

AROMANTICCOMEDY

MOVE IT

OR

LOSE IT

A LOVE MISHAPS NOVELLA



GRACIERUTHMITCHELL

MOVE IT OR LOSE IT

GRACIE RUTH MITCHELL

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To Becky. Thanks for encouraging me to write a second chance reminiscent of Esra and Ozan. I hope you're teaching the angels about Turkish dramas.

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ONE

SCARLETT

I DON'T HAVE definitive proof, but I think it's very possible someone was murdered in my apartment.

It just gives off those vibes, you know? Suspicious carpet stains and cracked linoleum and yellowing wallpaper. Dingy, buzzing lights and water that only ever gets lukewarm. Minimal natural light due to the lack of windows.

It's the kind of place you see snapshots of on the news, cordoned off with crime scene tape, and think to yourself, "Oh, yeah, definitely." Like of *course* they found a jar of eyeballs in the fridge. Of *course* they recovered three kidnapped children from the closet.

It's just that kind of place.

The appearance of my apartment isn't what tipped me off about its almost-certainly-morbid past, though. When I moved in here I was ecstatic to have a place to call my own. I was recovering from a broken heart (correction: *trying* to recover from a broken heart), and the prospect of living in a new place gave me hope. So when I first laid eyes on apartment twenty-three at Tampa Court Apartments—not located in Tampa, by the way—things looked pretty good to me.

No, the first clue was my landlord. Because he is, and I suspect always has been, the kind of man that just makes a girl feel...stabby.

So stabby. If I have rage-screamed into my pillow over this man once, I have done it a hundred times. It just makes sense that previous tenants of this hellhole would also have felt that same rage, leading to possible violent and/or murderish activities.

I certainly know *I'm* considering it right about now.

Mr. Bradigan's sneer is a lopsided thing as he glares up at me. His mustache is a weird color too, and it's distracting. His hair is dark brown shot through with wiry gray, but the feather duster on his upper lip is honest-to-goodness blonde—like Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, *blonde*. I have to think the coloring is on purpose, because how would that ever happen naturally? But I don't want to ask. It is my sincerest hope to move out of here and never think about this man ever again, and I'm *so close*.

"Your lease is not up, Miss Downing," he says, his arms folded firmly over his paunch as he stands in my doorway. "Which means you're responsible for finding a new tenant, and you'll continue to pay me monthly until you've done so, regardless of where you're living at the time."

"I already found someone," I say to his mustache, realizing only at the last second that I'm staring. I jerk my eyes away and meet his beady little gaze instead. "An old coworker. She'll be in to sign papers sometime in the next week."

Mr. Bradigan shifts where he stands, looking slightly put out at this news. And I'm sure he *is* put out; he's someone who loves having an excuse to be petty and lash out. My theory is that it's his own way of exerting power over a situation in which he otherwise has little to no control. I mean, he's in his sixties, single, and managing a dump of an apartment. All that would be fine if he were making the best of it and living his best life regardless—there's nothing wrong with being single, and there's nothing wrong with apartment management—but he's not. He exudes bitterness. He *wallows* in it, and it seeps over into every interaction he has.

So yeah. My guess? He's pretty much stuck here for life, and he hates it, and he takes it out on his tenants or anyone else who might have the misfortune of being nearby, like the delivery guy or the waitress or whatever. He's the scum at the bottom of the barrel—the scum none of the other barrel scum wanted to be seen with.

Never trust someone who's mean to the waitress.

"Fine," Bradigan says. He's somehow looking down his nose at me despite the fact that I'm a good six inches taller than him. But when he shoves his hand out into the space between us, palm up, I'm only too happy to drop my key there. That little key weighs half an ounce at most, but it feels like ten tons have been lifted off of me. Then, with one last look over my shoulder at my now-bare apartment, I'm out of there.

IT'S BEEN a long time since I've felt properly nervous, but I recognize the squirming feeling in my gut. I've been working at Sunset Horizons for years—ever since I moved away from home, really—and it feels strange to be leaving. Sunset Horizons is where I met my best friend, Maya, and incidentally, it's where *she* met her fiancé, Dex.

Dex Anthony, who I once believed would be my brother-in-law.

But that was before Jude took a wrecking ball to my heart and obliterated everything—

“Nope,” I say under my breath as I drive, the miles between me and Sunset Horizons stretching ever further. “Don't think about Jude. Don't do it.”

The problem is, it's kind of hard *not* to think about Jude. No matter where I go or what I do, I can't escape him.

Part of it is because his grandma, Cynthia, was the one who told me about the job opening at Sunset Horizons back when I first moved away from home. I've known and loved her since I was a little girl and my dad worked for the Anthony family as a landscaper and gardener, and I've kept in close touch with her over the years, even after Jude broke off our engagement. She's also the one who recently helped me find my new townhome; I told her I was moving and looking for a new place to live, since mine was so horrible, and when she asked if I'd be okay with something a few towns over, I said yes. She told me about a “nice young man” looking for a roommate—her words, not mine—in Hollidale, which is maybe twenty minutes away from Sunset Horizons. His name is Errol, and he's the grandson of one of Cynthia's friends at Sunset. It will be odd having a roommate, much less a guy, but I'll get used to it.

Cynthia helped me find a job, too. Unlike last time, though, when she just told me Sunset Horizons was hiring for janitorial positions, this time she took it a step further: she actually got me an interview.

Which I did *not* ask her to do, by the way. I told her I was moving, she told me about Errol, and then she said, “You'll be looking for different work, then?” I said yes. She nodded, told me she'd keep her ear to the ground, and then one week later she called and said, “You have an interview at Red's at six o'clock on Monday. It's a restaurant, a lovely place. Wear something nice, dear. It's a bit fancier than Sunset Horizons.”

So that's how I found myself meeting with Gwendolyn, the stern but poised manager maybe a few years older than me, telling her about my past restaurant experience (three years of waitressing and hostessing in high school). It was a bit awkward; she didn't ask how I got the interview, but she alluded to it several times, making me think she didn't like someone going over her head.

But really. How was I supposed to know Grandma Cynthia knew the owner of Red's? How was I supposed to know she'd call him up and ask him to consider hiring me? I didn't ask her to do that. She just did it, because that's the kind of woman she is: someone who helps people if it's at all within her power.

Jude was the same way, and I'm positive he got that quality from her, because he sure didn't get it from his parents. Nancy and Hanniford Anthony are not particularly altruistic. Nor did either of them like me very much—not that Jude ever cared about that. He never would have let them come between us.

No, what ultimately came between us was Jude's own fears.

Eighteen years old, engaged to his high school sweetheart, and suddenly Jude looked forward at the rest of his life and realized he wasn't sure about anything. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do for a career, he wasn't sure he was smart enough to live up to his parents' expectations, and he wasn't sure he was ready to commit the rest of his life to one relationship.

So he left. He broke off our engagement and went to college on his own, and I moved away as soon as I had saved up enough money. I didn't move far, but Sunset Horizons was far enough.

That was six years ago, and I'm sad to say that it still hurts to think about that man. It's still hard to breathe when someone mentions him in casual conversation.

He still holds sway over my heart.

I wish I could be more angry at him for leaving. It would be so helpful to be able to rage at his memory. And for a long time, I did rage.

But I'm older now. And looking back, I understand why he left. I don't like it, and I'd be lying if I said there aren't *some* hard feelings, but I get it. Eighteen is *young*, and marriage is a big, big step. We could have been happy together; I know that. I know it down in my gut, in the same way I know that Dex and Maya will be happy, the same way I know Cynthia loves me like her own granddaughter even though we're not actually related. I can just feel it.

And sure, Jude and I argued. We bickered frequently, in fact. No one made me angrier than Jude. But no one made me happier, either. No one loved me like he did. No one took care of me better or put my needs above his own, and I tried to do the same for him.

We would have made it. I know that. And we would have been happy.

But Jude didn't know that. He wasn't sure. And so...he stepped back.

I figure someday, at some point, I'll find a man I get along with even better than Jude. I'll find someone who makes me laugh as hard as he did, someone who will know how to handle all of my different moods with ease. Someone who will always let me be myself.

I'm sure that man is out there—

“No!” I say again, more firmly this time, when I realize my mind is once again throttling down the Jude path. “Stop it. Just stop it.”

Luckily, I need to pay attention to directions now anyway. So I put all of my brainpower into following my phone's GPS, pulling off the highway on the Hollidale exit and then twisting and turning my way not to my new townhome—which I have yet to move into—but to Red's. I wish I had time to go to the townhome first, but this morning before the restaurant opens is orientation, where the new hires are being shown around and given the lay of the land. It's not something I can miss or be late for, especially since I don't want to ruffle Gwendolyn's feathers any more.

I'm not sure what I'm feeling as I park my car, which is old, beat up, and very much out of place, even in a parking lot that's only a quarter full. The first time I ever came to Red's was the evening of my interview, but even in the waning light I could tell how elegant the building looked. That's even more visible now, the sun warming the white brick exterior and highlighting the contrasting black awnings over the windows and the main entrance. It sort of matches my outfit.

I glance down at my white button-down shirt tucked into a black pencil skirt; both are new (read: purchased secondhand but new to me), and I'm glad I bought them. I've put on a bit of weight over the last few months, though it's not enough that anyone but me would probably notice. I have no idea how the weight gain happened—I genuinely don't. It's not like I'm eating more now than I used to. I'm still living on easy meals with the occasional foray into actual cooking. It feels rude that my body would decide now is a good time to start hoarding the extra pounds, but that's what's going on. At least most of that weight has gone to my chest and my hips; I felt it

prudent to find a shirt that didn't gape open in between the buttons and a skirt that didn't pull across the bum.

Thankfully the other female employees will be wearing white button-downs and black skirts too, which will hopefully help me feel a little less out of place. Gwendolyn said they'd have a black tie for me this morning. I am absolutely sure I will look ridiculous, but it is what it is, I guess.

As per Gwendolyn's other suggestion, I've also got on my most comfortable black flats, since most of my job will involve being on my feet. They shuffle against the pavement as I get out of my car, closing the door and locking it behind me. I take just a moment to pull my red hair into a ponytail, keeping my eye on my reflection in the car's window, and then I'm ready.

I mean, kind of. I guess. Maybe "ready" is too strong a word. I don't know if you're ever ready to start over. And although I didn't set out to start over at age twenty-four, that's what's ended up happening. New job, new city, new home, new roommate.

A new chapter.

I cross the parking lot, forcing myself not to fidget with my rings or my long ponytail. Then, taking one last deep breath, I go in.

I'm not late—I glance around for a wall clock just to make sure—but there are quite a few people here already. I see Gwendolyn at one table, her sleek, dark hair pulled back into a professional-looking French twist, a clipboard and some papers in front of her. She doesn't look up as I pass the hostess stand and enter the room, which lets me breathe a little easier as I examine my surroundings.

It's a beautiful restaurant, and it's clear a lot of love and work have gone into the appearance. Everything is done in pale neutrals, tans and creams and whites, and sunlight pours through the large windows. The clear focal point, though, is the greenery. Large planters with what look like real trees are spread throughout the place, or at least everywhere I can see, and there's something dreamy about the plants that hang from above the lights and from the edge of the ledge that lines the top of the walls. I can see fairy lights twined in with the greenery too, though the effect is less noticeable during the day than it probably is after dark.

It's gorgeous, and I really should bake Grandma Cynthia some thank you cookies for helping me land this job. Because I can tell I won't mind being here—at least, as long as the coworker situation turns out all right.

I drift toward one of the occupied tables, forcing myself to keep the

course even though I'd prefer to sit by myself. I need to meet the people I'm working with, and it wouldn't hurt to have friends here. So when I reach the round table, I rest one hand on a vacant chair and glance at the people already seated.

"Can I sit here?" I say, forcing myself to smile. I am the unfortunate owner of a mouth that naturally tips down at the corners, making it look like I'm grumpy even when I'm not, so I've gotten used to forcing smiles. Maybe someday I'll be like Jude, who has the ability to genuinely smile at anyone and everyone, but for now I have to bully my lips into curving up.

The women at the table don't seem to notice my smile is forced, though—or rather, they don't look at me long enough to notice. There are two of them, and they both give me only a cursory glance and smile before nodding.

That's fine; I don't need a red carpet entrance. I'll take what I can get.

"I'm Scarlett," I say, trying to seat myself elegantly rather than just plopping down. I'm trying to keep my knees together so that no one gets a peek up my skirt, but this isn't my strong suit. I'm more of a loungeur, and I rarely wear skirts and dresses because I prefer to sit in unladylike ways—cross-legged or with my feet propped up or just sprawled haphazardly. I guess it's a good thing I'm wearing flats, at least; my descent into my chair is only minimally wobbly.

"Hi," chirps the woman directly across from me. Her thin brown hair is cut around her ears in a longish pixie cut, and her wide smile takes up more of her face than I expect. It's a Julia Roberts smile. "I'm Candice."

"And I'm Delia," the woman next to her says. Delia's smile is no less friendly than Candice's, her teeth flashing white in contrast against her dark skin.

Okay, I tell myself. Delia and Candice. I can remember that.

"You guys are new hires too, I assume?" I say, smoothing my shirt as a way to give my hands something to do.

Delia nods. "We're waitressing." She tucks a long braid behind one ear before going on, "We were just talking about the owner. He's the chef, too. Have you seen him yet?"

"No," I say, curious. "This is my first time being here since my interview. What about him?"

"Well," Candice says as she exchanges grins with Delia. "He's notoriously gorgeous. I'd be lying if I said that wasn't part of the reason we wanted to work here." She and Delia both giggle, and it's clear that they were

already friends before today. They have that ease and familiarity about them, and I suddenly find myself wishing Maya were here.

“I hadn’t heard anything about that,” I confess. “I just moved here and needed a job.” And I am 100 percent *not* interested in a cute chef, restaurant owner or not.

“Are you waitressing?” Candice says, looking back at me.

“I’m a hostess,” I say, shifting in my chair. For such a nice place, it’s not a very comfortable seat.

Delia nods. “That makes sense. You’re like, really pretty.”

I bite my tongue to resist the urge to make a *Mean Girls* joke. I just laugh instead.

“I don’t know if that’s why I got the job, but thanks,” I say.

We wait around for a while longer, making awkward small talk and glancing around every so often to see what other people are doing. The atmosphere grows steadily more anticipatory, brimming and bubbling up throughout the room.

I’m just searching for another topic of conversation when Candice straightens up, her eyes widening. “He’s here,” she says, nudging Delia. “Look.”

I spin around in my chair in time to see a man leaning over Gwendolyn’s table, talking to her in a low voice. I angle my head, trying to get a better look at him—

But then he stands up.

My gaze starts at his feet, tracking slowly up his body as I take in neatly pressed slacks over narrow hips, a white shirt stretched over a muscular torso and broad shoulders—and then up, up, up, past a firm chin that has alarm bells beginning to ring, past smiling lips that I would *definitely* recognize blindfolded, up finally to laughing eyes that have yet to spot me—

And this is the unfortunate moment when my body and my brain decide that this is all *too much*.

It happens in slow motion. I swear it does. The mouthful of water I’m about to swallow instead somehow explodes out of me, reaching horrifying heights and distances, coating the table in front of me—and Delia and Candice—with spray. I feel like I’m suffocating, like I’m desperate for air, and then I realize that it’s because I *am* struggling for air; I’m coughing so hard one of my lungs will probably come up soon—

And through my blurry, tear-laden gaze, I see his head swivel in my

direction, his brow low with concern, before his jaw drops and his eyes widen as a single word forms on his lips:

“Red?”

TWO

SCARLETT

WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN, Jude bought me a dress.

We'd been at the mall, not really doing much shopping—we just liked to walk around and hold hands and talk. Time I spent with Jude was special that way; it never mattered what we were doing or where we were. All we cared about was that we were together.

I hadn't planned on purchasing anything that day, but when our leisurely stroll took us past a store with a white dress in the window, I stopped in my tracks.

It was a wrap dress that tied over one hip, made of a lacy eyelet fabric. It had flutter sleeves, a deep v-neck, and a short, playful skirt. I loved it immediately.

Unfortunately, though I had a bit of spending money since I was working as a waitress, I definitely wasn't putting away enough to buy the dress. So instead I looked dreamily at it for a moment before moving on.

I didn't give it another thought. But when the weekend rolled around, Jude showed up at my house with a bag and a dinner reservation for that evening. He'd just smiled as he watched me open his gift, unfolding the dress from the folds of tissue paper. I squealed and rushed to the bathroom, slipping into the dress.

And when I stepped back out to show Jude...the way he looked at me sent shivers up my spine.

He painted me with his gaze.

His eyes moved slowly up my legs, over the flirty skirt, lingering on the deep v-neck. I watched his throat bob as he swallowed and then continued his trek, his gaze trailing up my neck, pausing again at my lips, and finally

finding my own eyes.

The heat in his stare was palpable. I've never forgotten that moment—the way he looked at me.

Bizarrely, incredibly, it's the way he's looking at me *right now*—in the middle of my job orientation at Red's, as I spew water and hack up all of my internal organs, my face undoubtedly a violent shade of pink.

Jude Anthony is here, *right here*, in front of me for the first time in six years, and though he looks concerned by my current state, though his eyes are wide with surprise and confusion...he's also looking at me like I'm something he wants desperately.

That look lasts for one fleeting second, as does any sign of recognition. It all disappears behind a mask of neutral concern. I watch through blurry eyes as he cocks an eyebrow at me and says,

“Are you all right, Miss?”

His words are accompanied by a vaguely charming smile, and my eyes narrow at him as I get myself under control. His smile grows a little more forced as he looks at me, and I can tell exactly what he's trying to convey.

He's going to play this like he doesn't know me, and he wants me to play along. While the still-hurting part of me wants to be loudly offended...the bigger, smarter part of me knows to keep her mouth shut until I get a read on this situation.

Also if I could talk my heart rate down from dangerous speeds, that would be good too. It's fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird, and moving no less quickly are my thoughts.

I've thought about this moment, of course. Everyone secretly imagines what it will be like when they see their ex for the first time, especially after so many years. Will you look good? Will *he* look good? Has he moved on? Will all those feelings come rushing back?

Yeah, I've thought about it.

I just imagined it would involve significantly less spit.

Jude clears his throat, and the group of new hires turns their attention away from me and onto him. He launches right into a welcome speech, captivating as always. It's a good thing—I can gather what's left of my dignity in peace. I flash Delia a grateful smile as she pushes her own untouched glass of water toward me, and the way I gulp it down is unladylike at best. But I don't care—everyone is paying attention to Jude now, and my brain is overheating from the speed of my swirling thoughts.

Jude.

Here.

Me, also here.

How is this possible? How can this be happening?

I force myself to tune in to Jude's words as he speaks, and hearing his voice again is the most surreal thing that's happened to me in a long time. Deep and smooth and laced with laughter and good humor—seductive and smile-inducing all at once, although there's a hint of that forced quality about it, telling me he's still off-kilter.

Good. He should be. I shouldn't have to suffer alone.

The other waitresses are no less captivated. Delia and Candice are perched on the edges of their seats, watching him with rapt attention. Gwendolyn could not be more clearly in love with him either, judging by the gooey look on her face and the way she's unconsciously smoothing her hair down—I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Ugh. What do I do? I'm extremely tempted to just run away. Also tempting is the idea of giving him a very public piece of my mind. So how do I handle this? What do I *say*?

But I guess I know already. It's a question I've already answered—many times.

I made a promise to myself years ago that if I ever ran into Jude again, I wouldn't be rude or angry or bitter. I would just treat him like an old friend. Because he was so important to me for so long that any other treatment would be an injustice.

That plan feels a little optimistic now, especially since I'm not the kind to hold my tongue, but I applaud my past self for her desire to take the high road.

Okay. I take a deep breath, pulling my eyes away from Jude. He's never been good for my concentration.

He's an old friend. That's all. Sure, my *old friend* promised me eternity and then split, but all friends go through rocky patches. Then they get over it and move on. That's what I'll do too, and I'll try to keep the snark to a minimum.

I wipe my sweaty palms against my skirt, making myself pay attention again. This is first and foremost a work event, and despite Jude's presence, I actually do need to be listening.

I wish I could say I understand a lot of the things coming out of his

mouth; I wish I could say it doesn't bother me that his eyes skate over me every now and then like I'm just another employee. But those would be lies. And the more he talks, and then the more I have to watch him move as he shows us around the restaurant, I find myself bursting with things to say—questions, mostly, but also feelings.

So it's almost a relief that once the tour has been given and Jude and Gwendolyn have proclaimed orientation over, I hear him again.

"Miss Downing," he says from behind me, his voice light. "A word, please, before you go."

I turn slowly to look at Jude. He's standing next to Gwendolyn—who still cannot keep her eyes off of him, by the way—his arms folded across his chest, a stupid little smile on his face. It's a masking smile, vague and pointless, betrayed by the turbulent look in his eyes. Those eyes tell me one thing: Jude has *questions*.

Well, join the club, buddy.

Ignoring Gwendolyn's questioning look, I give him my most saccharine smile—the one that he used to call my *cheeky brat* expression—and nod, following him when he spins on his heel and heads toward the back of the restaurant, around the tables and then down a hallway. He disappears around the corner, and as soon as I make the same turn, his hand is clenching around my wrist.

"In here," he mutters before I can even gather my bearings—and he flings open a door, storming in and tugging me behind him.

I yank my arm out of his grasp the second the door closes behind us, and for the first time all day I feel like I can finally free my tongue.

"Oh, my goodness," I say into the dark, striding away from him. "I should have known this was your restaurant. The most pretentious thing about you has always been your cooking—"

A sharp laugh causes my words to die on my lips. There's a little click, and a light turns on overhead, illuminating a small storage room around us.

"Not even a hello?" Jude says, folding his arms and looking at me with amusement. "Just starting in on my food already?"

I swallow, trying to force my eyes away from him. But I can't. My gaze eats him up as my stupid heart warms at the sight of his smirk. I sigh, taking a few shuffling steps toward him.

"Hi," I finally say, the word whooshing out of me.

Jude's smirk turns into a genuine smile, his eyes soft but guarded. "Hi."

He looks at me for a second longer and then shakes his head, his smile slipping into something more like worry. “What’s going on, Red? What are you doing here?”

I ignore the nickname, the way it falls off his tongue as easily as ever. I also do not let myself think about the fact that this restaurant seems to have been named after me. I simply focus on answering; that’s all I can do at the moment.

I turn around, crossing the space between us and jabbing him in the chest with my pointer finger and trying to build my armor back up. “*Your grandmother* got me an interview—”

“Cynthia?” he says, pushing one hand through his hair and swatting my finger away from him. “That was—she wanted this job for *you*?”

“Yes.” I fold my arms over my chest. “And she never told me a thing. Did you know?” I accuse.

“What?” he says, frowning at me. “Of course not. But we can’t—I mean, can we? We can’t work together. Right?” he finishes awkwardly. It’s a far cry from smooth, charismatic Jude, though his rare vulnerability has always pulled me in more than any amount of charm ever could.

I take a deep breath, thinking. I need this job. I can look for another one if I want, but for now at least, I need to be earning money.

“I don’t see why not,” I say slowly. Then I look at Jude, tilting my head. “We’re adults. I, at least, am mature”—he rolls his eyes at the dig but doesn’t argue—“and I got over you a long time ago.” Those words are a bit ashy in my mouth, and the brief flash of hurt in Jude’s eyes doesn’t help, but I don’t take them back. Now, more than ever, I need them to be true.

And if I tell myself over and over and over again that Jude is just another man to me, maybe I’ll start to believe it. That always works, right?

Meh. To be determined.

“You’re over me,” Jude says evenly, taking a step closer.

I nod. “Over you.”

His eyes narrow. “And you’ve moved on.”

Another nod, shakier this time. “All the way on.”

“And you don’t—you know.” He clears his throat. “You don’t have any hard feelings?” This question he voices with a trace of trepidation. “You’re not going to try to...I don’t know. Off me behind the scenes?”

“And why would I have hard feelings?” I say with a sweet smile. “Did you do something wrong?”

He glares at me. “Not *wrong*,” he says hotly. “There’s nothing *wrong* with ending a relationship, Scarlett. But...I left,” he finally mutters, tearing his eyes away from me. “So it seems possible that you’re not my biggest fan.”

I nod. “I can remain professional.” I don’t tell him that sometimes it still hurts to think about him. I don’t tell him that I still dream about him.

He considers me for a moment, and wow, I’d almost forgotten what it was like to be the sole focus of Jude’s scrutiny. It’s like you’ve suddenly developed your own field of gravity—that’s how thoroughly he gives his attention.

“Well, then,” he says, his expression clearing. Then he sends me his most charming, sparkling smile, one that makes me fidget nervously. “I think you’re right. It won’t be a problem.”

I swallow. “Exactly. Not a problem.”

ALL RIGHT. This is a problem.

I got into the townhome just fine; the key was under a dingy, faded welcome mat that I plan to replace ASAP. My bedroom is fine, too—not large by any means, but bigger than what I had in my Tampa Court apartment, plus a nice window that doesn’t have bars over it. It’s a step up for sure.

No, the *problem* is the man standing in my doorway. The man whose expression of utter shock would be comical if I weren’t wearing the exact same one.

“You—” I say faintly to Jude freaking Anthony. “You’re not Errol.”

No answer; Jude is still staring at me with an unhinged jaw. His uniform from the restaurant is rumpled, and there’s a red stain on his sleeve that might be pasta sauce.

Ugh. Jude makes the *best* red sauce. He cooks it from scratch, boiling the tomatoes in a pan with onion and garlic and a bit of butter before—

No! No. This is not the time to be thinking about Jude Anthony’s pasta sauce. There are other, more important things to be focusing on. Like the fact that Grandma Cynthia lied through her dentures when she told me my new housemate was a “nice young man” named Errol.

Jude seems to come to this realization at the same moment I do, because his jaw twitches and his hands clench into fists at his side. “Grandma Cynthia,” he says, his voice low, his face a mask of frustration.

I nod. “I think so, yeah. Matchmaking, probably.”

He pushes one hand through his hair, sighing and looking around. His eyes skate over the boxes, my bare mattress, and the open closet door. “Well, what do you want to do? Can you find a new place?” He hesitates, then adds, “I don’t want to force you to leave. But living together...”

I cock one eyebrow at him, feeling a surge of daring rise within me as my pulse gallops faster. “Why can’t we? Scared you’re going to fall in love with me again?”

He rolls his eyes. “You wish, Red.”

I stick my tongue out at him.

He ducks his head, rubbing one hand over his scruff, but he’s not quick enough to hide his smile. “All right. Do it, then,” he says. “Stay if you want. It’s all the same to me.”

“Fine,” I say.

“Fine,” he repeats.

“Fine. Are you going to ask if I need help unpacking or carrying boxes?” I say, folding my arms across my chest.

He grins at me. “Do you need help unpacking or carrying boxes?”

I sniff delicately. “No. I do not. But thank you for offering.”

His grin widens. “Always happy to help an old friend.”

Old friend? *Old friend?* I know that’s the exact same thing I called him in my head earlier, but hearing him refer to *me* that way...well.

I don’t like it.

Don’t do this, Scarlett, I beg myself. Don’t feel these feelings. Keep your head down and stay away from that man while you search for a new place to live.

But the way my eyes linger on Jude as he walks away doesn’t give me much hope. I square my shoulders anyway, turning back to the box I’m unpacking.

This is going to be interesting.

THREE

JUDE

EVERY SO OFTEN, I dream about Scarlett.

And by “every so often,” I mean “at least three times a week, more if I’m stressed.”

My dreams of my ex aren’t always the same. Sometimes we’re just talking, the way we used to do when we were teenagers—sitting on the back porch swing for hours in the balmy summer evenings, burrowing deeper and deeper in love with every word that passed between us.

Other times, more often than I’m proud of, I dream of the way Scarlett used to kiss me. She always had a firecracker of a personality, and it showed in her kisses. Those lips of hers...well. They were magic.

I’ve dreamed about the days when we were together—Valentine’s Day dipping raspberries in chocolate fondue, summer afternoons at the amusement park, winter mornings in the snow.

I’ve dreamed about the days we were apart. Those dreams are full of panic and loss.

All that being said, though, I know I’m not dreaming now. Because never before have I dreamed of Scarlett in this particular way: sitting at my kitchen table in sweats and a t-shirt, red hair a ruffled mess, downing a giant glass of milk like she’s been dying of thirst.

It was the shock of my life earlier, seeing her at the restaurant. At *my* restaurant, the one I’ve poured my sweat and blood into. Although she wasn’t particularly dressed up, she was somehow more beautiful than I remembered. And even though there were lines Scarlett and I never crossed, things we were saving for marriage, today I could still tell that some of her curves were fuller than they had been six years ago. Absolutely perfect, though highly

detrimental to my sanity.

And now she's *living* with me. That's not a dream, either.

It's well past nightfall, but she looks like she's just woken up from a nap—Scarlett loves naps. Her eyes are a little bleary, her clothes wrinkled. She's still the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen.

She taunted me earlier, when I got home and found her in the guest bedroom, about falling back in love with her. I rolled my eyes and brushed it off instead of telling her the truth: that it won't happen. I can categorically, unequivocally promise that I will not fall back in love with Scarlett Downing. Because to fall *back* in love with someone, you have to fall *out* of love with them first.

And I never fell out of love with Scarlett.

When I ended things between us, it was the most cowardly thing I could have done. I hated myself for it then, and I hate myself for it now. But my fears and my worries were too loud to ignore, and their screams drowned out everything I had with Scarlett. I didn't know what to do with my life. I didn't know how to be an adult, much less a husband, and as those worries grew into panic, I felt more and more like I was suffocating—until finally all I could do was cut myself free and *run*.

I'm not proud of it. It was a mistake, the biggest one I've ever made. And I always thought I'd have to live with that regret, because if I was able to give Scarlett up when I got scared, that must have meant I didn't love her enough.

But as I stand here and watch her drink this glass of milk, I can't deny the truth: I have never in my life loved anyone the way I love her. Parents, siblings, friends—no one.

And maybe it's selfish. Maybe I shouldn't feel this way. But this opportunity has landed right in my lap, so I'm going to take it, because I don't think I possess the strength to stay away.

I'm going to win her back.

I just have to figure out how.

“HEY,” I say the next morning when I enter the kitchen to find Scarlett at the table. She's sitting in the same seat again, the seat I usually sit in, but I don't care. She can have the chair. She can have the whole table if she wants. “If

we're really going to live together, we should probably talk."

She looks up at me, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Yeah," she says with a sigh. "You're probably right."

I spent the night coming up with a plan, and though it's not foolproof, I give myself a decent chance of success—assuming, of course, that Scarlett still has feelings for me. Knowing her, if she *does* still care about me, she'll fight it tooth and nail. That will probably be my main hurdle.

So, I've broken things down into five simple steps.

1. Provide closure and an explanation for our past relationship,
2. Start over as "friends,"
3. Ascertain whether she's still in love with me, and if so,
4. Get her to admit it, then
5. Convince her to give me another chance.

The key, I think, will be to appear as nonthreatening as possible. Scarlett will bolt if I come on too strong, too fast. So even though it's wildly tempting to just kiss her, I need to hold off.

"Want to come to the living room?" I say, gesturing.

She blinks up at me before pointing to her bowl of cereal, which I'm somehow only just noticing. I take that to mean we're staying at the table.

"Right," I say, more awkwardly than I'd like. "You're eating."

She nods before shoving another spoonful of cereal in her mouth. I smile at the way she examines that spoonful first; she has this thing where she has to check that the ratio of all her bites will be good before she'll put a bite in her mouth. When eating cereal with banana on top, for example, each spoonful has to have the right amount of both cereal and banana. No bites of just banana; no bites of just cereal. If she's eating soup, she checks every bite before putting it in her mouth to make sure she's not getting a spoonful of just beans or just chicken or whatever else. It means she won't eat in a darkened room while watching a movie or whatever, which I always found endearingly annoying.

I seat myself across from her, completely captivated by every inch of her appearance. Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders, even messier than it was last night, and there are indentation lines across her left cheek where she probably slept on a fold or a seam in her pillowcase. Pert nose, perfect lips, cheeks bulging like a chipmunk as she chews.

Right. This perusal is not helpful for my “no kissing her yet” agenda.

“Okay,” I say, folding my arms on the table in front of me. “So. We should talk. Clear the air, if we’re going to be working *and* living together for now.”

“I agree,” she says. She’s quiet for a second, stirring her cereal absently as she gives a humorless little laugh. “It’s funny, but I never thought I’d get closure with you. And now...well. Here we are.”

“Here we are,” I say, nodding slowly. I take a deep breath, suddenly feeling as unprepared as I’ve ever been. I know what I need to say, and I’ll mean every word. But this is the first step in my plan; if she shoots this down, I don’t know where to go from here.

“I’ll start,” I say. My voice is rough, which I don’t love, but I keep going anyway. “Let me get everything out, yeah?”

She nods, staring at me.

I swallow under her scrutiny, but I don’t let myself look away. I owe her eye contact.

I owe her so much more than eye contact, actually, but I have to start somewhere.

“I’m...sorry,” I say.

Man, it sounds lame to say it like that—to just drop it into the space between us. Laying out my inadequate apology like I’m setting the table—napkin folded in thirds, knife, spoon, fork, my regrets tucked into the corner of my plate.

Scarlett tilts her head as she chews her most recent bite, and I take it as an encouraging sign that she’s not glaring at me or shouting or anything. So I go on, forcing more oxygen into my lungs, trying to steady the adrenaline jumping in my veins.

“I got scared,” I admit. “Back then. I shouldn’t have, and it was stupid, but I did. And I’m just...sorry.”

I’m about to go on, but Scarlett interrupts before I have a chance.

“Was there someone else?” she says, not quite meeting my eye. She twirls a lock of hair around her finger, a nervous habit I haven’t seen in years.

I blink at her, though, shocked. “No,” I say immediately. “No. Never. It was always—” I break off, clearing my throat, moving past my sudden embarrassment. “It was only you. Always.”

She doesn’t say anything, but I can’t help noticing that some of the

tension leaks out of her frame, her shoulders dropping, a flash of relief stealing over her face before she hides it.

I heave another breath and make myself finish saying what I need to say. “If you’re able to, I think it would be good for us to put the past behind us and start over. As friends,” I add hurriedly. “Or even as acquaintances. Whatever you want.” I swallow, doing my best to sound normal rather than like a desperate man. “That’s...yeah. That’s what I wanted to say.”

Crap. I should have studied some really eloquent apology speeches before I did this. I sound like a moron. I push my hand through my hair, cursing myself under my breath.

To my complete, utter surprise, though, Scarlett just laughs. An unladylike snort of mirth, that puff of breath escaping through her nose as she continues to chew.

I stare at her, feeling relieved but also a little indignant, until she’s done with the bite in her mouth and she finally speaks.

“Yeah,” she says, looking at me curiously. “All right.”

“Yeah?” I say. *Stay cool, man*, I chant to myself. *Keep it together*.

Ha. Yeah, right. She knows me as well as I know her. I’m positive she can tell how happy her answer has made me.

“Good,” I say with a nod. “Friends, then?” I hold out my hand for her to shake. I regret it instantly—what the heck am I doing?—but it’s too late now. So I just wait until Scarlett nods and reaches out, closing the distance between us as our hands clasp over the table.

And *crap*, her touch is electric. A jolt up my arm, tingling in my fingers, memories of warm summer afternoons and kisses that lasted forever.

She feels it too. I know she does, because she lets go of my hand as quickly as I let go of hers, that perfect, porcelain skin of hers turning pink in her cheeks.

It was always like that with us. I’m not saying chemistry is the be-all, end-all determining factor in a relationship—in fact, I know it’s not—but... Scarlett and I have it in spades.

Spades.

“Right,” I say, standing up like my chair has just electrocuted me. My heart is pounding in my chest, my blood humming, and I need to get out of here. Put some space between us, clear my head. Except—

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” she says, frowning up at me. “Where do you think you’re going?” Then she points at the seat I’ve just vacated. “Sit down.

You're not the only person with something to say."

Oh. Duh.

I sit obediently—though being *obedient* has never been part of our dynamic, since usually we're bickering and bantering and then laughing until we can barely breathe. "Sorry," I say. "Go ahead."

She nods, pushing her bowl to the side. Folding her arms over her chest, she pins me with a look. "We can be friends," she says, her eyes narrowing slightly, "but *only* friends. Agreed?"

Nope. I don't agree. Not at all.

"Because like I told you before, I've moved on. I don't have feelings for you anymore. So any romance we had before..." She shrugs delicately. "It's gone."

Maybe she's telling the truth; maybe she's not. She could be dying of love for me at this very moment and her pride still wouldn't let her say anything about it. So I'll play along, and I won't push—for now.

Still, to avoid lying, I think carefully through my words before I speak. "I will be nothing but friendly for the moment," I say after a second. "Also," I add as another thought occurs to me. "At work, we need to keep this situation quiet."

"Which part?" she asks.

"All of it," I say. "Our past, the fact that we're living together—all of it."

She raises one brow at me. "Ashamed of me?"

I snort. "Not at all. But people would talk, and I just don't think we need any more drama."

"Yeah," she says grudgingly, biting her lip. "That's probably smart. All right. I won't say anything." She pauses, then frowns. "Hang on. Rewind. For the moment?" she says. "What did you mean, you'll be friendly *for the moment*?"

And I can't help myself; I just wink at her before scooting my chair back, standing up, and walking away, leaving her sitting stunned.

Steps one and two, done. Now it's time for step three, and I think I've got just the thing.

I can't very well *ask* Scarlett if she still has feelings for me. She's already denied it—twice. But she also looked incredibly relieved to hear there was no one else I was interested in back then.

So maybe that's my way in. Scarlett isn't one to sit by and do nothing if she's losing something she wants. She was glad there was no one else for me

when we were eighteen; how will she feel if she thinks I've truly moved on now?

It will be a tug-of-war between her pride and her feelings for me, but if she really still loves me...she'll put up a fight before she lets some other woman have me. And maybe it's presumptuous of me, but that's what I'm counting on.

Either way, I'll learn the truth.

FOUR

SCARLETT

I TOLD Jude I don't have feelings for him anymore. I told him any romance between us was dead and gone.

So I should probably stop staring at him. And I should *definitely* stop glaring at Gwendolyn.

Look, I'm no stranger to snarky women. I'm very familiar with the territory wars high school girls wage on anyone they feel threatened by. But Gwendolyn is not a high schooler. So is it wrong of me to expect better from her?

To be fair, I'm not even sure she's being this way on purpose. She's not overtly hostile; she might not even realize what she's doing. Heck, maybe I'm even imagining things. Maybe Gwendolyn truly has no hard feelings toward me.

But...that's not the vibe I'm getting. In fact, I'm feeling decidedly singled out.

I walk through the front door of Red's at 9:47 a.m., flanked by Delia and Candice. All of us are perfectly on time for the start of our ten o'clock shift.

But only one of us gets a stern look from Gwendolyn and an accompanying "You're cutting it close, Miss Downing."

Am I, though, Gwendolyn? Am I really?

I have a sneaking suspicion that she's acting this way because Grandma Cynthia had Jude get me an interview rather than going through the application process like everyone else. I think she might also be suspicious about the way Jude asked me to talk to him after the new hire orientation.

Either way, her hand is resting on his arm right now, and I...don't like it. There. I said it.

I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

They're outside the kitchen at the moment, talking. Jude looks like every chef fantasy I never knew I had, his white sleeves rolled up to reveal muscled forearms, a towel flung over his shoulder. Honestly I think if he put on a chef's hat I might even find *that* attractive. And that's saying something; those hats look ridiculous.

I don't think it's fair that he's somehow gotten better-looking in the last six years. Why didn't he have the decency to develop a beer gut and a few yellow teeth? I told myself I wasn't going to fall for this man again. And I'm not so deeply in denial as to claim there are no residual feelings there. But I'm perfectly happy to leave those feelings unexamined. It's just difficult to ignore them when Jude is *right there* and so much like I remember him.

"Friends," I mutter under my breath as I catch another glimpse of him and Gwendolyn deep in conversation. "Friends, friends, friends." It feels necessary to repeat this to myself since my eyes seem to be zeroed in on Gwendolyn's hand resting on Jude's forearm. From what I can hear, they're talking about the menu; is that really a forearm-touching conversation?

"Miss Downing?"

Jude's voice snaps me out of my jealousy-induced reverie, and I realize with a start that I've just been standing here, staring at Gwendolyn's overly friendly hand.

Dangit. How long have I been glaring at them?

I swallow, yanking my eyes away from Gwendolyn's immaculately manicured nails. My gaze cuts instead to Jude, who looks entirely too amused.

"Miss Downing?" he repeats, his stupid lips quirking at the corners.

"Yes," I say faintly. Then I clear my throat. "Yes," I repeat, my voice stronger. I straighten up, doing my best to look dignified.

"Can we help you with something?" Jude says.

I speak before I think better of it: "We?"

"Yes, Miss Downing. *We*." Jude gestures back and forth between himself and a shocked Gwendolyn. He looks smugger than ever—like he knows that I've been daydreaming about yanking Gwendolyn away from him and telling her to keep her hands to herself. Like he *knows* that my jealousy is rearing its ugly head.

"No," I say quickly. I do a very admirable job of restraining myself. I'm being absolutely ridiculous. "No. Sorry."

Jude nods, turning back to Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn, though, is still looking at me. “In that case, let us borrow you for a moment,” she says. “Follow me, please.”

“Borrow me?” I say, my eyes skipping between Jude and Gwendolyn. “For what?”

“Miss Downing,” she snaps. “Your tone is entirely unnecessary. Carry on like this and you’ll be let go.”

My *tone*? What tone?

“Sorry,” I say, my head ducking, my cheeks heating.

She and Jude turn as one and make their way through the kitchen, Jude stopping briefly to check on the two guys at the stovetops, before emerging out the other side and turning down the hallway. We pass the storage closet Jude pulled me into on the day of orientation, moving further until we reach the end of the hall. The door is cracked, and when Jude pushes it open, a cheerful-looking guy comes into view. He’s seated in front of a desk with his back to the door, but he turns around when the three of us enter, smiling brightly.

“Hey,” Jude says easily to the guy. Then Jude rounds the desk and sits behind it, gesturing to the open seat next to the smiling man.

Gwendolyn sits there immediately, not giving me a second glance. Which is all fine and good, but then where am I supposed to sit? And why am I even here?

“Miss Downing,” Gwendolyn says, not bothering to look at me.

“Yes,” I say. “Where—where should I sit?”

“Sit?” Gwendolyn says. She finally turns to me, a Cheshire smile curling on her lips. “Oh, no. You’re not sitting. You’re bringing us drinks. The three of us”—she points to herself and then to Jude and the other guy—“need to discuss a few business items.” Then, speaking to the two of them, she says, “How do you take your coffee? Miss Downing will take care of it so we can get to work.”

Coffee? She wants me to get them *coffee*? My hands curl into fists, coming to rest on my hips.

I’m not her maid. I’m not her servant.

My eyes cut to Jude, but his face is carefully arranged in a neutral mask. The only thing that betrays his feelings is the twitch of his jaw. That makes me feel marginally better; he didn’t sign off on this little power play.

The truth is, though, that Gwendolyn is my superior. She’s within her

rights to ask this of me. So I force a smile onto my face.

“What can I get you?” I say to her through clenched teeth.

“Black,” she says immediately.

I nod, turning to look at the other guy—who, now that I think about it, is probably the night manager. “And you?” My voice with him is a bit more friendly, because he just seems to be along for the ride.

“Cream and two sugars, please,” he says with an apologetic smile.

Gwendolyn nods sharply before looking at Jude. “What will you take, Jude?”

“Chamomile tea with lemon and honey,” I say absently as I watch that muscle jump in Jude’s jaw. Does he exercise his jaw muscles? Do people do that? Is that a thing?

But the unnatural silence that’s fallen over the small office pulls me out of my musings—complete, utter, *damning* silence—and I blink.

It takes me two seconds to realize my mistake.

“Because he has dark circles under his eyes,” I blurt out into the waiting quiet. “And chamomile helps you sleep.” My voice is too loud, my words too nonsensical, but I forge on. “He looks like he needs to close his eyes. To sleep, I mean,” I say. “With the dark circles. And lemon and honey to make it taste better.”

“There’s no need to be rude,” Gwendolyn says with a sniff. “Just bring him coffee.” She looks to Jude and smiles, a fluttering thing that has me feeling grumpy, before looking back at me.

As soon as her back is to Jude, though, he mouths to me, *Chamomile*.

Ha. Jude doesn’t like coffee.

I excuse myself from Jude’s office with a little bow of my head, and ten minutes later I return with everyone’s drinks—including a nice, steaming cup of coffee for Jude.

He looks into his cup and grins before rubbing one hand over his mouth to hide the smile. His eyes dart up to me, and I hate the way my pulse skips at the emotions I see swimming there.

Humor. Affection. Joy.

He sets the cup back down, still hiding his smile behind his hand. He won’t touch it, I know, but I’ll buy him some chamomile tea for the house on the way home after my shift. I grin at him before exiting the room, and the last thing I see before I close the door is his laughing gaze.

I CORNER him several hours later.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” he murmurs as I shove him into the storage closet after checking to make sure no one is watching.

“Oh, shut up,” I say, closing the door.

“No, seriously,” he says from behind me as I feel around for the light switch. “Do you know how many of my dreams start exactly like this?”

“Jude,” I say, exasperated.

“What?” he says innocently.

In the darkness my hand finds the switch on the wall, but I hold off flipping it long enough for my cheeks to cool off. Is it hot in here?

“Friends,” I say, fanning my face. “*Just* friends.”

“Ah, right,” he says, and his tone is completely conversational, like he’s not the least bit flustered by what he’s just said. “Just friends.” He pauses, then says, “Is that why you looked like you wanted to gouge Gwen’s eyes out earlier?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say stiffly, “but Gwen is what I wanted to bring up. I would appreciate it if she didn’t treat me like an errand girl. Is that what I can expect working with the two of you?”

“Hmm,” he says, and even though it’s pitch black in here, I can picture the exact look on his face as he goes on. “Maybe. She didn’t ask you to do anything wrong, though,” he says, his words colored with amusement. “She probably would have asked the same thing of anyone else who happened to be standing nearby, glaring at her hand on my arm.”

Ah. He saw that. Great.

“I wasn’t glaring at her hand on your arm,” I say. “I was—it was—workplace affection is unprofessional. That’s all. Maybe you could clue your girlfriend in on that.”

All right. I’m being a brat.

“You’re feeling petty, I see.” Jude’s voice is smooth in the darkness, laced with humor.

“Sorry,” I say reluctantly.

“You know, Red,” he begins, “if I didn’t know any better—”

“Don’t you dare,” I warn.

“I’d say you were jealous.”

I startle, blinking a few times as the light suddenly switches on overhead.

“I’m not jealous,” I say, glaring at Jude with renewed accuracy thanks to the dingy, flickering bulb above us.

“Really?” he says. “So the thought of me with someone else—”

“Doesn’t bother me one bit,” I say stubbornly.

He cocks one eyebrow at me, taking a lazy step forward. “So another woman kissing me, another woman making me laugh, another woman living with me—that wouldn’t bother you?”

I swallow down all the truths trying to come out and give him a fib instead. “No.”

He steps closer yet again, his crisp, masculine scent invading my senses. His hands come to rest on the shelves on either side of me so that I’m caged in. “So if you walked into a closet and found me standing like this with someone else...” His breath ghosts over the shell of my ear as he finishes, “That would be okay with you? You have no feelings for me? No lingering affections?”

I tilt my chin up. “No. No feelings. No affections.”

My words are good—strong, confident, assured. Unfortunately, I also suspect they’re a big, fat lie.

And Jude apparently thinks so too, because his mouth tips into a skeptical little smirk that I just want to smack right off his face. What right does he have to look so smug?

“I see,” he says, leaning closer to me.

I inch backward, trying to be subtle about it. I don’t want him to think I’m affected by his presence...even though I am.

“See, I think you’re lying, Red,” he says conversationally. He reaches out and twirls a lock of my hair between his fingers. It’s a familiar gesture, one he’s done a thousand times before, and I’m not even sure he notices he’s doing it. “I think you’d come running back to me if I put in even an ounce of effort to winning you over.”

My jaw drops with my indignation, heat burning in my cheeks. I fist my hands on my hips, ignoring the little voice in my brain that says Jude is being arrogant on purpose to rile me up. “I would not!” I say with a huff. I jab my finger into his chest. “I absolutely would not. *You’re* the one who would come running back.” I swallow. “I saw the way you looked at me when you saw me for the first time—”

“You looked at me the same way,” he shoots back, his eyes flashing, and something flips in my stomach when his hold on my hair tightens. “The way I

look at you like you're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen? That goes both ways, sweetheart. Don't pretend it's just me."

"It is just you!"

It's not. It's totally not. I'll die before I admit that, though.

"Liar." His voice caresses the word, silky and low, and there's that dangerous little smirk again. He takes another step toward me, closing the gap between us as he looks down at me. A few locks of his golden hair fall over his eyes as he does, but I resist the urge to reach up and brush them away.

And I know I should step aside. I should put some space between us. But I can't move. I can barely even breathe.

"I propose a bet," he says, his gaze darting over my face. His breath is ragged, caressing my lips as he speaks.

A bet. Yes. Good. Something to focus on that isn't related to Jude's lips inches from my own.

"I accept," I say.

"Don't care to hear the terms?" he says, and his smirk grows.

"Tell me, but I still accept."

He nods. "I'm betting that when I kiss you in a second, you'll kiss me back."

I narrow my eyes. "You're on, and you're wrong."

"Loser buys dinner. Tonight."

"Excellent. I'll request some ridiculously expensive ten-course meal with pretentious little portion sizes—"

"For the love of—" he growls. "Shut *up* about the portion sizes."

And then he slams his lips against mine.

And look. I do have to give myself a little bit of credit. I hold out for a good, long time—

Well. Okay. Maybe not a *long* time. But definitely a few seconds.

Like maybe three of them.

I hold out for three seconds, staying absolutely still. But then I feel him smile, feel the curve of his lips against mine, feel a puff of breath as he laughs...and what can I say? I've always been a sucker for Jude's laugh.

When he twists his hands into my hair, I'm officially done for.

It's not a gentle kiss. I wouldn't even call it romantic. It's a tangle of lips and clashing teeth and desperation, his hold bordering on painful, my hands grasping fistfuls of his shirt. All the awkward sounds of real, raw kisses, not a

hallelujah chorus but the wet sliding and smacking of lips in motion—

And there's that stupid smirk of his again, another little puff of laughter against my lips as we continue to kiss, and I just *know* he's feeling smug right now.

"Shut up," I mutter, my words barely intelligible.

Another laugh from Jude, followed by a murmured promise: "Never gonna shut up about this, Red. Not ever."

I TREAT JUDE TO A PRETZEL, hold the salt, no cheese dip—aka, the pettiest, least-appealing dinner I can think of.

But I'm a sore loser.

I didn't mean to kiss him back—I swear I didn't. In fact, I'm pretty sure I was determined *not* to.

But you know that feeling you get when you've been traveling for too long, and then you finally come back to your own place? That feeling when you curl up in your own bed, with your own pillow? That's what it's like, kissing Jude. It's like coming home.

"I hope you choke on that," I say to him now as he tears a huge chunk off of his pretzel.

He just grins at me while he chews, holding out his styrofoam cup wordlessly to me.

I glare at him but accept it anyway, taking a reluctant drink. When I taste Dr. Pepper rather than his usual Sprite, I gulp down a few more mouthfuls.

"You don't like Dr. Pepper," I say, frowning and setting the cup back in front of him.

"I know," he says easily. "I got it for you."

I swallow, then look down at the table in front of me as my eyes inexplicably well with tears. What on earth is wrong with me?

"You remember I like Dr. Pepper?" I say.

"Of course I do," he says, but there's nothing cocky or mocking about his voice. It's soft, genuine. "I remember everything, Red. I remember what you like to drink and which movies make you cry and the way your nose scrunches up when you sneeze. I remember all of it." When my eyes dart back up to him, a little smile is playing at the corners of his lips, and his gaze

has turned faraway. “I remember how you kiss,” he says. “Like no one else I’ve ever met.”

I clear my throat. “Have you been kissing a lot of people over the last few years?” I say.

Jude’s faraway smile turns into a smirk, and his eyes jump to mine. “Why?” he says—taunting, teasing. “Jealous?”

“Of course not,” I say, lying through my teeth. “You’re free to kiss whomever you would like.”

“Glad you think so,” he says. He crumples up the pocket of wax paper his pretzel was wrapped in before leaning back in his chair, releasing an obnoxious sigh and folding his arms across his chest. “Because I might have a date this weekend.”

Do not react. Do not react—

“What do you mean, a date?” I demand, because dangit, holding my tongue is not my forte.

“You know,” he says, his voice airy. “A date. Romantic dinner. Movie. Walk on the beach at sunset. That kind of thing.”

“I know what a date is,” I say, rolling my eyes. My hands have clenched into fists, and I force them to relax. Still, my voice isn’t as casual as I would like when I ask, “With who?”

“Does it matter?” Jude says. He abandons his casual pose, leaning across the table toward me and raising one brow in challenge. “You don’t have feelings for me, remember?” He shrugs. “Now, if you were to admit you’re jealous, I might be persuaded to—”

“No need,” I cut him off, my heart sinking even as my pride rears its stubborn head. “You’re right. It’s none of my business. Let’s get going,” I say abruptly, standing up. “I’ll wait in the car for you to finish.”

Because this is all too much. The kiss, the Dr. Pepper, the look in his eyes—it’s too much.

It was one thing to look inward before that kiss and see my feelings, as though from a distance, lying stagnant in my heart. But it was another thing entirely the way my pulse raced when his lips were on mine, the way I couldn’t bring myself to let go, the way my heart soared.

I knew before today that on some level I still had feelings for him. But now? Now those feelings have been released from their cage, loud and persistent, reverberating in my mind and in my heart. And at this moment I’ll do anything to escape all those emotions—to escape the rapid *thump-thump-*

thump of my heart that, even now, seems to beat only for Jude.

FIVE

JUDE

IT'S possible I've deviated from the plan.

I had a clear five-step list, and nowhere on that list was *Kiss Scarlett Downing until you can't breathe*. Especially since it's only been a few days since she came back into my life.

Not gonna lie, though, I don't regret it. Not one bit. I'm not stupid enough to think that anything will change between us—not yet, at least—but I know Scarlett, and I know her kisses. I know her goodbye pecks and her passionate declarations and everything in between.

And that kiss in the closet yesterday? It was six years of longing and regret poured into one explosive lip-lock.

She still has feelings for me. I don't know how strong or how deep, and I don't know what kind of future she's willing to try with me, but I *do* know she still feels something.

I can work with that, and I'm not going to waste any time. I want every part of this woman—heart, soul, mind, and body—more than I have ever wanted anything in my life.

It's time to jump in with both feet.

“Hey,” I say to my brother when I call him the next morning. “I need to ask your girlfriend a question.”

Dex is silent for a second before he answers, “Should I be worried?”

“Nah,” I say with a grin. “It's about—” But I break off, suddenly unsure of how to bring it up.

Dex, though, apparently doesn't need me to finish my sentence.

“It's about Scarlett,” he says, and I don't appreciate the knowing tone in his voice. “Got it,” he goes on. “Here's Maya.”

I swallow, feeling unaccountably nervous. I love Maya—she’s great, and she’s good for Dex—but this is a woman who probably knows better than I do how Scarlett feels about me. What if she tells me to give up because Scarlett secretly loathes my guts?

“Listen, Jude,” she says into the phone a second later. We’re not doing greetings or small talk, I guess. “I’m happy to give you some advice, but I need you to understand that girl code is very strict on situations like this.”

I smile, my worry ebbing away. “I would never ask you to betray girl code. But…” I sigh, raking one hand through my hair.

I think it’s time to set my dignity aside. I wouldn’t do that with Dex, but Maya has a way of making you feel comfortable.

“But I’m desperate,” I finish.

“You’re still in love with Scarlett,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say, the word gusting out of me. “Yeah, I am. And I’ll do just about anything to get her back. I just need to know—well.” I can feel my cheeks heating, but I force myself to go on. “Is there anything she’s complained about to you? Anything I did that drives her nuts in a bad way? I don’t want to mess this up.”

“Just show her she can trust you,” Maya says soothingly. “I think your chances are good—if you don’t do anything stupid like walk away again. So make sure you’re all in before you head in this direction. Or I’ll cut you,” she adds fiercely.

“Noted,” I say, smiling again, a warm rush of relief coursing through me.

“I’m your relationship’s number one fan,” she says. “Don’t make me regret it. It would be super awkward if I were forced to hate you because you hurt her.”

“Hurting her is the last thing I want to do,” I promise.

“Yeah, but it was probably the last thing you wanted to do back then, too, isn’t it?”

“Oof. Harsh.” She’s not wrong, but…it’s still harsh.

“Sorry. But just think of that comment as rehearsal for what you’re going to get from Scarlett,” Maya says.

“Yeah,” I sigh, because I know even better than Maya that I’ve got my work cut out for me. “All right. Thanks, Maya.”

“Of course,” she says, and even though I can’t see her, I can tell she’s smiling. “Good luck!”

We say goodbye and then hang up. After that I sit for a second, staring at

my bedroom wall, plotting.

Now that I know—or at least strongly suspect—that Scarlett still has feelings for me, and keeping in mind that trust and transparency are important factors here...yeah.

I think my dignity is going to end up flying *all* the way out the window.

And you know what? At this point, I don't even care.

I just want to be the person that makes Scarlett smile every day. I want to be the one that makes her happy.

With that goal in mind, I stand up, check my reflection in the mirror, and then leave my room.

"Red," I say briskly as I stride into the kitchen. Every step I take is purposeful, and my heart is hammering in my chest.

"Hmm?" she says, looking up at me as I enter. "Oh, hey, I got you some chamomile tea. It's in the cupboard," she says, pointing. "And I got honey and a little thing of lemon juice."

My steps falter. "You—for me? You got me the tea I like?"

"Yeah," she says, looking completely at ease. "I noticed you didn't have any."

My smile is soft and probably more lovestruck than I'd prefer. "Thanks."

"Sure," she says with a shrug.

It's ten in the morning, but she still has her pajamas on—cut-off sweats and a long-sleeved t-shirt. When I spot the mug of hot chocolate she's cradling in her hands, I make a mental note to buy mini marshmallows next time I buy groceries. She likes marshmallows in her cocoa.

"You said our romantic relationship was through," I say, diving right in as my heart races more furiously than ever.

Scarlett's eyes go wide, and a second later she begins coughing as she chokes on her drink.

I cross the kitchen to where she's standing, gently removing the mug from her hands and setting it on the counter beside her. Then I reach around and give her back a few good thumps.

"Get it out," I murmur as she continues to cough and I continue to pat her back. "Water?"

She nods as her coughing turns into aggressive throat-clearing, and I grab a glass from the cupboard, filling it at the sink before handing it to her.

Scarlett gulps down the entire glass before setting the cup on the counter next to her hot chocolate. She swipes at her watery eyes and then pins me

with a look that's half-surprised, half-flustered.

"You can't just spring that on someone," she says with exasperation. "Ease into it, Jude."

"Sorry," I say. Really, though, I'll just make sure she's not in the middle of drinking or eating anything next time I have something like this to say.

"To answer your question," she says, folding her arms, "yes. I did say that. Our romantic relationship is done."

I nod. Then, taking a deep breath, I say, "Permission to change your mind?"

Her eyes, if it's possible, widen even further, and her jaw drops. I wait, knowing that pushing her now is the wrong move.

Her gaze skates over my face, and for once I don't hide any of my feelings. So often I put on a pleasant mask or a cheeky expression, but now—well, now I let everything I'm feeling show. My longing, my want, the deepest corner of my heart that wants nothing more than to see her healthy and happy and fulfilled—I let all of those parts of me shine through as I wait for her answer.

And she gives me the same gift in return. I don't know if she's doing it on purpose, but each of her thoughts and feelings is etched clearly on her face as she looks at me. There's clear hesitation in the furrow of her brow, but there's hope, too—reluctant, maybe, but definitely present.

Her throat bobs as she swallows, and I set aside the temptation to swoop down and kiss that spot on her neck. That little hollow at the base of her throat calls my name too, especially as I watch it flutter with her pulse—faster than normal, I can't help but notice.

"I can't believe that it's too late," I say into the silence, my voice breaking. "I can't believe it's *ever* too late to make things right."

Her eyes soften. "Permission granted," she says finally, her voice breathy in a way that makes my stomach flip.

I nod, stepping closer. "By any means necessary?" I say.

She tilts her head, looking me over. Then, slowly, she nods. "Sure," she says finally, sounding...intrigued? "You can try. By any means necessary."

I smile at her—and believe me, I couldn't stop this smile if I tried—as triumph and elation rise inside me, a tide of adrenaline flooding my veins. "I'll see you at work," I say then, despite my desperate desire to kiss her immediately, to pull her close and hold her.

I keep my hands and my lips to myself, though, giving her a nod and a

wink before leaving the kitchen.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she calls after me. “Jude? Don’t get your hopes up!”

I just wave, my smile growing. I know better than to get my hopes up—yet. But I also know Scarlett. *By any means necessary* is going to involve getting her to admit to herself and to me how she feels, because that’s going to be the biggest hurdle: getting her out of denial, and then getting her past her pride.

And the drive to Red’s isn’t long, but that smile stays on my face the entire time.

SIX

SCARLETT

I AM a master avoider that week. Wherever Jude is, I am not.

This is mostly so that I can give my brain and my heart a chance to have a serious talk, one where we decide exactly what we want to do going forward. Because we're divided. One of us (brain) is tempted to stay far away from the man that devastated us six years ago so that we don't get hurt again. The other one of us (heart) wants to return to that man anyway, to let him love us and to love him in return, to trust him once more.

The one thing both brain and heart agree on, however? *By any means necessary* is simultaneously terrifying and thrilling. And I'm still thinking about what exactly it means when I get home from work on Friday.

We've fallen into a routine over the last few days: whenever Jude enters a room in the house, I leave that room, and he smirks the whole time I'm scampering away. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it's like Chinese water torture trying to predict when Jude will spring that *by any means necessary* on me.

I don't trust myself to be in the same room as him. Not yet. Not when I'm still so conflicted.

Even though Jude was still at the restaurant when my shift ended this afternoon, I check the house to make sure it's empty anyway. It's stupid. I know he's not here. But there's a little kernel of curiosity niggling at me currently, and when I do what I'm about to do, I don't want him to see.

When I get to my bedroom, I close the door behind me. Then I go to the jewelry box on my vanity.

It's not a fancy box. It's made of some sort of wood substitute, the corners blunted, the white paint chipped at the edges. The top opens on silent

hinges when I pull, and I remove the top tray, setting it aside. Then, from the bottom of the box, I remove a small drawstring bag—red velvet with fraying red ribbons.

Fraying because over the years, I've opened this bag more times than I care to admit. But as many times as I've spilled this ring into my palm, I've never once put it back on.

Until now.

It doesn't fit as well as it used to, that much is immediately apparent. The skin of my finger bunches as I work the ring on, but I do manage to get the white gold over my knuckle as it slides into place, the diamond solitaire glinting in the light.

And it shouldn't make me so happy. I shouldn't like this so much. But I can't help my smile as I hold my hand out, admiring the sight of Jude's ring on my finger. I really couldn't have cared less what it actually looked like—I think he could have proposed with a plastic ring from a vending machine, and I still would have loved it.

I still would have said yes.

I admire the ring for a few more seconds, watching the way it sparkles as I turn my hand this way and that. Then I sigh, giving the ring one last look of longing before I give it a tug so I can put it away.

I pull on it a few times before I start to grow nervous; it won't budge.

I just need to pull harder. Right?

I tug at it again, wiggling it back and forth. Nothing. I try twisting it and then pulling again—also nothing.

I bolt out of my room, rushing into the kitchen and standing at the sink. Maybe if I get my hand wet—

But from behind me, the door that leads to the garage opens.

I whirl around just as Jude walks in, hiding my hand behind my back as quickly as possible.

Did he see?

The way his eyes narrow tell me he didn't; he'd look much more smug if he'd noticed I was wearing the ring he proposed with all those years ago.

"You're...acting suspicious," he says, his eyes darting between my face and my arm.

"Nothing," I blurt out—like an idiot, because it doesn't even make contextual or grammatical sense. "I mean, no. I'm not—nothing. I'm doing nothing suspicious."

“Uh-huh,” he says slowly, his eyes still narrowed on me. He sets down a plastic bag on the counter, tilting his head to the side.

I nod at the bag. “What’s that?” I say, desperate to change the subject.

“Groceries.” He takes a step closer, still looking at me like I’m the sketchiest thing he’s ever seen.

“Obviously,” I say, rolling my eyes and tucking my arm further behind my back. “What *kind* of groceries?”

“Marshmallows for your hot chocolate,” he says absently.

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“You bought me chamomile tea the other day,” he points out.

“Well, that’s just because you sleep better when you drink it,” I say, trying to gather my thoughts. “It’s medicinal. Friends pick up their friends’ medicines all the time.”

“Uh-huh,” he says again, his eyes narrowing even further. “What’s behind your back, Red?”

I swallow, backing away from him as he inches closer. “Nothing,” I say. “Just my hand.”

“Uh-huh,” he says again, and if it’s possible, his eyes narrow even further on me. “Then why are you hiding it?”

“I’m not,” I say. My gaze darts around the kitchen—and yes, okay, I am being totally sketchy here, and he’d have to be an idiot not to notice—until my brain finally provides me with an out. “I do need to go, though. I’ve got some stuff to do. So I’ll just…” I trail off as I spring into action, angling my body so I can skirt past him sideways. So close, so close—

“Stop.”

I shouldn’t stop. I should keep moving. But Jude’s voice rings through the kitchen, firm, authoritative, and my feet obey without consulting the rest of me. I freeze in place, wincing as Jude closes the gap between us, reaches down, and pulls my hand out from behind my back.

He stares at the engagement ring sparkling on my finger for what feels like an hour. His hands holding mine are gentle, warm, but unyielding, too. He’s no longer looking at me with suspicion; in fact, he’s doing his best to keep his face completely neutral. But I know Jude better than anyone. I can see the muscle jumping in his jaw, the darkening of his eyes, the increased rising and falling of his chest as he tries to steady his breathing.

“It’s stuck,” I say in a broken whisper. “I was trying to get it off.”

Jude’s eyes fly up from the ring, his gaze clashing with mine. “I’ll help

you get it off,” he says hoarsely, “if you tell me why you kept it.”

I swallow, trying to quell all the emotions rising within me. “I—I wanted to wait to sell it until the value increased.”

He shakes his head, his eyes never leaving mine as he steps somehow closer still. His masculine scent is heady as it swirls around me, his lips too perfect as he speaks. “The real reason, Scar.”

“That *is* the real reason—”

“No, it’s not,” he cuts me off.

I scowl at his calm, conversational tone. “What do you want me to say, Jude?” I say, frustrated. “What do you want to hear? That I still—” But I break off, my mouth clamping shut.

“Say it,” he breathes.

“No,” I say. I swallow, a new determination flooding through me. “Not unless you tell me why you named your restaurant after me.”

For the briefest second, his face betrays a flash of vulnerability; then it’s gone, and I’m left wondering if I imagined it. In its place is an expression of forced calm. “Are you asking because you really don’t know?” he says. He looks away, running one hand through his hair. “I’ve been nothing but open about this, Scarlett. I told you I was going to change your mind about us being over.”

“Using any means necessary,” I say, my heart thudding. “What does that entail, exactly?”

“Anything that will get you to admit how you feel,” he says evenly. “Because I know what I’m really contending with here is your pride.”

I swallow, my cheeks flushing. I hate that he’s right. I hate that I’m such a stubborn person.

“But,” he says before I can speak, and his voice is softer now, “I also know that you’re scared. So I’ll show you that I’m serious, Scarlett Downing. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to go easy on you.”

What? What does that even *mean*?

I don’t ask that question out loud, but Jude somehow answers it anyway. How does he always know what I’m thinking?

“It means,” he says, leaning forward until his lips are just inches from my ear, “that I’m going to show you how much I love you still”—my heart hitches in my chest when I hear those words—“but I’m also going to make you realize how much *you* care about *me*.”

I swallow, my brain buzzing. “How—how are you planning to do that?”

He leans back, looking at me with amusement. “Not going to deny it?”

“Answer the question, Jude,” I say with a roll of my eyes.

Jude shrugs and steps away from me. “Probably going to kiss you again, for one. Since it went so well last time.”

I can feel my cheeks turning red, but my voice is mostly steady as I answer him. “That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Bull,” he shoots back, rounding on me. “I know how you kiss. I know all of your kisses, Scarlett. You felt something. Deny it. Look me in the eye and deny it.”

I don’t; I can’t. I did feel something. I *do* feel something. Lots of things.

“Fine. I felt something. What else?” I say. There’s a feeling stirring in my chest that I haven’t felt in a long, long time—excitement. That giddy, nervous excitement you get when you’re flirting with the person you like.

Jude barks out a laugh, one that rings through the kitchen. “You need more?”

“Yes,” I say, raising one eyebrow at him. “You can’t just kiss me all you want and expect me to fall back into your arms.”

His amusement fades, that light leaving his eyes as he looks at me seriously. “I know,” he says, his voice quiet. “And I’ll do whatever it takes.” His eyes dart over my features, and then some of his smile returns. “Permission to kiss you?”

“Granted,” I say immediately. “I also give you permission to not ask for permission.”

“Ah, so you *do* trust me,” he says, grinning.

“Only a tiny little bit—” But I break off when his lips capture mine.

And I’m falling. I’m falling so hard and so fast—for his kisses, yes, but even more for his caring heart and his hidden vulnerability and the way being with him is so *easy*. It’s so easy, loving Jude, talking with him and laughing with him and joking with him.

Except...does it count as *falling* if you’re already there? *Fallen*. I’ve fallen. I fell for him years ago, and I never got back up.

I never stopped loving him.

When he pulls away again, he smiles at me. “I want you to think about something,” he says softly.

“Hmm?” I say, still a little dazed from that kiss.

He reaches down and takes my hand in his, holding it up. Then he touches the ring—the one I completely forgot is still stuck on my finger.

“Think about how you felt when you put this back on,” he says.

I blink at him, surprised. “How did you—how do you know how I felt?”

He shrugs. “Did you feel happy? Wistful? Did it make you wish you’d never taken the ring off in the first place?”

I swallow, debating. I’ve been keeping my feelings to myself, but I can be honest about this much. “Yes,” I whisper.

He nods. “That’s how I felt when I saw you wearing it.”

“But you’re still going on a date this weekend?” I say.

Jude’s eyes sparkle. “If you’ll recall, I only said I *might* have a date.”

“Do you or don’t you?”

“I will,” he says slowly, his eyes intent on my face. “If you say yes.”

My heart skips a beat. “Are you—are you asking me on a date?”

“I am,” he says, smiling slightly. “At great risk to my pride. Go out with me tomorrow?” His smile wavers as his eyes flash with uncertainty—with that vulnerability that I love.

I hesitate for a second. “You broke my heart last time,” I say finally. My words are shaky, barely audible.

His face falls, his shoulders drooping. “I know,” he says, tucking a few strands of hair behind my ear. His eyes are sad as he goes on, “I broke my own heart too.”

“How do I know that you won’t do it again?”

If anything, he looks even sadder when he answers, “You don’t. I can’t give you preemptive proof.”

“I don’t want this if you’re not all in. I can’t do anything less than that. Not with you,” I say. My heart hums desperately in my chest, my hands fighting the urge to cling onto him and never let go.

“I’m all in,” he says in a croaky voice. “I’ll understand if you can’t believe me. But I’m in.”

I take a deep breath as my heart flutters even faster. “In that case…” I say, and then I nod. “All right. Let’s go on a date.”

He straightens up, his brows jumping. “Yeah?” he says.

I nod again. “Yeah. Let’s do it—”

But I break off with an *oomph* as he pulls me to him, his arms banding around me in the tightest hug I’ve ever received.

“Thank you,” he whispers. His arms tighten even further, which I didn’t realize was possible. “Thank you.”

My eyes widen, and I reach up, pushing him away. He lets go with

obvious reluctance, ducking his head. But I put one finger under his chin and tilt his face up so I can see.

“Are you—” I begin, shocked. “Are you *crying*?”

“No,” he says, his voice gruff as he blinks a few times. “Of course not.” He reaches up and cradles my face with his hands, his thumbs stroking my cheekbones. “I’m just happy.”

He stares at me for a minute, his gaze darting over my features until finally it comes to land on my lips.

“I dream about you,” he breathes, leaning in. There’s something desperate in his eyes as he goes on, “I dream about you all the time.”

I swallow, trying to slow my galloping pulse. “I dream about you too.”

His eyes flutter closed; he looks almost pained. But then they fly open, full of a new determination—and then he’s kissing me again.

SEVEN

JUDE

IT'S Scarlett's surprised groan that has me shifting my hands to her waist, pulling her closer until she's pressed against me, soft and warm and perfect.

Everything. She's everything.

My body itches to trace every curve, to explore her in a way I never have, but I restrain myself with an iron grip, clinging to her waist. My lips are hungry on hers, but it's not just me; Scarlett's hands are fisted in my shirt as she matches the slide of my lips stroke for stroke.

Closer. I need her closer.

I grip her tighter around the waist and push her backward, stumbling after her until we run into the counter. Then, with a swift flex of my muscles, I lift her up, setting her on the countertop. She gasps into my mouth, a sound that sets fire to my veins, before twining her arms around my neck. Her legs come to wrap around my waist, locking behind me until we collide completely, pressed together in a tangle of heat and chaos.

Lips, teeth, tongue; gasping breath and electricity spreading throughout my body.

Want her, want her, want her—

I yank back, freeing myself from her embrace as I stumble away, my steps loud and clunky. For a second we just stare at each other; her hair is mussed, her lips swollen, her cheeks red. Her chest heaves in a hypnotizing rhythm, and she looks like every delicious dream I've ever had.

"My self-control," I gasp, "is fraying. Date tomorrow at seven. We'll leave from here." I swallow, struggling to get myself under control. "Are you okay?" I need to make sure she's all right.

She nods. "I'm fine. Go."

“Emotionally, you’re fine? That was intense—”

“Jude.” Her cherry-red lips pull into a little smile, soft and affectionate. “I’m fine. Go.”

I nod once before spinning on my heel and leaving the room, fighting the urge to return to her with every step I take.

IT TAKES me a while to decide what I want to do for Scarlett on our date. On one hand, I want to ease into things; on the other hand, I want to show her what she means to me. And there is a way to show her how I feel, how I’ve always felt, but...

I snort with laughter, my cheeks heating as I remember that kiss. That wasn’t an “easing into things” kiss.

No. This might be my only chance. Go big or go home, right?

I don’t see Scarlett at all during the day on Saturday. She’s off work, and the house is still silent when I leave to arrive at the restaurant at eight. I spend a few nervous moments looking at the dessert menu, trying to gauge if there’s anything there that’s going to freak her out or seem weird. It’s not too late to change my plan, but...I don’t really want to. I want to lay everything out before her, shine a light on every pathetic, lovestruck corner of my soul, and beg her to love them all.

So that’s what I’ll do.

I spend the day stewing in impatience, checking the clock more than normal and pacing to get rid of some of that pent-up energy. Nothing works, though; despite the pacing and the bouncing on the balls of my feet and the running around the kitchen, I’m still buzzing with excitement and adrenaline.

And, if I’m honest, with anxiety too. I’m bringing Scarlett here tonight, and people will probably talk. I don’t particularly care about anyone’s opinions, but the less drama, the better. I’m thinking especially of Gwen, who’s never said anything but has made her feelings fairly clear. I could be wrong, I guess, but she’s attentive enough and touchy-feely enough that it seems safe to guess that she likes me.

How will she react when she sees me here with Scarlett?

“A bridge I’ll cross when I get to it,” I mutter under my breath.

“Huh?” the guy at the stove asks, looking over at me. His hair net is

lopsided, drooping over his left ear, and he has a splotch of something red on his uniform.

“Nothing,” I say with a sigh. I point at the pot he’s poised over. “Keep stirring. Don’t let it stick to the pan.”

When the clock finally reads six-thirty, I leave the kitchen and head to my office. I brought a change of clothes with me; I lock my door and get dressed faster than I’ve ever gotten dressed in my life, my entire body buzzing with nerves and excitement. Then I book it out of there like I’m on fire. I drive home a little too quickly, considering the laws of the road. It can’t take longer than ten minutes to arrive at home, but it seems to me like an hour. And when I pull up in front of our townhome, everything looks the same as it did when I left this morning, but it *feels* different.

Because this morning I wasn’t minutes away from taking Scarlett Downing on a date.

I can’t believe I used to pick her up by honking from the driveway. I want to slap my teenage self.

I hop out of the car and make my way to the front door, hesitating for just a moment before I knock. The door swings open, and my breath catches in my throat.

That ridiculous dress. The white one I bought her years ago, the one that looks incredible on her. She’s wearing it now, and I am going to expire on the spot.

No. No, I’m not. Not before I date her for a while. And then marry her. And then grow old with her.

I have too much to live for. I can’t die yet.

Look away, Jude. Save yourself.

I direct my gaze to hers as my pulse pounds in my veins. She gives me a tentative smile that nevertheless makes her glow.

“Hi,” she says. Then she stands aside, opening the door wider.

I don’t step inside, though. I stay right where I am, on the doorstep. “Hi,” I say, and it’s absolutely ridiculous how nervous I am; like I’m twelve talking to the girl I like for the first time. I feel like someone has just handed me something infinitely precious and fragile, and one wrong move could shatter it. “I’m here to pick you up for our date.”

“Oh,” she says, looking surprised. A little smile twitches at the corners of her lips. “You’re being all official about this.”

“Yeah,” I say, and I smile too. “I am.” Like I’m going to risk messing this

chance up? No way. “Are you ready to go?”

“I think so,” she says. She lifts her hand and smooths it over her hair. “You didn’t tell me the dress code. Is this okay?” She gestures to her outfit, and I exhale a shaky breath.

“I think you know perfectly well that I’m a *big* fan of that dress.”

A spark of mischief enters her eye as she steps out of the house, bringing her closer to me. “Now that you mention it, I do seem to recall something of that sort. I wasn’t sure it would still fit, but...” She trails off, giving a delicate shrug.

I let my eyes travel over her one more time, swallowing thickly. Does the dress still fit? Yes. But does it fit the same way it used to? No. Scarlett has filled out a bit in our time apart. The little white dress that was once sweet and flirtatious is now daring and flirtatious—still classy, never trashy, but hinting more at her shape than it did before.

Her *perfect* shape.

I shove my hands into my pockets and narrow my eyes on her. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you wore that on purpose.” To drive me crazy.

“And if *I* didn’t know any better,” she says, taking another step toward me, “I’d say you did the same.” She nods at my shirt—the shirt I know she loves. The shirt I dug out of the back of my closet and ran through the wash to get rid of the musty smell before placing it in my bag to take to work this morning.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that,” I say.

She grins, and something in my stomach flips like a pancake. Scarlett’s grin is my favorite. One part sweet, one part mischievous, wholly perfect.

I reach past her, letting my arm skim the fluttering sleeve of her dress as I grab the front door handle and pull it closed. It latches with a definite thud, but I don’t move; my heart is in my throat as all my attention is pulled to the intersection of my skin and hers—the brush of my inner forearm against her shoulder. A tantalizing slide of soft and hard, of past and present.

How is it possible to feel like this? How is it possible that I still find myself barely able to breathe, anticipation launching thousands of fluttering butterflies in my chest? Scarlett isn’t new to me. I’ve known her for years. *Loved* her for years.

But this version of Scarlett—it’s not the same Scarlett I left behind long ago. This version of Scarlett has new life experiences I know nothing about. This version might want different things and see things differently.

I'm not the same person I was back then, either. Similar, yes, and even identical in many ways, but not all. People change. That's just life.

And I get the opportunity to get to know her again. I get to learn all the new things about her; I get to memorize her new dreams and guard against her new fears.

"Jude," she says, barely a whisper. Her head is tilted back, angled toward me, and my name on her lips rings through my mind like the crystal-clear chime of perfection.

"Yeah," I say.

"Are we going?"

I swallow. "Yeah. We're going."

"Where?"

"To Red's. Is that okay?" I say. "I want to show you something."

She looks surprised, but she nods. "That's fine. Is—are *you* okay with that?"

I shrug. "Yes." I hesitate, debating, before I finally decide to spill what I'm thinking. "If things between us go the way I hope, I'm keeping you around for a long time. Long enough that people will know we're together. So we can wait if you want, if you're still unsure—" I break off as I hear the words coming out of my mouth.

Crap. Why didn't I think of that before now? If she's still unsure, she probably doesn't want to get her workplace involved.

My heart sinks as I do some quick re-evaluating. "Actually," I say, trying to keep my voice light. "Maybe we should wait. Just—just in case." *In case you decide you don't want to be with me.*

Scarlett's eyes are hesitant as they flit over my face, but there's a little smile on her lips as she says, "Jude. It's fine."

My breath huffs out of me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she says, her smile growing. "Let's go to Red's if there's something you want to show me. My feelings for you are not tentative. They're..." She sighs. "They're real. You were right—you *are* right. I still have feelings for you, big ones. And I can't promise you forever right now, but I..." She trails off and then says, "I want to try."

That's good enough for me.

"Red's, then," I say, holding my hand out to her. She takes it without hesitation, weaving her fingers through mine.

And something deep inside sighs with relief at her touch. Like I can

breathe again.

I slip into my time with Scarlett with the same ease I always have. Despite our back and forth, she has always been a place of rest for me. We drive to the restaurant with our hands tangled loosely over the center console, music playing, and neither of us seem to be able to stop smiling.

Scarlett's smile fades when we arrive at Red's and get out of the car, but mine doesn't. I grab her hand.

"Ew, Jude, wait—I'm all sweaty." She tugs on her hand, and I laugh, releasing her. She wipes her hands on her dress before looking over at me. "You're sure this will be okay?"

"Yep," I say, my voice easy. "But if you're worried about Gwen or any of the rest of the staff—"

"Gwen," Scarlett cuts me off, her eyes narrowing as she glares at the restaurant with more ire than it deserves. "I sort of want to punch her in the face."

"I'm gonna ask you to hold off on that one," I say as we cross the parking lot, unable to keep the amusement out of my voice.

She sighs wistfully. "I know. It's just something I daydreamed about when she was hanging onto your arm and looking at you like a lovesick puppy."

"Can you blame her?" I say. "I'm lovable."

Scarlett smiles but doesn't say anything, and I genuinely think my heart skips a beat at the sight.

That can't be healthy. Hearts aren't supposed to just *skip* entire beats. But Scarlett has mine doing all sorts of things I never signed off on.

A little smile spreads over my lips, and I shake my head, twining my fingers with hers.

This is who I am now. The man with the defective heart.

When we enter through the front doors of Red's, Scarlett's hand twitches nervously in mine. I don't let go; I hold on tighter. It feels like we're moving in slow motion as my worlds collide—work and love, public and private. The host does a double take when he sees us, greeting us both by name as he stares at our entwined hands. When he managed to pull his gaze away from our hands, he starts staring at Scarlett in that dress instead, and that's when my patience starts to wane.

"Hey," I say, snapping my fingers in front of his face. "I'm not paying you to stare."

“Sorry,” he says quickly, blinking and looking back at me. “This way, Mr. Anthony.”

“Give us the booth in the far corner if it’s open,” I say, and he nods, leading the way.

When Scarlett is seated, I wave the host away with a nod of thanks. Then I turn to the red-headed goddess sitting at the table.

“Give me a minute and I’ll be back,” I say. She nods, looking curious, and I make my way back to the kitchen.

I pass several obviously interested waiters and waitresses, most of whom are craning their necks to see and who scurry when I pin them with stern looks. I bump into Gwen standing just outside the hall of the main dining room, and it’s clear that buzz has already reached her in some form, despite the fact that Scarlett and I haven’t been here for more than five minutes. She too has searching eyes, though she’s more professional about it than our wait staff.

“Oh,” she says when I appear in front of her. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m on a date,” I say, giving her a smile. No one is going to rain on my parade right now. “So if you’ll excuse me.” I finish with a little bow and then skirt past her, trying to hide my smile at her slack-jawed stare.

I return to Scarlett a few moments later.

“We’re sampling desserts,” I say, balancing the large tray on one flat palm as I unload each of the dishes onto the table. Four of them in all—four hidden glimpses into my feelings for her, and I’ve never told anyone. I really, really hope she doesn’t think I’m too weird after this.

When everything is spread on the table, I set the tray off to the side and then sit across from her at our corner booth. Then I grab the plate of cheesecake and push it toward her. It’s only right that I should start with this one, because...

“Here,” I say. Our forks make little clinking sounds as I pick them up, passing her one. Then I grab the menu and open it, turning to the dessert section and pointing to the first item: *White Eyelet Cheesecake*. “Read.”

The look she gives me is curious, but she does what I ask. “*White Eyelet Cheesecake*,” she says, leaning further across the table so that she can see the menu. “A slice of our original homemade cheesecake, piped with white chocolate latticework and whipped cream ruffles.”

She looks at the cheesecake on the plate; then she looks down at her dress, the one I bought her all those years ago. I watch her connect the dots in

her head, so nervous I'm practically sick to my stomach. Her eyes fly back to mine, but only for a second; she then pulls the menu out of my hands and props it up in front of her as she begins to read the rest of the desserts.

"*Strawberry Blondie*. A double layer of strawberry-vanilla brownies, studded with white chocolate chips and topped with fresh strawberry."

I push the strawberry blondie toward her, but she ignores it. She doesn't even look. She stays hidden behind the menu.

"*Summer Loving Crêpes*. Two warm crêpes stuffed with sweet lemon curd and topped with lemon ricotta cream."

Again I push the plate of crêpes toward her; again she ignores me, instead reading aloud the last dessert item.

"*Red's Famous Chocolate Kiss Cake*," she says. "The chef's favorite. A triple-layered cake of decadent chocolate and raspberry jam."

The memory flashes into my mind as vividly as though it were yesterday: Scarlett and I on our last Valentine's Day together, dipping raspberries into chocolate fondue and licking the remnants from each other's lips. Both of us sitting on her kitchen counter, our legs swinging as we laughed and painted chocolate fondue mustaches on each other.

Does she remember?

For a moment, there's nothing but silence. It stretches between us, broken only by my own heartbeat whooshing in my ears. When I finally can't stand it anymore, I lean forward, tugging the menu gently out of her hands so that I can see her face.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I thought you—" But I break off, squinting at her in the low lights of the restaurant. "Oh, no—no. Are you—are you *crying*?"

"No!" she says loudly, slapping her hands over her face. "Don't look at me. Give me that." She yanks the menu away from me and holds it up so that I can't see her.

But my ears work just fine, and they catch one tiny sound: a sniffle.

I stand up, a smile breaking over my face. I think—I *think*—these are good tears.

"Red," I say softly as I round the table, kneeling down next to where she's seated at the edge of the booth. "Look at me, sweetheart."

Slowly, ever so slowly, she lets the menu drop away from her face. She tosses it to the side and then turns to face me. "What kind of chef makes his date cry with a dessert menu?" she says, her eyes glistening. In the dim lighting I can just see a lone teardrop sliding down her cheek.

I try to hide my smile, but it doesn't work very well. "I didn't mean to make you cry." I reach up, swiping that tear away. "I just wanted to show you that I never forgot about you. And that I never—" I break off, clearing my throat. "I never stopped loving you. That's all." I hesitate, watching her. "Do you want to eat? The chocolate cake is delicious, if I can toot my own horn. And I think you'll like the crêpes too."

"Jude," she says, blinking a few times as she tries to stop her tears.

"Hmm."

There's silence for a second before she speaks, and she looks like she's weighing her words carefully. "Let's date," she finally says.

I nod slowly, smiling even though I'm taken aback by the change in subject. "Yeah," I say. "Let's do that."

She nods too, decisively this time. Then she speaks again. "Cake," she says with another snuffle. "Let's try the cake first."

My smile widens, my heart expanding as I look at her. "Okay, sweetheart. Let's try the cake."

EPILOGUE

SCARLETT

OUR WEDDING CAKE is chocolate with raspberry filling, and it is hands down the most delicious thing I've ever tasted in my life.

Jude refused to let me help bake it.

"Wedding cakes aren't like regular cakes," he said—like that was supposed to mean something to me, who makes instant pudding from a box and calls it dessert. "Everything has to be perfect. And I love you, sweetheart, but you're not a chef."

This is true. Jude doesn't specialize in desserts, either, but he helped the restaurant's pastry chef, and the result was a three-tiered beauty full of chocolate and raspberry and perfection.

"Make sure you save the extra cake," I tell Maya and Dex now, right before I duck into the honeymoon getaway car. Jude is holding the door open for me, looking amused as I talk to my best friend. "As much as possible."

"We will save all of it," Maya assures me, nudging her husband—now my brother-in-law. "Won't we?"

"Definitely," Dex says with a nod.

"So get in the car," Maya says. "Your husband looks impatient."

My *husband*. I smile, looking at the man I'm now officially married to. Then I hop in the car, and he closes the door. He rounds to the driver's side and gets in, and away we drive, past the gauntlet of cheering wedding guests with their sparklers and smiles.

I look down at my hand, and specifically at my wedding ring.

The engagement ring that got stuck on my finger that day in the kitchen didn't come off until Jude replaced it with a new one. I couldn't bear to remove it. Now, though, in its place is a simple band of white gold, studded

with three small diamonds, symbolizing our past, present, and future.

I love it. I loved the wedding, I loved the cake, I love our friends and family who came to celebrate with us.

“But I love you most,” I say to Jude.

He smiles over at me, reaching for my hand and sliding his fingers through mine. “I love you most too. Happy ever after, sweetheart.”

I smile back at him. “Happy ever after.”

THANK you for reading MOVE IT OR LOSE IT, the conclusion to the Love Mishaps series! If you want to read a bonus scene from MAID OF DISHONOR and have access to other updates about upcoming projects, go [here](#)! And if you loved this novella, please consider leaving a review; it means more than you know to indie authors!

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