybe they were too stupid to see it, but that’s their problem, not yours. And there are plenty of people who aren’t as tragically, catastrophically mistaken.”

My eyes start to burn despite myself. I badly, *badly* want to believe that.

“Hey.” Theo stoops, bending his knees to bring himself at eye level. “Jenna handed me my ass earlier, because I acted like an idiot. Finn too, and believe me when I say he’ll get an earful for that little show. Diana had your back when I... also acted like an idiot. Seriously, remind me to play you her voicemail to *me*. I felt two inches tall. Still do. Larry, who’s possibly the crabbiest guy on earth – after me, obviously – he talks about you like you can turn water to wine or something. Which, incidentally, if you *can* turn water to wine, let me hire you for the restaurants. You’d save me a boatload of money.” He chucks my chin when I let out a wet laugh. He tips his head. “And there’s me. Former tragically stupid person who figured out pretty quick things were better with you around.”

I don’t understand it. How there could have existed a time when my feelings for him bordered on hatred.

“Plus, there’s Petunia. Who *definitely* thinks you’re worth a damn because she’d starve to death, otherwise.”

Another laugh catches in my throat. And without thinking it through, without trying to stop myself, I step forward, forehead bouncing against his

chest, arms curling around his waist. Feeling him like this for the first time, but holding him desperately like it's the last time he'll let me in this close. I let his body brand me like a heatmap, memorize the pace of his heart against my face, fill up my lungs with his woodsy scent, needing to remember the way it swirls in my brain. Makes me drowsy and wildly awake all at once.

For a moment Theo doesn't move, arms dangling at his sides. And then he does. He wraps me up tightly, one hand tangling in the hair at the base of my head, the other spreading on the small of my back, pulling me closer, molding me flush against him so that bone and muscle, every bit of him, creases my skin. His chin drops to the crown of my head, scrapes back until it's his mouth pressing into my hair. I want to exist like this, with him enclosing me from all sides. In this relief, in the way the tension has left me, the way the heat is building inside me at the feel of him against me.

I let out a long breath against him. I can't let go of him, not yet, so my words come out muffled. "Thank you. I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that. I feel so alone sometimes. Insignificant."

He exhales sharply, breath sweeping the top of my head and he tucks me under his chin. "You're anything but. I've never meant anything more than I mean that."

I believe him. I do, because he wouldn't say it if *he* didn't believe it, and I never feel insignificant, not when I'm with him. There isn't a shred of doubt in my mind anymore – I'm head over heels, completely gone for him.

We don't move for a while, not until my legs feel strong enough to keep me upright, though I hadn't realized they'd started to fail me in the first place. I pull away reluctantly, feeling a new awareness in my cells. As though they're permanently altered, now they know what it feels like to be

held by him, to have him carry their weight. *More. Give us more, bring us back. Closer.*

I don't know what this is between us, not really. Don't have a real clue about the depth of what he feels for me, whether I'd ever feel strong enough to tell him what I feel for him. All I know is that it terrifies me. Makes me want to hide. While making it completely impossible to tear myself away from him.

Theo pushes fingers through his hair. "Hey, that – that rule against hand holding. Does that still stand?"

"We don't have a rule against hand holding, Theo."

"Yeah?"

I do it for him. I take his hand, thread his warm fingers with mine, squeeze when his eyes go a little soft at the edges. I tug him gently.

"Let's go. I'm starving."

~

Every so often, the quiet around us is broken by errant pedestrians along the dark waterfront trail. Theo and I claim a bench across the river, devouring several slices of pizza too many because he talked up about ten different versions and I couldn't narrow down which ones I wanted to try.

I've completely lost sense of time. Any minute now I'll wake up from this dream. Because it makes no sense that I could ever feel this content, this grounded, curled up on a bench under the heaviness of Theo's arm. Gripping his hand because I haven't managed to untangle our fingers since they connected nearly two hours ago – or maybe he hasn't managed to. It's hard to tell. It's late, so late, and I'm exhausted. He mirrors my fatigue in the lines around his eyes. But we cling to conversation like our lives depend on it, dragging more minutes out of this night.

Theo uses his free hand to trace above my right brow. “What’s this scar from? I never noticed it.”

I let my head rest against the bicep draped around my shoulder. The scar is thin and white, barely there anymore. Only visible up close.

“I snuck out with Dave one night when I was twelve, and wiped out on a skateboard. Smashed my face and broke my arm. My mom cried for days, whenever she’d look at me.”

“You were trouble as a kid.” He says the statement like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Big time. We both were.” I bring my feet up on the bench, curling into his side. It’s strangely liberating talking about Dave, letting myself think about him. “School pranks, parties when our parents went away, you name it.”

He thumbs my knuckles, a smile in his voice. “That doesn’t surprise me in the slightest.”

“It doesn’t?”

He shakes his head. “You still are trouble. Maybe not pulling pranks but I’ve seen first hand how much joy you get out of pushing people’s buttons.”

My laugh is low, throaty, as though my body refuses to make any kind of sound that doesn’t slip perfectly into the intimacy of the moment. “Only when they deserve it.”

He squeezes his arm around me. “Do I? Still deserve it?”

I shake my head, letting my cheek rub against his arm. Theo’s eyes have taken on a dreamy quality. He looks so sweet, so soft, so content I want to bottle up that look and the feeling it gives me. Put it in my pocket and take a sip whenever I crave blissful summer nights, and the musk of burning wood, and raindrops landing on my skin.

“What about you?”

“Mm?”

“Any scars?”

He chuckles softly. “Baby, if you want scars, you’ve come to the right place.” He tucks me right against him to free up his hand. “This one’s from slicing myself open fileting my first fish.”

I finger the white line slashing across his palm. Bring his hand up to my mouth, and press my lips to it. His inhale is low, just sharp enough to hear.

“Where else?”

He swallows, wiggles his ring finger. “That ridge there. I ripped it open using a mandolin, before I figured out how not to use a mandolin like an idiot.”

I leave an open-mouthed kiss on the tip of his finger, tasting the salty traces of pizza.

Theo lingers on the finger a moment before flipping his hand. “I singed myself there, on my wrist. An oven rack at four-fifty degrees.”

I trail my lips from the scar to the inside of his wrist. Leave another kiss over his pulse, feeling the way it jumps against my mouth, matches the pace of my own.

Theo blinks slowly, eyelids heavy. He points a lightly trembling forefinger, runs his thumb along its side. “Eleven stitches, careless with a knife. The kitchen crew never let me live it down. I was sixteen.”

“Poor baby,” I murmur against his finger. I run my lips along the line, trying to steady his hand.

He exhales. “Jude.”

Dazed eyes drop to my mouth. He runs his thumb along my cheek and it takes me a moment to realize he’s chewing the inside of his cheek. My heart

picks up the second I catch it, the tell that there's something weighing on the tip of his tongue.

Suddenly he's standing, looking wide awake, almost frenzied. Running fingers through his hair, opening his mouth and snapping it shut again. I've shuffled forward to the very edge of the bench, feeling terrified, and desperate, and hopeful. Wishing for him to say it, to tell me he feels this too. Even though I haven't got a clue what I'd do with the words if he gave them to me.

Theo comes down in front of me. Anchors his hands against the bench, on either side of my thighs, the proximity and the heat of his body and the sight of him on his knees feeling wildly familiar yet completely dreamlike. My heart is pounding a path out of my chest with every beat.

The waiting becomes too much. I put out a hand, grip his shirt. And tug.

The silence is punctured by two intakes of air. I lift my eyes, watching the curve in his brow as he registers my intention. Watching the way his lips part as he gets closer. His nose stops just shy of mine. If he flicked up his chin, his lips would land on mine. His eyes are wide, and I bet mine are too. Two simultaneous exhales.

Theo up close. I might never get enough of it. Of the laugh lines carving around his eyes. The way he looks at me like I exist against a blank background, the only thing worth seeing for miles.

Theo stays still, completely still with openness, and patience, and want in his eyes. His lips are there, only a slice of air from mine.

And then I'm gripping the nape of his neck and his eyes ease shut, and he lands his mouth on mine. The world, us included, seems to hold still for a beat. Letting our minds catch up, letting us wrap ourselves around this new way of existing.

Reality hits.

Because he's really here, it's Theo, he's kissing me, it's his hands that are on me, touching my waist, holding my face, his gasps of air filling me, breathing life into me. The release of it stuns me. For a moment I lose myself again, let myself just feel the way his lips move against me, consumed by the sweet taste of him. He brings me back with a groan and a touch of his tongue.

My fingers brush the hair at the back of his head. He mirrors me, letting me draw the limits, open up the doors for him, one by one. He slides a hand past my cheek, running his fingers through my hair, doubling back to pull me in closer.

And I feel my guard rise a little. Have to remind myself that this is him, I want him here, this is okay, I've been wanting this kiss, badly. His thumb brushes up and down over his hold on my waist. Telling me he senses it, that he's got me, I'm safe with him. I scoot forward on the bench and he brings my body flush against him, lets me feel the heartbeat hammer against his chest. Meets my tongue, pulls back to draw my lower lip between his, gentle and soothing, before coming back in for more.

I shift forward again, still needing more of him, and I lose the bench completely. Theo moans into my mouth when my fall sinks him back on his heels. I'm straddling his lap with his arm snaked around my waist, keeping me close. And it's that moan more than anything that gets me more desperate now. Gets me tilting my head to kiss him more deeply, tasting the lingering traces of simple syrup and bitter orange from his last drink. Aching, *aching* to have him closer still, though there's no room for air between our bodies.

Theo pulls away before I'm ready, laying one, two soft kisses on my mouth before drawing back. Just as I've toed the edge of the cliff, softened my knees, built up the nerve to find a real, no-turning-back momentum and jump in head first.

He brushes my cheek. "Should call it a night," he gets out between breaths, eyes conveying something I'm too dazed to make out.

I nod, almost frantically, because it's all I can manage. I'm shaking. I want more, I want him, and I'm shaking for it. But he presses a gentle kiss under my ear. Helps me off his lap and takes my hand, leading me down the path to home.

And only then do I grasp what he'd been trying to convey. How bittersweet the kiss had been for him, every press of his lips telling me hello and goodbye at the same time. Just enough to show me how it would be between us, if I let him in – raw and hungry and giving. Holding back just enough to keep me there with him. It felt like a kiss thick with want and the understanding that I wasn't his to have, not really.

That a single wrong move could send me running.

Chapter 20

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Jude

“**H**urry, my arms are getting tired!”

I balance carefully on the top rung of the ladder I’m perched on, lifting myself up on my toes to angle the bottle of amber liquid exactly right on the shelf backing the bar.

“There,” I say, tweaking the bottle one last time so that the label sits perfectly centered. “Only about fifty more to go.”

Jenna tightens her hold on the ladder as I gingerly climb down. “Have I mentioned you owe me for this?”

I recruited Jenna to help us put the finishing touches to Sunset Landing, me and the set-up team from Dime now littering the restaurant, hauling tables and chairs and unpacking décor. I’d normally bestow her role on Carly, if I could trust her to do the job without further sabotage. After the fiasco with the floors, I’ve kept her off the project for the most part. Fortunately, I’ve been holed up at the restaurant and not at the office, so I haven’t had to incur any of her wrath.

I hop down to the ground and grip the next bottle, a stunning translucent aquamarine that might as well be holding rubbing alcohol, for all I care. The display shelf is pure aesthetics.

“Do I owe you? Did I or did I not personally orchestrate a successful night between you and Finn on Saturday?”

Jenna scoffs. “You and I have very different ideas of what constitutes success.”

She rolls her eyes, but I can tell she's trying to play it cool. She had called me from a cab yesterday morning having spent the night at his place, sounding absolutely drained though she insisted they hadn't so much as touched all night. Apparently, they'd accidentally ended up on a whirlwind adventure through the city for hours after Theo and I left, before finally making it home.

"Anyway, hear me out," Jenna says, swooping down to rub at a scuff on her perfectly white sneakers which I assume she bought strictly for today's exercise, because the girl lives in heels. "I've thought about it and I think you should ask him out."

I eye the group of people over my shoulder. "I've *also* been thinking, and don't you think he would have said something if he was interested in getting together? Maybe he's content to leave things like they are."

"Are *you* content to leave things like they are?"

"It's a lot less complicated this way," I shrug, using a rag to wipe the bottle free of fingerprints.

"You're grossly overestimating your ability to keep this platonic. You've both had enough trouble doing that without adding kissing to the mix."

She's right. I've played today in my mind about two hundred times since Saturday and not a single scenario involved me keeping my hands to myself. Assuming he wants me to not keep my hands to myself. I could, if it came down to it.

Probably. Maybe.

I groan. "Thank god this place is packed with people. I'm not sure what kind of hedonism I'd give into otherwise."

Jenna pokes me in the arm. “Give in. If you’re both willing then why the hell are you holding back?”

“The whole thing is so complicated –”

“Only because you’re overthinking it,” Jenna hisses, suddenly exasperated. “I am *begging* you, Juju. Put me out of *my* misery and do something about this! The *will they, won’t they* is making me crazy. My eye is twitching. Seriously, look –”

She crowds me, bulging her eye.

“Okay. *Okay*,” I laugh, pushing her away and climbing back up the ladder. “I’ll consider it –”

“Oh! He’s here,” Jenna murmurs from below, and without even turning around, I know he is.

The entire lounge, which had just been teeming with conversation, falls completely silent. And I’m cursing myself for not telling him to stay away today. It isn’t typical for an owner to come in during set up, though he’d told me last week he wanted to help. Theo’s standing perfectly still in the archway between the foyer and lounge, scanning the room until his eyes land squarely on me.

Something like displeasure crosses his features, and the way his eyes trail down the ladder to where Jenna struggles to hold it tells me that’s what bothers him. As it is, I’m having to steady myself with a hand on the shelf hanging off the wall as he pins me with this long, heavy gaze I feel deep in my lungs.

Because suddenly I’m feeling the slip of his mouth against mine again, and the way his fingers moved in my hair. The room gets loud. No – it doesn’t. That’s the sound of my heart pounding in my ears, at the way he looks up at me. The set of his jaw gives him a completely haughty, heated

look that to anyone else would seem threatening, almost angry. But I've seen that look before. It's hunger and it makes my legs vibrate dangerously.

A light tap at my ankle startles me out of it. Below, Jenna saucers her eyes. "Everyone. Is. Looking," She mouths silently, with her back to the room.

Theo seems to understand her reproach from where he's standing, and he returns his gaze to the crew. The sound of him clearing his throat is loud in the otherwise quiet space, and the few sets of eyes that had turned to see what he'd been staring at shift back to him.

"Looks great, everyone," he says evenly.

The collective exhale tells me I was wrong. That their silence had nothing to do with his presence, and everything to do with his reputation as a sulky, overbearing, hard-to-please client. The way I forgot he could be, before I'd spent so much time getting to know him and – I swallow the heat rising up my throat – falling for him.

Murmurs of conversation start up again, and the moment someone in the dining room gives a loud laugh the tension dissolves entirely. I turn back to the shelf, placing the blue bottle of liquor next to its neighbor.

"Holy hell, Juju," Jenna mutters when my feet hit the ground again. "How do you manage to keep your clothes on when you're together? He looks at you like you're his last meal on earth."

"It takes everything in me, sometimes," I tell her, trying to steady my breath. I pry the next set of bottles free from the storage bin with shaking hands. "Do you mind putting up the next few bottles? I might fall off if I try."

Jenna takes pity on me and climbs the ladder, mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like *platonic, my ass* while I pass her an ornate, crystal

bottle.

“Hey.”

The syllable sounds so delectable to my ears it punches a gust of air from my chest. Theo leans his forearms onto the bar, ducking his head so that his shoulders sit by his ears and hair spills over his brows. Just like that I’m now cursing the room of people. Wishing I could have him alone to freely brush the hair off his face.

“Should I go find some busy work?” Jenna asks from up the ladder.

“Yes,” Theo says, eyes stuck to me.

“No,” I tell her, without looking away from him.

He studies me. “Are you trying to avoid me?” His eyes narrow when I shake my head, and I catch a light twitch at his mouth. “You don’t think I can behave myself?”

“Actually, I think I may be the problem.” I suck at my bottom lip. A compulsion since Saturday, craving traces of the way he tasted that night. The set of his jaw looks painful as he watches me do it.

“You can’t look at me like that,” he says quietly. His eyes drop down the length of my body, and it feels like a bit of a threat. Like he’s trying to choose which spot to bite into first. “You’re destroying my restraint.”

“Then stop looking at me like *that*.” Every corner of my body is buzzing from the weight of his stare.

“Holland –”

“As much as it feels like I’m watching the start of a very good porno, you two need to take this somewhere else,” Jenna mutters above us.

Theo still hasn’t taken his eyes off me. “Back office. Now,” he says, a command and not a request. A whimper makes it out of my mouth. He

walks off without another look, down the same hallway that leads to the washrooms.

“Whew.” Jenna shakes her head, climbing down to join me. She watches me move slowly, shaking out limb after limb in an effort to regain full consciousness. “Jude, are you kidding me? He says ‘Holland’ like he’s about to spank you. I almost volunteered to take your place.”

“See what I mean? What am I supposed to do with all that? The second we open this door there’s no turning back.”

“You are long past the point of turning back. Look at you. Your hands are shaking.” She grips them tightly between hers, until she’s satisfied that they’ve steadied enough. “Now please, go meet him before I do. I’ll cover for you.”

She grips my shoulders and turns me in the right direction, adding a little smack to my ass for good measure.

Okay, I coach myself, suddenly nervous as I trail down the hallway, passing the washrooms on barely solid legs. Okay. Be cool. Easy. Not... that kind of easy. More like... easy breezy. Totally cool.

Should I... Am I supposed to kiss him? Is that something we do now?

Do I?

Like maybe a quick peck, or...

Crap.

I make it a foot into the office before turning on my heel. I can’t. I need a proper Jenna pep talk, need to get to the bottom of this kissing thing –

An arm closes around my waist and suddenly I’m tucked into Theo’s chest. “Nope. Nice try,” he mutters in my ear.

It helps. The effect of his body against mine is almost instant. Because this is Theo. *Theo*. Kind, patient, understanding Theo who’s never let things

fester, or get weird, or uncomfortable between us. Theo who cuts through tension like a butcher knife through soft butter.

He holds me until my shoulders relax, body unclenches and I take a proper, deep breath. The office is small, just a desk backing a window and some cabinets lining the far wall. It makes Theo look about twice his size.

“Thank you,” I say sheepishly, threading my fingers through his when he releases me. “I needed that.”

“I know.” He lifts our hands to sweep a strand of hair off my cheek. “We need to talk about Saturday.”

The statement is insanity to my ears, and the laugh I give is pure sexual frustration. “*Talk?* Is that what we need to do?”

He bites down on a smile. “Stick around after work today.”

“To talk?”

“To talk.”

“Because I spook easy?”

“Pretty much.”

“I’m not spooked. Actually, I...” I eye the hallway over my shoulder, voices echoing from the lounge.

Theo plays along, lets me turn him, push him up against the wall next to the doorway with very little force, brows pushing up his forehead when he sees me lick my lips, lift my chin, wait for him to catch up.

“Come here,” he says quietly.

And before I understand how or when, he’s flipped us around so that my back hits the wall, his hips coming in so close, so close but not close enough. Stopping just short of me, and I tuck my fingertips into the front pockets of his jeans, needing to anchor myself to some part of him. To dig in, stake some sort of claim on him, and his body, and his heart.

Because I want this. I want him, and Jenna's right. What's the point in fighting this, if we both want it? Even though I love him, have no idea what to do about it, whether I *want* to do something about it, no idea whether this is anything more than a crush for him. Even though I'm not convinced I'd ever be able to keep him, on the off chance he even wants me. Maybe we give in, anyway. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take without bursting into flames.

Theo presses a thumb to my lips. Brushes them once with the pad of his finger before threading my hair and tipping back my head. His mouth meets mine and that's it for me. That's it. If this keeps up I won't stop it. I want it all, right here, right now. On the desk, against the wall, on the ground on all fours, I don't care. I need him in me –

“Diana! What are you doing here?”

Jenna's voice is loud, very loud, carrying from the other end of the hall and somehow my heart rate picks up even more. I'm so worked up there's a hot flush in my cheeks, and the way Theo has mussed my hair would leave very little to the imagination for someone much less observant than Diana.

“Oh my g –”

Theo slides a quick hand between our mouths, laying it on my lips.

My eyes are frantic, voice muffled when I say: “She's going to see –”

Theo's hand presses harder. “Shh, baby. Be quiet.”

And it's a strangled whimper that comes out next, insanely turned on that he's called me baby so off hand. He lays his forehead against mine, keeping me still with the hand in my hair. Eyes shackled to mine, all hard and hungry and frustrated, shoulders rising and falling as fast as the pace of my own breath.

“I'm looking for Jude –”

His fingers trace soothing lines along the base of my head. And maybe he means for it to calm me. But his proximity, the way he pins my mouth, the heat lifting off him in waves, absorbed by my skin, does anything but. The need and adrenaline blasting through my veins forces a tremor through my fingers. Without thinking, I tighten my grip on his pockets and tug him closer and I might have caught him off guard because he collapses forward. His leg lodges itself between mine, knee hits the wall, thigh pushes up against the spot below my waist already aching for him.

There are footsteps coming down the hall. One pair of them stomping, as though in warning. “I think Jude just stepped outside, actually –”

I’m properly panting into his palm now. Theo’s eyes drop as though he’s only just realizing how close together we’re pressed. Not just a tickle of my breasts against his chest. I’m there against him, hard enough that our breaths move in sync, for his cock to dig into my stomach. I whimper, squirm against his leg and it seems to dawn on him what it’s doing to me. With a little smirk he presses into me harder, firm against my pussy, delivering bliss and utter torture, and I clench everywhere. Trying, desperately, to keep myself from grinding into him. So he moves for me. Pulls back, hits my clit with pressure again. I moan into his hand.

“Margaret says she came this way. There’s an office back there.”

And Jenna’s voice is there, right there by the door now. “Oh, really? Let me check.”

We stand still, perfectly still save for the panting that gains speed with every passing second. Jenna pops her upper body into the office, not two feet away from where we are against the wall. She gives an exaggerated shift of her head as she looks around the room, her trajectory not stuttering for a second even as her eyes glide over us.

I owe this woman my first-born.

“Nope. No one in here,” she says, retreating, voice moving away from the office. “She’s probably in the washroom, back down that way. Would you like me to get her?”

Diana mutters a reply I don’t catch, because I’m breathing so hard now the edges of my vision start to diffuse. All I see is bright green and dilated pupils. All I feel is an urgency between my legs, a desperate need to feel full, filled by him.

An explosion of laughter from out in the lounge echoes down the hall, and Theo starts so hard my body shifts with his. It breaks the spell, this absurd sorcery twined around us, and he releases his grip on my mouth, my hair, peels away completely to press a forearm on the wall above my head.

My body sags as though he’d been holding me up like a puppet on strings. Everything throbs painfully.

“Fucking hell,” he lets out, knocking his forehead to his arm like he’s trying to wake himself up. “I don’t know how to function around you anymore.”

“Funny you say that. I said about the same to Jenna earlier.”

Theo breathes out a laugh. Quick, low, warm, and by the time my eyes open he’s settled down. He gives me the kind of smirk that will melt off my panties at any minute. “Yeah? What’d she come up with? Something helpful, I hope.”

“Depends what you consider helpful.” I run my knuckles along the bristles at his jaw. “D’you keep this for me?”

“Maybe,” he says, tipping up my chin. “You’re really not freaking out.”

“Give yourself more credit. You’re not *that* bad a kisser.”

He laughs into my neck. “You should know I can do a lot better than that night.”

He drops a kiss under my ear. In the same spot he branded Saturday night, and my skin rejoices his return with a flurry of goosebumps. Reluctantly, I push him away before I lose my head and lock us in this office for the day.

“Okay, you. I need to get back out there. I’ll see you after.”

He lets me come off the wall. “To talk.”

I blink innocently over my shoulder. “Whatever you say, Theo.”

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Chapter 21

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Theo

This has to be the longest four hours of my life.

They've been at it all morning. Putting out tables, setting up decor, the display behind the bar, getting rid of the tarps covering the benches and everything else made up of fabric. I'd started helping lay out the dining chairs until Jude threw me a look that plainly told me to stop, and I got she meant that it was off for an owner to lift a finger at this stage. So I hovered around uselessly instead.

I think they're just about done. Jude's running a broom under the spot waiting for the living wall delivery this afternoon, and most of the crew is gone by now. And thank god for that, because if I have to spend a single minute longer without knowing what the hell is going on between us, I'm going to combust.

At some point between those insane minutes in the office and this very moment, my euphoria dissolved into something real ugly.

So we kissed on the weekend, so what? We're no strangers to flirting, getting a little physical. Fuck, I've had my fingers inside her and it turned out that meant absolutely nothing to her.

I was glad – no, *thrilled* – earlier that she isn't freaking out over it. Now? That only makes one of us. It's taking everything I have to keep my cool, stay solid for her so she doesn't start to lose it. So it doesn't set us back. But it's occurred to me more than a few times over the last four hours that she might be this calm because it *doesn't* mean anything.

“I’m heading out,” the last crew member calls out to Jude, where she’s standing with Jenna. “You guys want a ride back to the office?”

What a stupid suggestion. She’s not going anywhere until she puts me out of my misery, one way or another. I start casting around for some excuse to keep her, but she beats me to it.

“I still need to go over some final budget numbers,” she tells him. Her eyes meet mine. “Do you have a few more minutes?”

I’d give her a lifetime, if she wanted it.

“Sure, no problem,” I say instead, managing to keep my voice steady.

Jenna doesn’t miss a beat. “And as thrilling as that sounds, I think that’s our cue, Jeremy.” She heads for the lobby, motioning for him to follow. “Let’s go before we die of boredom.”

That woman has earned herself free drinks for life, from the day we open.

Fucking *finally* the front door slams shut and I feel like we’ve just outrun our chaperone. I take a few steps to shrink the gap between us as Jude scans the room, as though she’s only now taking it all in.

“It just hit me,” she says. “This is all over in four days.”

I don’t know which *this* she means. The project? Or me and her?

And it hits me too, now. It never crossed my mind that ending the project could mean saying goodbye. Which is stupid. Because of course it could. I’m losing my only real excuse to keep this going. Unless she wants something more, what reason would we have to see each other every day? Even a friendship wouldn’t excuse it.

She gives me a wistful smile. “Can you believe we pulled it off?”

I look around the lounge. At the weathered floors, the clean windows letting in the sun. The bits of steel and concrete and the way it feels alive in

here. “This was all you. And yeah, I can believe it.”

She beams, eyes going a bit pink and wet around the rims. “Happy tears,” she tells me, reading the alarm on my face. She dabs at the corners of her eyes. “I haven’t been this happy since... You know. It’s been a long time.” She inhales, shaking her head like she’s signaling to herself it’s time to perk up. “And you! Congrats. Restaurant number four. How does it feel?”

Meaningless. That’s how it feels.

I don’t do a good job covering it up. She pulls a face. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s hitting me too.”

She gives me a long, contemplative look. “I have an idea.”

She grips my hand and practically drags me through the lounge. Like she still hasn’t figured out I’d go anywhere, as long as she asks. In the kitchen, she stands me at the edge of the workstation her desk used to occupy and holds onto the counter, one hand on either side of me.

“So, when I was little, my mom used to make this amazing chocolate fudge sauce that we’d slather all over ice cream. Sundaes on Sundays – you know how it is. But whenever I’d get sad, or stressed, or whatever, I ate that stuff right out of the jar. And it always made it better.”

She stares at me, dark eyes wide, waiting for me to catch up.

I tilt my head, amused. “Are you gonna make me chocolate fudge, Holland?”

She launches herself backwards and plants her hands on her hips. All mischief. “Well, here’s the thing. I don’t actually *know* how to make chocolate fudge, and this is one recipe I don’t want to screw up. Luckily, we happen to have a very good chef in the room with us.”

I snort, rub the laugh off my face. “Are you asking me to make myself chocolate fudge, Holland?”

Her smile fucking dazzles. “*You’re welcome.*”

~

Making chocolate fudge is a ten-minute operation.

But fuck, if it isn’t some of the best ten minutes of my life. She’d done all the heavy lifting at lunchtime over the past month, cooking for us every day, trying to prove a point ever since I’d razzed her about the Cheerios. But today, Jude buzzes around me. In the pantry, around the kitchen. This ball of energy, watching me work, asking questions, handing me spoons and measuring cups and whisks like only someone who’s spent time living in here could do.

My mind goes there, more than once. Is this what it would be like, life with her? Crushing emotion one second, raging high the next? The thought of a life like that blows me away. Annihilates me when I remember it’s not mine to have.

And now, we’re making too much fudge. There’s a massive pot of it on the stove. I haul a blender off a shelf at the back of the kitchen, and turn back to see Jude with her finger in the pot. She gives me a sheepish look, pulling her finger out of her mouth with a *pop*. I almost go slack-jawed watching her do it.

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” she winces.

“See what?” I stick my own finger in the pot, then in my mouth and turn off the burner. I get the top off the blender. “Almost done.”

“My mom never used a blender,” she says. I love it, how freely she brings up her family since the minute she blew up her walls on the weekend.

“Secret trick. Watch your hair.” I hook a finger around a bit of it that’s dangling dangerously close to the rim of the pot. I’d rather twist the strand around my palm, give it a hard tug, shove her against a wall. But I let go instead, and her eyes linger on me like she knows what I’m thinking.

I cough, motion to the blender. “Alright, pour out the pot in here. I’ll grab the jars.”

“So, does this make me, like, your Sous Chef?” She calls as I head back into the pantry. “I want this on my resume.”

Fuck, I love this woman. And I really don’t know how much longer I can keep it in.

“Oh, that’s hot,” Jude yelps from outside the pantry. “Theo, I’m making a bit of a mess here.”

I haul a pallet of mason jars off the shelf. Out in the kitchen, Jude’s emptied out the pot both in and around the blender. “It was heavier than I thought. Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing for nothing.” I grab a bar rag from a shelf off to the side. I push it through some of the fudge on the counter, but there’s so much of it I give up. By the time I look up, she has her finger on the blender.

My voice slices the silence. “Wait –”

It happens in slow motion. She registers my warning half a second too late. Notices the missing lid on the blender after she flips the switch. After the motor starts running. After the fudge starts churning. A second before it splatters over her and a second after it hits me.

I slap the blender off and the dead motor leaves a deafening silence in the kitchen.

It’s everywhere. Chocolate all over the counter. Streaking down her face, leaving a trail behind it. In her hair, splattered across her white t-shirt.

I don't have to see myself to know I'm looking just as rough. The look she's giving me tells me enough. So does the dripping sensation down my cheeks.

Her mouth is frozen in a near perfect 'o' shape. Her eyes are saucers. "Do I apologize *now*?"

Something rumbles deep in my stomach. I hear my snort before I can stop myself, and the rippling feeling inside me turns into a gurgle that leaks out of my mouth, a full on laugh I can't reel in.

Jude's face goes from shock to some kind of awe. My eyes start to water, I'm almost doubled over and I'm convinced I'm giving it all away. If she doesn't know I'm madly in love with her, the abandon in this laugh must tell it to her straight. I knew it would. I've worked hard to keep it in check when she's around. The thought sobers me up quick.

She's got this hazy look to her eyes, looking at me from under half-raised lids. And then...

There's something wrong with the air. It shifts around us, gets all thick and hot. Makes my lungs weigh a thousand pounds. We stare at each other and I'm vaguely conscious that the pace of my breathing would be better on par with cresting that goddamn hill I make myself run every morning. And I'm struggling. Fucking *struggling* to keep my hands to myself. Because I meant it when I said we needed to talk.

She makes it harder. Jude reaches out, scrapes a finger by my mouth, collecting chocolate off my face.

"You have dimples," she informs me.

I know this. They've done alright for me, when I cared to show them to women who weren't her.

Then she gives me that smile of hers, the good one, the one she gives when she really means it. Her nose does that scrunching thing. The one that drives me up the wall. And I lose my shit completely.

Her hand's still hovering somewhere between us, hanging out in my peripheral vision. I don't recall commissioning movement from my own, but it goes out too. My fingers close around her wrist. The blender blowing up in slow motion has nothing on this.

I have her hand retrace its steps and she goes willingly. Her mouth's sync'd up with mine. It drops when mine does. Except her finger slides into mine. My tongue tastes cocoa and sugar even before I clamp my lips, curve my tongue around her finger. Suck on her, just for a second. Slide her back out.

The smile's wiped clean off Jude's face. She looks borderline comatose. I feel borderline comatose. I haven't felt this out of my mind since I fell to my knees in that hotel room. And instead of digging deep for an ounce of self-control, I play the What-If Game.

What if she wanted to be with me? Well, I'd probably bend her over this counter. Peel off those sticky clothes. Take my time tasting chocolate and her. Do everything that's come to mind since that night at Nivoli's. Make her feel so good her legs don't function, watch her fall apart with every lick, stroke, thrust. On the counter. On the floor. Against the wall. In the fridge, just to see what it's like. I'd need to fumigate the place after we'd finish with it.

I trace her body with my eyes. Over every spot I'd rather run my tongue. Along the chocolate dripping down her neck, pooling in the hollow above her collarbone. Down the neckline of her shirt, cutting off the skin at the top of her breasts just to torture me. Down her legs, clad in jeans that

can't erase the memory of her in those little red shorts, or the view I got when she let me take them off. I'd spend days in front of her, on my knees. Tasting and worshipping.

The heavy breathing is just embarrassing now. I don't come out of it until I realize my cock is straining against the front of my jeans. Fuck.

I drop her wrist and grab a couple clean bar rags, tossing her one of them. I angle myself away while I try to get this fudge off my face and the crazy out of my mind, long enough to have a conversation.

"Theo, I've been thinking. About you and me."

The rag goes limp in my hand. Is she trying to kill me?

She's done a quick job of wiping the chocolate off her face. It's just leftover smears I want nothing more than to lick off myself. Her eyes have gone dark. I've never seen her like this, not earlier in the office, not in those minutes in her bedroom. Not even the night she let me finger her. She's hot, she wants it bad. And god knows I want to take her up on it.

But I need to know what this is about.

I toss the bar rag in a heap and brace my hands on the counter, sinking my fingers into pools of warm fudge. "What does that mean?" Her face is pure lust. I'm not sure I'll survive this. Not sure I *want* to survive this, if – there's urgency in my tone this time. "What does that mean, Jude?"

"I don't want to hold out anymore."

I hang my head.

I'm a mess. A fucking mess of questions. Does she want me – me specifically? Does she feel something for me? Or is this about scratching an itch? Knock it out of her system now that the project's over, and she never has to see me again. My knuckles are turning white from the effort of keeping them on the counter. Pants so tight it's hard not to wince from the

pain. I badly need to adjust them but handling myself right now is the last thing I should do. Not until I figure this out.

She's biting her lip. I'm jealous of her teeth. Of the way they're digging into her, pinching her skin. She smells like chocolate and cardamom and some kind of citrus combination I've been trying to place since the first time I caught it on her.

Get it together, I order myself. Say the words. Ask what you need to ask.

But I can't even look at her. The fucking effort it's taking to keep my hands off her –

“Theo.”

Fuck it.

She's so close, I barely have to reach. My hands find her ribcage without trying. My thumbs graze the edge of her bra and I might fucking combust. She must hear my heart thump against my chest, must have heard the groan that came out of me at the sound of my name on her tongue.

I should be gentle. I should. But my hands are rough against her, pressing into her, dragging down the curve of her waist, gripping her hips tight through her jeans. Fuck, *fuck* she's warm and soft and perfect under there, and it's fucking torture not seeing what I'm touching. She makes this sound from inside her throat. She moaned and I might die. Might die if I don't have her, this is it, the last day of my life. I tug her closer, pivot a little so she's backed up against the counter. I slip a finger under the hem of her shirt on each side. Not enough. Feeling her isn't enough. I already know it isn't. But god, I want to.

Her chest is heaving. The V-neck of her shirt gapes and from this high up, this close up, I can see the pink lace gathering her up. I want my mouth

on her. Want to peel this shirt off her and – her hands slide up my forearms, stopping just short of my elbows. God. I’m so fucking wound up –

But – what is this?

Her hands glide up higher and she’s running her thumbs along my biceps. They twitch reflexively under her skin. She inches closer and fuck – she’s pressing my dick into her, with so much purpose and no hesitation and I – I think I’m losing my mind –

“Theo, I can’t take it anymore.” Her voice is throaty, heavy. She looks like she’s in pain. Her fingers hook in my waistband, thumb grazes the button. “Please. I need this.”

“Fuck,” I breathe.

One tug. That’s all it takes and my jeans are open. A strangled groan makes it out of me. She pushes herself up on her toes, brushes against me on the way up to meet my mouth.

And there’s nothing tentative about it.

She wraps her arms around my neck, presses down on my shoulders, her body telling me what to do. So, I do it. I lift her up and she locks her legs around me and I cup her ass and fucking hell I can’t help digging in. Fucking livid that there’s a pair of jeans in the way. Livid. But she’s moaning into my mouth now and I’m easily distracted because I get my fingers in her hair. Grip a gentle handful, tug a little harder and it gets me another moan. She likes getting her hair pulled and it has to be the single greatest fucking discovery I’ve ever –

Easily distracted. She grinds her hips against me and it’s the only point of contact I can focus on now. I go a little lightheaded because I think we’re about to fuck, I really think we are and I never thought we’d get here. Not really –

Where is this going, though? Is this just –

Jude grips my jaw, thumbs my chin, talks me into a deeper kiss. Fuck, this girl can kiss. I tighten my grip on her hair. *Fuck* this girl can kiss –

But – where is this going? Is it just a casual fuck, or –

I lose her mouth and it's painful, like losing a limb. But she's running slow, wet kisses along my jaw, down my neck and I swear to god I'm about to lose any bit of self-restraint I've got, it's seeping out of me from every pore. But –

She drops her hands between our bodies. Gets my zipper down.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck –

“Jude – oh, *fuck*. Jesus.” It's a whole fucking struggle. A whole fucking masochistic struggle but I catch her hand as it closes around my dick. “Hey, hey – can we –”

“What?” She hits me with a look of such savage lust I almost let it go. Almost tell her never mind, put her hand back where I found it and play out the fantasy that's been running in my mind for three years.

But then her fog clears. And her jaw drops. “Oh my god.” She pushes against my chest, drops her legs and I let her go. She holds her hands up like I've come to arrest her. “I'm so sorry. I thought – oh my god.”

She turns on her heel and makes it to the other end of the workstation before I catch her with an arm around her waist.

“Oh, no you don't.” I sit her on the counter top. “We need to talk this out.”

Her face is a mask of pure horror. “I thought –”

“Trust me, you thought right. Just – let's talk this through, okay?”

Talk this through. I hadn't made it that far in my own brain. What is it, exactly, that I need to get across, again? Her eyes glide down my body as I

zip myself back up.

“Is it because I freaked out before? Because –”

I groan at the words. The memory of her grinding into me is a blinding flash behind my eyelids.

“Because if you don’t think I want you, I do, I really, really want you –”

I sag forward on another stuttering groan, bury my face in her shoulder.

“I kind of can’t stop thinking about it honestly, and –”

“Jude, *please*.” My voice is muffled against her.

“I think it would really be good, like so good between us –”

“Jesus, Jude *please*. Please stop talking. You’re killing me.” I shake my head into her shoulder. Fuck me. Seriously, fuck. Me.

“Do you not want to, anymore?” Her voice is so brittle I hate myself. “It’s okay if you don’t –”

My spine has given up all ability to hold me upright and so I speak into her shoulder. “You have no *fucking* idea how much I want you. But – Jude, I can’t have this be just a sex thing. Not with you.”

Tell me it wouldn’t be.

Tell me it wouldn’t be casual. Tell me you want me, just me, for good, and I’ll fuck you right now.

Because I’m past this, and I know now I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t sleep with her, no strings attached, and walk away unscathed. I’m too far gone for that. Give me the strings, give me all of them.

It’s an eternal pause. I can feel her thinking, weighing her words. I breathe in her hair before lifting my head, like it can inject me with courage. I could use any bit of it right now.

She fiddles with her fingers, and I realize she looks completely relieved. “So, it really *isn’t* a sex thing, then?”

What the fuck?

She's shocked every word out of my vocabulary. How could she ever have thought –

And then it hits me. The ogling. Telling her I want her, and not much else –

I'm fucking *idiot* –

“So then what would it...” She gives me a look, begging me to fill in the gaps. To be strong for her, because she got us here but can't take this conversation to the finish line.

Okay. I can do this. Get the words out. Real, make-or-break-the-friendship kind of words. My legs are amped up, the same kind of feeling that gets me out for my run every morning. I start pacing.

“Okay, look. It's occurring to me that I've been going about this the wrong way –” I reach the end of my runway and turn the other way. “I thought if I kept it all easy and casual between us, we could avoid a freak out –” I turn with so much ferocity I almost trip on my own feet and march back. “But that's not really what you need is it? And it's not how I want to operate, not with you, because there's nothing casual about you for me –”

I swing back around and stop abruptly to face her. Plant my feet because I need an anchor, need every bit of steadiness I can find. “I care about you.”

She smiles gently. “I care about you too.”

I blink.

Wh –?

“No,” I shake my head, slice through the air with frustrated hands. “See, that didn't come out right.” I reach for her hands. To help me convey it properly but also because I need some of her strength too. Her gaze alternates between our hands and my face.

“What I meant to say is that I’m crazy about you, Jude. Like, completely lost my head, you’re everything I think about, kind of crazy. For – for weeks now. Months. For as long as I can remember, actually. So long I don’t even remember what it feels like to *not*... And I thought that if I could keep it to myself, I’d be able to keep *you*, because I knew you didn’t – and I know that feeling this kind of thing isn’t easy for you to begin with. You need time, and you need to trust people and... But I want you to know that I feel this way, in case... I don’t know.” I gesture around us with our intertwined hands. “In case up becomes down and by some impossible miracle you feel the same way. But even if that never happens, I swear I don’t expect a thing just because I’ve said this out loud. And I won’t disappear if you decide you want no part in this. Because being your friend is worth a lot to me on its own. And – and I’ll be whatever you need me to be, whatever you want me to be. Because I care about you. Which I already said so – so since I’m only talking in circles now I – I guess I’ll stop, and... Yeah.”

Well, fuck.

Truly, I never expected to get that out. But whenever I pictured this moment, I’ve been a lot more eloquent, a lot more put together. Told it to her in a way that made sense, explained, clear as day, how bad I love her. How lost I feel when she isn’t around. But faced with the reality of her... I just needed to get them out of me. To take every word and thought that’s ever plagued me and offer them at her altar to do what she wants with them. End me or send me flying.

It takes a second for her eyebrows to uncinch. Like she’s parsing through my words – totally fair since I was a rambling fucking mess. But then I watch the words land.

“Wow.”

I tug gently at her hands. “Is that a good wow or a bad wow, or...”

Good wow. Say it’s a good wow. Please, Jude. Please, please –

She’s staring down at our hands and god I want to reach out, lift her chin, feel her eyes on me.

“It’s... good.”

Good? Did she say good? Did she just –

“I’m... Theo, I think I *am* freaking out.”

“No. Hey,” I duck down, slip one of my hands from hers to nudge up her chin. “There’s no pressure, okay? This doesn’t have to change anything.”

She shakes her head. “It changes everything.”

Fuck.

“What would it... We work together. You’re a client. I work for you. How could this work?”

She’s rationalizing. She’s trying to rationalize it, figure it out, and maybe it means she feels the same way –

“The project wraps this week.”

“But if we did this... I mean the odds of it going south are...” She gives me a pleading look. “I’m sorry, I know I’m not being very coherent right now. But Theo you – your friendship means a lot to me, too. And I don’t want to lose it.”

“But what if it didn’t? Go south?”

“But what if it did? These last few weeks – I’ve felt more full than I have in years. And – and you think you like me now. But you could wake up tomorrow and change your mind. Or I could fuck it up. Or you could

fuck it up and then where does that leave me? Back where I started. I don't know if I can stand that."

Ask her. Ask her, even though it's a stupid, needy question, just ask –

It's that blurting thing again. "Do you have feelings for me?"

An eternity passes.

She rubs her lips together, thinking. No, not thinking. Debating whether to say the words. I have no idea what my face looks like because I've lost all function of it at this point –

She nods.

And it's the most beautiful nod I've ever seen. It takes everything in me not to lift her off this counter, squeeze her half to death, kiss her until my lips go numb.

"Okay," I say, and it's a struggle to keep my voice even, face steady.

She deflates. "I really know how to be a buzzkill, don't I?"

At that, I let out a laugh. "Trust me, this buzz can't be killed. This buzz is fucking invincible. I'm about to run a marathon off this buzz."

She gives me that laugh I'd give up a lot to keep hearing. I brush the hair off her face.

"Listen, I meant what I said. I don't expect anything out of this conversation. Other than the buzz, which I thank you for. And also for having me feel about a hundred pounds lighter, because you hearing me out is more than I'd ever hoped for. It's up to you where we go from here, and if you want to stay friends then I promise I won't hold it against you. Just don't avoid me, okay?"

"Of course not."

Relief. Sweet fucking relief.

“Okay.” I help her off the counter. “I’m going to stay and clean up this fudge, if that’s okay. But I’ll call you a car.”

“I should stay. The living wall is due in a couple hours –”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it. And I’ll see you Friday, right? At the opening party?”

“Of course, you will.”

I fiddle with my phone and she takes my hand as we walk out to the foyer. I’m somewhere between being devastated to see her go for four days, and badly needing time alone to catch my breath. Assess the damage, how big a fool I’ve made of myself. How big the odds are that she’ll turn me down when I see her next, and how I can manage a recovery.

“Hey.” I tug her back when her hand hits the front door. “I lied. I want one thing.”

It takes her just half a second to figure me out. She comes up onto her toes and steadies herself with a hand on my chest. One of us groans. Or maybe both of us do, because whatever happens next can’t take away from the reality that me and her kissing just works. It just fucking *works*, even on that first try, two days ago. Nothing awkward or clumsy about it. Our lips connect at the right angle. Tongues know exactly how to get along. Teeth bite just the way they should. In my mouth she lets out the best sound in the world. Her moan is the last thing I want to hear before I die.

I dip to wrap my arms around her waist and lift her off her toes. Savor every brush against her tongue. Squeeze her tight, sway her a little and she lets out a breathy chuckle when I come up for air. Just for a second before I go in for more.

She puts an I’m sorry in the kiss. A thank you. An I care about you, too. No promises other than she’ll figure it out. What she wants out of this. I’ll

take it.

Still, though. I kiss her like it'll be the last time.

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Chapter 22

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Jude

The opening party for Sunset Landing rages around me.

It's not *really* raging. It's tasteful and civilized, like any opening party I've ever been to. But to me, in a state where I wrestle with furious nerves, it rages.

The lounge is packed with people, chatting and drinking under the sunny glow of the light installation, the only light they've left on in the space other than the backlight behind the bar. Theo's fingerprints are all over the music coming from the DJ, who's spinning an upbeat version of a Phil Collins song.

The déjà vu is nauseating.

Three years ago, I left a Theo Jordan opening party to disastrous consequences. Tonight, disastrous wouldn't even begin to describe what it would do to me if things went wrong. A promotion, up for grabs again. And this thing with Theo, that's amounted to so much more than the silly school girl crush that started blossoming just a few weeks ago.

It hit me on Monday, watching him grow smaller through the window of the car taking me away from him. I looked at him and realized: this man could destroy me. If he ever decided he'd had enough of me, decided he didn't want me after all...

I didn't just let him see the precarious house of cards I've become, just started to build back after my parents left me. I gave him the power to send

it toppling down, with nothing but an exhale. How much loss can someone take in a life time, without falling to complete and utter ruin?

But because he's him, because he's the kind of man who says what he means and truly *means* what he means, Theo's made it easier on me. He's texted me several times a day since I last saw him. About nothing at all. Like nothing's changed, like this thing between us isn't balancing on a silky thread, with fear and the unknown on one side, and the safety of friendship on the other.

I join myself to Diana's hip for most of the night, buying myself time. Graciously accept congratulations and compliments on the design. Weave through the crowd whenever I get a glimpse of Carly, avoiding her surly looks at all costs. And by sheer virtue of being our host, I watch Theo get tugged around from guest to guest all night. Able to get nothing more than a smile at me from across the room whenever he sees me looking, and a single text he sends me early in the night.

THEO: *You look beautiful.*

I might have turned the exact shade of red as the dress I put on, the same one I caught him checking out more than once when we'd gone on that road trip.

"Darling, I just ran into Theo on my way over," Diana tells me, finding me in a booth I'd settled into while she used the washroom. My heart leaps into my throat at the mention of his name. "He set a meeting about the contract for next week!"

"He did?"

"He didn't say anything outright, but he might as well have. It's looking really good for us."

My heart surges, properly cutting off my air supply. In my gut, I knew he wasn't the kind of man whose decision would hinge on whether I reciprocated his feelings. But having the proof of it now, that he'd be willing to keep working with Dime, with *me*, even if I rejected him... He is exactly who I've made him out to be in recent weeks.

Diana presses a hand on my shoulder and leans in so I can hear her over the thumping music. "You've done so well for us, darling. Look at this place – it's a dream. I'm convinced he'll sign." She gathers her leather jacket off the bench. "I'm going to head home. But know that I am so proud of you – look at how far you've come."

"Thank you for trusting me with this," I mumble, feeling a surge of affection for the woman in front of me. The chance she took on me fresh out of school all the way to now, betting on me to land us Theo's contract.

"You'll be the youngest designer on staff, you know. Congratulations, darling. I'll see you on Monday."

"See you," I say faintly. But on the inside, I'm dancing.

Jude Holland, Designer. It's going to happen this time. I can feel it.

And then it grips me. The realization that it's him, Theo, the person I want to tell this to, get excited with.

And that's my answer, isn't it? I could no more turn him away than give up breathing. It shouldn't be that simple. And somehow it is.

I slide out of the booth and wander out of the dining room, scanning the lounge. The height of the party is dwindling now that most of the food's gone. The place has cleared out a bunch, with only a couple of groups gathered at the bar. That's where I find him. Theo's standing with a woman with her back to me, dark, glossy hair piled on top of her head. She's a little

taller than I am, but he still has to hunch to hear her over the music. He grins when she reaches to hold his cheeks.

I realize with a jolt that, other than the fleeting laugh he let slip the other day, this is the first real, big smile I've seen on him. And it lights up his whole face. It forces one to spread across my own, makes me warm and tingly in my extremities, makes me want to spend the rest of my life getting it to reappear. His eyes curve right up in shining crescent moons. Mouth stretches in a devastating arch. Cheeks carve with long, shallow dimples. I feel the warmth radiate off him, even from here. I love his face. I love him, so much I can barely stomach it.

I don't know who this woman is, who's managed to steal that smile from him. But I can't look away. Like he's got some kind of built-in sensor, he finds me over her head. He flicks his brows, once.

Don't move, he's saying.

I don't. I watch him say something to the woman, indicating the foyer, but immediately she looks around, catches sight of me and comes forward. I can see her properly now. She's beautiful. Her cheekbones are perfectly high and her eyes a familiar brilliant green that shimmers even in the low light.

"Wouldn't you know it, this boy just tried to shuffle me out," she grins at me, throwing Theo a reproachful look over her shoulder. She's got them too, those dimples. She takes my hand between both of hers. "Hi, honey. I'm Lori. Teddy's mom."

Teddy?

He raises his eyes to the ceiling as I press my lips together. The nickname simultaneously melts me and adds the perfect ammunition to the arsenal of ways I plan to make him blush.

I give his mom my most radiant smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lori. Could I get you a drink? I have so many questions for you.”

“Actually,” Theo says, eye boring into me. “Weren’t you just saying there was trouble in the kitchen –”

“Good grief, you’re a terrible liar, honey. She’s barely said a word.” Lori rolls her eyes. “Your name is Jude, yes? She’s *very* pretty, Teddy.”

I laugh at the pained look on Theo’s face.

“Well! Jude, I was just telling Teddy how *absolutely* proud I am. His fourth business! I don’t know how you do it, honey. I’d be a basket case of stress, personally.”

I flinch before I can help it and thank god Lori’s attention has turned to Theo, who gives her a sweet smile. But I catch the pained lines around his eyes.

To her credit, so does Lori. “Teddy?”

There’s an edge to her tone that tells me it isn’t the first time she’s worried about this. Theo hesitates, clearly scrambling to find the right words to end this line of inquiry.

“Actually, I was the resident stress case on this project,” I tell her quickly. “It was my first official one. Your son’s been really great to work for.”

Theo gives me a grateful look, though I’m not sure how much his mom buys the cover. For all her wide eyes, Lori doesn’t strike me as someone easily fooled. But after a long moment in which she sizes me up, she breaks into a dimpled grin.

“Well, then we should celebrate your big night too! Shall we tell Penny to come back in, Teddy? Maybe you can send Marcus a text message. They’re waiting in the car for me,” Lori adds for my benefit.

“They’ve got the kids with a sitter, Mom, remember? They need to get home,” Theo says patiently.

“Oh, that’s right,” Lori deflates. “Well, Jude, perhaps we can meet again soon? Oh, I know! We’re all coming back for dinner on opening night. You have to join us. When is it, Teddy?”

“Next weekend. But, look Mom, Jude doesn’t want...” He sends me an apology with his eyes. “She’ll think about it, okay?”

“No, I’ll come. That sounds lovely,” I hear myself say without thinking. “Though this is your fair warning that I expect all your best stories from Theo’s childhood. And photographic evidence would be a real plus.”

Theo smiles. A real, proper smile, gifting me those crescent moon eyes for the very first time and I feel completely lightheaded, loving that I’ve put that look on his face.

“Well, that’s wonderful! Between Penny and I, you’ll have all the best material. Now, I should go before she drags me out by the earlobe.” Lori plants a kiss on my cheek. “It was so nice to finally meet you, honey. Thank you for looking out for my boy. You’re as lovely as I imagined.”

Finally? Imagined?

I feel Theo’s eyes on me. Suddenly the light installation is too bright. They must see every inch of the red staining my face.

“Alright, Mom, let’s get you out there.” Theo takes her hand. To me he adds: “Give me a minute, okay? Stay here.”

I nod weakly, and the parting, anxious look he gives me tells me exactly how much panic he sees on my face.

There’s a group at the bar getting a little rowdy over a round of shots. In my state, their shouts hit me like a knock to the head. I don’t even know

why I'm losing it right now. So, he talks to his mom about me. It must mean he really *does* like me, right?

But... isn't it a little soon for that kind of thing? He can't have started to catch feelings until a couple weeks ago. Days ago, even. I mean, that's a little impulsive, isn't it? Is he really thinking this through –

My phone vibrates in my hand and I grapple with it, desperate for a distraction.

JENNA: *Update?*

ME: *Just met his mom. I think he talks about me?*

Her reply comes quick.

JENNA: *DO NOT FREAK OUT.*

JENNA: *EVERYTHING IS FINE.*

Right. *Right*, do not freak out.

An email notification flashes across my screen before I can reply.

Thursday, August 29, 10:38 PM

From: cmarshall@marshallmarshall.com

Subject: Updated Invoice – Sunset Landing

Hello Jude - See attached the updated invoice with the additional delivery from this week.

Craig

Marshall & Marshall Nurseries

What?

Which additional deliveries? I click open the attachment, feeling a prickle of dread.

Oh no. No no no.

This is so far out of budget.

I scroll through the invoice. What is this? I didn't order any of this. I turn in a circle on the spot, as though the long list of flowers, and trees, and planters, and soil will materialize around me.

And just as I think it's all a mistake, that I'll be able to call Craig in the morning and clear this up, I reach the end of the document. A delivery confirmation with Theo's signature at the very bottom, dated for four days ago. An hour after I left him, covered in chocolate fudge.

A prickle of understanding blooms in my chest. Because this veers too close to coincidence, that I would have told him I loved to garden. That they make me feel better, now that I'm apart from my mother. And suddenly the trappings of a garden appear? I walk up to the windows, as though I expect to see land. But it's just the Hubbart below, flowing innocently like the ground isn't shifting under my feet. Like I'm not having an out-of-body experience, turning on the spot again.

"Hey, Guinea Pig. You look lost."

"Hi, Finn," I say absently. He splits up from the small group at the bar and lops towards me with a beer. Then it occurs to me. "Oh! *Finn*. Finn!"

He grins comically, pointing to himself. "Yes. Me, Finn. You, Guinea Pig."

"Sorry," I say sheepishly. "Do you know if – is there some kind of outdoor space around here? Or maybe you've seen some plants lying around? In the back office maybe?"

He takes a swig of his beer. "I don't know about any plants. But there's the rooftop. Is that what you mean?"

"How do I get up there?" My heart beat is in my ears.

"The door at the back of the kitchen –"

I take off.

The smell of fresh cleaning products assaults my senses as I make for the door tucked at the very back of the kitchen, the one I hadn't noticed once in all my time here. I climb some dimly lit stairs without a clue in the world as to why I'm running so fast. My legs are burning with effort by the time I'm on the second flight. There's only one way out, and it's through a paneled glass door at the top of the steps that I push through, welcoming the cooling outdoor air into my lungs.

When my eyes adjust, I'm in a fairy tale.

It's a rooftop garden. Daisies and roses and azaleas and marigolds. Vines crawling up trellises. Colorful potted trees drawing green and purple lines across the space. Weathered blue herringbone under my feet and the sounds of the rushing river down below. Above me, a canvas of twinkling lights, draped from one end of the garden to the other, making me feel like I'm standing in the middle of the most breathtaking star. The floral smell is intoxicating, and I collapse back onto the brick wall of the stairwell, taking it all in.

I get it, now.

Really get it, what he'd been trying to articulate on Monday, what he'd danced around with his sweet words and the way he'd kissed me before I left.

That this isn't just some fling for him, some crush, some friendly feelings that caught fire.

I hear footsteps barrel up the stairs.

Chapter 23

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Theo

Shit shit shit.

This isn't how –

I never meant for –

Shit.

I burst through the doors at the top of the stairs and she's there, frozen against the wall. Staring out at this lovesick, embarrassing, senseless thing I did. This thing I never really meant for her to see. Not like this. Not with everything up in the air.

I look around at it now, trying to see it through her eyes. The product of days of trying to divert my nervous energy. This thing that I've probably done completely wrong, because I haven't gardened a fucking day in my life. I tried to make sense of about a hundred internet searches that were completely lacking in practice. Won myself a painful sunburn and a couple splinters in the process.

All this because I forgot to ask them to bill the new delivery separate from the living wall. Of course, she noticed it. She's too good at her job not to.

Jude hasn't moved an inch since I've come up, looking hypnotized by the lights. About a hundred word variations race through my brain. I can't settle on a single one that makes sense, does this justice, saves me from this.

So, I go with: "Do you like it?"

"It's amazing."

My stomach flips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You did this for me.”

She’s not asking. It’s not a question. And when she finally looks at me, I see it in her. She knows. I’m a kid backed into a corner, aware that the jig is up and it’s time to come clean.

“I did.” The adrenaline hits me and I’m shaking.

She nods. “Because you’re in love with me.”

“I am. I want – I need to be with you, Jude.”

There’s fear in every gold fleck in her irises. In every freckle on her nose. Every strand of hair spilling over her shoulders. But her eyes don’t falter. She lifts a hand. Puts it against my chest.

“Your heart is pounding.”

I cover it with one of mine. “It’s yours.”

She huffs a breath. Leans in to touch her forehead to me, next to our hands. And I feel high on adrenaline. Jittery from the relief of letting it out. Sick from the anticipation of finally knowing, one way or the other, whether I’ve got a shot in hell, here.

Jude wraps her other arm all the way around me. And that’s got to be a good sign. It has to be, unless it’s a way to let me down gently because she’s hiding her face and so what if she agreed to meet my family, you can meet family as a friend and I’m losing my mind now, properly losing it and I can’t remember the last breath I took and maybe that’s why I’m starting to feel so lightheaded but I can’t seem to make myself inhale and I’m doing my best to be patient, here, but –

I swallow. “On a scale of It’s Fine to Would Rather Blow my Brains Out
—”

Her laugh fills me with helium. If she weren't holding me, I'd float into the sky.

She pulls back.

And her nose scrunches.

"I'm sitting at a solid I Need to Be with You, Too."

Holy shit.

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Chapter 24

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Jude

It feels like I'm falling.

My words have tipped me straight off a cliff, body feels like it's been swept up by a breeze, swaying me across the sky, a gentle flutter on the way to somewhere that feels safe and wonderful and terrifying all at once.

Theo closes his eyes, as though letting my words wash over him. His breath comes out like a small *huh*. He comes to only a second later and suddenly I'm not breathing, not thinking. I can't, under a look like that. The nerves or whatever gripped him only a moment ago is gone. His eyes tell me something different now.

Theo untangles his fingers from mine. Rakes back my hair, holds the back of my head.

"Breathe, Jude," he murmurs.

It's an audible intake of air. Theo's face stretches into a soft, easy grin, eyes reflecting the lights above. He eases my lips open with his.

It's me and him, with nothing left in our way. Still, Theo puts on a masterclass in restraint. The movement of his mouth, of his fingers in my hair, of the tight grip of his hand on my waist. They're swift and measured all at once. Hungry and patient all at once. He's releasing something he's kept from me, kept locked tight, letting it unfurl slowly, savoring it. Telling me things with the heat of his skin that leaves me as hungry as he's been.

I've been wanting this a while.

He tugs at my hair when I slide my tongue to meet his.

Let me show you how long.

But I'm not as patient. I can't be, not with him, not when I've been craving him the way that I have. I find my momentum. Slick his lips with my tongue, kiss him deeper, pull back, bite his lip. I need to feel him against me, to feel his weight, his body on mine. My hands crawl up his back under his shirt, and I tug him closer. Theo meets me halfway. He pushes his hips into me and the weight of him flattens me into the wall, rouses a sharp, hot pulse between my legs. I moan into his mouth.

He breaks the kiss first, gazing at me with unwavering veneration, and the air scorches my parched lungs.

"Jude, you have no idea –" He doesn't make it to the end. He bows down to my neck, dragging wet lips down and then up again. He seems to come to again. "Should I slow down?"

"Don't."

His hand sweeps up my hip, feeling me through my dress, cupping my breast, making my breath rattle. I'm tired of oxygen. I want my mouth against his until I pass out. I bring him back up by the hair and he comes willingly, letting me taste him again.

Something shifts on the second kiss. His grip turns firm, rough, and then there's licking and nipping and something roars inside me and I falter at the knees. Theo's hand crawls down my body. He flicks away the hem of my dress and cups my ass. Holding me steady, skin-to-skin, letting out a groan from deep in his throat.

For so fucking long.

A hot jolt spreads from between my thighs. I need more of him. It's a desperate urge now. I drop fistfuls of his hair and finger the edge of his shirt.

“Theo.” My voice is a thick rasp. “Need this off.”

Theo lets up against my body, gives me room to maneuver. Buries his head in my neck like he can’t bear to sever himself completely. I slide his shirt up as far as I can, palms dragging up his torso until he has to pry himself away to help slip it all the way off.

I take him in, the light reflecting off the skin stretching over muscle, the heaviness of his shoulders, and the noise I make sounds like a deep *oof*. It hits different this time, seeing him like this. Knowing I get to look, feel, kiss, lick. Somehow, he’s feeling shy. I can tell by the way he fiddles with a curl, pushing it off his face.

I’m feeling anything but shy. I rest my head against the wall, gazing up at him, wanting him to do it for me.

“My turn.”

Shyness be damned. He’s in control again as he presses a wet kiss under my jaw, against my throat, down the bare skin along my chest. He tugs at the wrap of my dress, slides it off my shoulders and it drops to the ground with a quiet *swish*.

“Fucking hell, Jude,” he mutters, looking like he’s been hit over the head. “I don’t have enough hands.”

The ones he has are on me again, firm, rippling the skin under his fingers. He’s down my waist one second, teasing a nipple under my bra the other, skimming the crease of my hip the next like he can’t decide where he wants to be.

Seems he wants it all. He scoops me up like I’m made of nothing. Sends my legs around his waist and presses me into the wall, sliding his hands to hold my ass, leaving a trail of heat across my skin. The fabric of my panties feeling so silly and inconsequential between us.

His hands are full of me, so it's my turn now. He watches me run my hands down his arms, tensed against my weight. Up his chest, hard and ridged. Groans with me when I rock my hips hard against his, again and again. His cock feels so good, the way it returns the pressure. But it's nowhere near enough anymore.

My fingers are shaking by the time I run them through his hair. Letting the thick strands snag between them.

I sigh. "I've been meaning to do that."

He grins, eyes curving into those little moons. I mold my palms to his cheekbones, feel his stubble against my skin, brush his lips with my thumb. I drink him in. Absorb every little angle and line of his face. It knocks the wind right out of me, seeing him up close like this. I bite my lip. He leans in, bites it too. Catches it between his lips, a light suck to soothe the sting.

"This is crazy. I can't believe this is really happening," I whisper.

We stare at each other and it all seems to settle in at once. What we're doing, where we're headed. There's a fraction of hesitation when he leans in to lay soft kisses on my lips, like he still can't believe I'm letting him do it. I kiss him deep. His dimples are in full effect when he pulls away.

"Crazy," he agrees.

And we break out in quiet, exhilarated laughter with our foreheads pressed together until the vibrations ripple down our bodies and pull our attention to a single point of contact between us. Theo lets out a shaky breath when I push into him.

"I want you." His voice is husky, breathless.

Mine is sure, hungry. "I want you, too."

The restraint is gone.

I blink and I'm on my feet.

Blink and my bra is gone.

I arch against him, under the thumbs brushing my nipples, hard hands running all the way down, trailing fire and goosebumps. He cups my pussy through my panties and I grind into his palm, over and over until he pushes the fabric aside to slide a finger inside me and god, my body missed him like this. I've tried to fuck myself like this so many times since the night at the hotel, trying to recreate the magic. It's been impossible. He pumps gently into me, so slow it's perfect and aggravating at the same time, adding another finger. Possessive eyes on my face as I squirm into his hand when he adds a third. Then changes his mind and hooks the band of my panties instead.

My distress comes out as a whimper. "Don't stop."

"Have to. I need this."

And I think this is it. He's finally going to be inside me. It's the only thing he could mean.

Theo gets me into a last, slow kiss before dropping to his knees, pulling my last stitch of clothing down with him. I blink again and I've got a leg over his shoulder. He's kissing the soft inside of my thigh, and before I register what's happening his tongue deals me a long stroke, dipping inside me along the way, and my head slams into the bricks behind me, and I've got fingers in his hair, pressing him closer, encouraging his pace. Slow at first, savoring, tongue picking up speed with every moan that I give him, every *yeah* and *please* and *more* at the way his lips clamp around my clit, fingers pump inside me.

Theo looks up and the sight is so debilitatingly hot that my legs give out. I slip down the wall and he groans against me.

“Fuck. Sorry,” I breathe, moving to brace my hands against his shoulders.

He lets out a low growl that sounds a lot like a threat. Surfaces from between my legs. Licks my slickness off his lips.

“What did I say about apologizing for nothing?”

He hikes my leg off his shoulder and eases me down to meet him. Looks at me like he’s got lessons to teach me. I want to learn all of them. Now.

I snag his bottom lip. Brush his tongue. Tug his hair. Drag my hands to the front of his pants. He’s so hard, feels so ready for this. I run my knuckles along him. Theo doesn’t take his eyes off me for a second, breath picking up speed with every stroke, surrendering control. But I need so much more than this, want him to feel so much more than that. I flick open his pants but he wakes up, flips me onto my back.

“I’m not done with you,” he says darkly. “You think that was enough? D’you have any *fucking* idea how many times I’ve thought about it? Having my mouth on you. Hearing you scream while I fuck you with my tongue? You’re not getting off that easy, sweetheart.”

God. I’ll never get enough of the way his voice drops when he’s turned on.

He drags his lips down my stomach and I’m aching for him, willing him to find his way back. His tongue runs slow, long laps over every bit of me, and I know this is for him. I can hear it in his greedy groans, the way he’s not leaving a single inch of skin uncovered, staking his claim on me. And then –

He’s figured me out. Ten minutes in and he’s figured me out, how good those firm, quick strokes of his tongue feel. How loud I get when he gives

me fast, shallow pumps with his fingers. He tightens his hold on my thigh, angles me out, pushes me open, makes me so crazy I grab fistfuls of my own hair until my legs start to shake.

“Theo – *Theo*,” I breathe urgently, needing him to let up before I can’t come back from it.

Because it’s good, so *good*, but there’s a deeper ache between my legs, begging for more of him. Needing him a different way, wanting to come for him a different way.

“Theo. Come here. Please.”

He doesn’t. He pulls away, sits back on his heels, rakes his hair back, face dripping with despair. “Jude. I don’t have anything on me.”

“What?” I lift my head. My body is filled with lead. I’m lightheaded and it takes a few seconds to register what he means. When I do, my answer comes out as a breathless, barely coherent stream. “Oh. I’m on the pill. And I get a physical every year and honestly, I haven’t been doing this, like at all and, oh god, please tell me you’re good, I’m dying for you, need you so fucking badly –”

Theo’s relief is palpable as he pulls me up to meet him. “I’m good, too.”

“Thank you,” I sigh, dropping my hands to his open waistband. “I want these off now.”

He beats me to it, tugging down his zipper before I can wrench his hands away.

“Uh-uh.” I grip his jaw and force up his face, meeting the frantic look in his eyes. “Don’t I get a turn?”

His answer is a desperate groan. “Fuck. I love it when you get like this.”

“How could I not?” I say, tugging down his pants, freeing his cock. “Look at you.”

I get it in my fist, finally feeling him, running my hands firmly along him, over and over until his breathing comes as ragged as mine. I lick my lips, desperate for a taste, but he stops me with fingers at my chin.

“Can’t,” he grinds out. “I’ve needed this too long. You put that mouth on me and this is over before it starts.”

“Starts?”

“Come here.”

And he pulls me into his lap and I hinge my hips, easing him in.

“Jude. Fuck. *Fuck.*”

I try to kiss him. Try because I can’t move my mouth, at the feel of him in me. I gasp against his lips. His shudder against mine. We stay like this for a second. Still. Wide-eyed. Watching each other adjust, fit, mold. Soaking in the potential.

And then I lift. He meets me halfway, sinking inside me with a moan, looking like he’s gravely in pain. But there’s nothing painful about this. His hands guide me by the hips, fucking up into me. He scrapes my jaw with his mouth, buries his face between my breasts, mine falls into his hair, and we’re so synchronized we might have done this a million times.

I think the world is ending. That must be it, why I’m allowed to have this.

My fingers are carving his shoulders but I don’t think he notices. The world could burn and I wouldn’t notice. The only thing that exists is his skin on my skin and his body in my body. He eases a hand down where we meet, and his first stroke to my clit releases a cry out of me. It doesn’t take long for the feeling of him to take over me, a tight quiver to build inside me, start to spread and swallow me up. I close my eyes, bite my lip hard. I’m trying, desperately, to hold myself together.

I go quiet and Theo catches it, trailing a hand across my cheek.

“Hey.” My eyes flutter open. There’s a smile at his lips. “Still with me?”

“I’m so close –”

But the words catch in my throat when he lifts me a little, tips me back a fraction, hits me at a better angle. His grin is pure filth. “Prove it.”

The twinkle lights disappear. Either I’ve gone blind, or my eyelids have stopped working. I shake my head frantically. “Not yet – please Theo, it’s so good –”

He gives a soft laugh and lurches me backwards, dropping me onto the ground. He slows things down for me. Comes down on his elbows and lays soft kisses on my mouth, my cheeks, my jaw. Sweeps a hand down my neck, my shoulder, over my breast, down my waist, feeling me everywhere. Quiet, easy rolls of his hips, helping me make it last. And suddenly it’s the last thing I want. The mounting pressure between my legs becomes too much and I need all of him, everything he can give me.

I lock my ankles around him, meeting his next push, coaching him to pick up his pace, to drive a little harder, rougher. He gets it. I drop my legs and Theo hooks a hand on my hip. Anchors me down. And he’s absolutely *fucking* me now, the pushing and tugging becoming so hungry, so hurried, so utterly desperate I can’t suck in a breath, can’t even make a sound, until my body erupts and I cry out, tensing, shaking against him. Theo watches me unravel, brows crinkled, sweat glazing his temples.

It takes a while for the edges of my vision to even out. For him to become anything more than a blur in my line of sight. To feel my back against the paneled wood again, the outdoor air around me. And coming back to him is just as good as where he sent me.

I look up at him, this near perfect man, perfect for me, and how he's done everything imaginable to make me feel good in my skin. Tonight, and for several weeks before. The urge to give some of it back to him steels my mollified bones.

I hook my legs around his hips. "On your back, baby. Let me do this for you."

With a hungry groan, he rolls and I land on top of him without much grace at all. But the way he looks at me with heavy-lidded eyes, it makes me feel like an archangel gracing the earth. I can feel it won't take much more. I come in close, sensing it's where he needs me. Pressing my forehead to his, eyes peering into his, fucking him slow until his breath becomes frantic.

"Jude, baby, pull me out if you want to –"

I don't let up. "I want you like this."

He lets himself go with a hoarse grunt and a tensing shake, sinking his teeth into my collarbone like he needs some kind anchor to reality as I run soothing fingers through his hair.

Above, the twinkle light canopy sways with the breeze.

"Oh," I say after a while, because it's the only thing I can muster. I can't manage to move off him yet but he doesn't even let me try, holding me tight against him.

He starts shaking with breathless laughter. It echoes through me. "That escalated fast."

"*Fast?* The past couple months have been the most painful foreplay in the history of time."

Now we're both laughing, really laughing and I push away so that we lie shoulder to shoulder, staring up at the sky. There's a rose nearby

drooping in my direction, and I put out a hand to stroke its silky yellow petals. God, I haven't felt this at ease in a long time. There's none of that weirdness I've had in the past, when the veil of lust lifts and I'm left wildly aware of my body and overthinking every sound and fumble that led up to this point.

He takes a long steadying breath, with an arm over his eyes. "I've been wanting you for years."

"Years?"

"Years. Since the hallway at Nivoli's."

I turn. "*What?* I can't believe that."

"Believe it. You had this way about you that night that drove me up the fucking wall."

I push myself onto my side, laying my head against my arm. He does the same. There's so much sincerity in his face that it almost crushes me, that he would have sat on his feelings for so long.

Theo throws an arm around my waist and reels me in closer, brushing the hair off my cheek. "You're thinking hard."

"Kind of."

"Think out loud."

"I'm... I'm a little scared. But a lot happy."

He smooths my brows with his thumb. "Promise you'll tell me. Every time you feel more scared than happy."

How did this happen? How did I get here with a man who gets me so completely, doesn't shy away or resent me for my shortcomings?

I grip his face, pour as much gratitude as I can into the kiss. Tangle my legs with his because I crave him even closer. When I pull away, for air

more than anything else, I watch the breeze catch the thin branches of a young potted tree behind him.

“I can’t believe you did all this.”

The twinkle lights show me the light flush building in his face. “I know it’s a bit much. I don’t think I ever really thought you’d see it. It was more... on the off chance you felt the same one day.”

“I love it. I love that you did it.”

I’m close enough to hear the tiny catch in his breath. And it hits me that I never said it. Never told him I love him. The words are still buried all the way down in my gut, unripe, unready to meet the light of day. I’ve opened myself up tonight, more than I ever expected to, and as relieved as I feel, I still need to keep a piece of myself wrapped in Teflon.

“Do I get to come back?” I ask gently.

I’ve never seen him so luminous. My heart swells and threatens to float away. “Whenever you want. I know summer’s almost over, but I left empty planters at the back, if you want to get in there.”

“I do. Thank you.” I fill his dimple with my finger. Then I remember. “Hey, is there still a party downstairs?”

Theo freezes. “Shit.”

I pinch his chin. “What kind of host are you? Sneaking off to get it on with a party guest.”

He sits up and roots through the pockets of his discarded jeans. “Terrible host. Completely fucking worth it.” He brings his phone to his ear. “Finn? Get everyone out of here. Don’t – stop asking questions, just do it. I’ll – oh, shut up.”

Theo tosses his phone and dips back down to press his lips to mine until I’m laying all the way back again. “Finn says hi.”

I laugh against his mouth. Against the backdrop of the canopy lights, he looks like a dream. I should pinch myself to make sure he's really there. But if he's not, and if this really is a dream or even a nightmare in the making, I'm not interested in having it end.

And it hits me again. The depth of what I feel for him, how much of me he's got now, the crushing loss I'd feel if he ever walked away. Fear sits heavy on my chest.

Don't hurt me, I beg him between kisses. *I couldn't take it.*

He stares at me like he's seeing the moon for the very first time.

"You make me so fucking happy, Jude Holland."

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Chapter 25

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Theo

The warm glow of the Saturday sun is on my back when I wake up.

It always is. I sleep with the blinds open every night, needing the lit-up city skyline to lull me to sleep, and the rising sun to get me up. The views at my apartment are just about the only thing I can stomach about the place.

Except it all feels a little off this morning. And when my eyes open to slept-in sheets on the other end of the bed, it comes back to me like a fever dream. So different than the last time I woke up to flashes of a night with Jude because this time she actually – we actually –

The bedroom is an explosion of clothes, and towels, and pillows thrown off the bed. I got her underneath me again the second we made it here. We can't have slept more than a handful of hours.

Fucking hell. The things we did last night –

There are soft sounds coming from downstairs and my organs give a simultaneous spasm. It feels like it did on Christmas morning back before my father walked out on us. But infinitely better, because all the presents in the world can't top the sight of Jude in my living room, hair a mess, wearing what looks like the t-shirt I had on last night.

"I can hear the filthy thoughts all the way from here," she says without looking up. She snaps shut a copy of *The Art of French Cooking* and slides it back on the bookshelf lining the wall.

There's something warm and thick in my throat, and words fail me. It feels so surreal, the way we're now staring at each other from either end of the room, and if she's anything like me she's replaying our second time upstairs. The midnight shower that served no purpose whatsoever, because we were just as sticky as we started only an hour later. I couldn't get enough of her.

I am in so fucking deep, there's no surfacing from this.

Another quiet beat, just the sound of her phone buzzing from the kitchen. And then Jude breaks into a smile as blinding as the sun, that gets even bigger when I return it. And fuck if I don't use up every bit of dignity I have to stay put instead of sprinting at her full tilt.

Thankfully, Jude's smarter than I am. She decides against dignity and closes the gap between us at a run. Because fuck dignity. Who the hell needs it? It's overrated, a completely useless trait when all it gets me is her in my arms a second too slow. I catch her mid-jump, mid-laugh, and the momentum backs me into the kitchen island.

"You're up early," I say into the hair, because she's wound herself tight around me, legs locked at my waist.

"I couldn't sleep so I started snooping," she tells me, running her fingers in my hair. I'm in heaven. "Theo, this place is amazing. I can't believe I even let you cross my threshold."

"I like your place. It feels like you."

"Small, worn down and messy?"

"Warm. Comfy. Somewhere that lets you just be you." I ply her shoulder with kisses. She smells like sex and me, and it's a fucking thrill, the idea that maybe that citrus scent of hers rubbed off on me, too.

“I realized the next morning I had a pile of fresh undies sitting in broad daylight.”

I grin. “Trust me, I know. I almost took home a pair as a souvenir. You hungry?”

I sit her on the island and start pulling stuff out of the fridge. I’m not hungry. Not at all, but there isn’t a chance in hell I’m letting this woman keep that shirt on much longer, and I need to get us fed. When I turn back she’s looking over her shoulder, through the wall of windows in the living room.

“Hey,” I nudge. “Are you in your head?”

“A little.”

I settle between her thighs, threading my fingers between hers. “Talk to me.”

She makes a face. “Honestly, Theo? I don’t get why you like me.”

“No, that’s your first mistake. I don’t like you. I’m madly in love with you. I can’t be any more clear about that.”

“But, *how*? I’m not exactly...”

She struggles to find the words, but she doesn’t need to. It’s in the way her shoulders slumped in defeat, the second the word *love* came out of me. She hasn’t said it back, hasn’t exactly been forthcoming about the way she feels at all, and I can tell she feels the weight of that.

But this is her. She opens up in smaller ways, that feel so much sweeter knowing how hard she has to work at it. I don’t need her to love me yet. I just need her to keep trying. To fight the urge to shut down to protect herself from the damage and insecurity that only comes from knowing how bad it feels to be left behind by people who should have stayed put.

I smooth down the hem of my shirt where it started to ride up her thighs. “You’re more than enough. I can’t even start to explain what you’ve done for me. Mentally. Emotionally. Pen took one look at me at the party last night and asked if I was dying. Seriously. That’s how much of a damaged asshole I’d been before you.”

She squeezes me around the waist. “Don’t call yourself that.”

I squeeze her back. “I’m here. I’m happy and I’m staying. I haven’t come this far with you to fuck around. You’re it for me, Jude. You know that, right?”

She looks at me like she loves me. She grips my face like she loves me, and I lose all train of thought when she kisses me. She could confess to blowing up my apartment, plant her lips on me, and I’d still manage to forget the offense.

“So, Chef Jordan –”

I cut her off with a whining sound I’ve never made in my life and go in for another kiss, because that just wasn’t enough. When I free her again, she motions to the carton of eggs on the counter beside her.

“What’s my job this morning? What can I chop, or shuck, or flambe for you?”

I snort. “Flambe? After the circus act with the blender?”

“I’m trying to find a way to be insulted, but that’s totally fair.”

I plant a kiss on her cheek and duck down into a cupboard. “Here. While you wait –”

“Oh my god. This is, hands down, the most romantic thing you’ve ever done,” she says, when I hand her a box of Honey Nut Cheerios. She pries it open and throws a couple loops into her mouth. “Why do you have this? Don’t tell me you finally came around on cereal as a meal?”

I'm not even embarrassed. I'm crazy about her, and she needs to get that. "Fuck no. But you never know when a Cheerios addict will show up on your doorstep."

She crunches on cereal, amused. "You bought a family-sized box of Cheerios just in case I came over one day?"

"Call it good manners with a side of blind optimism."

She stops me as I go to turn on the burner, catching a fistful of my shirt from behind. I love this woman snarky. I love seeing that glimmer of mischief in her eyes when she's playful. But fuck, I *love* seeing her soft like this. How round her eyes go, how she doesn't smile but gives me something even better: a look like she gets me. And she likes what she sees.

And then she bites her lip. "I'm going to need to you stop cooking, now."

This woman's going to end me.

Chapter 26

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Jude

I'm not sure what it is I did to deserve this.

In the moments I manage to let go of the guilt of falling short every time the word *love* stays tucked inside me, it feels like he's bundled me in a warm blanket. There's really something to it, being loved like this.

Up on the counter, I spread my arms, inviting him in.

"I don't need a thank you for the Cheerios," he grins, dimples denting his cheeks as he drops his hands to my hips.

I'm sore and tired, and probably a little delirious from our marathon night. We went at it until my body shut down, passing out as the sky started to lighten outside the wall of windows in his bedroom.

"Trust me, this is completely selfish."

It isn't really.

Last night, he made it all about me. How I wanted it, when I wanted it. Same as it's always been between us. He worked hard to hook me, make sure I'd come back to him for more. Like there'd even been a question of it. Like he didn't quite grasp that him getting off was just as good for me as it was for him. He's a giver who needs to be taught how to take.

He smiles. "You tempt me too hard and you're spending the rest of the weekend on your back. The second I get you naked again it's game over."

"You talk like I'd hate that." I run a hand through his hair and he rests his head on my shoulder. "You talk like I haven't wanted you since the first time I saw you."

He lifts his head. “Yeah?”

“Have you seen yourself? And then you just had to go and be the most perfect person. I’m just waiting for the influx of hate mail for taking you off the market.” I skim the hem of his shirt, slide my hands underneath, stretch my fingers across his stomach. Run my thumbs along the ridges. “God. How are you real?”

That freaking blush. The way he gets shy with me sometimes – this big, confident man – it shatters me, then puts me back together into a woman who’s a little more for him. He’s so sweet I want to take a bite out of him. But I can do him one better.

“The night you fingered me...” I scrape my nails along his arms, smiling at the goosebumps that chase my fingers. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve touched myself thinking about it. How different that night goes in my head, if I’d had the guts to ask for what I wanted. To do to you what I wanted.”

Theo watches me, not moving a muscle. “Tell me.” It’s an order, and my pussy clenches. “Tell me what you wanted.”

I’ve ignited it. That inherent urge of his to provide.

“That night, you got on your knees. I wanted to push up against you.”

I shuffle forward until my hips meet his. I drag my hands out to his sides, pressing down against muscle. Theo tugs me in completely, sculpting me so flush against him I move with his breathing.

I rest my lips against his ear, flick his lobe with my tongue. “I wanted to take my time with you, feel every part of you. Every hard bit,” I touch the muscles over his shoulder blades. “Every soft bit,” I brush my lips against his neck. I feel his heart thump against my chest.

I lift his hand off my back, leading it inward. “And then you started touching me.”

His hand slips under my panties and my breath catches in my throat, feeling him glide over me, press inside. Hooking his fingers just the right way, in the right spot, as though he’s already memorized me like a map. I let him go for a minute, not stifling my pants or whimpers. Letting him watch his effect on me, knowing how much he revels in it.

I swallow, tugging him away. “And then – god, I wanted you to pick me up. I wanted to give you that. To let you take control of me.” I wrap my legs around his waist and roll my hips. He groans, returns the pressure. “I wanted you to get my shirt off.” I lift my hands over my head and he peels his shirt off me, soft fabric skimming me on the way off, making me shiver.

My own breathing comes out in ragged spurts. I grind against his cock. Those sweatpants aren’t long for this world. He sinks his teeth into my neck.

“And Theo?”

“Yeah?”

I grip a fistful of hair, pull him up, run my tongue along his lower lip. “I wanted to mess with your head a little. Make you a little crazy.”

He blinks. “What did you want to do?”

I grin, brush my lips to his. Ease them open, meet his tongue with mine. He kisses me with a groan, rough and firm and deep, pulling me in with fingers in my hair. God, that tug will send me to my grave. It makes me crazy.

“I wanted to get your shirt off.” I grab his shirt, yank it off, drop it to the floor. “To pin you against the wall.”

I shove him, hard. He grunts as the velocity drives him backwards. I hop off the island, back him into the counter behind. He looks absolutely stricken. Eyebrows twisting, mouth ajar, chest heaving, desperate look in his eyes.

I read it in his face. That wild *will she – is she going to –*

“I wanted you naked.” I tease him through the soft fabric of his sweats. “I wanted you in my mouth. Badly. Last night, too.”

Yesterday was all about me. Touching me. Tasting me. This time, he tries to help me push down his pants. But I force his hands to his sides.

“Sit tight, Theo,” I tell him, dropping to my knees. His breath hisses through his teeth.

Theo is obedient. I take him in my mouth and he throws his head back in relief. Still, his fingers keep their death grip where I put them. I moan around him, sinking down his cock as far as I can go, and his biceps struggle against the instinct to move. I look up at him and his hips pulse under my hand.

His mouth moves though, telling me all sorts of things. A broken sequence of fucks, and gods, and praises, and threats for retribution, once he gets his hands on me again. I let out a throaty laugh against his cock and it sends him on another senseless tirade. God, he’s so worked up it makes me hot. I trail a hand between my legs, slowly rubbing myself, and whimper with my mouth around him.

“Fucking hell,” he manages, looking like a man coming undone. “Jude. Ease up.”

Theo unlocks himself at last. Comes down to gather me up and lift me with him.

“Little smart-ass,” he mutters in my ear. He sits me back on the island, running his thumb over my lip. “Just had to do that, huh? How do I get anything done anymore, knowing I could have that instead?”

I pout. “You said I’d spend the weekend on my back. Don’t make promises you can’t cash.”

“Yeah?” He takes my breasts firm in his hands. Changes his mind and takes them in his mouth, one by one. “Is this what you’re after?”

I grab fistfuls of his hair, bring him in to bite his lip. “Not even close.”

He changes track. Wet, hot kisses on the inside of my thighs, my calves, making my heartbeat bloom between my legs as he peels off my panties. Hitches my legs up by the knees. Yanks me forward so hard I fall back with a gasp, catch myself on my elbows before I knock my head against the marble.

He takes his time with me. Dragging his lips, his tongue, his fingers inside me, around me. Teasing, then slow, then firm, then teasing again. Playing a delicate game where he brings me close then slows it right back. Indulges me in mounting rush after mounting rush. Like we have entire weeks to keep this up. Like there’s nowhere else he’d rather be but there, between my thighs.

When he’s done toying with me, I don’t manage to stop him. I mean to tell him to let up, wanting him inside me when I come, but the words catch in my throat. And when he takes me over the brink, shaking legs and arching spine, it’s his name that comes out of my mouth.

Theo doesn’t pull away. He doesn’t let me ride the waves. His mouth urges me into them, to feel them crash over me one by one. His fingers raise a new one every time I think I’ve been hit with the last. He stays put until

the shuddering subsides and my legs go limp around him. Heaves me up to sit. Bites my lip, this time.

“That what you’re after?”

I shake my head, trying to gather my breath. “Not even close.”

A vicious grin flashes across his face. “Tell me.”

“I want you.”

He doesn’t need telling twice. He flips me over, angles inside, and I’m crying out face down into the counter, cheek pressed up against the cool marble. My hands scramble to find purchase, somewhere to steady myself, but they end up slipping ineffectually on the glossy surface. He takes care of it. Glides his hands down my back to my hips, anchoring me. I encourage his furious pace until it builds in me again, that hot, pulsing cinch, running up my thighs, gathering in the middle. And the shock of it cuts off my breath, of getting back there so quickly when I never have before.

“Oh, no.” It comes out of my mouth even though I couldn’t mean it less, want it more.

Theo’s hearing is a few seconds behind but he registers it, eases me around. His eyes are wild, hazy, like I’ve just pulled him out of the depths of the ocean.

“No?”

I shake my head frantically. “Yes. Yes. I meant yes.”

His eyes seem to adjust. He realizes what I mean and lets out a low, rumbling laugh that almost does me in on its own. I wrap my legs around him, prop myself just off the edge of the counter to meet his hips, urging him back in. He carries most of my weight. It doesn’t seem to phase him. So I come up to meet his mouth, grip his shoulders, in denial that he’ll

manage to do this to me twice but savoring the effort of it. His eyes are stuck to me, studying every change in expression. Adjusting with them.

“Help me,” he grinds out. His fingers pulse against my ass. “Hands are full. Touch yourself.”

“I don’t think I can twice –”

An impatient growl leaks from his throat. “Humor me, sweetheart.”

I snake a hand down from his shoulder.

He proves me wrong. A little shift this way, a little bit more, another hard drive and I’m shaking again, biting down on his lip. That does it for him. He grips me tight against his chest, heartbeat exploding against me as he fills me. Another hoarse string of words in my ear. Gratifying, adulating, beseeching. *Thank you, you’re perfect, incredible, you’re a god, let me do this again, please, let me have you again.*

Have me, have it all, I tell him with a kiss. He slides me onto the counter where I collapse completely, staring at the ceiling, begging the air into my lungs.

Theo rests his forehead above my belly button, rising and falling quickly with my breath. He drops a kiss on my stomach. It can’t be later than nine in the morning. If it’s already like this at nine in the morning –

How is this real?

His reply is the only indication I’ve said it out loud. “I don’t know, Jude. Fucking hell. You think we’ll get this out of our system any time soon?”

My phone buzzes against the counter somewhere by my head and I feel around blindly for it, fingers trembling madly.

“I never want this out of our system,” I tell him. He reaches for my phone and I answer the call blindly. “Hello?”

“Jude, it’s Diana. We need to talk.” It takes me a second to compute and for a moment I panic that it’s actually Monday and that I’m gravely late for work. But it’s definitely Saturday, and her tone is definitely cold as ice.

“Diana? What is it?”

Theo looks at me curiously as I sit up, a trickle of dread dripping down my spine. This isn’t right. Why would she call me on a Saturday morning?

“Jude, I need you to tell me what I’m hearing is wrong,” she says, and her voice drops an octave a syllable.

Oh, no.

“What’s going on?” Theo mouths silently, brows pinching together.

I shrug, hopping off the counter.

“I need you to tell me why I got a call from Carly this morning, who seems to be under the impression that you’re sleeping with Theo Jordan.”

Oh, no. No no no no –

“Say that you’re not,” Diana continues when I’m silent too long. Her words feel like bullets, tone barely above a whisper now. “Say that you’re not putting us in a fucking *hideous* conflict of interest, Jude. Say that you haven’t been making a complete mockery of my business, Jude. Say it.”

No no no no no –

The world around me goes silent. I feel like I’m underwater, holding my breath, deafening nothingness beating into my ears.

How – *how* –

Theo grips my arm, looking frantic now. “What’s wrong?”

He’s said it out loud. But I barely hear him over the sudden pounding in my eardrums. I force myself to breathe. When I do, my lungs sear painfully like they’ve forgotten what to do with the influx of air.

“You’ve chosen a particularly terrible time to go quiet, Jude,” I hear Diana say.

“Jude, talk to me,” Theo says urgently.

But I can’t face him. Can’t take the worry on his face at the same time the rage I feel seeping through the phone. I pick up one of his shirts off the floor and hurry into the bathroom off the living room, sinking onto the slate floor with my head between my knees.

Another gulp of air. And I make myself speak.

“Diana, I – I...” I search for the right words. When they don’t come, I search for any words.

“Damn it. *Damn* it, Jude. What the hell were you thinking? We’re bidding for his *fucking* account. How do you think it’ll make us look – make *me* look – if it got out that we landed a contract while my assistant was...” She drops her tone to a full whisper. “*Sleeping with the client?* How do you expect me to keep you employed after this?”

No no no no no –

“Diana, it’s not like that, I *swear*. I – I can explain... I swear it’s not –”

I’m hyperventilating now, and I clamp a hand over my mouth.

How did I get here? *How did I get here?*

How could I have let this happen? I should have gone to her. I should have gone to Diana before any of this, and told her everything. It’s one thing to sleep with a client. Surely, it’s completely another to fall in love?

And how the hell would Carly have known? There isn’t a single soul who knows about this besides Jenna and Finn.

Diana speaks at last: “Monday. In my office. First thing.”

The line goes dead.

I knew it. I knew this would come back to bite me.

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Chapter 27

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Jude

I feel like I'm in the throes of a raging hangover despite not having had a drop of alcohol.

I holed myself in Theo's apartment the rest of the weekend, trying to think it through. How to come back from this even though I know she's right. Of course, it would reflect badly on her business if people were to find out. He and I get together and suddenly he renews with Dime?

It doesn't matter that he and I have never discussed the contract. People will talk, people will assume.

But that's not even it, is it? I don't know that he *can* give us the contract now, with all this between us. If I were his advisors, his business partners, I wouldn't have it. I'd put my foot down, refuse to let him give a contract to the woman he was dating.

I've cost Diana the whole thing. Cost myself my job, a promotion, everything I've worked for the last five years of my life. The only thing that kept me going after Dave, gave me purpose after my parents left.

Theo's gone through his own winding road of emotion. Upset to see me cry, almost frantically coming up with plan after plan, ways to smooth this over. And then the kind of disgust I haven't seen on him in years, not since he'd been brought bad news about progress on Nivoli's. The kind that had people quaking in their boots.

He insisted on coming with me this morning for support, though I'm still not convinced showing up together was the right move. We're here

early, knowing that Diana tends to come in a good couple of hours before anyone else and hoping to miss any prying eyes.

But as we make our way to Diana's office, me feeling like I'm on my death march, we hear muffled voices coming from the other side of the door. Someone is here, after all. I can make out Carly's voice clearly. Because she's shouting.

"It's a joke, Diana. A freaking joke! When did we get *carte blanche* to go sleeping with clients?"

Theo's head whips towards the door, revulsion etched on his face. He's been frighteningly quiet all morning, stewing in fury. Diana's voice, quintessentially calm, is too low for us to hear.

"Is that what it takes to get all the major accounts? Why don't you send around a memo? I'm sure the rest of the team would be *very interested* to know all you have to do is spread your legs! Who knew it was that easy?"

Next to me, Theo's hands are balling into fists. But he tears his eyes from the door to come up behind me, pulling me into his arms. I'm numb, listening to her words. I'm so cried out, they don't even dent me.

"This isn't a brothel! You can't possibly consider keeping her. And I swear – if she gets that promotion, I'll –"

Diana raises her voice a few notches and I catch words like 'threat' and 'calm down.'

"I'm not going to calm down. She's turned this place into a joke. There needs to be some punishment, Diana!"

Finally, Diana's voice clear as a bell: "I don't answer to you. Now get out of my office and get your act together."

I pry myself gently from Theo as the door swings open, and suddenly I'm face to face with Carly.

“What is it with you?” She spits at me, scathingly. “Everyone bends over backwards for you, puts you on the best accounts. Since the day I started, I’ve never understood it. Who knew this whole time you were just whoring yourself out –”

Theo springboards off the wall. “*What did you say to her?*”

Carly starts, looking up at him as though she’s just noticed him there. Her snarled mouth opens over a retort before Theo cuts her off.

“Careful,” he says simply. He’s drawn himself up to his full height, and the intent of the single word couldn’t be clearer: *don’t forget who I am and who I know, if you intend to keep working in this city.*

It’s a threat, and there’s nothing empty about it. Tucked behind him, I get flashes of that night at Nivoli’s, roles reversed, as I watch Carly understand his meaning. Slowly, she deflates and stalks away with a last searing look in my direction.

Theo turns to me. His eyes are gentle, though I can feel the cold fury radiate from his body.

“Are you okay?”

“If you’re about done with the theatrics,” Diana’s cold voice cuts off my answer. “I’d like to speak with you now.”

Diana sits at her desk, hands folded neatly in front of her with not a hair out of place. I give Theo a tight smile before leaving him out in the hall, dropping into one of the cream-colored chairs pointed at Diana’s desk.

“You may as well join us, Mr. Jordan,” she adds, without looking away from me. “Since you came all this way.”

Theo enters the office and nudges the door shut with his shoulder. He leans against it with his arms crossed tightly, looking like a bodyguard with thinning patience at the rowdy crowd before him.

Diana looks amused now, at least. In a borderline angry sort of way. She indicates the armchair next to mine.

“Mr. Jordan, why don’t you make yourself comfortable.”

Theo sprawls into the chair with his arms draped over the armrests, looking decidedly unamused and completely reminiscent of the haughty, irritable version of himself I almost forgot existed.

“Why the sudden formality, Diana? You’ve never called me mister anything. I don’t see why we should start now.”

Diana taps together the tips of her fingers. “Someone here should maintain a semblance of decorum, don’t you think?”

“Has there been a lapse in decorum? Frankly, I’m still struggling to understand what it is we’re doing here at the crack of dawn like a couple of kids in the principal’s office. My personal life is no one’s concern but hers.” He jerks his chin in my direction.

My eyes close. He’s completely unabashed in his arrogance and anger. And as thankful as I am for his protection, I’m not sure it’s doing me any good right now.

Diana turns her attention to me, not rising to his bait. “Were you involved when I assigned you to this project?”

The words spill out of me. “No. I swear Diana, we hadn’t met in years. Not since the last project. And nothing – it didn’t progress until... There was flirting and – but the relationship itself is recent.”

“After we closed off the Sunset Landing project,” Theo adds flatly.

Diana’s gaze bounces between Theo and me. “Regardless, surely you understand the position this puts me in? The disadvantage you’ve put on my business with a contract on the line.”

“It had nothing to do with the contract,” I say quickly. “It happened out of nowhere –”

“And do you intend me to make this caveat clear to everyone who raises an eyebrow at this?” She asks sharply. “That this just *happened* to happen at the time of contract renewal? A total coincidence?”

“No,” I deflate. “Of course not.”

“How would people find out, exactly?” Theo chimes in. He jerks his head back at the door. “How did *she*?”

“She saw you, as it happens. At the opening party, disappearing into the kitchen one after the other and never resurfacing, even when the party ended. She put two and two together. She had brought along a friend from Paradigm Designs, an agency I understand is making a play for your contract. I wouldn’t be surprised if half the industry in this town knows by now. It sounds as though they’ve been quite the chatterboxes.”

“Of course, they have,” Theo says derisively. “That woman has made it her job to undermine Jude since the design pitch. She tried to sell me some bullshit about sinking ships.”

“*What?*” Suddenly it dawns on me, that there might have been more to the warning he gave me about her weeks ago.

Theo turns to me. “I didn’t want it to rattle you. And I didn’t buy it. But she enabled the utter fuck up with the floors, Diana, and if you take issue with anyone here it needs to be her.”

“That’s beside the point. I believe I made myself clear at the outset how important this contract would be to the business –”

“Is it not, anymore?” Theo cuts in loftily. “Diana, you’re hurting my feelings.”

Diana sets calm eyes on him, unflappable as usual.

Seeing she won't play into his words, Theo continues: "Look, I don't see what's changed. The renewal depended on the success of this project. I was clear about that, before matters relating to my personal life changed. I hope you'll still be happy to hear that we're planning to offer Dime the contract. The only caveat being that you never assign *that one*," he jerks his head at the door again, presumably referring to Carly, "to any of my projects. I won't work with her."

"Even if what you say about Carly is true – *and I tend to believe you there, Mr. Jordan*, don't you worry," Diana adds loudly when Theo starts to interject, "I will deal with Carly in due time, because I expect everyone who works for me to act with integrity. And it truly, *truly* pains me to say that I'm not sure you have, darling."

My lungs clench at the term of endearment she's used since my job interview, now helping her convey her disappointment. She looks at me as though she's imploring me to talk her out of this, to say something that will make it better.

"I never, *ever* meant to do anything to jeopardize your business, Diana. All I've wanted since the day you brought me on was to do well, to make you proud because I'm so thankful for the opportunity you gave me. And I completely understand if you don't think I can come back from this. But please know that I never planned for this to happen –" My voice catches on the beginnings of a sob.

Diana sighs deeply, fiddling with the gold bangles at her wrist.

"It's not – I wouldn't have risked my job for a fling," I add out of desperation.

She surveys me sternly, chin dipped, lips pursed. Beside me, Theo's leg starts jiggling, drawing her eyes. "If she no longer worked here, would you

still renew?”

Theo’s jaw ticks. “Yes. Assuming you have other designers as good as she is.”

She studies him for a long moment. Finally, she sits back in her chair. “Darling, you’ve always spoken about it as though I did you a favor by hiring you. But the truth is that I took a chance on you because I saw a fire in you that was quite like my own when I was starting out. You proved me right. You’ve consistently taken your work by the reigns, even when the work wasn’t yours, and you made things happen where others have failed to. If this thing between you is more than a fling, then I can’t in good conscience stand in your way. I can’t in good conscience let misguided rumors stand in the way of your employment here, either. But I won’t ever make an allowance like this again. Do you understand me?”

Relief pools in my chest, weighing me down in my chair. “I do,” I say quickly. “I won’t let you down.”

Diana nods slowly. “Well. If that’s settled, I suppose there’s still the matter of your promotion. I told you we would re-evaluate pending Mr. Jordan’s... feedback,” she tips her head sardonically, “and your ability to build a positive relationship with our client.”

My stomach drops as Theo’s head swivels in my direction.

It hadn’t once occurred to me to mention the deal Diana had made me at the start of the project. Why would I, when it didn’t factor into the relationship we’d started building? But hearing it said plainly like this, seeing the confusion on his face, I know I’ve done the wrong thing.

Diana continues, oblivious to the shift in his energy: “Well, Theo. I’d have chosen to do this behind closed doors, but there seems to be very little

point in that now. I assume you found no issues with Jude's... professional performance?"

I force myself to look at him, meet the questions I knew I'd find in his face.

"Of course not," he says quietly, his eyes on mine.

It's not how it sounds, I tell him silently. He only stares.

Diana goes on: "And, knowing she has been in the running for a promotion on the back of this project, I assume you would recommend her for the job?"

A beat of silence. "Of course, I would."

"Then I suppose that a deal is a deal. Congratulations, darling."

But I can't look at her, can't tear myself away from the doubt in Theo's eyes, even as he ticks up a corner of his mouth.

"Congratulations," he echoes.

~

It's a quiet ride to my apartment.

I can sense him thinking carefully as he drives, but I'm almost grateful for the silence. Because I'm thinking too, frantically trying to piece together the right words to dissuade the misguided logic I sense him putting together. Wishing I had proof, solid, tangible proof that I hadn't been using him to get a promotion.

He glides the car to a stop outside my building, and the words burst out of him in a breathless rush.

"Is that what all this was about? You changing, acting different towards me. Was it for this? You get me on your side, and you get promoted?"

"No. No. Absolutely not."

He rubs his face. "But... that night. At the hotel. Not even then?"

My stomach clenches. “If you’re asking whether I slept with you – or whatever that was – for a promotion –”

“No,” he says quickly, loudly, every line on his face horrified at the mere suggestion. “Not at all. I meant earlier, at dinner. And on the drive there, after we argued. Not even then? It was like a switch flipped. One second you couldn’t look at me, and the next we’re getting along.”

I feel sick. “You think I would do something like that?”

The look on his face tells me he feels it too, the rolling nausea in his stomach. “Please. Just answer the question.”

“Theo, that had nothing to do with the promotion. *Nothing*. It was never going to be sustainable, living another month at each other’s throats. So, yes, I made a conscious decision to back off for the sake of the project. But everything after that – I wanted to be around you, for you. Wanted to be with you, for you.”

Theo stares at the hands in his lap as though they’re not his. “Then why wouldn’t you tell me?”

I shrug helplessly. “I don’t know. I mean, it’s not typical to tell a client you have a promotion hinging on their project.”

Instantly, I know I’ve said the wrong thing. Theo looks like I’ve slapped him clean across the face.

“Please don’t do that to me,” he says quietly. “Don’t reduce me to a client, after everything. It’s hard enough keeping the faith that this thing is real with as little as you give me.”

And there it is.

The insecurity I’ve felt since Friday solidifying into reality. I haven’t told him I love him, haven’t reciprocated the words, and as understanding as he is, it still gets to him. And of course, it does. Who wouldn’t be

bothered by it? Being as open and raw as he's been, with someone too emotionally stunted to give some of it back?

"I'm sorry –"

"Don't apologize. I know it doesn't come easy for you and I went into this with eyes wide open. I'm not asking for you to suddenly pour your heart out. All I'm asking is that you don't walk back whatever progress we've managed to make."

There isn't a speck of accusation in his expression. He looks at me the way he always does, as though I've hung the moon for him and him alone to admire.

And that's what breaks me.

He doesn't deserve this – the way I can only muster one foot into the doorway of this relationship. A man like this deserves someone willing and able to take what he has to offer and to give it right back. I've known it, tried to fool myself into thinking it would be okay anyway. But what I'm giving him isn't enough, and that isn't okay. It's the last thing I want for him.

"This had nothing to do with the promotion," I say again, coaching my hands to stop trembling, my heart to stop aching. To shove it all in deep, the way I've become an expert at doing. Cut off the pain at the source before it's too late and it spills right out.

"I believe you," he tells me, without hesitation.

I take his hand. Squeeze it tight, needing to memorize how he feels, to absorb his fingerprints into my skin so that fifty years from now I still remember what it felt like, being loved by him. Like a buoy thrown to me in the middle of the raging sea. A lump rises in my throat, and I take a few

seconds to swallow it down. At least until he leaves. Because he'd never go otherwise.

"I wish you didn't," I whisper, dropping his hand. "I wish you'd argue and yell and tell me how bad it hurt to hear Diana say that. I wish you'd berate me for giving you so little that it would even seem plausible that I might have been using you."

"I don't need you to say or do anything you aren't ready for," he says gently. "You're enough like you are –"

"I'm not –"

"You *are* –"

"Okay, maybe I'm enough today. But tomorrow? Next week, month? How long can you go like this?"

"This isn't a race. It takes time –"

"I'm not convinced I'll ever be able to let go of my issues – it's been years and I'm still a mess. I'm not convinced I'll ever be able to let you in the way you deserve."

He looks baffled, so genuinely confused by the shift in conversation that I almost balk. I feel like a wolf on the prowl, stalking a peaceful, unsuspecting nest of birds. But chickening out now will only hurt him later. He deserves so much more than the scared, broken thing I am.

I fold my fingers together so tightly they start to pale. "Theo, I need some time to myself."

"Okay." He seizes on my words, relieved for some kind of plan, a next step. "That's fine. I can pick you up tonight. Or – I guess we don't have to spend every night together. I can come over tomorrow? We can stay at your place if it's more comfortable."

The lump in my throat surges upwards with a vengeance.

“No, I... I need space. I’m not in the right place for a relationship. It isn’t fair to you, and it’s way too much pressure for me –”

“What are you talking about?” His brows pull together, and he looks at me like he’s trying to solve a complex equation scribbled on my face. He stares so long I start to scramble for new words, a different way to put it so that he understands. But finally, I see it connect. His gaze drops to my hands, my grasp now so tight my fingers have started to tingle. He swallows. “You’re ending this?”

“I’m so sorry.”

His mouth forms a word but no sound comes out. He tries again. “Talk to me. Please, for fuck’s sake, just talk this through with me, Jude. We can figure this out.”

He’s imploring me with his eyes, too. But I don’t dare speak. I’m on the cusp of a breakdown and I can’t do that in front of him.

His shoulders capsize at my silence. He gazes through the windshield like he’s trying to figure out whether he’s asleep, or living through a terrible joke. “Was I coming on too strong? Because if I was –”

My lungs seize. “No, it isn’t you –”

“I can back off a bit.”

“It’s not you, Theo –”

“We can go back to how it was before.”

“I’m so – I am so sorry. I can’t.”

“But...” He stares blankly at the steering wheel, absently rubbing his chest. “Jude, I – this is breaking my heart.”

“I am so sorry,” I say again. Because in this moment I know not a single syllable in the English language would help absolve the pain I know I’ve just inflicted.

I want to hold him. My limbs are screaming at me to reach out, touch him, take it all back. Wipe that broken look off his face. But I don't. I am an awful, shell of a person. When I'm good and gone, books will be written about my callousness and I'll have earned every word said against me.

Just let me go, I beg him silently. I'm hanging on by a thread.

My internal dam starts to lose the battle against the flood at its other side. As discreetly as I can, I wipe the tears seeping out of my eyes.

Theo rests his forehead on the steering wheel. Takes a moment to collect himself before finally saying: "Right. Yeah. Whatever you want."

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Chapter 28

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Theo

The passenger door snaps shut.

It's quiet, polite, and even though I can't look, I can tell she hovers there for a second. Like suddenly she realizes she's standing outside and can't remember what she's doing there.

Is that it? Really?

All that angst amounting to a couple days? And how pathetic does it make me if I think that yeah, actually. A couple days with her were well worth this agony. There has to be something seriously wrong with me.

I'm forcing, fucking *forcing* air into my lungs.

How could *this* be the solution she came up with? How is it that she could have fallen out of love with me so quick?

Did she, though? I rewind, fast forward through the last nightmare five minutes in my head. No, she didn't say she didn't love me. Never said she *did* love me, to be fair. But I've never particularly doubted her feelings, not since the night on the rooftop. Until that single moment of weakness, a few minutes ago.

I know her. The lines she just fed me are bullshit. I know that when she tells me she's letting go of this for my benefit... she isn't lying, but what she's really saying is that she's afraid. That she loves me and she's afraid there exists some kind of fissure in this dimension that would somehow make it possible for me to fall out of love with her. To leave her the way she's been left before.

I stare out of the passenger window, as though somehow I'd missed her still standing there. But she's gone. She loves me and she's afraid and I let her walk out of here without a fight.

Fuck.

I kill the engine, wrench the door open so hard it should have come off the hinges. I'm so riled up, vision a complete blur at this point I almost smash into someone wearing a neon vest who'd apparently been mouthing something at me through the window.

"This is a no parking zone –"

For fuck's sake. Truly the wrong fucking day.

"Then fucking tow it!" I slam the door and beep it locked. Barely catch the startled look on his face before taking off at a jog into the empty lobby of Jude's building.

The elevator to the right pings open and I barrel through the open doors. Rush down the hall as soon as I hit the sixth floor and pound on her door.

"Jude, open up." There's no sound on the other side. "Jude, open the door. Let's talk this out."

Silence.

"Jude. You don't get to shut me out like this. Do you hear me? Open up, or I swear to god I'll stand here all day until you do." I force my teeth to stop grinding, listening to the sound of silence on the other side of the door. "You want me to work for it? Fine. I hope you have a backstock of Cheerios. You'll run out one day soon, and then what?" I slide down the opposite wall and land on the faded carpet. "I'll sit here all week. It's the beauty of working for myself. Not a single person can tell me I can't." I contemplate the door. "Although, will you at least toss me a phone charger? I'm at seven percent. Maybe also a snack."

I strain my ears trying to hear something from inside. A door down the hall swings open and a woman sticks her head out an apartment.

“Jude, you should know your neighbors are starting to freak out. So, if you won’t do it for me, at least open this door for them –”

Her doorknob jiggles and by the time Jude appears, I’m up and crowding the doorframe. Her eyes are bloodshot, cheeks damp, and her lips are pink and puffy in a way that would bring me to my knees if it didn’t mean she’d been crying.

My heart pummels my airway. Thing is, I’m good and pissed off now.

I’ve been patient with her. I’ve gotten so good at feeling her out, her moods, letting her set the pace. But the person looking at me now needs to get out of her own way.

“Theo, please. Don’t make this any harder –”

She wouldn’t be my Jude if she didn’t make me work for it. So I do. I walk her back into her apartment, kicking the door shut behind me, until her back hits the wall. And god, just being this close to her makes my stomach clench. There’s no way, just no way I can let this girl go.

“This is a bad idea. You shouldn’t have come up here –”

“Why? You think it’ll make it harder to run, letting me in?” She huffs out a breath, giving me that petulant little look of hers at not having it her way. “You think you can push me away and I won’t come after you? Won’t pound on that door until you open it? Won’t knock it right off its hinges if I have to?”

I lay a kiss under her ear. She’s biting her lip. Her hips squirm under my hands, and I’m getting somewhere. Maybe not the mature discussion I had planned when I came up here, but I’ll take whichever opening she gives me. If this gets her attention, I’ll go with it.

I press my hips to hers, keeping her against the wall as I tug my shirt over my head. Her next breath dies in her throat, lower lip pops open. I press my thumb to it. Swipe it across her skin, letting the wet edge of her mouth drag across my finger.

Jude tips back her head to look me full in the face. “I don’t think break-up sex is a good idea.”

I want to rip the word *break-up* from her vocabulary. It slashes through me, hollows me out.

“Then it’s a good thing this isn’t a break-up,” I say gruffly. I shouldn’t be breathing his hard, there’s no real reason for it. I take her chin in my fingers. “We’re two people in love, working something out.”

Her eyes spasm at the word *love*.

Yeah, I did that. I’m calling your bluff, sweetheart. Now, tell me I’m wrong.

She doesn’t. She clamps her jaw so hard I feel the muscles clench. She doesn’t deny it and I’ve never adored a stretch of silence this much in my life.

I push off the wall and rip open my jeans. Tug them down and kick them off while she watches. Squirms like she does when she’s turned on, because she can try to break up with me all she wants and she still can’t deny that she loves me, that she wants me here. She lets her head fall, parts her lips and waits for mine to land. I don’t have it in me to be gentle. My mouth is rough. Tongue rough. And she meets me pace for pace. Stroke for stroke. Sinks her nails into my bare ass. Gives me a greedy groan when she feels my dick harden against her.

I’m done being upright. I wheel her down the hall, not letting up on her mouth. Grip her when she trips over her feet. Push off the back of the sofa

when we crash into it. Drive her towards her room and slam the door open with a fist, not giving a fuck when something crunches after it smashes into the wall.

Toss her onto the bed, for good measure.

Jude looks up at me from the middle of her mattress, chest heaving. Her hair is a mess, tousled over her shoulders and down her back. Her hands are fists on her bedsheets. Eyes eating me up, and I'm fixated now on a single thing. On giving her everything she asks for. Doing everything I know she likes. Watching her discover things she didn't know she wanted. Showing her how much I know her, want her. That I'm here and here to stay, goddamn it.

She's rubbing her lips together, though, in a way that tells me she's not done talking. She's got something to say and I'm glad. It's what I came up here to do, before this fortuitous detour.

I plant my hands on the edge of the bed. "Lay it on me."

"Theo, I haven't changed my mind. I know I'm h-hurting you. But I need time to get my head right. Won't this just make it harder?"

My eyelids drop. "Harder for who, huh? You already ripped me to shreds out there. What's a little more?" I grip her ankles and tug her towards me. "Harder for you? You afraid if you lose your clothes, you'll let down some of that wall too? That if I put my mouth everywhere you like it, you'll tell me to stay? That if you let me fuck you, you'll realize it's exactly where you're supposed to be? That it, Jude?"

"You're not playing fair –"

"Fuck fair. What you did down there wasn't fair. You walking away isn't fair. I'll play fair when you play fucking fair." We stare at each other, breathing hard. "Now am I taking these clothes off or not?"

A second ticks. And she peels off her tank top. My hands are at her zipper before her shirt's even clear off her head. I pull her up the bed with me. Lay her flat on her back, nudge her hand away when she wraps it around my dick because I've got a point to make. Several points to make and she's going to hear them.

I slide her bra down, and yeah. The points I need to make are hanging on by a thread in my brain. I groan against her chest, because three days in and I still can't play it cool when she loses her clothes.

Points. Points to make.

"What's it going to take, Jude?" My voice is muffled against her left breast. She squirms and fuck I love that squirm. "I let you hand me my ass for weeks with your smart little mouth." Her head pops up to look at me. I take in the perfect line that carves down her stomach. The way her panties hug her hips, fold in a little between her legs. Fuck. Every time with this girl is an exercise in not coming just from looking at her. "I told you my deepest secrets. Became your friend even though it fucking killed me not telling you how I feel."

"What do you mean, let me hand you your ass?"

Getting somewhere.

I lick a strip of skin under her belly button. "You needed to hate me. I gave you something to hate."

"W-what? But you didn't like me. You didn't want to work with me."

I bite the inside of her thigh and she gasps. Punishment for believing that bullshit. "I had a meltdown when I saw you again. I didn't think I *could* work with you."

"But *why*?"

I rest my forehead on her stomach. “Because I haven’t stopped thinking about you since that night.”

I don’t need to elaborate. She knows which night. The hallway at Nivoli’s. The night I fell for her.

Her voice is small. “I thought that night was why you hated me.”

Another bite, this time to her hip. “You and hate don’t belong in the same sentence.”

“But... you reported me to Diana.”

That one catches me off guard. I crawl up her body to hang my face over hers. “What the hell are you talking about?”

The space between her eyebrows creases up. “You told her I went off on your partner. She almost fired me the next day.”

What the fuck?

“I didn’t say a word to Diana. Why the hell would I? You stood up for me like I couldn’t have.”

“Then who...” Her expression clears. “Carly was in the bathroom when I went in. She must have overheard.”

And I see red.

I am going to. Fucking. Lose it.

No – *no*. Focus.

“I lost my head for you that night,” I tell her instead. “Three years ago, Jude. That’s how long it’s been for me.”

Her next breath sounds like an *oh*. Glad we settled that one.

“So, what’s it gonna take?” I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties, and it’s a testament to how incredible her body is that I haven’t properly admired this silky black thing until it’s about to exit stage left. I apologize to them with a firm kiss. Win myself another squirm and a

fucking great whimper. “I let you in. Showed you I cared with a fucking rooftop garden. Anything you needed from me I gave it to you. Because that’s who I am, Jude. I do anything for the people I love. I *keep* the people I love.”

I yank down the panties. And frankly, how I manage to get out the next words instead of diving in is nothing short of a miracle.

“What’s it gonna take for you to get it? I’m in it. I’ve been in it. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m a mess, Theo. And I’m so sorry –”

I push a finger inside her. She’s already so fucking wet –

“*Theo.*”

God, I love it when she whines.

“What’s it gonna take?” I take back my finger. Lap my tongue against her. Just a single pass and her fists come down on the mattress, frustrated.

“Is this it? This what you need?”

“*No.*”

“No? Okay.” I come up to eye level, bringing her legs with me. But my grip falters when I lock onto her face. Her perfect, soft face. The love and the fear and the lust all over it. And I almost choke up, right there. Choke on this lump taking residence in my throat, looking at this woman I love so much who can’t just let me do it. Let me love her. Let us be happy. She’s got her wall up and I can’t, just can’t fucking get it down.

“Theo,” she urges me. Her legs wrap around me.

I swallow hard. Press a kiss under her ear.

“You have to tell me, Jude. Give it to me. I live for those words. They’re the closest you get to the real thing.”

And suddenly she's there. My Jude, the real, fierce, vulnerable Jude I'll never get enough of. Her eyes round and I've reached her. It's probably fleeting. But it's so good a dry sob slips out of my mouth. She reaches out, combs her fingers through my hair.

"I want you, Theo. I need you."

"Anything. Anything you want," I tell her, and I push myself in.

If kissing Jude is a dream, fucking Jude is something otherworldly. It yanks my every sense to attention. Feel her heat on me, smell the scent off her hair, see only her, hear every note out of her mouth. It takes me somewhere beyond what's physical. Somewhere warm and bright, where her smile is the only thing that matters, where nothing can go wrong so long as I keep her happy.

It sends something hot down my throat, when our eyes connect like this. Puts my heart into overdrive, fills my lungs with helium, sends my brain into serenity. Pure tranquility, even with the blood rushing through me, the frantic breaths, the harsh cadence of our hips.

Jude slides a hand to the nape of my neck, line carving between her eyebrows. She's already right at the edge. I can tell in the way she's clenching around me, begging me in, keeping me longer. I gather her up with a hand on her lower back, angling her the way she likes.

Her eyes shut. There's something off about it, a different slant to her mouth when she lets out a gasp. And then I catch them. Wet little beads forming in the outer corners of her eyes and I lower her, my next thrust slowing right down.

"Don't stop," she says quietly, eyelids wrenching open, letting me see the tears pooling in them. "Please, don't stop."

Getting somewhere.

I kiss up her tears. Pull away my hips and give it back to her slow. Pour as much of my heart as I can into each push. Hold her face, forehead to forehead until her deep gasp, shuddering hips, weakening thighs. And she kisses me, fingers in my hair until I let out a groan against her mouth.

Keep me, I beg her silently after I collapse against her. *Don't make me try to live without you.*

After a while, I wipe the moisture from my eyes and pull away. Make it out into the hall to get my clothes back on.

Maybe I didn't get a definitive anything out of her. Maybe I don't get to stay here today, and hold her, and laugh with her, and feed her something other than cereal. Maybe she still needs time away, to come up with whatever missing piece she feels she needs to find. But she's in there, she loves me, and the least I can do is give her the space to find it. Believe that she sees what we have, and that she won't give it up.

By the time I'm back in her bedroom she's sitting on the edge of the bed. Wearing that yellow t-shirt, the one from the road trip. The one I wore the last time I was here, on a much happier day. And in this moment, I don't understand her. I can't even *pretend* to get her, what she's thinking putting that on for me to see. Like she somehow can't grasp how bad it would hurt me.

It must be all over my face because she shifts uncomfortably. Grips the hem into tight fists. "I've been sleeping in it," she confesses to her knees. "It still smells like you."

What the fuck are we doing?

How do I love her this much – how does she sleep in a shirt because it smells like me – and somehow, we don't get to be together? What kind of sick joke is this?

But she's got shit to work out. Real life, terrible shit that I'd never begrudge her for. So, I muster all my reserves of patience.

"You can have your space, Jude. If that's what you want, then have it. But I'm not done with this, okay? And if you are... god, I hope you're not. But if you are, then I need you to tell me, point blank. Tell me you don't love me. It's the only way I'll be able to let you go."

She hangs her head. I swallow and it feels like shrapnel going down my throat. This is it. My breaking point. I haven't needed a real cry or maybe to punch through a wall this bad. Need to get myself home before I can't hold it in anymore.

A tear hits her thigh and I can't get my voice above a whisper. "Just don't take too long, okay?"

I pause on my way out of her room. Swing the door away to assess the damage where the knob punched into the drywall.

"I'll send someone to fix this," I tell her, without turning back.

Chapter 29

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Jude

It's burned into my mind, like staring into the sun and seeing a dark spot everywhere I look. The image of Theo's face crumbling in the car. His tears dripping off my shoulder and staining the bedsheets.

I spend the rest of the day in bed, sheets all the way up to my face so that with every breath I can catch a whiff of him that lingers from when we made love this morning. I miss him. Missed him the second he turned away, before he even crossed the threshold of my bedroom.

I feel so stupid and cruel and broken because what kind of woman – what kind of human being – would turn away the kind of love a man like that offered so freely? I turned him away despite the optimism I still found there in his face, even as he was telling me goodbye.

Petunia tries reasoning with me.

Just call him, you idiot. Make it right.

She looks at me in pure disgust and leaves the room. I don't move from the depths of my bed until the next night, when the door knob jiggles out in the hall.

"I know you're in there, Juju. Open up."

I stand so quickly the world goes dark for a second, and I steady myself against the wall before pulling open the front door.

It's Jenna, arms full of pizza and cheap wine. I texted her only half an hour ago, finally able to stomach myself long enough to do it. She strolls

past me into the apartment, dumps her offerings on the coffee table and buries me in a hug.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” I mumble into her shoulder. “I think I broke up with him.”

She leads me to the sofa and we sit curled against each other, her stroking my hair, me tearing up on her shirt, soaking it through. Petunia comes to investigate, curling up on Jenna’s lap and purring her approval when I scratch her head.

“You *think* you broke up with him?”

I wipe my face with the back of my arm. “No, I did. I broke up with him. We got back from the meeting with Diana and he – it became painfully obvious, how much I was hurting him. I couldn’t reciprocate my feelings.”

Jenna goes to sort through the kitchen cupboards and comes back with wine glasses. She pours hefty servings of chardonnay and I take one, gulping gratefully as she studies me.

“Jude?”

“What?”

“You love him.”

I nod.

She clinks her nails against her glass. “So, what gives?”

I shrug.

“No,” she says firmly, taking my glass and putting it down on the coffee table with hers. “No nodding, no shrugging, no shaking your head. Talk to me. Somehow, I suspect this is part of the issue.”

I let out a shuddering breath. “I couldn’t get out of my own head. I’d look at him sometimes and think... there’s no way this will end well. And telling him I love him felt like I’d be making it too real.”

But Jenna purses her lips. “Jude, I’m sorry. But that’s bullshit. This is the most blatant self-sabotage I’ve ever seen you pull. The guy acts like you’re his center of gravity. What could he possibly have done to make you lose trust in him like that?”

“I trust him –”

“Clearly not. You’re punishing him because your parents did something that’s never even crossed his mind to do.”

Oh god.

I press my face into my palms, trying to will away the image of his broken face. I’d known I was an idiot for letting him go. But said as plainly as that... besides Jenna, there’s no one more worthy of my trust than Theo had been. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Three years ago –”

My head snaps up. I’m not talking about this. How can I talk about three years ago on top of the wreckage of this breakup? But I sense that Jenna knows this and that it’s exactly why she’s deciding to forge ahead. She gives me a hard look.

“Three years ago, I watched you go from a little fireball to a complete shell of yourself. It was so hard to watch, Juju. But I got it. I know how much you loved Dave. You could barely shut up about him, even on a bad day. So, I got it. And then your parents did what they did and the shell of yourself became... nothing. Just nothing. There was no fight in you, barely anything at all. And you tried to pull away from me too, I know you did. In your head, you were cutting to the chase. Cut me off, before I cut you off. But I stuck, Juju. I didn’t quit on you. And it’s not a given that everyone you let in will quit on you, either.”

Jenna watches me carefully, absent-mindedly scratching Petunia's head. I know she's right. Of course, she's right. But the doubt lingers, a dark spot in my chest I can't erase no matter how much I want it gone.

"I need your help with something," I say at last. I force out the words before I chicken out. "I think I want to call my mom."

Jenna's ashy brows reach high up towards her hair. "Okay," she whispers. "Okay, we can do that. Now?"

"Now," I nod. "Before I lose my nerve."

"Do you have her number?"

I walk over to the window, digging through the stack of Architectural Digests until I find the issue I'm looking for. One from two and a half years ago, bought the day I changed my phone number and deleted her contact from my phone.

Jenna grips the magazine and gazes at the phone number scribbled on the back. "You're sure?"

I hand her my phone, needing her to do it for me. My hands shake so badly I move to sit on them as Jenna dials, putting the call on speakerphone and setting it down on the coffee table. She lifts her wine glass and takes a long gulp.

The phone rings, practically deafening in the apartment that's silent save for Petunia's quiet breathing. And then –

"Hello?"

At the first word, the first note of my mother's voice, Theo's face flashes in my head.

Beside me, Jenna looks down at the phone, shell-shocked like she wasn't expecting anyone to answer. And I... I don't know what I feel. I

know what I was *expecting* to feel – devastated, maybe even angry. I expected a tidal wave of tears.

“Hello?” Mom asks again, this time tentatively.

Jenna gives me a frantic look but I only shake my head. And maybe I never expected her to answer, either, because in this moment I can’t muster a single word.

“Do you want to hang up?” Jenna mouths silently.

I’m about to nod when my mother speaks again.

“Jude?”

And my eyes shut. Something gets a tight, punishing grip around my throat, fisting it closed and making it impossible to drag in a single breath.

“Jude, if that’s you...” Her voice trembles. It trembles and my body does too. “I’m so sorry. Jude, I’m so sorry. I was so selfish, I was –” Her voice breaks.

Jenna’s fingers thread through mine. And I love her dearly, this friend of mine. But her fingers are too small, too soft.

“I’m so, so sorry, Jude. I want to see you. I want to talk to you. Your phone number was out of service and – I understand if you don’t – I messed up very badly.”

The hairs on Jenna’s arms are standing. I get it – I feel it too, this chill that’s just passed through the room. I shiver, hearing a soft sob on the other line.

“Mom.”

The word comes out on its own, a strength in my voice that I’d never have expected to hear if I ever spoke to her again. I expected to fall to pieces. But I feel... intact.

“Jude?”

“You know where I live. Why didn’t you come?”

After a long pause, she answers: “I was terrified you’d turn me away. What I did to you was so wrong. I couldn’t stand the idea of seeing you, and you telling me to leave. I – will you let me make it up to you?”

Could I forgive her? I’m not sure this revelation did us any good.

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. “I don’t think that’s a good enough reason. You let me believe you didn’t want me. That you didn’t care about me, that you left and felt nothing about it. All because you were afraid that maybe I’d turn you away?”

“Jude, what can I do? How can I make this better?”

“I don’t know that you can. Maybe one day we can sit down and talk, or something. But right now... I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

I cut the line before I can hear another word. Because it *isn’t* good enough. She let her fear get in the way of us, of a better life for both of us. And I’m doing the same to him, aren’t I?

Jenna watches me cautiously. “Are you okay?”

I take a moment before answering. Checking in on each one of my limbs, organs. Making sure they’re still intact. That my lungs still function, heart still beats. I am. I’m okay.

And also, I’m not.

I feel a brand-new awareness covering my skin. I can’t live like this, under the shadow of this painful thing that was done to me years ago. The fear won’t go away, maybe ever. Maybe I’ll always be tending to these wounds. But he makes it better. I have to believe he’ll keep making it better, and that, even if he stopped, I’d still be okay. That I’d survive, the same way I did when my parents left.

Jenna squeezes my knee. “You wish it was Theo sitting here, don’t you?”

I grip her hands. “Jenna, I can’t tell you how much I love you. But I really, *really* wish you were him right now.”

Jenna’s face breaks into a smile. “Go get him, Jujube.”

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Chapter 30

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Theo

“F eeoh!”

The pitch of Gabby’s voice carries over the packed dining room, and even louder sounds coming from the lounge.

It should be a thrill, seeing Sunset Landing like this. Chock full on our first night of service. But it doesn’t do anything for me. Doesn’t look anything more than dull, colorless shapes. I barely feel a semblance of the relief I normally do, on opening nights.

The last day and a half have been a mindless stream of meetings I couldn’t care less about and an unreasonable amount of running, which seems to be the only activity I can properly handle. Other than staring at the ceiling, obsessing over Jude. Jumping every time my phone went off, hoping, fucking *praying* it was her. That she was ready to talk.

It would be easy to give up. To get angry, bitter that she’d put me through this, that she’d choose to go without me. But I feel none of that.

Because she’s my Jude. Mine, made for me, and two days into this break — or whatever the hell this is — I still believe it in every corner of my body. You don’t give up on something like this, someone like her. I’d sooner give up breathing.

It’s not over, we’re not over. This is only a minor detour. And isn’t life full of those? It certainly won’t be our last. Assuming she wants to be with me.

By the time I make it to their table, Mom and Pen have made a solid dent in a bottle of wine. Marcus is tipping a beer right down his throat as Evan and Gabby shriek beside him, brandishing crayons and fighting over which one of them gets to draw the clownfish in their coloring book.

Mom's face breaks into a smile when she sees me. "There you are, Teddy! Isn't this incredible? There's a line up around the front!"

She gets up for a hug and I make my rounds, slapping kisses on the heads of two restless kids and rumpling Pen's hair just to be an ass. I drop into a vacant chair across from Mom. It helps more than I figured it would, being around them. The acute pain in my chest goes down to a throbbing ache.

Still, I should have stopped by the bar for a drink. I try to wave down one of the servers, but she blows me off with a finger that says *wait a minute*. This is just the way my life goes now, I guess. It was easier when people were scared shitless.

"So, tell us what's good here, Theo," Pen says over her menu. "Is that the same fish burger you do at Nivoli's? Oh, hibiscus sea bass. Interesting!"

"Fish fingers! Fish fingers!" Gabby starts chanting, without taking her eyes off the coloring book. "Fish fingers, Feeoh!"

"She's on a fish finger kick," Pen mutters under her breath. "All day, every day. Won't eat a single other thing. It's these dinosaur-shaped ones someone deserves to be shot for inventing. They served them at pre-school once."

"They don't do fish fingers here, Gabs," Marcus tells her, gulping down his beer.

Gabby throws back her head. "NOOOO! Fish fingers!"

I snort. The couple at the next table throws us a dirty look.

“Shh,” Marcus puts a frantic hand over Gabby’s mouth, which only slightly muffles her yell. He turns to me, gritting his teeth. “Why aren’t there *effing* fish fingers on this menu?”

I catch Mom’s eye and a laugh properly escapes me. God, it feels like I haven’t laughed in years.

“We’ll get you fish fingers, Gabs, don’t worry.” I shrug at Marcus when he gives me a grateful look, and pull out my phone.

ME: *Finn – figure out how to make fish fingers. Please. Thank you. Etc. Don’t ask.*

FINN: *Copy that. Want me to order you a Shirley Temple, while I’m at it?*

“There,” I tell Gabby. “Fish fingers coming right up.”

Gabby quits her shrieking, looking very pleased with herself as she goes back to her coloring. I scratch at a smudge of crayon on the table.

“So!” Mom says casually. The sidelong glance she sends Pen is a dead giveaway she’s been sitting on this since the moment I sat down. “When does Jude get here, honey?”

I flinch. I’d been banking on Mom forgetting Jude had agreed to come. I should have known better, prepared some sort of cover. Something that wouldn’t turn them off of her, because somehow I doubt they’d be as understanding of the truth.

“She’s not,” I mutter finally.

“What, honey?”

“She’s not coming, Mom.”

God, I need a drink. I take Marcus’s half-gone beer and down it before he has a chance to tell me off.

“What did she do to you?” Pen asks sharply.

I have no intention of explaining. Pen always goes off the deep end, whenever she feels I've been slighted. As a kid, she'd challenged a grown man to a fist fight for bumping into me on the street. But her going off about Jude is the last thing I'd want to sit through.

"Nothing. Everything's fine. I'm fine."

I've always been a shit liar.

I busy myself watching Gabby and Evan fight over a red crayon, tugging violently on either end until it snaps in half.

"You really know how to pick them," Pen says, and this time there's a sad edge to her voice. "That last bimbo who was in it for your money, this one who breaks your heart."

There's a long pause in which three out of six people at the table look at me silently. I swallow. "She didn't –"

"Oh, there she is!" Mom exclaims, looking over my shoulder with a huge grin spreading over her face.

I stare at her, confused as hell, until a pair of hands land on the back of the empty chair to my right. And suddenly Jude's here, beautiful, and perfect, and looking down at me anxiously.

The biological response is instantaneous, same as it's always been when I see her. My chest seizes, legs start to stand, arms demand to be wrapped around her. But I force myself into my chair. Because I can't figure it out, what her face is telling me. Whether she's here to raise me from the dead or dump dirt into my grave.

"Hi, honey! You made it."

Mom rounds the table to throw her arms around her, and the trepidation on Jude's face falters. Her eyes round, go a bit pink around the rims. And I

can tell how much she needs it, that hug Mom's giving her. She sinks into the embrace, gives a little smile into Mom's shoulder.

God, I love my mom.

If I can't hold Jude like that, this is a fair substitute. There's no hug better than Mom's.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Jude says when they break apart. She gives a tentative smile around the table, waving timidly at the kids before landing on me. "Can I talk to you?"

"Why don't you sit, Jude?" Pen calls before I can answer. "Join us a minute."

There's ice in Pen's voice and I shoot her a warning look. But Jude drops into the chair next to me and it's fucking unbearable sitting here next to her without knowing what she's come here to say. Without reaching for her hand under the table, or soaking in her face, or breathing her in any more than the casual whiffs of mandarins I get off her hair. My muscles are so wound up I'm sitting rod straight.

I feel like a live wire. Simmering under a calm surface. Ready to combust at the slightest touch.

"Feeoh, that is your girlfriend?"

Death by three-year-old. I feel Jude stiffen next to me at Gabby's question, and three pairs of adult eyes come to rest on me. If there's anything good left in this world, the ceiling will cave on my head any second.

But Pen's on a tear. She pats her daughter on the arm and turns to Jude. "What a great question, Gabs. What *are* your intentions with my brother, exactly? And why is it he was under the impression you weren't coming, until the second you showed up?"

“Pen,” I warn.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jude fold her palms between her thighs. “It’s a fair question –”

“No, it’s not,” I say firmly. Glaring at Pen mostly for somewhere to put my eyes, because if I lose too much focus I’ll only end up dropping to my knees and begging Jude to take me back.

“You can’t blame me, can you?” Pen directs at Jude. “For getting protective when someone messes with his head.”

“Penny,” Marcus winces.

“I’m glad you’re protective,” Jude tells her. “You should be.”

Because you’re about to dump me, or...?

“I don’t need your blessing to be protective over my brother –”

“Pen, are you about done here?” I ask, running a hand over my face. This is veering closer and closer to a living nightmare.

But she isn’t done. She deals a final blow: “How is it you feel about him, then?”

“That’s enough.” My chair scrapes against the floor and I’m up, fists on the table, shooting daggers at Pen. “What are you doing?”

“Theo, it’s okay.” Jude’s fingers close around my wrist.

And I break. Can’t help but look at her now, and there’s a tug deep in my soul when her cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink.

“Seriously, it’s okay. It’s kind of a softball question. Thanks for teeing me up,” she spares Pen a small smile before settling on me again. “I have no problem telling your sister how I feel about you. But I’d much rather say this to you alone.”

Finally, the weathered chord anchoring my heart into my chest cavity snaps. It pounds upwards, lodging itself in my throat.

“Let’s go,” I tell her.

I slide out of her grip but she catches my hand before I can get away. Links our fingers together. A surge of adrenaline zips through me. She’s decided what she wants, and it’s me, isn’t it? That’s the only thing this can mean. Right?

Right?

I pause only to lean over the table and give Mom a kiss on the cheek. The poor woman looks confused as hell, watching all this unfold. As I straighten, Pen throws me a smug look. She sticks out her tongue.

That little shit. She knew exactly what she was doing.

“I’m sorry to have disrupted –” Jude starts saying to Mom, but I wheel her across the crowded dining room and through the lounge. I’m heading for the foyer, but Jude pivots at the last second and tugs me into the kitchen.

It’s hot and smells fucking incredible in here, line cooks dodging around workstations like a well-oiled machine as Finn fumbles around the pass window.

“Hey, Guinea Pig,” he calls when he spots us.

Jude hits the breaks. “Hi –”

I hook an arm around her waist and drag her towards the door leading up to the roof. “Not the time,” I throw to Finn over my shoulder.

“Your fish fingers are done.”

“Table twenty-six,” I call back. “I owe you!”

And we’re finally alone. In the stairwell, with the door shut between us and the kitchen. Jude spins, holding me still with warm hands on my stomach when I try to usher us up the stairs.

“I love you,” she says in a rush, eyes wide, nails digging gently into me like it’ll help the words sink in.

My heart.

My fucking heart. It's too big for my chest, swelling so bad it's about to explode, so bad I start to feel lightheaded.

"You love me?"

"I love you. And I want you back."

There's a tremor running down my legs, and I'm aching to take off in a victory lap around this restaurant. But there's still a hurdle there between us, and I need to settle it before I can really soak this in.

"Let's go up," I tell her, giving her a little nudge towards the stairs.

She hesitates, tripped up by my lackluster response. But she does what I say and when we emerge onto the sunset-drenched rooftop, her body slumps in what can only be described as relief.

"I thought it might all be gone," she says, looking around at the plants still dripping from when I'd watered them earlier. "I don't know what I would have done."

"Run away again?" It comes out harder than I'd wanted. To her credit, she doesn't wince, or flinch, or stare at her feet.

"I'd have understood," she says evenly. "I'd have gone down and kicked everyone out of the kitchen to cook up a Forgive Me Frittata."

This girl. She wrenches a laugh out of me.

"I love you, but there's no way in hell I'd eat that mess again."

She smiles. "The frittata would have been for me. I'd have eaten the whole thing. Licked the pan, even, to get you to forgive me. Would it have worked?"

"There's a good chance." Sighing, I thread both hands through her hairline and cup her face. "Jude, I can't do that again. If this is going to

work you can't shut down on me. I need you to trust me. I need you to talk to me."

"I know," she says softly. "I called my mom today."

My stomach drops. Stupidly, I run my eyes over her body searching for signs of impact, as though I'd find traces of heartache on her skin. But she's still standing, eyes aren't even bloodshot or puffy. Not a hair out of place and fucking hell, pride swells in my chest. I've seen a lot less set her off.

"You're okay."

"I'm okay. She told me she missed me, that she didn't come see me because she was afraid I'd turn her away. Talking to her didn't change anything, but I wish you'd been with me."

"I wish I'd have been there, too."

I move to tuck her in against me but she resists. "Just... wait a minute. I need to say a few things." She hooks her fingers in my belt loops and gives a little tug. "I meant what I said when I told you I wasn't sure I'd ever get over what they did. I don't want to pretend I'm somehow cured of all that a day later. But I want you to know that I'm going to work on it. Because if the alternative is melting down so badly, I have to live even a second without knowing the next time I get to see you... I couldn't do it."

I'm the luckiest son of a bitch in the world. "Can I hug you, now?"

"Not yet," she smiles. "I'm trying this new thing where I tell you how I feel."

I pry her hands off my jeans and squeeze them. "I see that. I like it."

"Good. Because now's the part where I thank you for how incredible you are. How warm and kind, and honest, and patient you are with me. And selfless, almost down to a fault. The way I love you, Theo? It feels impossible. It terrifies me how made for you I feel. How badly it would hurt

if it didn't work out between us. I protected myself by hurting you and it's the sickest thing I've ever done. And maybe this does all go to crap in a month, or a year, or twenty. Maybe it does. But loving you, and being loved by you, it would be worth every second of that risk."

I can't go another minute. "Can I kiss you yet?"

"Yes, but –"

I don't wait for the end. I pick her up, fuse her to me like I'm binding myself for good because my body wouldn't have it be another way. Jude wraps her legs around me, touches her forehead to mine, and I get a gentle grip on her hair, hold her close. Our lips mold together so perfectly I let out a groan. I can't fathom how I managed to survive without kissing this girl. Living without my oxygen. I walk us back towards the edge of the rooftop. Set her down on the half wall without losing my grip on her, or letting her legs drop from my waist.

Jude nips my lip. "I wasn't done talking."

"There was more?"

"A lot more. I wanted to say that I want you back."

I brush her lips with mine. "You already said that."

"Oh. Honestly, I might have blacked out, seeing you again. Did I say that I love you?"

I grin against her mouth. "You did."

"And that I'm yours for as long as you want me?"

"And how long do you think that is, Holland?"

She scrunches her nose. Combs my hair with her fingers, and I'm back home in heaven again.

"Always?"

I throw back my head. "*Finally*," I tell the sky. "She gets it."

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Bonus Scene

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How a Cab Driver Almost Ruined My Night

“No handcuffs.”

“No ‘cuffs. Copy that.”

She watches me twirl a strand of her hair around my finger. Even in the dark back of the cab, the sweet, pink lock shines around my skin. Smooth and smells like roses.

The cab takes a wide turn. The momentum slides Jenna down the leather backseat, knocking our thighs together and pinning her to my chest.

From somewhere in the back of my head, I register that we probably should have made it to my place by now. I’m only about a ten-minute ride from the bar we just left, and traffic’s not exactly an issue at this time of night. In all likelihood, we’ve probably taken a wrong turn or something. I’d check, if I had it in me to tear my eyes off this woman. I expect this is a phenomenon she’s used to dealing with. She seems to have command of her own gravitational pull.

Jenna flutters her eyelashes and presses her breasts into me before moving away. It’s not that, nor is it the suggestive way she bites her lip that does it for me. Though it really doesn’t hurt.

Truth is, I haven’t managed to rip my eyes off her since the second she came to our table on a fact-finding mission for Jude. And watching her so masterfully get Theo to pull his head out of his ass? Well, there was just about no way I’d be going home without her.

Luckily, we seemed to be on the same page from the get-go.

“No spooning,” she adds to the – short – list of boundaries she’s carved for us tonight, and at that I dip my chin and give her a playful pout.

“Not even a little bit? I’ve been told I’m a world-class cuddler.”

Jenna smooths a hand over my shoulder. “It’s not your cuddles I’m after.”

I nod solemnly. “Deep conversation and chef-quality post-bar food. You’re just like the rest of them.”

I swear, the soundwaves from her breathy laugh travel straight to my dick. I do hope she was kidding about the cuddle thing, though.

“Last rule, Finn,” Jenna says, and she pulls away to look me with sudden gravity. “No next time. No feelings. We get one single night together, and pray we never have to see each other again.”

Well, this is new. Usually, I’m the one impressing this important detail on my dates, even though nine out of ten times I don’t need to. It’s what tends to happen when you dip into the pool at work. Word spreads, expectations are set before you even get around to it yourself.

“It goes hand in hand with the ‘don’t fall in love with me’ rule,” Jenna adds, when I’m quiet too long. “But somehow I don’t think that’ll be a problem for you.”

I can see it in her face she doesn’t resent me for it. She’s right, anyway. I’ve got it down to a science by now. Dinner, drinks, an orgasm apiece – two if we’ve got enough chemistry – and I’m in my own bed by midnight. Offer her my most charming grin the next time I see her at work, so she knows it isn’t awkward, and she’ll go on to tell the other servers just enough about the bimbo Head Chef to spark curiosity with the newbies. I set clear boundaries, treat her like a goddess for the night and like a friend the next day. Rinse and repeat. No harm, no foul.

So... what exactly was that sinking feeling in my gut? It's a weird time to experience my first hit of carsickness.

At last, the cab eases to a stop. Without taking her eyes off me, Jenna gets a grip on the front of my shirt and tugs me out of the door after her. I haphazardly thrust a few bills at the driver, calling out that the change is his to keep.

A breeze picks up just as we're outside, and I don't bother to hide the way my eyes linger on the extra inches of thigh I see as her dress flutters. Trying to decide which part of her to latch onto first, the second we get upstairs and she loses her clothes.

"Finn?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"I've heard about the whole farm-to-table thing, but this is taking it to a whole other level."

Huh?

Suddenly I realize it's almost pitch black out, with nothing but the moon and the retreating tail lights from our cab lighting up the world around us. Really, it's the dead quiet that should have clued me in sooner. None of the rushing traffic or drunk bar-goers bumping into us on the sidewalk. In fact, we don't seem to be standing on a sidewalk at all. There's nothing but gravel and dirt under my sneakers, leading down a long driveway cutting through nothing but field around us.

On the beaten-up mailbox to my left, I see 1481 Rockney Lane. *Lane*, instead of Road.

Oh, hell.

"Seems we've taken a minor detour," I say, looking around, taking in the sounds of crickets and the way the trees in the distance catch in the

breeze. “Nice night for it, at least.”

“Why does it suddenly feel like I’m about to meet my untimely death?” Jenna says, sorting through her little purse and pulling out her phone. “If I knew I’d have to run from a deceptively innocent-looking flirt, I would have worn more sensible shoes.”

“My expertise with a knife should have tipped you off,” I grin.

She shifts uncomfortably on her feet, in shoes that probably add a good four inches to her height to bring her right at eye level with me. She’s tall, I realize, even without the help. Must be close to five-ten, five-eleven on her own. One of my closest friends, who also inherited her dad’s height, swore off heels in her early teens because of how tall she’d feel around the guys she was crushing on. Not that it matters much these days, since she married her pint-sized wife.

But Jenna... this woman seems to award very little care to what people think about her. And it’s not just the soft pink hair, or the sinfully long legs, or the way she seems to speak every thought that comes to mind. There’s something so shame-free about her, like she long ago resigned herself to being nothing but her. And hell, that’s hot.

Jabbing at her phone, she balances on one foot to shake out the other at the ankle. She’s wincing, and the gravel would make it impossible for her to stand comfortably barefoot. Can’t have that.

She lets out a sweet little gasp as I lift her in both arms. After a shocked moment she throws an arm around my neck to steady herself, murmuring a thank you through those plump, pink lips. And for a second everything seems to grind to a halt, letting me take in the high peaks of her cupid’s bow and the tiny little dimple that caves in near her chin when she smiles. How warm she feels in my arms despite the cooled, late night-early morning air.

I don't – woah. Is the air different out in the country? I've never held a woman this close and registered the length of her eyelashes before the press of her tits on my chest. Maybe it's getting to her too, because I catch the way her eyes zip away from my mouth. I start holding my breath right around when I notice I've been inhaling her perfume like a man starved for oxygen.

"I'm about to make it even easier for you to murder me," Jenna says, clearing her throat. "My phone's dead."

"S'okay," I mutter, forcing my voice to lose its sudden tremor. What gives? I hike her up in my arms. "Can you reach around to my back pockets for mine?"

It sounds like a line. In fact, it *should* sound like a line, because it *should* be a line. I should be pulling out all the usual stops. The casual flirtation, the grin my sister always warned me to keep in check unless I wanted its recipient to follow me around like a puppy.

I'm relieved that my body remembers how this thing goes. The front of my jeans definitely gets a little snuggler when she reaches back to pat my ass.

"Hate to break it to you, kid, but there's no phone in your pockets."

"Shit. I think I left it in the cab."

"Uh-oh. Put me down before you Hulk smash that mailbox, will you?"

I shrug. "It's just a phone, shit happens. If anyone should be worried about getting caught up in a Hulk smash, it's me. A guy says one wrong word to your friend and you looked about ready to reach down his throat and rip out his heart, arteries and all."

She smiles big. "It worked though, didn't it?"

“Yeah. Mission accomplished for the Jenna Bear.” I take off along the side of the road towards a weathered gazebo I see a little way away. It’s got a couple of solar-paneled lights dotting the ground around it.

“Jenna Bear?”

“Yeah, you know. Like a sexy Mama Bear.”

She laughs. “I like it, actually.”

“Not bad, huh? Came up with it just now.”

Whoever owns the property must not sit out here much. The wooden gazebo is rickety, and the Adirondacks under it are covered in dust and cobwebs. I try very hard not to think about the contingent of spiders probably hanging around this thing when I crouch to run a quick hand over the seat and dislodge as much dirt as possible before setting Jenna down.

I turn towards the property, taking in the barn way off in the distance and the brick house out in front. It must be a newer build. I can see the mammoth size of the house under the moonlight, so different than the modest farmhouses you’re used to seeing out here.

“We could go over and ask to use their phone? Looks like a nice house. What are the odds rich people are shotgun-toting crazies?”

“In my experience,” Jenna smooths her dress over her thighs. “Every rich person scores high on the crazy scale, yours truly included. We’re better off waiting for a car to drive by.”

“You, crazy?”

She throws me a look like *come on*, and points at her hair.

My eyebrows pinch. “I don’t follow.”

She tilts her head, amused. “You know, you don’t have to try so hard. Carrying me because my feet hurt, pretending not to be offended by my hair

color. News flash, Finn – *you’re getting me out of this dress the second we make it back to civilization.*”

“Babe, that’s the one thing I promise you I’ve never had to try at,” I say, and the line delivery is all wrong. There’s none of the ease that should come with saying words in that order. Instead, I squint to get a better read on her face, made harder by the roof of the gazebo blocking out the moonlight. “Who doesn’t like your hair?”

The question seems to stump her. Because she assumed the answer was ‘everyone?’ Or because my tone held an unexpected edge to it?

Jenna dips her gaze down to her knees. “The rich crazies making up the Carling family are at the top of the list.” She flashes a smile when she sees me confused. “Jenna Carling, nice to meet you.”

I sink slowly down into the chair next to hers.

“So, what? The hair was an act of rebellion against your crazy family?”

“Started out that way, maybe, when I got it done a year ago. I thought I’d only have it for a couple of months, and then I couldn’t picture myself looking any other way. My hair is naturally –”

“Woah, woah,” I cut in, waving my hands. “If you tell me your hair doesn’t naturally come out the color of cotton candy I’ll be crushed.”

The way she tucks her chin to laugh almost sends me into a tailspin. How is it possible that she’s both cripplingly adorable and the kind of sexy that promises a dirty string of words in your ear while she rides you?

“I like it, by the way,” I say, when I realize I still haven’t. “Your hair. It fits you. Who you are.”

Jenna’s eyes narrow. “You don’t even know me.”

Whoops. Definitely just stepped in shit. She’s defensive now and I consider backpedaling, consider trying to figure out what a backpedal

would even look like. But screw it – she and I have this in common. I decided a long time ago I’d never pretend. That people would always know exactly where they stand with me.

So, I jab a thumb at my chest, drawing Jenna’s eyes. “I feel it. Here.”

She looks at me a long, quiet moment. So long this weird, tingling sensation starts up in my chest, like someone’s gone and turned me into a snow globe, shaken me up until the little white flakes start fluttering down. The set of her jaw softens. And I think that maybe she’s feeling it too, whatever the hell has permeated my body tonight.

But the softness goes as quick as it came, and she throws me this wicked smile that sets off that single little dimple. “Weren’t the rules your idea? I can be talked into handcuffs, but I stand firm on the last one.”

I let out a throaty laugh. Short, dry and as fake as the ease with which I force out the next words. “I won’t be falling in love with you, Jenna Bear. I can promise you that.”

She sticks out her fist, with her pinky pointing straight out. “Pinky swear.”

“Seriously?”

“Pinky swear, Finn. No feelings, okay?”

I try. I try really hard to ignore that sinking feeling again as I wrap my pinky around hers. Why is there sinking? There should be no sinking. None. I don’t do this. I don’t do feelings. And I certainly don’t fall in love, haven’t been in love in over a decade, and it’s going to stay that way until I’m good and buried underground.

I’m not falling in love. I’m just not.

Fast forward eight months. Jenna and Finn – a self-proclaimed bimbo and himbo, both with an overwhelming preference for casual sex – end up as totally-kind-of-almost-platonic roommates for the summer. Don't miss their happily ever after in [The No Judgment Zone](#), the follow-up book in the Sunset Landing series.

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I never intended to let this book see the light of day.

I've never written a book, before this.

When a piece of Jude and Theo's story came to me in a dream, I thought up the rest just for the fun of it. Then, on the tail end of finishing up Jenna and Finn's follow-up story, I thought: why the hell not? Imposter syndrome be damned. I could probably learn to self-publish. Even if people hated it, at least it was out there.

I aimed high: my goal was to have one single person read *The Sixty/Forty Rule*.

So, thank you. It means so much that you've taken the time to read it, and I hope you enjoyed Jude and Theo's story as much as I enjoyed watching it unfold on paper.

It would mean a lot if you took a moment to [leave a review](#).

And, if you're so inclined, sign up for my newsletter to get some bonus spice delivered to your inbox, in addition to news about future book releases.

Let's just say, I never thought Theo would agree to share his girl. Love can make you do crazy things.

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