



Hot on Her Heels: An Age Gap Lesbian Romance

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Description: A fading TV star, her eager young replacement – what started as rivalry turns into passion: But can ambition trump love?

Josella Frank was unstoppable. Fierce. A pioneer journalist. And drop-dead gorgeous. An inspiration for Eden Rutherford, and her childhood crush.

Now Jos is a boring talking head. A sell out. No longer a true journalist and a free spirit like the one Eden has become. But when Jos offers Eden a co-hosting job on her show, Eden can't decline. Her present gig is dangerous and dead-end. Jos' show is flailing – but the platform and the reach are still incredible. She could finally get her voice heard.

And working with Jos? Not a problem. Long past her crush, Eden knows she can be better than the washed up, insufferable woman any day.

Or can she?

The San Jose Evening Edition used to be the hottest show in town. These days, the viewership is melting quicker than snow in July and it's only a matter of time before Jos is out in the cold.

And then it happens. A co-host. Her replacement-to-be.

Operation Push Jos out has commenced.

Or has it? Sassy, raven-haired Eden isn't at all what Jos expected. She's got no ambition to be the next big thing. Idealistic and full of passion, Jos can't help but see her younger self in Eden.

As they get closer, Jos falls for Eden. The young, beautiful and determined woman soon rocks Jos' world, and if she isn't careful, those impenetrable walls she's worked so hard to surround herself with will soon come tumbling down.

Suddenly, when Jos realizes their attraction can't be denied she must decide. Is she really willing to risk her influence and prestige to take a chance on love?

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Prologue

Jos

“But we’re trying for a baby together! How can you even think about doing this at a time like this?”

Sandra threw up her hands, radiating anger like a nuclear blast. Her beautiful face was transformed into something nasty as she stared Jos down.

“No. You’re trying to have a baby. This whole thing was your idea. It’s like a mission for you or something. You’re doing it like you do everything else—blind and deaf to any opposition. You’ve always gotten what you wanted. You carved and scratched and fought your way from the ground up and this is no different, except this time, when you finally realized there was more to life than just your job, you steamrolled right over me. Your wife.” She threw her hands up and blew out a sigh that deflated her completely. Her eyes tore away from Jos like she couldn’t stand to look at her, but Jos knew the truth. Sandra was hardly ever confrontational and this blow up meant things had been brewing for a long time. “I’m not the enemy here, and I wish you wouldn’t treat me like I was.”

Jos had to admit that Sandra was right about the whole scratching and clawing thing. She was a force to be reckoned with. She was unstoppable. She used to love when people said that about her. It was a compliment to her tenacity, her will to succeed, especially as a woman in an industry that was typically very male dominated. She hadn’t just survived, she’d thrived for twenty-one years.

“So, you’re telling me that you don’t want to do this? Why now, after I’ve already gone through with the treatments, the painful, terrible treatments, the stress of the whole thing?” Jos paused, knowing full well she wasn’t being fair. She raked her hands through her shoulder length white-blonde hair. “I might already be pregnant. I can’t do this without you.”

Instead of garnering empathy when she appealed to Sandra that way, she got a mean, twisted, icy grin. “That’s the thing. You can do everything without me. You’ve proven that time and again. You want to do everything on your own just to prove that you can. You’ve been cutting me out for years. And now, you want to have a baby because you woke up one day and realized your job, which has been your lifeblood for over two decades, and all the fame that it’s brought hasn’t fully satisfied you. Here’s a news broadcast that for once you didn’t cover—you’re having a mid-life crisis. You’re doing this because you’re forty-three and you’ve achieved everything that one person could possibly achieve.

You came from nothing, and you’ve made this name for yourself. You were the kid no one wanted, the one who bounced around from foster home to foster home until you aged out of the system and put yourself through school by working three jobs. You were the one who put in the time no one else was willing to do. You were always there with your nose in everything, your fearlessness driving you forward until someone had to take notice and give you a job because you were willing to do it all. You were willing to work any hours, cover any story no matter how tedious. You didn’t even know the word no. Now you have a house anyone would kill for, clothes that cost more than most people make in a lifetime, cars, a vacation house in Florida even though we freaking live in San Jose, and on and on. It took you twenty-one years to realize just how hollow fame really is.

“I’m sorry. I just freaking can’t anymore. I can’t stay with you and keep pretending that everything is fine. I can’t keep going to all your dinners and award shows and charity this and charity that because you want everyone to believe you’re this great

person who cares about the community you grew up in. I'm done being your plus one. I'm never going to be your partner, and that's what I want to be. That's what I deserve to be, as your wife."

Jos had experience with just about everything. She'd lived on the streets for six months back when she was eighteen. She knew what it cost to live through eleven different foster homes in seven years. She knew how to hide when her mom was high, or when her boyfriends came home with her, drunk or high or both, and always, always cruel and easy with their violence.

Her earlier life had shaped her, hollowing her out and turning her to stone. She didn't allow things like base emotions, and that's why she was so successful. When people said she was fearless—travelling all over the world in the early stages of her career, going to dangerous places, interviewing dangerous people—they were correct, but only because she'd learned long ago what it meant to swallow her fear along with any tenderness that mi

ght make her weak.

She'd realized, five years ago, believing she was hollow made her hollow. Her job was her everything, and even though she would always live for it and put it first, she'd begun her search for something else. The thing that everyone said would change a person, add value and completion to their lives, soften their hard edges. She'd truly wanted it. Wanted to see if it could work. If she was capable. She'd tried. God, how she'd tried.

Sandra stared at Jos like she was a monster. Her face fell flat, which was the expression she used to hide when she was in pain. Jos registered that. The pain she caused this woman that she told herself that she loved. That she'd tried to love the best way she could. And she'd failed. She'd failed because Sandra wasn't happy. She looked like she was being suffocated.

“You consume people,” Sandra hissed, letting her venom fly in the one real fight they’d had in the five years they’d been together. “You inject them with your vileness. Everyone thinks you have this zest for life. That you’re this amazing person who’s going to save the world. You’re Josella Frank, and not even the media can tear you down. You’ve survived war, dictators, being held at gunpoint eighteen different times. You’ve gone without food for nine days, been trapped in an avalanche once, and been lost in the jungle. Your version of settling down was hosting the prestigious evening news. You were freaking head-hunted for it. You were the chosen one. The golden child.

“You’re this amazing person on the outside, but on the inside? There’s nothing there. Nothing but the San Jose Evening Edition. You’re less than empty. You don’t love me. You never did. You wanted to do the things other people were doing. Give yourself that shot at a normal life because you thought it was the right thing to do. That having a wife and children would validate your position in the world not just as a superhuman, but as a woman. This kid is just a tool for you, just a pawn, because your whole life is a game. It’s strategy for you, never feeling.”

Sandra’s lips pursed together, and her jade green eyes shot daggers at Jos. The level of hatred that was being levelled at her took her breath away. Just because she rarely allowed emotions of her own didn’t mean that she was immune to the emotions of others.

For once, Jos was at a loss. How was she supposed to defend herself against that? Was she supposed to defend herself? Sandra solved her dilemma for her, speaking first.

“This, like everything else, is your baby. He or she will be a part of you because that’s what you wanted. You never even asked me if I wanted to use my eggs. Then again you never asked if I wanted to be a mother. We’ve been married for two years, and last year you came home and told me that we were doing in-vitro. That you’d

done all the research. That you were starting the process. You never once asked me if I was ready to be a mom.”

“You love kids!”

“That doesn’t mean I’m ready to start a family with you.”

Jos shook her head in disbelief. “You never said anything! It’s a little late to start this now, telling me you don’t want a family when I might actually be pregnant!”

Sandra cleared her throat roughly. She was tall and willowy, still stunningly gorgeous at thirty-seven. She’d modelled earlier on in life, given most of her money to her controlling, abusive father, then started fresh, quitting everything and moving from New York to San Jose. She was working as a waitress at a five-star restaurant in the heart of the city when Jos met her.

She’d gone for a late-night dinner with a business exec that she’d wanted to interview. Wine and dine was the way to get them, or at least the way the bigwigs liked to convince people to do their shows and not a competitor’s, but the guy had never showed. He gave that interview to a competing show, a morning show of all things. Jos had never seen Steven so angry. Not really at her, but also with her. He’d seen it as her failure, which meant she’d had to work extra hard to make up for it, landing interview after interview, story after story, when it wasn’t even in her job description to have to attract and land people for the show.

That late-night dinner turned into something. She’d eaten alone, and her waitress, Sandra, had taken pity on her. They’d ended up chatting, which was virtually meaningless to Jos, just one woman being polite to another, but at the end of the night, Sandra left her name and number on the back of the receipt. The highly unprofessional move had surprised Jos. For that reason alone, she’d called Sandra the next day.

“I’m done.” Sandra’s voice was flat, but her eyes burned with a fire Jos hadn’t seen before.

Her pulse kicked up. She’d trained herself to avoid things like this, and even now, though it had been years since she’d found herself in a dangerous situation, she found herself levelling her breathing, trying to settle her heart rate.

There was a long pause, the silence yawning between them like a vacuum, sucking up all the air in the room until Jos’ lungs felt strangely constricted.

“Done with what?” Jos reached out and grasped the edge of the counter. She thought, ridiculously enough, of walking to the fridge and calmly pouring herself a glass of bottled water. Not wine because she might actually be pregnant, though she had yet to find out if the in-vitro had worked.

Sandra’s face changed yet again, and Jos realized she wasn’t the only one who had an at the ready, made-for-TV smile. How long had Sandra hated her? How long had she felt this way? How long had she resented her without saying anything? Her smile was an ugly slash on her beautiful mouth. Her normally placid features were pulled into sharp points. She looked hard and cold, which shocked Jos further, because she truly believed Sandra wasn’t capable of feelings like that.

“What’s it like to be the one at a disadvantage?” she asked levelly, her voice dripping ice. “To be the one overlooked? The one seen through? The one who is just there? The one thrown away whenever it’s not convenient to be there?”

“I-I’ve never treated you like that,” Jos stammered. “I love you, Sandra.”

“Love? Oh, my God!” She snorted and that twisted smile became a twisted sneer. “You don’t know how to love anyone or anything except your job. The fact that you have to ask me what I’m done with just shows how out of touch you are with

anything and everything. You're an excellent journalist in all aspects of the word, but when it comes to knowing yourself, you're so fucking clueless. You have everything, but you're empty. You only married me because you thought having a wife was the all-American thing to do." Her eyes dropped to Jos' stomach. "I seriously hope you're not pregnant, for everyone's sake. If anyone could raise a child alone, you could, but you'll never be a mother. You have no clue how to be a parent. You have no clue how to be a wife. You're a solo unit. You always have been, and you always will be. Since you need me to spell it out, I'm done with this." She waved her hand back and forth between them. "I'm done with you. I'm done trying. I'm done begging for scraps from your table of affection. I'm done trying to figure out what it takes not just to please you, but to make you even notice that I'm here. I'm done with this marriage."

"Sandra, I..." Jos could think of a thousand things to say on any other day at any other time. No matter how tough of an interview, she always found the right words. It was something she'd been praised for time and time again. Now, though, when it really counted? When Sandra deserved to be fought for, to have a piece of Jos' truth? She found herself without any words.

Sandra shook her head like she'd been expecting exactly that and wasn't at all surprised or even disappointed. Her face blanked out, a vengeful mirror of the one Jos often gave people when she didn't want them to chip away at her carefully perfected façade. "I want a divorce."

Chapter 1

Six Months Later

Jos

Jos always knew when she was in for it, and when she was called to the fourth-floor

boardroom, the one used only by execs, owners, and general managers, she knew it couldn't be a good thing.

She was sure she wasn't in for one of t

hose you're getting a promotion conversations.

She supposed that was the one good thing about not being pregnant; she could choose to walk up four flights of stairs instead of using the elevator. When she walked through the open door, only years of training pushed her forward.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen both the president and vice president of the station in the same meeting. Those were the kind of meetings she wasn't singled out to attend.

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Sheldon Redecord, the VP, sat to the left of Jim Chamberlain, who took the head of a long cherry wood table as president. Alden Shetfield, the news director and the boss of all bosses, was seated on the other side. Beside him was the general manager, David Busford.

They sat huddled together, a collective mass of scowling faces. Not one of them was under fifty, and the only reason they hadn't been pushed out by now was because they were powerful men with good contacts who had worked in the industry for a long time and brought a lot to the table. They worked as a cohesive unit most of the time, and when they had it in their mind to put someone's head on the chopping block, that person would be hard-pressed to escape, let alone find work anywhere else.

Entering the room made Jos immediately nervous. She broke out in a cold sweat, the beads of it trickling from her neck down her back. She didn't like it that no one smiled. No one offered a word of greeting. It was silent as a tomb in that room with all of the cheer of a funeral.

Her funeral.

Jos silently shut the door behind her, then took a seat across from Alden and David, in order to even out the table. She thought it would be less intimidating for her if she levelled things out instead of taking a seat at the end and getting stared down.

It was Alden who finally cracked a bit of a smile. It was more of a grimace, but that was as far as Alden ever got with displays of emotion. Jos appreciated his upfront candor. She liked it when a person just said what they were thinking, and Alden was

one of those rare people who could do that, but also apply tact and a filter if needed. He was a good man when it came right down to it. He was good at reading people, and the fact that he still had what Jos liked to call a soul was probably the reason he hadn't advanced further up the corporate ladder than he already had.

"Josella. Thank you for joining us," Alden said smoothly. He never called her Jos. "We had something that we wanted to discuss with you."

Your immediate termination and shipping out so that a much younger version of you with bigger boobs and even blonder hair can replace you.

Her stomach did a queasy turn, and her palms were even damper as she clenched them under the table. She refused to show weakness to these men.

She wasn't stupid. She knew the ratings were down. She knew other stations were nipping at their heels. The fact that she was number one meant there was always someone coming up behind her, ready to swallow her whole if she paused and fell back for even a second. She knew how the industry worked. She'd expected for years that Alden or one of his bosses would have been eager to find her replacement.

It would start with a cohost. Someone they could audition and train up. No, not they. Me. I'd be the one training Miss Perky Boobs to take my place one day.

David took charge while Sheldon and Jim glowered at her. Then again, they glowered at everyone. She was sure their faces were set to perma-scowl mode. "You know that the show has been without a cohost or co-anchor for a long time. Years, actually. We were thinking now is a good time to change things up."

This is how it starts. Operation Shove Jos Out Because She's Too Damn Old commences now.

“The fact is, ratings are down. They’ve been slipping lower and lower. We’re losing out on interviews to other stations. Our competition is out there, and like the wolves, they are hungry. They want to be at the top. We’re there right now and we have been for a good long while, which means everyone is coming at us.”

At least they agreed on that point. Jos couldn’t find her voice. It felt like she had a lump the size of a baseball wedged in her throat. She made sure her face was completely impassive and nodded in agreement.

“We need new blood,” Alden said, but kindly. “We’re not saying that you haven’t done a good job over the years, Josella. Everyone knows you’ve done great. You’ve had a storied career. You’ve won awards for your journalism. It’s just that, you know as well as we do, this industry is a young person’s game.”

“We’re giving you a choice,” David explained, like he was doing her a favor, when in fact he was using a condescending tone. “The person we have picked out for the spot is a young up and comer. She’s garnering some big notoriety for her own style of journalism. She’s out there on the street every single day, literally, doing work with the homeless. She has a book telling the stories of San Jose’s forgotten set to be released. The stats she’s compiled on homelessness, mental health, drug addiction, lack of low-income housing, rates at which shelters are full, and the correlation between all of those things and more is astounding work.”

“Not to mention that she’s the daughter of Joe Rutherford,” Jim stated dryly. He was as dry as dust most of the time himself. He looked bored to death, like he couldn’t wait to get out of the meeting.

“We were asked by her father, who is worried about her being on the street so much of the time, if we could find her a position here,” Alden explained.

He didn’t have to tell Jos there was a big kickback for the station, and probably all the

big wigs involved in the deal. She was astounded that this girl, who obviously wasn't even working in broadcast journalism, was being considered for such a prestigious spot. One day, if things worked out for her, she'd be first in line for Jos' job. Jos had to work and scrape and literally risk her life to get where she was. This girl? What had she done other than write a few stories and embellish with flowery statistics anyone could look up online?

Oh, right. She was the daughter of Joe Rutherford, start-up tech king turned politician. He was quite young himself, so his daughter must practically be an infant.

Jos was willing to bet her left nut (which she obviously didn't have, but if she did, she would have staked it) that the girl was pretty, naturally blonde, and well endowed in every way aside from gray matter.

"Jos? Are you still with us?"

Embarrassed that Alden had to even ask, she snapped her head to the side and smiled softly in his direction. "I'm with you. And I agree, of course. I think the show could use new blood as well."

I think what you really mean is fresh blood. My blood. And a pretty face to replace the head you'd like to see rolling out the damn door.

Jim nodded emphatically. He pulled out his phone and glanced at it before tucking it away. He seemed more eager than ever to get out of there and get on with his other business. He likely had a round of golf lined up for that afternoon. "I'm glad you agree, Jos, it's important that you're on board. Very important."

Sheldon had been conspicuously quiet until then, but it was clear he was there to lay out the terms. He pushed a stack of paperwork from in front of him towards the middle of the table. Jos knew that was her cue to reach forward and take it. Even

though she felt sick to her stomach, she managed to keep her hands from shaking.

She glanced over the paperwork, scanning the neatly typed lines.

“Three years?” She raised a brow at that. “You’re willing to give me a contract extension of three years after this one is up, guaranteed? And a salary increase?” She was genuinely confused. She’d thought she was finished the second she walked into the wolf’s den, and they were giving her an extension and more money? It didn’t make sense.

It must come with one hell of a catch.

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Alden leaned forward and put on his soft look. The one that said he understood things weren't easy and he was there. It was mostly bullshit, Jos knew. He might be a decent guy, but the way he switched faces would leave anyone with whiplash.

"We have it from Joe himself that his daughter once idolized you. You were her first crush, actually. You were the reason she went into journalism."

"In that case, you'd think he'd want me fired since he's not happy with what his daughter is doing." She realized, too late, that she'd said that out loud. There was no taking it back, so she put on a tough game face of her own.

"No, he doesn't want you fired. Eden would have switched her major from business to pursue journalism anyway. He made that quite clear. He wants his daughter to work with you, and when you're Joe Rutherford, you get what you want." Alden was a smart man. He was a very, smart man.

"So, you basically want me to go find this girl and charm her into taking the job because she obviously doesn't want to. You want me to do this because she's a lesbian and I'm a lesbian..." She hoped she wasn't reading the whole crush statement wrong. That would be embarrassing, but then, this whole situation was turning into one massive pit of humiliation.

That contract in front of her was like blood money. It was a way to save her own neck, though she was setting it on the chopping block anyway. It was a delayed execution.

"We thought you might have something in common," Alden said, looking

uncomfortable. There was actually a collective, uncomfortable sigh from all of them.

“We took a chance on you,” Jim had the nerve to say.

“I more than earned my spot,” Jos argued evenly.

“Fact is, we made your career,” Sheldon stated, backing up Jim. “We made you famous. We made you who you are. Fact is, Jos, you’ve been a bit of a mess the past six months. Your divorce was highly public, and you clearly are at a stage in your life when you want other things. A family...”

/> Jos couldn’t believe it. She felt her jaw unhinge before she could stop it. She snapped it shut and ground her teeth together hard enough to wear down some of the ridges on her molars. She couldn’t believe the audacity. This man clearly cared about no one and nothing but himself and his money and his ratings. She was nothing but a tool in that scheme, a thing, less of a person or not a person at all. Even Alden made a noise low in his throat.

There was no way that Jos was letting them get away with this. She wished she’d had the foresight to record the conversation. In this day and age when the public was increasingly hostile toward entitled, rich old men who thought the world should kiss their feet, the conversation would have been quite a juicy tidbit to let leak.

Obviously, she would have been sued into oblivion and that would have been the end of her, and she did not want to go down that way, but the pleasure at the thought of how Jim and Sheldon would squirm was quite delicious.

It was the only thing keeping Jos calm enough to not get out of her chair and find something to throw across the room. Sometimes throwing things in a fit of anger and terrible despair was the only thing that would vent that grief so that it didn’t turn into a thick, choking mass inside her.

“Is this really what you want?” David cut in, trying to be tactful and break up the horrible silence. “This job, I mean.”

All the fight rushed out of Jos, and she felt weak and watery. She missed the old version of herself. The one that didn’t take crap from anyone. The one that had a backbone of steel. The one that wouldn’t have hesitated to tell these asswipes to go straight to hell.

If she lost her job, she’d lose just about everything that she was.

“We’re also bringing a few new people on board for the morning and lunch spots,” Sheldon said stiffly. “It’s not just your show that’s getting a new look.”

That was way too little, way too fucking late, but Jos didn’t have anything left in the tank. Not after they’d brought up her recent heartache.

“What if she doesn’t want the position?” she choked out, sounding nothing like her normal self.

“Then make her want it,” Jim demanded in a bored tone. To him, it was already a done deal. Jos wouldn’t fail because Jos couldn’t handle failure.

“I’ve given you everything,” Jos whispered before she could silence herself. “Everything. My career is my life. I’ve given up my privacy, my secrets, my marriage, my child, my life.”

“Well, that’s the hard truth about being famous,” Alden said sympathetically. “It costs so much more than most people realize. Most people admire it and hate it at the same time. You’ve been dragged through the mud and put on a pedestal. I understand that. You’ve been a sweetheart of this country and an icon, but the one thing you’ve never been is yourself. It’s important to create a persona and stick to that image and

sell it, and not just in your work life. We all know you've paid the price lately in the tabloids, but you're right. You of all people know what it takes. That's why we can't think of anyone better to convince Eden that she needs to take this job." Leave it to Alden to give her a series of deeply personal, deeply intuitive, backhanded compliments.

The atmosphere in the room was so cold that ice crystals could have formed on every surface in the place.

Jos looked from one white head of hair to another, then eventually to Alden's younger, salt-and-pepper gray. He was the only one wearing a sympathetic expression. Jim was already tuned out and the others knew they'd get their way because that was how their world worked. People gave them what they wanted, or they didn't give anyone anything at all, because they were shipped out. And Jos had just given herself up on a silver platter. She'd said that her job was everything. She'd obviously do anything to keep it.

She gave a tight nod and stood up, ducking her head as she gathered up the contract to read. She had no doubt that she had less than a year left, maybe not even that much time, if she didn't convince this rich girl to come be her replacement. It wouldn't be above anyone to fire her and pay out the remaining time on her contract.

She somehow found it in herself, digging to the depths of her very being, to raise her head and give everyone the charming smile she'd perfected over the years. "I'll get it done."

No one bothered to respond.

Chapter 2

Eden

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Once upon a time, Eden Rutherford would have given anything to meet the Josella Frank. The woman was basically a pioneer. She'd heroically led the way for female journalists. She hadn't had a style of journalism, because she'd done it all. She was a real-life superhero.

But that was back when Eden didn't know any better, when she was young, dumb, and full of dreams. Back before she understood how the world worked. Back before Jos Frank had given everything up. The years since had changed Eden as well. Her starstruck awe had belonged to a child, and eventually it faded, ground down by age and maturity and the reality of having an adult mindset instead of that of a young, sheltered teenager who didn't understand the way the world really worked.

Still, if it was anyone else, Eden wouldn't have agreed to the meeting. When her dad called and told her that Jos Frank wanted to meet with her, she'd been so shellshocked that she'd found herself agreeing to the date and time her dad set without even really thinking twice about it. She didn't have a chance to ask why Jos would want to meet with her.

Three days later, Eden sat across an uncomfortable metal table with matching and equally uncomfortable metal chairs from the one and only Jos Frank herself. Because Eden had the choice of venues, she'd purposely picked a dumpy hole in the wall coffee shop in a crappy part of San Jose, not far from the tiny apartment where she lived. She'd chosen it because she imagined how distasteful someone like Jos would find it.

This woman with the elegant, regal, old moneyed bearing used to walk through nations ripe with strife and razed by war. She would have cut out part of her own soul

if was it readily available to get just one more interview with someone who counted. Someone who could be held accountable. Someone who could explain the horrors the world was sometimes just seeing for the first time.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.” Jos finally opened up the conversation over two paper cups of black coffee. The stuff tasted like it had been filtered through garbage first. Honestly, Eden wasn’t sure it wasn’t made with some dubious ingredients. Jos had arrived at the same time as she did and had bought them both without asking Eden what she wanted.

She would have said black coffee anyway, and it made her vibrate with annoyance that Jos had read her mind. Or maybe black coffee was just an easy go to. Jos lifted the cup to her scarlet lips and took a tentative sip. She managed not to wince, but that was probably because her tough girl mask was in place, and she was here to show zero weakness.

Eden found her gaze slipping lower and lower, back to Jos’ red lipstick. Perfect lips. Flawless. Beautiful. She was annoyed with herself for noticing. She told herself that anyone with eyes would. That Jos’ perfection wasn’t just a trick of good makeup and good lighting. It was real in person, too. She was stunningly beautiful, and she probably would be to the end of time.

“I didn’t really agree,” Eden clarified in an artice tone. Her eyes shot back to her hands, clutching the disgusting coffee. “My dad said you wanted to meet with me, and I said yes because I was so shocked. I didn’t really think about it until after I’d hung up. My dad’s good like that. He’s good at getting what he wants.”

Jos’ throat bobbed as she swallowed. She tapped her coffee cup quietly. Her nails were real and done with a French manicure. Eden slowly let her eyes peruse Jos. When one goes to battle, one must know their enemy. With her tight, curve-hugging black dress revealing just a tasteful amount of her ample cleavage and a bright yellow

blazer, she looked totally out of place in the neighborhood.

“Where did you park?”

“Just down the block.”

“In a lot?”

r /> “No.” Jos’ tone changed, the huskiness she never let creep through on-air seeping in. It did something to Eden’s stomach, sending a dizzying feeling straight to her head.

To cover up the way her body betrayed her, Eden let her lips curl up in an ugly sneer. “The chances of your windows getting smashed before we’re done here are high. You probably drove something entirely too visible because that was your only option.”

A quick blink told her just how taken aback Jos was, though she tried to hide it. “You’ve done your research.”

Eden shrugged. “I’m sure everyone knows what you drive. That’s the point of driving it, isn’t it?”

She was also carefully trying to hide the fact that she was still gobsmacked at meeting her one-time idol. Sure, it had been a long time since she was a thirteen-year-old girl, figuring out that she was attracted to other girls and not boys, crushing on that hotshot journalist who had taken the world by storm. By then, Jos had already been on TV for two years.

Eden inhaled deeply. She dragged in too much of the soft, floral scent Jos wore by mistake and leaned back an inch, like that would help anything. She didn’t like that she found the scent tasteful. She actually didn’t like that despite what she thought of

Jos now, she found the woman more than attractive. She was also more than lovely.

Jos Frank might be forty-three years old, but she obviously had a great personal trainer and probably also hit the gym or yoga class six times a day. She was tall at five-foot-ten and endowed with lush curves and breathtaking features. Her sharp cheekbones, full lips, delicate nose, and tapered jawline were probably a dream for any makeup artist. She was so toned, so perfect, it almost looked like she'd been manufactured. That was absolutely not Eden's type, but maybe old habits, or old crushes, died hard, and she found her heart beating just a little too fast.

Peeved with herself, she turned waspish. "I've done my research because I'm a real journalist. I hit the streets and I plug away, day after day. I write the stories of those who can't speak for themselves. I give a voice to the people that society has thrown away, to the ones that have been forgotten. I always wanted to do investigative journalism and I'm doing it, working with San Jose's homeless."

"You're basically living on the streets," Jos said, her tone flat. Her expression didn't change. She was too much of a professional to let the barbs dig in. If she was disgusted by what Eden had been doing for the past year and a half, she was too professional to show it. Then again, was Jos even capable of producing real emotions anymore?

Harsh. That's way too harsh. You're being petty. Catty. Don't be catty. Being catty is gross. Being jealous is even worse.

She wasn't jealous. That wasn't why she was being snappish. "I actually have an apartment," she shot back. "Small and hole in the wall, but that's okay. I wanted to live as authentically as possible. I knew I couldn't survive on the streets, and I'm not pretending that I do. Everyone knows I'm a journalist. The catch is that I'm a freelancer, so I set my own rules and boundaries and I think that people can respect that."

Jos eyed Eden coolly, but a slight shuttering of her eyes was the only indication she was even listening to what she was saying. Josella Frank could be mistaken for a much younger woman, even without fancy lighting. She was truly gorgeous, but she was cold. So, so cold. So different than the Jos the public was treated to every night.

“I’m up front about everything,” Eden continued. She was even more annoyed with herself for noticing anything about Jos. What did that say about her? That she cared? She certainly did not care. “I don’t try to trick anyone into letting me tell their story. I’m not making a dollar off anyone. Any proceeds I make go to paying my living expenses and then all the money gets poured back into the community. I have never and will never lose touch with reality or become indifferent to what’s going on around me here in my own city or in the world in general.”

Jos’ cerulean eyes flashed. “That’s very noble.” Her tone said the opposite. Jos Frank was salty and kind of mean in person when she didn’t have to be fake for the eyes of the world. She was still perfect, salt or not.

Eden found herself momentarily transfixed after her outburst, then tore her eyes away when she realized that she was looking.

“I’m not doing it to be noble,” Eden sniffed. Her hand curled around her cup, palming the lid. She rubbed at the uneven ridges in the plastic. She’d worn an old purple hoodie with a college logo on the front, one she hadn’t gone to, and a pair of skinny jeans. She’d done her nearly waist length brunette hair up in a severe bun and had foregone makeup. She didn’t have anyone to impress.

She certainly hadn’t had to overthink anything. She hadn’t second guessed herself. She absolutely did not check the mirror before she walked out, tempted to put on just a base layer of foundation and add a touch of blush, some tinted lip balm, and mascara. The two women couldn’t have been more different, sitting there in the dingy coffee shop, staring each other down.

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“Why did you really want to meet with me?”

Eden figured she should just get it out there. She told herself she was tired of small talk and had things she needed to get to. She did have work to do. Work she loved. She didn't want to spend another second sitting there across from her ex-idol than she had to because that would just go against her hard-fought ideologies to actually want to engage in any kind of debate with a woman who had sold her soul for fame.

“I think you know why I'm here,” Jos challenged. She was smart. Sharp. Still. Even as a sell out. Eden had to give her that.

“I don't, so maybe you should explain,” Eden said churlishly.

Jos lifted a brow. She slid her gaze down Eden's body, though for what purpose, she wasn't quite sure. That icy blue stare unnerved her, but she crossed her arms and raised a brow of her own as a challenge. If Jos wanted to do this the hard way, she was down to not let her take the easy road out.

If it was a battle of wills, Eden won, but she felt no thrill in the victory. Jos did give a small sigh, but it was more like she was bored than anything. It was obvious that she didn't want to be there.

Was she thinking about her car? About how it might be missing two windows and keyed down the sides? She should have known better. If she wasn't entirely tone deaf, she would have anticipated that driving a hundred-thousand-dollar cherry red import into a neighborhood where the majority of people were single moms and lived way below the poverty line and a large portion of the population called the street their

home wasn't a smart thing to do.

"Alright. If you want me to tell you why I'm here, I'll give it to you the way you want it. Unvarnished and raw. I'm here because you have options. I'm the one they wanted to present them. I'm here to tell you to take them. To do the right thing. You can't possibly want to be out there, day after day. It's not safe."

"Do the right thing?" Eden couldn't believe she'd actually heard that correctly. Her mind was racing. She knew how her dad operated and she knew who Jos worked for and where she worked. It wasn't hard to connect the dots, even if it was overwhelmingly strange.

Eden told herself that she had to be wrong. She forced herself to pick up the terrible coffee and take a sip. It was as bad as she thought, and she gave Jos silent props for not gagging when she'd tasted it. Eden let the silence drag out just because she hoped it would make the seemingly unflappable Jos uncomfortable.

Eden schooled her facial expressions as carefully as she did her emotion. She wasn't normally someone who got mad. Regulated emotions were a quick way to keep things on a level path and get answers. She'd also found that she could steer conversations in the direction she wanted them to go and get answers when she was calm. Getting mad never helped anything or anyone. Hadn't she learned that from Jos' interview style? How would she like that thrown back at her? It seemed more likely that she wouldn't even notice.

"How am I not doing the right thing?" Eden asked in a neutral tone. "Don't answer that. I want an answer for this instead. How would you know what's right for me considering you don't even know me?"

Jos stared at her like she should know better. Like she was a spoiled, indulged child playing at helping the world because it made her feel better. Like she was having her

moment of rebellion and then she could run home to her life of leisure and luxury, back to her parents and their money.

What she said was much more tactful, of course. “I can tell that out there, with unstable people who are often violent, or who are using substances so that they’re not themselves, it isn’t safe.”

“This is based on your own experience working in war torn nations, traveling the world to remote locations to get that story no one else can, and interviewing extremely volatile individuals?”

The only reaction that garnered was a slight wrinkling at the bridge of Jos’ elegant nose. Her blue eyes were so intense it was like staring into a set of extremely rare sapphires. It was impossible not to notice how elegant a picture Jos Frank cut. She was glorious, so utterly gorgeous that staring at her was like looking directly at the glowing sun. This woman was everything Eden had once admired. She was everything she wanted to be. How many times had she sat in front of her dresser mirror in her room, pretending to be Jos interviewing some high-profile businessman or politician?

Jos swallowed thickly, but still showed little emotion past a tug of her lips that Eden could tell was practiced. She didn’t blast off her made-for-TV smile that Eden had long ago come to realize was exactly that. Pasted on, manufactured, fake.

Eden knew she was pushing the bounds of something, testing the lines of something dangerous within herself. Too much emotion one way could quickly swing the other. It was better to stay neutral inside. Carefully cultivated dislike could turn into hero

worship or even attraction as easily as her one-time crush had turned into feelings of disgust.

“Actually, yes,” Jos said evenly. “It is. I did things earlier in my career that were unsafe and foolish. I risked my life for stories more times than I can count.”

Eden shifted on the hard seat, her watered down, old tasting coffee entirely forgotten. “But you did it because you thought people should know the truth, right?”

There was zero hesitation. “That’s right.”

“Because the truth used to be important to you.”

Chapter 3

Eden

The air went glacial. They were the only customers in the shop, and it was a good thing, because everyone else would have complained that their drinks went frigid simultaneously.

Eden knew she’d pushed way too hard. She’d been intentionally rude, but at the same time, she’d meant to call Jos out. She wasn’t one to shrink from the truth and she wanted Jos to know that.

In an odd way, Eden wanted to prove herself, which was worse, and she knew it. She didn’t want to admit that part to herself. She wasn’t trying to show off and she wasn’t trying to get into a pissing contest. She’d been the one to come into this meeting with an attitude she never took with anyone else, not even her parents when they were pushing her to do what they wanted her to do, shoving her into that tiny, neat little box of what they deemed an appropriate daughter looked like.

Eden had always felt like she’d been on the outside looking in. She knew for a fact that even though Jos Frank had kept her background on the DL and refused to talk

about her past, that she'd come from next to nothing. She'd been a fighter once. Now, she was just the token story of that person who made it and forgot all about where they came from.

Eden knew she had no right to judge. She had even less of a right to inflict injury or wound this woman who had never done her wrong. Except by selling out. Maybe that was it. Eden was still deeply hurt by the death of her idol in her own mind.

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Jos stiffened at Eden's tone, but that was all. "The truth is still important to me." How she managed to say it like she was both drowning in rage and perfectly unfazed was beyond Eden.

"Are you sure? Because I think that a big house, a nice car, expensive clothes, and a high-profile lifestyle in the public eye became way more important to you fifteen years ago."

"Fifteen years ago, I was still green as grass, and when I got asked to be on that show, I was ecstatic. I was totally in disbelief. I wasn't the only host. There were three of us at the time. It only happened, as Sheldon and Ray got older and retired and things took off for me, that the show became more something that was mine." Jos rolled her eyes. "And high living is for big cities like New York. I'm not the evil celebrity villain that you seem to have issue with. I live within my means the same way doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and many other people do here. Well, well under the level of your parents."

Eden let the comment about her parents go. Jos wasn't going to turn this around on her.

"Hmm. Funny that you said retired, but then, they were male, so they were probably allowed to do that and didn't have to worry about getting pushed out because they'd reached their prime and no longer held value for the world. Their cup size and the fact that they had a few more wrinkles every year probably didn't mean anything for them."

Jos picked up her cup but set it down hard enough to slosh liquid up over the hole in

the plastic lid, drenching the white plastic like a brown sea before it receding, a low tide dribbling back in one drop at a time.

“I think that’s quite a bitter way to look at things.”

Eden shrugged. “I know the type of men who run your network, who own the station and the studio and everything else. I know it’s a male dominated industry and I know that, universally, women over the age of forty become invisible.”

“Again, the way you view the world is rather bitter.”

Eden sat back and laughed, but it was a hard sound. “I think the word you should be using is realistic. I’m a realist. I know how the industry works. Much to the chagrin of my very rich parents, I changed my major from business to journalism, which included doing an internship, as you well know, since you went to J school yourself. I might not have gone the broadcast route, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t seen for myself how shit goes down.”

“Maybe in some places. Not at ours.”

Eden grunted. “You’re lying through your teeth.”

Jos apparently didn’t like that. She shifted in her seat again and a flash of discomfort ebbed across her face, gone as fast as that splash of coffee had disappeared.

“You can’t tell me that you’re not here to headhunt me because upper management told you to do it and gave you an ultimatum. The cruelest one they could have given. Find your replacement. Train her right. Maybe if you’re lucky, they’ll let you stick around for a few more years. Contract extension to save your bacon. That was the exchange, wasn’t it? I can’t see you coming here and sucking up to me for any other reason other than to save your own ass. Maybe once upon a time, but we both know

the caliber of your journalism has gone way downhill in the past decade or more. You've gone from making the world a better place to just reporting the damn news. You don't find your own stories anymore. You don't have your own sources. You just sit there and regurgitate whatever comes across your desk and that stupid teleprompter. You ask preplanned questions because heaven forbid you should ever say the wrong thing or step on the wrong set of toes. You're not searching for anything anymore. Do you even care about anything?"

"I care," Jos snapped, clearly pushed beyond her limit for politeness. "I'm here because my boss wanted me to talk to you, and he's not a man who takes no for an answer, but don't lay the blame at our door for everything. It was actually your father who intervened. He wants you to take the job because he's worried sick about you being out here. He doesn't like that you're risking your health and safety, maybe even your life, to do this. He offered a generous contribution to have you come to work with us. So, before you think you're the be all end all of the world, that a nobody journalist with zero experience in front of a camera and passible looks at best would be singled out and chosen to co-anchor a prestigious news program in a spot that really counts at the number one station for news in the entire state, you had better think again. It seems I'm not the only one with an ego problem."

Eden had no idea how she could have once idolized this woman, let alone had a crush on her. How freaking embarrassing. She was ashamed of her younger self. If she could go back in the past and change just one thing... Except that if it wasn't for Jos Frank, she never would have become a journalist herself, and she loved what she did. She'd absolutely found her calling and she knew that this was what she'd been put on earth to do. People searched so hard for their purpose in life, the meaning behind all of it, but Eden had found hers the second she'd done her first interview and written the story afterwards.

Despite her resolve to stay calm, Eden stood up sharply. Her face was probably giving away every single one of her turbulent emotions, but for once, she didn't care.

“It’s pretty clear that you have everything figured out. It doesn’t sound like you really need me or want me to come, so you’ll have to go back and tell your boss that my answer is a big, hard, fat, fucking no. Then you can explain why. I don’t imagine that will be comfortable for you.” She should just leave it at that. What she’d said was more than enough, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I’m not my parents. I wanted to take a different path in life. I appreciate that my dad wants me to be safe. Really, I’m not the classic rebellious rich kid who wants to stick it to their parents by being an embarrassment to them in every way that I can. I was made to do this. This is my truth and I’m going to keep telling it. The entire organization you work for basically stands for everything that I don’t believe in. You can tell them that if you need something to soften the blow for yourself.”

Eden turned on her heel and stalked through the coffee shop. She shoved the door open and burst out onto the street, breathing in the familiar scents of the city in the afternoon.

“Eden, wait.” That voice, so cool and controlled and oddly...intoxicating.

She spun around, annoyed that Jos had followed her. Was she coming out here to beg? To humiliate herself by pressing Eden into something she clearly didn’t want to do? Or was she out here to try to defend herself? Either way, Eden had an absurd urge to save her one-time idol and the first woman she’d ever had a crush on from totally embarrassing herself.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Eden huffed. “I shouldn’t have said those things. It probably made me sound childish and spoiled and entitled, which are all things I never wanted to be. I’m sorry you came all the way out here. Your boss never should have sent you. It was a waste of time. He could have called me himself and I would have told him I’m not interested. My dad never should have gone to the trouble. The only reason I agreed to meet you here was because my dad said it was important and you’re, well, you’re you, and I guess I couldn’t say no.” Eden stopped before she succeeded in

embarrassing herself.

“They said that if you said no, I should tell you that you could pick a lot of your own stories. You could do the journalism you want to do. You could make news that matters. My boss was looking for a new angle. Something to change things up. Something different. That’s why he wanted you. He picked you for the prime spot on a show that’s had a single host for years. They want someone fresh, yes, but that’s not the only reason. I think he and everyone else might have had their eye on you for a long time. Your dad just gave him the push he needed to seal the deal and offer you enough incentive to come on board. They’re willing to do what it takes to get you there.”

Eden narrowed her eyes, staring down Jos Frank. The woman who used to make her heart beat wildly before she herself had any notion of what that truly meant. It wasn’t just a physical passion that Jos incited in Eden. It had been a burning desire for change and justice. Recalling that hero worship of the past made Eden’s head swim. If she wasn’t already so annoyed, maybe she wouldn’t have believed any of what Jos had just said. As it was, when the reality settled in, she found that her heart was beating all over the place just like it had when she was a teenager, rattling under her ribs, knocking so hard it affected the cadence of her breaths.

Maybe Jos Frank deserved a slice of her sympathy. She’d made it in a male dominated industry, not just as a woman, but as a gay woman. The early years of her career were literally something no one else would have the courage, gumption, or contacts to recreate. She was a legend, whether she’d ended up selling out for a cushy spot, regular routine, and high-end lifestyle or not, and Eden knew it. She wanted to tell Jos to go to hell. She wanted to mean it. She wanted to stick to her principles and keep doing journalism that mattered.

But, for some reason, the words refused to come.

She probably looked a tad bit crazy standing there on the sidewalk, clenching and unclenching her fists, her nails biting into her palms. Was she really considering that maybe Jos might be telling the truth? That maybe someone out there, a major station even, wanted to give her a chance to tell her truth on a broad scale that could affect the whole city and eventually a much wider circle?

If it was true, and she could bring to light all the issues people weren't talking about, weren't taking seriously, or just plain didn't care about because they saw it every single day and had become numb and immune to the suffering of those around them, then didn't she have a duty to consider saying yes? If it meant she didn't have to sell out or trade what she believed in for a fat paycheck, should she think about it seriously?

So what if she got a big bump in her pay? She'd been living on nothing since she refused to take money from her parents. Had she been too proud for years? Could she have done so much good with that money? With her own money if she had more of it?

When she'd been offered to have her work turned into a book, she hadn't said no, and that book was projected to become a best seller, even though it was still just in its finishing stages. She'd thought only of how much good would come of people reading her book, of waking up and becoming aware, of wanting to fix a problem that was endemic to society.

"Are you serious?" Whoa. Eden couldn't believe she was really asking that question. Was she giving in? Was she really standing there considering taking Jos' offer? "I'd really be able to choose my own stories?"

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“Some of the time, at any rate.”

“What percentage?”

Jos shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask for a percentage. That’s something you can negotiate into your contract, I’m sure. It’s my job to bring the offer to you and to get you to come sit down and hear more. If you do that, they’ll be happy, even if you turn them down in the end.”

“Or you’ll have lived up to your end of the bargain and you’ll get whatever’s in it for you?”

Jos blinked and pinned that bright blue stare on Eden so that she suddenly felt like she had to rub the dirty rubber part of her canvas shoe into the sidewalk. “Nothing’s in it for me except knowing the world will benefit from your work.”

“Let me guess. You see a young you in me.”

One blonde brow arched elegantly. “Not at all. We’re not one bit the same,” Jos said coolly, and in that, at least, she was being totally honest.

Eden pretended that it didn’t sting.

“Meet me tonight at nine and I’ll prove it. I’ll do one better than that. I’ll give you a list of reasons that will make it clear that this is an offer you can’t refuse.” Jos pulled a card out of the pocket of her blazer and handed it over, then spun on her five-inch stiletto heels and walked briskly down the sidewalk, leaving Eden to gape after her.

Damn it, Eden had hoped for the last word, but Jos had taken it without so much as raising a finger or expending the slightest bit of effort.

Eden stared at the card, which had the name of a pub on it. Not what she expected at all. She should toss the card in the nearest trashcan and forget all about her meeting and that silly offer, where all the good parts were probably fabricated, but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Eden had always said that she wanted to change the world. She wanted to do everything she could to make that happen. She felt a sense of obligation and duty all over again, and it was with a defeated sigh that she watched Jos stride down the sidewalk and turn the corner out of sight.

Eden already knew where she'd be at nine that evening, but that didn't mean she had to like it one bit.

Chapter 4

Jos

The pub was busy. She hadn't been to the little hole in the wall in years, but she wasn't surprised to see it had changed as much on the inside as on the outside. She still kept a stack of those business cards handy, as though she ever had to meet with clients or sources anymore. She'd driven by the block at least once a week for as long as she could remember, assuring herself that the old meeting spot was still there, hadn't changed its name, and that the cards were still valid. She'd watched as it changed over the years. It had gone through two facelifts on the exterior, changing its brick façade to a smooth stucco that was white, then black. The sign changed three times, but the name stayed the same.

The interior wasn't a dive bar now. The wood plank floors weren't original. They

were made to look old, hand scraped from a box. The bar and tables were new, not worn or old or pitted. The whole thing felt disingenuous and fake, but she figured that was perfect because she was lying.

She had no idea how she'd convince anyone to let Eden choose any stories, but if that's what it took, she figured she could put the right words in the right ears. Someone who wasn't her, likely everyone above her, stood to gain a lot from the bonus Eden Rutherford's parents would send their way. What was a few stories here and there until the little tartlet forgot all about her original plans to save the world? It would mean nothing to Sheldon, Alden, David, or Jim.

Jos ambled up to the bar, smoothing down the dark edges of her brunette wig. It gave her a small thrill to don clothing she didn't normally wear. Her pub meeting disguise included a set of black boots that went over her knees, short black dress, and an oversized black blazer. The last time she did this almost felt like another lifetime ago.

She ordered a gin and tonic, the one alcoholic drink she'd allow herself tonight because she had driven herself again, parking blocks and blocks away to hide her car. The one that stood out like a sore thumb, as Eden had pointed out earlier.

Everything she said about me was right.

Jos took a sip of the drink, letting the bitter dryness work away the foul taste in her mouth. She had no one to blame for the truth sticking her between the ribs like daggers except herself. She knew that, but it still rankled. It felt a lot like Sandra's many arrows which had left their mark despite Jos' seemingly impenetrable armour.

She wasn't sure how long she'd have to wait. She'd wait all night if that's how long it took. She was going to save her damn job because it was the one thing she had left. The one thing she couldn't live without, no matter how pathetic and even dirty she'd felt after her conversation with Eden earlier.

She'd lied when she said that Eden didn't remind her of her younger self.

The door to the pub opened and Jos recognized Eden's tall, lithe form. She'd recognize her long black hair anywhere. The piercing dark eyes, dark as coals. She was the furthest thing from what Jos had imagined.

And fuck, her beauty was so breathtaking, it was like a sucker punch.

Jos' fingers pulsed against the cold glass in her hand. She wanted to run them through that waterfall of raven black. She wanted to run the strands between her fingers and let the smoothness glide over her skin. She wanted to know what scent Eden wore at the pale column of her neck. What fragrance was trapped in that gossamer hair. Lily? Lilac? Coconut? No, too simple. Something complex and manufactured.

She swallowed down the absurd thoughts and moved quickly, gliding through the pub, passing by tables. She grasped Eden's upper arm around over the sleeve of her sheer black blouse and pulled her to the corner before she could react. When she did, it was glorious, her eyes swinging with fear and shock to Jos' face.

She relaxed as soon as she reali

zed it was her and Jos dropped her arm without ceremony and sunk into a seat at the table. The chairs were new too. They were stained dark, hard wooden things with edges that pressed in uncomfortably.

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“Jesus, are you wearing a wig?” Eden hissed.

“Obviously.”

“Why?”

“Because I—never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, no, it does. You’re going to tell me why you’re here in disguise. That makes no sense.”

Because sometimes it’s nice not to be me. Because old habits die the hardest of all. Because I like the feeling.

Jos shrugged. “We’re here to talk about you. Taking that job.”

Eden crossed her arms. She was getting a stubborn pout on lips that were full without any enhancement, when a young waitress came by to ask if they wanted drinks. Jos ordered a soda water and Eden got a double whisky.

Jos raised a brow. “Whisky?”

“When you’re raised rich, you learn to drink hard, I guess. Anyway, I’m not driving. I planned for a cab, seeing as this was a pub. I can have a double if I want to.” Something flashed over Eden’s beautiful face. She was a knockout. So gorgeous that every single person in the pub was turning to stare at her, some discreetly, others not. Eden was completely oblivious to the fact that her makeup-free face, non-descript

black blouse, and skinny jeans were drawing such a reaction.

“That’s the real reason you became a journalist? Rebellion? You said it wasn’t, but I think you were lying. To yourself, even.”

Jos expected a fight. She wasn’t sure why she wanted to provoke one, except that it excited her in a way she’d never been excited before to see Eden’s eyes flash with anger. To her utter disappointment, it appeared that Eden had better learned how to compose herself since that afternoon. She’d lost her raw edges when she responded.

“I got tired of people using me as a stepping stone or an open doorway to see what they could get from my parents. Using me because they straight up just wanted my dad’s money.”

Jos drank the rest of her gin and tonic and set the glass aside. “I suppose those are the hazards of being the only daughter of filthy rich, well-connected parents.” She said it lazily, as if she were stating it had just started to rain outside.

Eden couldn’t hide her snarl, which was unusually attractive. Jos didn’t understand why she could provoke such reactions. It wasn’t just excitement. It made her feel something, and that was shocking in and of itself. Even with Sandra, she hadn’t actually allowed herself to feel real, bone deep emotion. She’d been that way for a very long time.

Eden shrugged like Jos’ arrow hadn’t hit the mark. “I wanted to try something else. Something I wholly loved and believed in. Something where I could just be me. The other hazard of being raised a spoiled heiress is that you learn how to not take shit from anyone. You grow up with a backbone of steel. That backfired on my parents because it was clear that I wasn’t going to change my mind about this. And I’m not going to change my mind now.”

“No?” Jos prompted, but she kept her tone bored. “That doesn’t sound like you believe in anything, then. That sounds more like you’re turning yourself into the cliched rebel who needs mommy and daddy to hear her roar.”

Eden sat up straighter in her chair. “That’s not what this is about,” she snapped. She pursed her lips and tore her gaze away, letting it roam over the small pub. She stopped for a second on the TV behind the bar, watching sports replays and highlights. When her gaze tracked back, she was disappointingly composed again. “Did anyone ever tell you that you’re not very nice?”

Jos would never admit to herself how that stung. She’d also never admit that she liked the fire burning in Eden. The fire that went so much deeper than the amber flecks in her dark eyes. Flecks that only shone when she was angry, Jos was coming to realize. “I’ve been told that I’m blunt and to the point. I took it as a compliment.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have.”

“Maybe you should stop posturing and take the damn job. You know, if you are about doing all the good that you can do and making a real difference. If this isn’t just about how developed your backbone is.”

The waitress was working her way around the pub, dropping off drinks at other tables. She eventually, unhurriedly, set down their drinks and ambled away without asking if they’d like anything else or if they wanted to order food.

“You’re very keen on me taking this job.” Eden was very perceptive. She looked at Jos like she could see right through her, straight to the pit of her lies. She picked up her glass, and without ceremony, tossed back the double shot of whisky like the amber liquid was nothing more than juice. “What’s in it for you?”

“Nothing,” Jos lied. It made her gut feel twisted and sour. “I just believe in good

journalism.”

Eden snorted. “You believe in kissing the asses of rich old men who think they’re infallible because the world treats them that way.”

Jos shrugged. “Or maybe that.”

She’d deflated Eden’s argument with just a hint of vulnerability and honesty. She pushed harder, knowing that she had everything on the line. “You don’t like me because I remind you of everything you’re fighting so valiantly against. Disingenuous living. People using each other as ladder rungs on the way up. It’s worse, because I wasn’t born into that. It’s somehow wrong for me to enjoy the things I’ve worked so hard for.”

“I think we might differ on what it means to work hard.”

Jos shrugged again just because she could see how it infuriated Eden to see her do it. She liked the slight pink flush that colored her cheeks above those sharp cheekbones. Eden Rutherford could be a fairy or a pixie quite easily. If some movie set rolled into town, she’d fit the part to perfection.

“This really isn’t about me at all. This is about you and what you want.”

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Eden's eyes narrowed and her lips pressed into a hard line. She was doing her best to look intimidating and tough, but all that tough edge did was highlight how gorgeous and delicately built she was. "Tell me the truth, then."

"I have."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because I have nothing to gain by having you there. You're clearly my younger, prettier, hungrier replacement."

That rocked Eden. She folded in on herself a little, looking around until she caught their waitress's eye. When the pretty brunette came back, she asked for two more whiskeys. Not doubles. Jos very happily sipped her soda water. Either Eden had a high tolerance for alcohol, or she wanted to get blitzed for some reason.

"No," Eden disagreed, and even though her voice was soft there was no mistaking the command in her tone. It did something to Jos' stomach. And lower, between her legs, that word made her throb.

Jesus, what the hell? She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt a baseline of attraction for someone, let alone this alive. Sparring with this woman who she should hate. This cocky, young, arrogant despite her withering appraisal of arrogance, self-assured, spoiled little heiress turned world's savior was doing it for her. The world had flipped on its ass somehow, taking Jos by surprise. And very little surprised her anymore.

“No?” She managed to cough the word out, then cleared her throat and took a sip of her drink to cover for it.

“No,” Eden repeated, defiant as before. She leaned across the table, and Jos inhaled on instinct, dragging in not a floral scent, but something much darker and more expensive. The little princess had kept her obscenely costly bottles of perfume from her past life, it seemed. Not as authentic as she was so hungry to be seen as, then. “I want you to tell me something. Something about yourself that no one would know.”

Jos weighed her options. Her heart leapt into her throat, an uncomfortable notion for someone who had spent her whole life telling herself that she didn’t really have one. That feeling anything, fear, joy, happiness, sorrow, was a waste of time. That it was a weakness, and weaknesses could be exploited.

r /> She could tell Eden something about her past, but she hated talking about that. She never discussed where she had come from. The only person she’d ever told everything to was Sandy, and that hadn’t gotten her very far. She’d used it against her in their divorce. The past was a no-go. A zone that Jos refused to visit, even in her own mind. There was no way she was going to give this spoiled little heiress those details. She’d think they were trite. She wouldn’t understand, because how could she? She, who had grown up with everything. That was the thing when describing true horror. It was past the grasp of understanding. It was just words, and words made it trite, and trite could be dismissed.

Jos felt the old, irrational anger rising up in her as images flashed in her mind unbidden. She pushed them away. Her past had taken from her, but she’d used it to carve out a life for herself. She’d survived the horror of it and that made it easier to walk into war zones. It made it easier to face off with people the world considered scary. To go places no one else dared. She’d already been through a baptism by fire. There were no further marks life could leave on her soul, so she’d been bold, and the world had taken notice. It wasn’t courage. No, it was anything but courage.

“I had a miscarriage,” Jos blurted without thinking it through. She wished she was the one with a whisky coming. The burn of it would wash the sorrow out of the parts of her that she’d thought were bereft of feeling.

She hadn’t been as numb as she thought.

“Jesus, what?” Eden barked. She bared her teeth as she gasped, then forced her composure back in place. Her pretty little world had been rocked right off its axis. She studied Jos for a minute that felt like an eternity, then Jos saw it.

The warmth and compassion that she wished she could truly have seen from other people when she lost her baby. It was all there now, etched into the face of a virtual stranger. She was disarmed by that genuine grief.

It was such a stark contrast to the dismissive way Jim, Sheldon, David, and Alden had treated her at that meeting. They might not have known what to say, but it seemed more like they didn’t know how to approach her because things like that weren’t supposed to happen to Jos Frank and they didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“Yeah. I was three months along. At the safe zone.” Jos looked away. She was done talking about herself. She wanted to make that clear.

Eden cleared her throat. She got the message. “I’m not some trust fund, silver spoon brat. I know my parents love me and I love them. I’m not doing what I do to be a rebel. I just truly think I can make the world a better place this way. This is where my talents really lie. One person, even a rich man, can only give so much to charity. Giving is a good thing, but it’s not going to change people’s minds. It’s not going to get to the bottom of society’s endemic problems. That’s what I want to do.”

Grace. Dignity. A regal bearing. Eden Rutherford wasn’t just beautiful, she had a softness about her. A smile that was dangerous because it was so disarming. She had

a whole arsenal of weapons at her disposal, and she was completely unaware of them. She was refreshingly guileless, and Jos couldn't help but feel that she was trapping her into something.

Eden's eyes swept to hers, burning gold, the window to a soul that was still somehow untarnished. She should tell Eden to run. She should tell her the truth. Did she really care about those extra years on her contract so much?

What would I be if I wasn't a journalist? Her younger self would have told her to go fuck herself with a single finger flown high in the air.

Eden didn't bother to hide her soft spots. She didn't see them as a weakness, even though people had tried to exploit them in the past. It wasn't just her youth that made her hopeful.

"If it's not an attitude thing, then I think you should consider the job," Jos said quietly, as unguarded as she could allow. "I think you're doing a major disservice to a field of journalism that you really haven't experienced very much of. No show or experience is the same as the other. You're discrediting thousands of journalists around the world who truly do care."

"It's not them I have a quarrel with."

Jos recalled exactly why she was here right now. Because she'd once been this girl's idol. Something horrible raked through her chest. It felt a lot like the pinpricks of barbed wire surrounding and digging into her heart. "So, it's me then."

"I don't know."

That surprised her.

Eden's drinks arrived and she drank them both quickly, shooting back one after the other, not stopping to taste anything.

Jos shifted uncomfortably. Maybe she was going about this the wrong way. "No more flattery or platitudes," she said. "No lies. Just drinks, and the truth."

Eden eyed her suspiciously. “Did you drive here?”

“Yes.”

“So it looks like I’m the only one drinking.”

“I’ll still drink. The non-alcoholic variety.”

Eden sipped another drink, this time with some soda mixed in, then another and one more. They talked about nothing. They people watched in the pub. Jos let Eden sit with the weight of her decision. She’d presented her evidence and done what she could. Nothing was going to convince Eden to take the job if she hadn’t already done it.

“I’ve been doing this for three years,” Eden finally said quietly. Her words were slightly blended together, but that was the only evidence she was feeling any of those drinks. “I could still do it. That, and so much more.” She stopped and frowned. “Maybe it’s a good opportunity. I wouldn’t have to stop what I’m doing right now. I could try it and see how it goes. How much benefit there is. If that outweighs my other concerns. And I’ll donate my salary to this neighborhood for improvements, just like the book sales. I’ll still keep living here. Not much has to change.”

She’s a saint. Goddamn it, I’m being saddled with a saint.

It didn’t make Jos feel better to be sarcastic. It made her feel worse. She felt every ounce of the pain she’d felt after her miscarriage. The guilt. Like she was being punished for something even though she knew that was illogical and that miscarriages

weren't uncommon.

"Jos? Are you okay?"

She forced a smile, but it probably came across as cold in the face of Eden's guileless warmth. "Absolutely. I'm glad you're going to give the position a shot."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"You're a pretty good liar, you know."

This time, the sadness in Jos' smile was something she felt straight down to her soul. "Clearly not good enough."

Chapter 5

Eden

"I'm sure there'll be one coming soon enough." Eden was aware of two things.

The first was that she was drunk. Drunker than she'd maybe ever been in her life. The whisky hit at all once, and what the heck had she been thinking, ordering them like that anyway? She'd gone into that pub, thinking—no, knowing—she had something to prove. She was going to turn down that job. The only thing she'd proved was that she was a terrible lightweight and a horrible bimbo.

The second was that there were no freaking cabs in all of the entire city.

"You're sure you called?"

“No.” She fought back an insane urge to laugh. Jos Frank was standing out in front of a hole in the wall pub in an area of town that was better than where Eden lived, but far, far worse than where Jos’ palace of a home resided. She’d been standing out there with her for over half an hour. “But you did.”

“You didn’t call?” Jos’ mouth dropped open, and the fire was back in her eyes, making them flash a brilliant blue. A blue as bright as the stars and the streetlights.

Eden blinked. “Uh, I think I did?”

“Good lord, the dispatcher probably couldn’t understand you. I can barely understand you.”

“Hey!” Eden’s words sounded perfectly fine to herself. Plus, she was doing an admirable job of staying upright, and that counted for something, didn’t it?

“Ugh, for the love of god.” Jos’ patience had clearly run down to the point of no return.

“What are you going to do?” A river of fear dumped into Eden’s bloodstream. “Are you going to lose your shit? Punish me?”

Jos’ head whipped around so fast that the wig nearly flew off. Eden bit down on her bottom lip to keep a giggle in. If she started, she’d probably fall on the ground, and since she was so damn drunk, if she fell on the ground, she might not get up.

“What the hell are you talking about? Punish you? I’m going to give you a ride home.” Jos’ hand was strong when she grabbed Eden’s upper arm. Eden nearly yelped at the brutal grasp, but she realized that she wasn’t being hurt in any way. Jos wasn’t pinching her or pulling her or tugging her along. She was just holding her upright. “Can you walk a few blocks?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes. Yes, you can. Come on.”

Jos’ pace felt punishing, but that was only because Eden couldn’t quite distinguish between the ground and the sky. She was glad she’d worn her sensible canvas shoes and not heels. She’d left all of those at her parents’ house when she’d moved out. She didn’t need them with the work she was doing, where she was living. She’d been glad to leave that part of her life—charity events, fancy dresses, empty parties, designer everything, fake smiles, fake everything—behind her.

How far away had Jos parked? She’d clearly gone to great lengths to disguise herself, for what, Eden had no idea. She’d also hidden her fancy, flashy red import approximately eight million light years from the pub.

By the time they made it all those blocks, Eden was panting. She was breathing shallowly because everything was swaying so furiously.

“Are you going to puke?” Jos’ tone was anything but kind.

“No.”

“If you are, please do it outside of my car.”

“I’m not going to throw up.”

“Your eyes are crossed. Fuck. I should have cut you off. I don’t know what you were thinking.”

Well, that made two of them.

“Sorry,” Eden whispered, hating herself for it. When she forced her eyes to focus and look at Jos, she was surprised to see something move across her face. A flicker of emotion? It was probably just her drunk vision and a combination of passing headlights sweeping down the street.

“Okay.” Was Jos’ voice softer, or was she just imagining it? “Get in, then.”

Eden fumbled with the passenger door. It was a puzzle that she didn’t have the answer to. With a sigh, Jos rounded the car and wrenched the door open. She helped Eden in, mostly by putting her palm on the top of her head and shoving her down so she didn’t take herself out with the low as hell roofline. Eden’s bottom hit the seat, which was about as soft and plush as a boulder. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest. Something slid over her shoulders, and she panicked for a second, until she realized it was just the seatbelt. Jos had put it on her. Clicked it into place.

“Okay,” Jos said when she was behind the wheel. “Give me your address.”

“Umm, it’s...it’s, uh...”

Jos drummed her fingernails against the steering wheel, waiting. The sloshing in Eden’s stomach was awful. The sloshing in her head was worse. She felt like her brain was emptied out, and in its place was only water. Water which would not hold a thought or a memory or precious information like her own address.

“You do know where you live, don’t you?”

“I do.” Eden pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to push the numbers in her watery skull together. “I don’t know,” she finally said, and to her utter horror, tears

stung at her eyes. She might be entirely made of liquid, but she wasn't going to let them fall. She wouldn't humiliate herself further.

"For the love of... Fine." Jos huffed. "I'll take you to my place, then. You can sleep it off in the guestroom. But, Eden? You're taking that job. I don't care if it's just a trial or whatever you have to do. You're taking it."

"Or what?" Eden huffed. "You're going to leave me on the side of the road right here in a bad neighborhood, completely trashed out of my tree?"

Jos punched the button in the dash and the car roared to life, the rumble of the engine probably waking half the neighborhood. "No," she grunted, an admission that she didn't want to make.

She said nothing else after she peeled away from the curb. That was fine with Eden. She didn't want to talk. She was too busy trying to calm the angry sloshing in her stomach as Jos sped through the dark streets. The scenery was a blur outside the windows, so Eden shut her eyes. That only made everything spin inside herself, which made her feel sicker than ever, so she opened them a fraction and studied her hands in her lap. All seven of them.

She stared at them until Jos pulled into her driveway, then into one bay of a three-car garage. Before she did, Eden got a fleeting glimpse of a huge square house, white with wooden and dark trim, all terribly modern. She hated modern architecture. It was cold and so square and just so not homey.

She was proved correct on her assumption of the inside of the house as soon as Jos hauled her out of the car and helped her inside, one arm around her waist, the other under her shoulders. Her strength was shocking, since she was basically half-dragging, half carrying her ass, and her touch burned through Eden like a wildfire raging in her blood.

She was so shocked that as soon as Jos released her, she collapsed against the nearest wall. She blinked several times, until her vision focused enough to make out the details of a living room where everything was as square and white as the exterior of the house. Only a few dark lines bisected it all.

“Show mooch whoosh,” she said, attempting to voice her thoughts.

“Dear lord,” Jos sighed. She grasped Eden’s arm again, but when she swayed, she tucked her shoulder under her side and wrapped an arm that was far too strong and warm around her waist. She steered her down a hall, flicking on lights as they went to reveal, yep, more white. “Here.” Jos let Eden slide down the wall as soon as they entered the spacious room.

It was way too big to be a bathroom, but that’s what it was. The area boasted a free-standing tub, a glass shower, marble floors and walls, a vanity with three sinks, and a toilet cloistered off by itself behind a partition in the wall. That was where Jos let go.

“I’ll get you some water. This is probably the best place for you at the moment.”

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“I’m good. I’m not going to puke.”

“Right. Well, hold that thought. You might change your mind after I force a few glasses of sober fuel down your throat.”

“Sober fuel?”

Jos was back in a minute with a crystal glass, a tall, heavy thing, filled to the brim with cold water. Eden didn’t feel like she could drink another drop of anything. Her insides were still an ocean, but she took the glass and sipped at it anyway.

“All of that. Please.” Jos paced around the bathroom while Eden drank.

It occurred to Eden, after she was done with the first glass and handed it back, only to receive a refill, which she groaned at, that Jos was worried. Did she feel responsible for this? Was she scared that Eden had alcohol poisoning? Did she think she’d pass out or fall asleep and choke in her sleep?

After she was done with the second glass, she felt like she was going to burst, but she did feel far more sober. The room stopped spinning. Thoughts found purchase in her brain. Her hands shrunk down to having the normal amount.

“I don’t have to work until tomorrow evening,” Jos said. “I’m going to go to the kitchen and make you something to eat. Some toast or something. If you’re okay now, I’d like you to have a cold shower.”

“A shower? And why cold? Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly bossy?”

Jos stared her down, hands on her hips, but then her lips did the impossible and lifted at the corners. “Actually, I think most people are too scared to. The shower doesn’t need to be frigid, but the cold water will probably help sober you up some more. A few more glasses of water and you should be in much better shape before I let you go to bed.”

“My bladder can’t take a few more glasses of water.”

Jos rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to supervise you anymore. I think you’re past needing that, so feel free to use the facilities.” She pointed at the toilet. “That there is a great remedy for bladder woes.” Eden realized there was a very dry sense of humor lurking in Jos’ serious depths. She was all business on the outside, but underneath that? What was underneath that? She shouldn’t want to know, but she did.

Maybe it was the journalist in her, always itching to get at the truth.

She wasn’t going to get any more out of Jos until she was showered, apparently. Jos was indeed bossy, and she expected Eden to obey. Dunking her head in cold water wasn’t going to cut it. Jos was also one of those people who would probably sniff at a kid’s toothbrush to see if they’d actually brushed their teeth with it or just wet it and said they had.

Eden pulled herself off the floor. She still felt a little wobbly, but after a minute of getting upright again, it passed. She did use the facilities, then walked towards the fancy shower. It was like what her parents had at their house in just about all their many bathrooms. She knew how to operate the dials on the wall and soon had a stream of lukewarm water flowing from the rain head overtop. Eden stripped off her clothes and got in, shivering and unable to bring herself to make it any colder.

It turned out that Jos was right about that too. The water revived Eden, refreshing her, chasing away the lingering effects of the whisky. She toweled off with a huge fluffy

tow

el, then used the facilities again. The more she peed, the better she felt. Maybe Jos knew what she was doing with her booze cure.

Eden was about to get dressed in her clothes when a soft knock sounded at the door. “I’m putting a set of pajamas out here. They should fit you.”

She held her breath, her eyes stinging for some reason. Jos wasn’t trying to be kind. She just probably didn’t want Eden’s dirty clothes slipping between her sheets. That was likely all that it was.

She padded over to the door, shivering as the air hit her cold skin and dripping hair. She opened the door a crack and pulled in the bundle that was there.

That bundle turned out to be the world’s softest pajamas. There was a cami top in lilac, a color that couldn’t possibly belong to Jos. The bottoms were fuzzy, with little clouds all over the pale purple fabric.

Eden towelled off her long hair, twisted it into a knot at the base of her neck so it wouldn’t drip all over the place with a thin elastic she always kept around her wrist, then studied herself in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were a little bloodshot and her cheeks were more flushed than normal.

She hung up her towel and collected her clothes, folding them and carrying them under her arm. It wasn’t hard to locate the kitchen. It was just down the long hallway.

Just like everything else, it was done in blinding whites. The cabinets were modern and glossy, the appliances a matte steel. The fridge was expansive, pearly white backsplash set in around the gas stove. The countertops were probably quartz, with a white marble pattern shot through with gray.

Jos stood at the center of it all, the only splash of color.

Eden had been so uncomfortable when she'd walked into the pub, so filled with nervous energy that she'd barely noticed what Jos was wearing, then she'd been hidden by the table. She'd been way too drunk after that to take note.

Now, though?

Jos Frank had just made toast in knee high boots. Her shapely legs were showcased in them, and she was rocking the stiletto heels.

Holy shit, she dragged me through city blocks in those, and basically carried me into the freaking house in them.

The dress hugged her curves, and she had plenty of them. Jos had the perfect body. She probably spent hours with a personal trainer every single day and it showed. She was also naturally endowed with an impressive curves up top . Her breasts were neatly confined in the tight fitting, short little black dress, and hidden tastefully by the blazer, but not altogether disguised. Eden had trouble tugging her gaze up. Or down. Or away. She'd shed the wig and her blond hair looked like it had been finger combed out. Still, there were no strands out of place.

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Was it any wonder that her first crush had been on this woman?

She couldn't believe she was in Jos' house, standing right across from her, drinking in the vision that she was, the smell of fresh toast and salty butter reaching her nose.

But it was really happening. Maybe after years and years, Eden hadn't quite let go of all her idol worship. Maybe a seed of it stayed rooted inside her, because she was suddenly breathless.

Jos' eyes settled on her, those sapphires cutting in, chipping away at Eden until she felt naked and exposed. She did nothing with that sharp gaze except keep it pinned on Eden while she slid a plate with perfectly golden toast along the island.

Of course she makes perfect toast. Everything she does has to be perfect.

Jos rolled her shoulders back and walked around the island. She got closer and closer, and Eden's breath hitched. Her lungs felt like they were going to blow up, but still, she couldn't breathe in or out. She was a statue, burning on the spot. When Jos reached out, Eden's heart leapt into her throat. She braced for her touch. What would it be like if she touched her? Not a hand under the shoulder or around the waist, but really touched her?

Instead, Jos took the clothes from Eden's grip. "I'll wash these. Eat that toast, please. You have two more glasses of water to drink before you go to bed."

Eden groaned.

“You’ll thank me in the morning.”

Jos took the clothes and stalked off, her hips swaying naturally, and Eden was transfixed. All the things she’d thought she knew about Jos Frank were stripped down in a single night. Or maybe she was just having trouble controlling her base emotions. Jos was still a sell out. She still had this big, fancy house. She still wasn’t a real journalist anymore. She’d lost her way. She’d lost touch.

Maybe Eden just didn’t care as much. Maybe it was hard to dig down and find your principles and dislikes and reasons against or for anything when a person’s head was a mess and whisky and water were still fighting for purchase.

That was it. That was all it was.

Eden sunk down hard onto one of the square, chrome and white barstools at the island. She took a bit of the toast and nearly groaned at how good it was. It somehow tasted better than anything she’d ever tasted in her life.

Chapter 6

Jos

What exactly am I supposed to do with her?

Jos knew what she should do. She should put Eden to bed in her guest room and forget about her until morning, when she would call a cab and send her on her way. She really should send her on her way now. She was in much better shape and no doubt could recall her address if Jos pressed. Oddly enough, she didn’t want to press or send Eden anywhere.

She threw Eden’s clothes in the washing machine, along with a few of her own items

to make a full load, added soap, and twisted the dial to start everything. She walked away, taking slow, measured steps back to the kitchen.

She found Eden standing by the island, her empty plate behind her, the stool pushed back in.

“You look tired.” It wasn’t true. Eden didn’t look anything less than alive. Her dark eyes sparked like twin fires. It wasn’t just the whisky responsible for it. She had strange eyes. Eyes that were alive and saw too much. Soft eyes in a beautiful face.

There was an ache in Jos’ chest, an empty spot that she didn’t recognize. When she looked Eden right in the eye it was like she was seeing it and it was magnified a thousand times, so glaring that Jos couldn’t ignore it.

“I am. I guess.” Eden glanced around the kitchen, and Jos breathed a sigh of relief. She’d never had any trouble looking anyone in the eye. Not ever. “Are you sure you don’t want me to leave?” she asked, catching Jos’ gaze again.

It was back, those flames erupting over every inch of Jos’ skin, something like hunger tightening her belly. “No. That would be more trouble than it’s worth. I have three extra bedrooms. I won’t even notice you’re here.”

Eden’s lips curled up. She could read straight through that, and that terrified Jos. “Okay. Thank you. Can you show me where to go?”

Jos started walking. She thought putting more space between them and fleeing was the answer, but it felt like Eden’s eyes were chasing her through the house, burning through her back. She felt stripped naked, strangely vulnerable, and she did not like it. She couldn’t just run and hide. She hadn’t done that since she was a little girl, and she’d promised herself that she would never do it again.

She stopped in front of the guestroom after going up a set of stairs and down the hall. She flicked on the light and stepped away, not wanting to be trapped in the same space with Eden. Which was silly, because they were in the same house at the moment. The same city. The same country was already too much.

Jos felt her throat close up and she wondered what the heck was happening. Eden stepped past her and took in the room. It couldn't be more than anything she was used to, having grown up with rich parents.

"Wow," she breathed. "This is nice." Her smile was like a sucker punch. "But you do know there are other colors on the spectrum other than white. Everything is white."

"That's not true," Jos muttered. "Black and chrome are thrown into the mix."

Eden hesitated. Jos knew she should run. She could feel the heaviness of the moment, sense the way the air shifted like a storm was about to roll in. She braced without knowing what she was bracing for. "Can I ask you something?"

No. Never. Run. Leave. Go.

She crossed her arms and waited, not a yes or a no. Her nipples beaded under the push-up bra she'd worn with the little black dress. She felt ridiculous now. She'd kept the boots on, and the heels were high. The balls of her feet were on fire. Even her toes hurt. Her lungs hurt more. The real fire was there. She was holding her breath and she didn't know why.

"Are you lonely?" The words burst out of Eden, sucking up what little oxygen was left in the room.

Eden never would have asked that question if she wasn't still being somewhat fueled by liquid courage. Would she? Jos didn't know. She didn't know the first thing about Eden Rutherford other than that she shouldn't like her.

She was a threat. She was everything Jos had never liked. Someone who didn't have to work for anything. Someone who was cherished and loved as a child. Protected. Kept safe. Even as an adult, her parents pulled favors for her. Got powerful people to listen because they had even more power.

She was on a mission to save the world, while all the while she'd lived in an ivory fucking tower. She was headstrong and stubborn even though she'd rebelled against, what? Getting the wrong designer handbag for her birthday? She had the audacity to throw Jos' choices back at her. She was rude and mouthy. Sassy. Annoying. She couldn't hold her liquor despite her confidence that she could. She was going to be the one to replace Jos because she was younger. She was the new and improved Jos. The network was going to love her, and all the while Jos would be counting down her

days. Worst of all, she was far too beautiful. The flawless, effortless, genuine kind of beautiful.

Before Jos knew what she was doing, she was reaching for Eden. Wrapping her arm around her waist, she angled her towards the door. One hand shot up to her throat like a collar, but she didn't press in. She kept her caged there against the door, which bucked into the wall in protest at the sudden movement. Eden's eyes went wide, but they weren't blown with fear. Her pupils were very black and very large and full of raw hunger that she didn't bother to hide.

A whimper, soft and needy and wild, escaped her throat, and then she surged forward, her throat against Jos' hand, her hands warm and soft, bracketing her face. She brought her closer, struggled against her until she could reach her and then her lips were against Jos'. Not unyielding, but soft and pliant, seeking, searching.

Jos kissed Eden so much harder. She scalded her lips. She was furious in her kiss, threading her fingers through the long, silky strands of Eden's hair. It was so much softer than silk. It was like the fabric of some goddess in some faraway land. Something too soft for the touch of mere mortals. Her lips were even better. Plush. She tasted like the faint burn of whisky.

Jos didn't know what it meant to surrender. She didn't really know tenderness. She was the one who gave the orders, who expected to be obeyed. She handed out the pain and the pleasure and Sandy had taken it. She'd submitted. They hadn't done scenes, and Jos wasn't into putting a label on what she liked in the bedroom. She was scared that if people knew what she wanted, what she liked, how she liked things and why she liked them that way, there would be no coming back from it. Sandy had understood. She wanted it, craved it. And that's why they'd worked. They'd talked about it before they'd ever slept together that first time. There was already a level of trust. They'd known what they wanted from each other.

What did Eden want? What did she like? How would she respond if Jos nipped her bottom lip? If she bit her shoulder and scraped her teeth down to her perfect breasts and kissed her there, hard enough to bruise? If she twisted and pinched her nipples? Would she understand what Jos needed? That she would only hurt her as long as it brought pleasure, and no more? That it wasn't her pain she craved, or her pain that she wanted? Would she want to explore? Test those boundaries? Or would she be afraid? Would she look at Jos like she was depraved and disgusting?

Stop. This is a mistake. You're not going to work together. She's young. Mouthy. She doesn't know how to keep private things private. Even if you liked perfectly normal, vanilla sex, she'd probably tell everyone that she slept with Jos Frank, her one-time idol.

Jos ripped away with great difficulty. Her shoulders were heaving. She stepped back, shocked at the force of her desire. She'd just touched Eden, kissed her with a hunger that rocked her to the very essence of her being. She'd put her hand to her throat like she had any right to possess her.

Eden's eyes jerked open. "Why are you stopping?" she demanded, her voice wavering, breaths ragged. "Please don't stop."

The sound of the word "please" falling from her lips did something to Jos, but she wasn't going to give in. Kissing Eden was too much. A monumental mistake. A colossal loss of control from someone who never lost control.

"I think you should go to bed now. Sleep it off."

"No." Eden shook her head, stubborn as ever. Her teeth worked her bottom lip, sawing furiously at it. Jos' gaze was pulled there, and her stomach cramped. Her hands shook. Her whole body trembled. "No, I don't want to go to bed. I want to do that again. I want to kiss you again."

“You’re drunk. Clearly.”

“I’m not. Well, not really. I know perfectly well what I’m doing.”

Jos didn’t want to scare Eden, but she didn’t know what else to do. “You couldn’t handle it,” she snapped. “You’re too sweet.”

“What do you want to do?” Eden shot back. “Break me?” Jos nearly lost her shit right there. Eden’s mouth fell open. “Like, how much?”

“We are not having this conversation.”

“No. I want to know. Are you into that? Like chains and whips and stuff? BDSM or whatever?”

“No,” Jos growled, and that was the truth. “No chains. No whips.” Why was she talking? Why couldn’t she shut up?

“So, what, then? Clamps and toys? Rigorous physical activity?”

“Rigorous physical activity?” Jos actually laughed. “I need to write that one down. I like that.”

“If you like giving commands, or putting a hand at my throat or whatever, that’s okay. I liked it. I’ve been to clubs before. Some underground kind of thing in New York where they did things to people. Hurt them. But they liked it.”

“Christ.” Jos backed up, bumping straight into the wall. “I have never and would never try anything like that. I’m just not sweet and gentle. I’m not capable of that. You’re young and you’re both of those things. And if I kissed you again, I wouldn’t stop there, and you’re a child. You’re—”

“Twenty-six. Not a child. A woman. A woman who has desires. I’m not innocent and I’m not stupid, and I’m sure as shit not scared of you, Josella Frank.”

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Sudden understanding lit up Eden's eyes and she was definitely not as drunk as Jos thought. If she was truly drunk, there was no way she would even have dared to kiss her. It wouldn't have been right.

"You're worried what people would think if they knew you didn't like vanilla sex? Umm, you're a lesbian. You like having sex with women. That's already not vanilla. In the best way, I mean. What do people think? That the only and best way to get off is missionary? That didn't and probably never will work for me. If you're worried about me telling someone, I would never do that."

"We're going to be working together. It would be so wrong."

"That just makes it more exciting."

Jos rolled her eyes. "Your youth is showing. That's a very childish way to think about it."

"Or maybe I'm just a woman who wants another beautiful woman and I don't care that we're going to be working together because I can be professional. I can keep a secret, and I sure as hell don't want my personal life becoming public, so I would never do that to another person. You've been on TV for two decades. I've been in the public eye since I was born, and my parents are far from celebrities. I know what it's like to have your every move watched. I've fought so hard for everything I've wanted. I've spent my whole life fighting, whether you believe that or not. You kissed me, Jos, and I'm not going to let that rest. It's probably best to just get it out of the way."

“Get it out of the way?” Jos turned to leave, but Eden grabbed her wrist. She spun her around and pulled her against her. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t make herself move away. She couldn’t make herself stop, even though she knew it was wrong.

She’d never wanted anyone the way she wanted Eden. It consumed her. The last shred of her control slipped away as Eden brought her hand to her face and turned her so she had to look at her. So she had to see the raw, naked want in her eyes.

“Yes,” Eden said, her voice thick but not wavering.

Jos had never once in her adult life thought to herself, fuck it. She thought it now. It was dangerous, but she didn’t give a shit about the danger at the moment. All she wanted was this maddening, intoxicating woman in front of her. It didn’t make sense. She couldn’t justify it to herself. She couldn’t explain it, which made it infinitesimally worse, and she still couldn’t stop.

She wrapped a hand around Eden’s shoulder, then slid her fingers higher, until she reached the back of her neck, and she pulled her close. She kissed Eden hard, without sweetness or restraint, and Eden didn’t shy away or gasp in shock or tell Jos that it was too much. She slammed her hands up against Jos’ chest and curled her fingers into her shoulders, hanging on as she plundered her mouth. She even dared to nip at Jos’ bottom lip, whimpering when Jos groaned at the sting.

She thrust her tongue into Eden’s mouth, kissing her furiously, tasting her and drowning in the sheer bliss of it.

“I tried to warn you,” Jos said thickly. She sucked Eden’s bottom lip into her mouth, panting with the restraint

of holding back. “I tried to save you from yourself. No, I tried to save you from me.”

Eden trembled as she pulled back. She looked Jos in the eye, shook her head, and hooked her hands in the hem of the thin camisole, raking it over her head.

She had nothing underneath.

Jos' mind fractured into a thousand pieces. Eden was perfect. Tight, toned body. Slight curves. She was tall and willowy with the most perfect breasts. Breasts too big for her frame, but still just a perfect handful. Her tight, dark nipples begged for Jos' mouth. For her fingers. She'd never felt her mouth go so dry. Her panties were soaked, the hot throbbing between her legs an incessant need she couldn't ignore. She wanted to put her fingers there to ease the ache, but she wouldn't. She'd deny herself. Because this was going no further.

It was going further.

Eden slipped off the pajama pants in a single movement and stepped back, out of the fuzzy material pooled at her feet. She was a goddess naked. Her skin was pale even though her hair was naturally dark. She was perfect and smooth, and it was obvious she hadn't given up all of the accoutrements of her past life. Like expensive waxing appointments.

Jos had never seen anyone more beautiful. She felt pale in comparison. The lights were on in the room, but Eden didn't seem care. She didn't need to care. She had the confidence of youth. What would she think of Jos' body if she saw it? Yes, Jos worked her ass off with a personal trainer and killed herself at spin class and did yoga even though she hated it. She hadn't tasted junk food in twenty years. But still, there were things that she couldn't do to stop the passing of time, and she no longer looked like that.

She turned on her heel and started down the hallway, surer than ever that what she was doing was a mistake. She wouldn't be tempted. Wouldn't be lured into a trap. No

matter how perfect Eden was, no matter if she never told a soul, they couldn't. She couldn't. Jos was panicking because she'd never felt so out of control.

She didn't expect Eden to follow. Rejection stung and she was sure that she'd take a hint, put her clothes back on, and go the fuck to bed. Alone.

She was wrong.

Eden caught up with her at the door to her room. It was down the hall, far from the guest room, but not far enough. Her small hand closed around Jos' wrist, yanking her around. Eden was a pillar of fire that landed in Jos' arms. Her lips were fire, finding Jos', refusing to let her back down. Refusing to let her take the coward's way out.

Jos kissed her back. She couldn't stop herself. She couldn't stop herself from wheeling them away from the light of the hallway, into the darkness of her room. She flung the door shut and spun Eden, steering her to the bed.

She couldn't stop kissing her. Couldn't stop the way she set her on fire. Couldn't stop the sensations she'd never felt before, the ones that scared her and electrified her and made her feel fully alive when she hadn't felt that way since she did her first interview.

Eden kissed her deeply, not stopping or pulling away. She buried her hands in Jos' hair and tugged her down to the bed on top of her. It wasn't graceful or neat, but it was clear that Eden didn't want it to be that way. Eden's hands got bold, daring to touch Jos. She worked her way under the blazer, pushing it from Jos' shoulders. She struggled, freeing her arms until it was gone. Eden's hands were everywhere, tracing the lines of her body, her curves, her breasts above the dress. She couldn't stop tasting Eden's mouth, warring with her tongue, stroking her, nipping her, swallowing her whimpers as she gave them up to her like an offering. She couldn't stop.

She was all furious desire between her legs. The throbbing was taking over her common sense, the need in her body shutting down her good judgement. Control? What was control in the face of her all-consuming, overwhelming need?

Jos ripped away and crawled down the length of Eden's body, feeling as though she was going to fracture into a thousand pieces. She found Eden's breast in the dark, thumbing her nipple until Eden threw back her head and cried out.

Jos wasn't gentle, as she promised not to be, but Eden loved it. She loved it so much that when Jos took that nipple into her mouth, suckling the hard bud, scraping her teeth over it then pulling back to pinch it with her fingers again, Eden bucked beneath her. Her hips rose up sharply, and Jos pinned her to the bed with the flat of her hand splayed over her belly.

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Eden clutched Jos' wrist with both hands and she pushed her hand down. Down her belly. Lower, lower. She didn't stop until Jos was cupping her between her legs, and she was perfect. God, she was so, so perfect. Warm. Smooth. So wet that she was dripping down her thighs, soaked with her desire.

For me. She's soaking wet for me. She wants me.

Eden's legs fell open, an invitation. She writhed against Jos' hand before she even moved it. "Please," Eden said, begging so sweetly. "Please, Jos. I need you."

Jos growled, but she couldn't stop. She was too far gone to even think about stopping. She couldn't make Eden leave. She couldn't make her own body obey her commands. She had to have her. She had to taste her. And that word. The sound of her voice. That "please" so breathless, a whimper, a moan, a prayer.

Jos parted Eden's thighs, spreading her legs so far apart on the bed that she gasped. "Are you sure?" she asked the darkness.

"Yes." Eden was sure. She wasn't wilting or fading or trembling. She was panting. She loved having her legs spread open. She knew what she wanted. She wasn't drunk and she was indeed an adult who knew her own mind.

"Because if I taste you now, I'm not going to stop until you're coming on my tongue. Coming on my fingers. I'm going to make you come so hard that you'll beg me to have mercy. You'll beg me to stop. I'm going to make you come until you can't come anymore. Until it hurts. Do you understand, Eden?"

Eden did shiver then, but it was from desire, not fear. Her hand pressed against her seam, finding her clit, and she circled it slowly. She ran her hand through her folds, coating her fingers in her wetness, then she lifted her hand, offering it to Jos like proof. Like the most divine treasure in the world.

Jos leaned forward, taking Eden's hand and plunging her fingers into her mouth. She made a noise in her throat that she couldn't stop. She was delicious. So fucking delicious. She was a wreck. Hard desire pounding between her legs. Her heart thrashing in her chest. Blood surging in her ears.

"Do you understand?" she asked again, her hands on Eden's thighs once more, bracing her.

"Yes," Eden panted. Her head dropped back to the bed and thrashed there. "Yes, I understand."

Chapter 7

Eden

Eden knew there was no going back now, but fuck going back.

She used to be afraid of the parts of herself that she didn't understand. She was confused for a lot of her early teenage years before she figured out that she was gay, then she had to come out to her parents and her friends. She had it easier than most. Her parents loved her and accepted her no matter what. She'd lost some friends, but most of them didn't care. The fact that she was gay was fine. What was not fine, the most confusing parts to her and to most people she knew, was who she was attracted to.

Women, yes, but it was women who were twice her age or more. She'd never been

attracted to anyone her own age. Never. She hadn't dated in high school for that reason, then after, she'd kept all of her liaisons a secret if she could. She learned not to be afraid. Not to be ashamed. She didn't have room in her life for a relationship, and she was slowly initiated into more casual, but no less meaningful interactions with women who wanted the same thing. A night of consensual pleasure that was meaningful because it was brief and because it gave them exactly what they wanted.

Eden had done things she figured Jos herself probably hadn't even done. Jos was trying to warn her that she wouldn't be gentle, or that she liked it dark, maybe even some things that bordered on kinky, but Eden had already been there and tried that. She wanted to know exactly what she liked. She was liberal when it came to trying new things. She refused to feel shame about the fact that she wasn't made for vanilla, as she'd said.

Jos didn't want people to find out.

Eden liked to keep her private life private too. She really did understand. Not just the details of what she did in the bedroom, but all things.

She was giving up what anonymity she'd gained by agreeing to go on TV, but she kept telling herself she had an obligation if she really cared. If she didn't want to be a hypocrite. That some sacrifice was worth the good. That she could stop at any time and fade out into obscurity.

Was that really why she'd agreed to the job?

Or did it have more to do with the fact that Jos was the one who asked her? The one who wouldn't take no for an answer? Jos Frank, the most beautiful woman in the world. Eden had been lying to herself. She couldn't lie to herself now. Whisky was a goddamn truth teller and it whispered in her ear, telling her all the things she didn't want to hear. From the minute she'd sat down across from Jos at that shitty coffee

shop, she'd wanted her.

She'd wanted her for a freaking lifetime before that.

Eden didn't think that what she was doing, what she wanted with Jos or with anyone else before her, was filthy or dirty or wrong. She'd wanted it every time and there was no shame in that desire. If it shocked other people, the fact that sometimes hurting could be good, that there could be pleasure in some forms of pain, then let it be shocking. The way Jos had looked at her as she'd said it though? Like it hurt her, like she didn't like it about herself? That stung. There was no way Eden had been able to let that go.

She wasn't letting it go now.

She'd driven Jos to the edge, provoked her, and this was the result.

And fuck, it was glorious.

Jos kissed her furiously and Eden was unprepared for the wild ache that was building inside her. She'd said that she understood. That she was ready. Nothing in her life could possibly have prepared her for this moment.

"We should stop," Jos hissed, warning Eden again.

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nbsp; Eden didn't want her to stop. She couldn't live with anything if Jos stopped, so she pulled her closer. She kissed her hard. She licked at the seam of her lips until they parted on a whimper, then she thrust her tongue into Jos' mouth, stroking hers, stoking her fire, daring her to be able to push her away when it was clear that Jos wanted her as much as she did.

"Get on your hands and knees," Jos commanded, breaking the kiss. She scraped her teeth along Eden's lower lip and the bloom of copper in her mouth was tangy and sharp on her tongue.

"Wh-what?" she panted. She wasn't drunk anymore, but her overstimulated brain was working slower than it normally did.

"If you want to do this, if you want this, me, right now, then you'll get on your hands and knees."

"O-okay." Eden was moving even before she finished saying the word.

She scrambled up onto her knees, then she planted her hands on the mattress near the pillows. She curled her fingers into fists, grasping the sheets and the blankets. She was so open, so exposed and bared, and Jos was looking at her. A ripple of humiliation washed over her, but as soon as Jos' touch was there, one finger trailing down her spine, it was banished, the shame turning into something else that burned so much hotter and brighter.

Jos trailed her finger down Eden's spine, stopping at her bottom. She cupped the twin globes boldly and Eden gasped. Jos spread Eden's legs with her hand, knocking them

apart, truly opening her up. She could feel the rush of the bedroom's cool air against her overheated skin. She was wet. She was so wet that it was mortifying.

"Look at you," Jos purred. "So wet that you're dripping down your thighs already." She dipped her hand between Eden's legs, not touching her there, but gathering the wetness that was indeed trickling down the insides of her legs. Shockingly, she smeared it over Eden's ass after, over both her cheeks, painting her with her own desire.

"If you're going to spank me, just do it," Eden ground out.

"Is that what you want? My handprint across your beautiful, round ass?" Jos' voice was bored, but Eden could hear the fraying that she didn't want to reveal. She was painfully turned on and it made another rush of wetness coat Eden's thighs.

"I don't know. Do what you want to do."

"Spanking is so trite. If you want to be punished, I'm afraid I'm not going to give that to you. I'm going to deny you what you want."

"Wh-why?"

"Because that's a different form of punishment. Anticipation. Waiting."

"Oh God, Jos, please."

"Begging now? Well, which is it? Do you want my hand across your ass, or do you want my mouth on your pretty pink pussy?"

"Oh fuck. Oh God."

“No. No God. It’s just me. It’s just me and you, and if you want to stop, then you had better get up and leave now.”

“I don’t want to stop. I don’t want to stop. Please. Give me your mouth.” As soon as Eden said it, she thought that just because she had, Jos wouldn’t do it. That she was playing games with her, twisting her words around, being cruel with her to prove that she was in control, but Jos was an enigma. She didn’t twist anything up for Eden, didn’t turn anything around.

No, she gave her what she wanted.

Her hands knocked Eden’s legs even further apart, until her thighs shook with being spread so open, then her mouth was there. Hot, so hot. She didn’t go easy. She wasn’t sweet. She didn’t start out slow and warm Eden up. She attacked her with a fury, driving her tongue into her opening, through her folds, eating her messily.

Eden was desperate. She was desperate for every new sensation unfurling in her. She was wild with it, out of control. And all with this woman, the very first woman she had ever craved. She was desperate for her touch. For her fingers and her tongue and her lips. She’d never thought she’d be here, never thought she’d want to be here, but she was, and it was everything she thought she wanted and everything she thought she’d never wanted, and so much fucking more.

She was wrecked with it. She felt destroyed. Her legs were shaking. Her thighs were vibrating. And there was Jos. Jos knew what she was doing. She licked Eden over and over again. Brutally. With hot, hard passes. She licked her from her entrance almost up to her ass, and Eden struggled against her. She struggled because it was so taboo and so wrong and so, so good, and so right. She was losing her mind. Her brain was jumping ship and her body was taking over. She was all want and need.

Jos grasped Eden’s legs, holding her open, keeping her from falling over, bracing her.

Eden's hands grasped at the sheets, clawed at the pillows. She writhed against Jos, her hips a swirling, arching, aching mass.

"So fucking gorgeous," Jos said from behind her. "You have the most perfect pussy. So wet. So soft. So delicious. So pink and open and wild for me. You like what I'm giving you, Eden?"

"Yes," Eden sobbed. Her hips thrashed wildly. "Yes."

She was aching between her legs. Throbbing. She'd never felt anything worse. Never felt anything better. Jos knew just how to torture Eden. She flicked over her clit, gave her no real pressure, nothing to grind against when she bucked her hips back, demanding, trying to take. She wasn't the one in control.

Jos' hand moved up, caressing Eden's slick folds. She ground against her fingers, but Jos was too skilled. She stayed away from Eden's clit, and she let out a growl of frustration, a sound so feral that it astounded her. Jos did part her, spreading her open. It was too intimate. It was too much. It was never going to be enough.

"Please," Eden begged. "Please, Jos, make me come."

"Are you sure? You might be sorry you asked me to do that."

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Now the hairs on her arms were standing on end, but Eden wasn't stopping. She wasn't sorry for craving a second of this pleasure.

Jos kept Eden spread open and she ate at her again. Not gently. She punished her with her tongue, lashed her clit with it until Eden was a mess again, soaked between her legs, frantic, hips bucking. Jos didn't try to hold her still. She didn't tackle her and pin her to the mattress. She didn't let Eden take her pleasure either. She ate her noisily, so loudly that it made Eden's cheeks flush scarlet, and Jos didn't care. She wasn't ashamed or embarrassed and it did something to Eden. Made her bold. Made her reckless. Made her want more and more and more.

When Eden was about to break, about to split her skin and wrench out of her body with need, Jos slid two fingers inside her without warning. She lashed at her clit, and she buried her fingers deep inside, and Eden screamed. She arched and bucked and was wild and messy and out of control. Her body was a life force of its own.

"Use my hand," Jos commanded, moving her mouth away, but fucking Eden hard. "Use my fingers to come. I want you to work for it."

"Fuck," Eden hissed. She said it over and over. Chanted it. She worked her hips madly, grinding against Jos' hand, against the fingers filling her up and stretching her wide. Jos scissored her fingers, then curled them until Eden was so full and sore and stretched that she was panting with that too. One more curl and something changed.

She normally hated that kind of stimulation. It was uncomfortable. It felt like getting something medical done to her body, an invasive exam. But this was different. She knew Jos was touching those spots, spots she hadn't even touched herself, and it was

uncomfortable at first, but after a few seconds, the sensations changed, and it wasn't discomfort that Eden felt. It was fire. Hot, raging fire. Her body trembled, her muscles coming apart, tearing in half. She was tearing in half. Over and over again.

She was barrelling towards that orgasm, and Jos was driving her there, fucking her there with her mouth, then her fingers. Eden was fucking herself against those fingers, moaning and wild, her head thrown back, her hair everywhere, beads of sweat rolling down her forehead and beading between her breasts. She was moving her hips, searching, aching for the right angle, for more.

She imagined Jos behind her

, her face soaking wet, her lips glistening, and when Jos curled her fingers and thrust again, Eden was gone. She was so fucking gone.

Jos fucked her hard, hitting that spot every single time, until Eden burst.

The orgasm pummeled her to the ground. It was hard and violent and earth shattering and so, so wonderful. Eden didn't just see bright lights bursting behind her eyes, she was the light.

She'd barely caught her breath when Jos spun her around and pinned her to the bed. She caged her in with her arms and kissed her hard. Eden was still shaking, still in the throes of her orgasm, and she responded messily, kissing, licking, biting, tasting herself all over Jos' lips and tongue and chin and even down her neck. She kissed her until she couldn't breathe, until she couldn't get enough, until she wanted more all over again.

And that was, of course, when Jos pulled away.

Eden blinked up into the empty space where Jos had just been. She stood by the bed,

watching Eden almost warily, a strange expression on her face that was quickly arranged back into a semblance of careful neutrals.

“Sleep,” Jos commanded.

Eden struggled to sit. Her body felt so heavy. Sleep. It was a wonderful suggestion. “You’re not going to sleep here too?”

“No. I’ll be in the guestroom.”

“But this is your bedroom.”

“Just go to sleep,” Jos commanded.

She left, taking all the air in the room with her. Eden’s eyes were so heavy that it was all she could do to pull a blanket over herself before she was fading. She didn’t have time to digest everything that had happened. Her body was liquid, warm, and the lingering whisky in her blood was pulling her under. The blankets smelled like Jos, she realized. Like Jos and like herself, and that was somehow comforting. Eden was warm and her body was liquid, and that was the last thought she had before surrendering to sleep.

Chapter 8

Jos

There were perfectly good reasons why Jos didn’t do this kind of thing. So, so many reasons.

She knew it was a mistake with every fiber of her being, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to regret it. She looked at Eden, her skin pale and flawless in the early

morning sunlight, asleep in her bed. Her dark hair fanned around her on the pillow, a snag in one of the strands that Jos wanted to smooth out with her fingers. She didn't let herself. She didn't dare.

Touching this girl was like touching a flame.

Not a girl. A woman.

She'd made a conscious choice to be with Sandy. She had been tired of being alone. People got older. They got settled. They got married. They shared their lives with other people. They had families together. In all of it, she'd blundered so completely. There had been so much space for things to go wrong that she didn't see coming.

She'd thought she could do it, give enough of herself to satisfy another person. To make them feel happy and complete. She'd been so wrong. She'd paid a heavy, public price for it. It wasn't even the knowing that other people knew about her failure that bothered her the most. It was that she knew. She knew she'd failed so spectacularly. That failure was a thorn in her heart, burrowing into the spots where she normally felt nothing, and she hated it.

With Sandy, it had been years. Years of her life. Years of trying. With Sandy, it made sense that she should feel something. With Eden Rutherford, it made no sense at all, and that scared Jos. It scared her in a way that nothing else did. She didn't feel fear. She didn't allow it.

She had to wake her up. She had to get her to leave. She had to get her out of her bed, out of her house, out of her mind and her space and her blood.

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She had zero experience dealing with something like this, but she wasn't going to let that make her frantic. She stayed calm as she called a cab, and when she was told it would be twenty minutes, she hung up and walked over to the side of the bed where Eden was sleeping.

"Eden." She nudged her shoulder. "Eden." There wasn't so much as a batted eyelash or a flicker of coming into consciousness. Jos sighed and gripped Eden's shoulder, shaking it hard. "Eden."

"What? What's happening?" Eden exploded out of the sheets, the blankets falling to her waist to reveal her perfect breasts. Her nipples hardened instantly after losing the warmth of the blanket and Jos tore her eyes away.

Not fast enough. Hunger and raw need overpowered her until she felt dizzy with it. What the hell was that? Clearly it was a brain fart. Eden's breasts were just breasts. Yes, she was beautiful, but Jos had never felt anything like that. She rubbed her chest where the feeling persisted. Apparently that gin and tonic the night before was giving her some strange form of indigestion.

"I called you a cab. You have to leave."

Eden blinked at her like she didn't understand. She did that for a few seconds before reality rushed at her and she swivelled her head around, taking in the room. She realized she was naked a second later and let out a yelp.

Jos had already set Eden's clothes from the night before, washed and neatly folded, on the foot of the bed. Eden spotted them and dove for them. Jos turned around while

Eden stumbled around, pulling on her jeans and blouse. Her soft footsteps brought her into vision a minute later.

“You’re kicking me out? After we...?”

“Yes. I have things to do today and work later. You’re going to get a call from someone at the network today. It would be better if we both forgot this happened.”

“Forgot? I can’t just forget!” Eden stared at her like she’d just turned into a viper.

“Forgot?” she asked again, clarifying, like she couldn’t quite believe what she heard.

“That’s right. Forget. We work together. It’s not professional. You were drunk and I was, well, people make—”

Eden shoved a finger at Jos accusingly. “Don’t you dare say mistakes. If you say mistakes, I’m going to scream.”

Jos was tempted to do it, just to see if Eden actually would. But then, if she did, Jos would grab her by the waist and throw her back down on the bed and cover her mouth with hers, eating at the sounds until that scream turned into moans of pleasure.

What the hell? No, I’m certainly not going to do that.

“I’ve called you a cab. Things happened last night for whatever reason,” Jos said calmly and logically. She was relying on her professionalism, the perfected on-air demeanor she’d polished over the years, to get her through. “You’re taking a job and we’re going to be cohosting the same show. There is no room in our careers for error. You know that as well as I do. Not with viewers and not with anyone pulling the strings.”

“What you’re really saying is that we slept together, and you liked it, and you don’t

like that you liked it.”

“Your cab is going to be here in ten minutes, maybe less.”

“Jos! Let’s just talk about this.”

Jos put her hands on her hips. Something close to pain stabbed at her chest. “We aren’t talking about this. There is no this. We used each other. We slept together. It was fine. Now, it’s morning and that’s not going to happen again. If you don’t want to forget it, that’s your business, but it’s not going to affect how we work together and it’s not going to happen again. If you were expecting sweet and tender this morning, I’m afraid you have the wrong idea about me.”

Eden narrowed her eyes like she could see straight through that, but then she frowned, and that frown said something else entirely. She was displeased. Hurt, even. Jos knew it was for the best, but her heart still sunk irrationally.

“I didn’t have the wrong idea about you,” Eden said coolly, her face shuttering closed. The hope in her eyes was banished and any lingering tenderness from the night before disappeared. Her face took on a hard expression that didn’t suit her at all.

Jos hated it, even if it was necessary. To protect her job and her reputation as a journalist. To protect herself because that’s what she did, that’s what she’d always done.

“That’s good.” She walked to the doorway of the bedroom. “Because there isn’t room for any silly little girl fantasies. No room for feelings or emotions. That’s not what it was about. Sometimes sex is just sex and that’s it.”

Eden circled around, feet slapping hard against the wood floor behind her. She made it through the doorway first, blocking it with her slight form, her arms crossed over

her chest and one hip thrown out. She looked like a bossy goddess and Jos nearly groaned.

“I didn’t think you were capable of tenderness,” Eden snapped. “Maybe for a minute, but that was a silly mistake. Don’t worry. I won’t get carried away again.” She narrowed her eyes. “I could refuse to take that job at the station. Then you’d be screwed, and all of this really would have been for nothing.”

Everything in Jos rebelled at that thought. It wasn’t nothing. Even if it should have been, it wasn’t. Even if she wanted it to be, it didn’t feel like it.

“I’d be fine,” she lied.

She’d lied about a lot of things yesterday. Things that mattered. She felt guilty about it now, which was odd because she’d told herself she was willing to do what it took to save her job.

She didn’t care about Eden Rutherford. Yes, she cared that she might get hurt in this industry. She didn’t want to see that happen to another journalist, let alone a young woman with stars in her eyes and hopes for saving the world, but she’d also lied trusting that it wouldn’t happen to Eden. No one at the network was going to chew her up and spit her out knowing who her dad was. That kept her safe. That gave her a layer of insulation.

“But you’ll take the job. You’ll take it because you want to change the world. You want to save the world. And you know this is a good opportunity. Anything less would be hypocritical, and you couldn’t live with yourself.”

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“Where are my shoes?” Eden snapped, eyes flashing fire. She was nearly snarling, and she was so damn intoxicating it was almo

st impossible for Jos to tear her eyes away.

“By the door.”

“Well, that’s a good and logical place for them, isn’t it?” Jos very nearly smiled at that, but the chill in Eden’s tone stopped her. “Thanks for making sure I got home okay last night, then feeding me to the wolves anyway. And the complete opposite of thanks for being a total asshole this morning and ruining any good that came of last night. See you in a few days, Josella.” Eden turned, but then she faced back around. “It’s not me who is the hypocrite. It’s not me who can’t live with myself. It’s so clearly not me.”

Jos let Eden walk away with the last word. She was too stunned to think of anything to say, even if she wanted to. She was too floored to move a muscle to go after Eden, even if she wanted to.

It was better that Eden disliked her. That way, things could remain professional. No lines would get blurred, no boundaries would get crossed. There would be no scandal, and no one would lose their job. They would host the show that had been hers together. Eden would be the new blood the network wanted, and Jos would suck it up because that was all she could do. She would retire from a distinguished career in three years, and then she’d find something else to do.

Maybe she’d write a book.

A fucking book.

Whatever she did, she'd find something to keep herself busy with, because when she was busy, she wasn't thinking about all the things she didn't have and how all the things she did couldn't even begin to convince her that she was happy.

Chapter 9

Eden

Eden hadn't been sure whether she was dreading her first day or looking forward to it or something in between, but as soon as she'd walked through the doors of the studio, she was greeted with a flurry of activity and a sea of people. She was good with names and faces, but after five minutes, they'd all started to swim and blend together. Within a half hour of getting there, she'd signed the forms she needed to sign with HR, then she was taken down to the set and shown her dressing room.

She met the people from wardrobe, the makeup artists, one who had been hired just for her, the producers, assistants, camera people, people who did lighting, other journalists, and a ton of other people she was hard pressed to even remember their titles because it was all too much.

Throughout it all, her new boss, Alden Shetfield, had stayed pretty much glued to her like it was his personal responsibility to make sure she succeeded. She'd arrived at the studio hours before she actually had to go live and do the real show, and she'd run through several practice takes, sitting up on stage under hot, bright lights with a face full of makeup, clothes that weren't her own and weren't exactly her style, and she'd had a crash course in reading the teleprompter. A lot of it she remembered from journalism school and her first internship. This was so not her jam, but she wasn't going to give up on it. She wasn't going to disappoint her parents or anyone at the studio by up and quitting before she even got started, no matter how distasteful she

found the whole thing.

Remember the good. She'd kept coaching herself with that line for hours.

Now, the whole remembering the reason she was there was a poor reason to keep her mouth shut when Alden ushered her off the set and helped her take her microphone off. He lifted one of her black curls, which she'd painstakingly put in before leaving her apartment, and frowned.

"Have you ever thought about going blonde?"

Eden turned, angling her body so that her hair slid away from his fingers. She barely repressed a shudder. She didn't like being touched by strangers without her permission and having already sat through getting her makeup done and the wardrobe people fussing over her and then getting a microphone put on and having all the eyes in the place on her, she was already chaffing at the attention she didn't want.

"No," she said icily. "Going blonde would probably break half my hair off to get it to lighten. I like it exactly the way it is."

Alden shrugged like it didn't matter. Eden wanted to groan. So this was how it was going to play out. Most people would be afraid to say anything to her, let alone be genuine, because of who her parents were. She hated the whole special treatment, ivory tower thing. She didn't want any of that either.

It must have been getting closer to seven than Eden thought, because she caught a flash of blonde bob and a black power suit and her whole body stilled. A shiver rattled down her spine and heat exploded between her legs.

She could sense Jos before she saw her, and the minute she did, Eden swore that when she dragged in a calming breath it was scented with lilies and gardenias and the

other exotic flowers that seemed to cling to Jos like she had an array of gardens out behind her house that she spent hours in every day before coming to the studio.

Yeah, earth child Jos is not.

Jos walked over, all easy confidence, a perfect mask in place. She was gorgeous. Flawless. She'd already gone through her hair and makeup, and she was nothing short of spectacular. A queen, and not just in that room.

Eden swallowed hard, hoping it wasn't audible. Hoping her face didn't give her away. She'd always been told that she had a face that read like a thousand books.

"Eden, you've already met Jos Frank," Alden made the introduction smoothly, indicating Jos, who wasn't more than a few feet to the right.

Eden's heart rattled around in her ribcage, knocking so furiously she was afraid the whole studio could hear it. It was a damn good thing they'd already taken her mic off. She glanced away from Alden, toward Jos, and when she didn't react or narrow her eyes or make a facial twitch like some secret code, Eden figured her face was probably fine and her expression was good to go. She apparently wasn't wearing a yep, we've met, and holy shit did we ever meet, this woman gave me an orgasm that made my brain freaking explode out of my skull kind of look.

"Yes," Eden blurted when she realized she was just standing there, and Alden was starting to look at her. "Yes, of course we met." She pasted on a smile for Jos. "It's good to be working with you. I can't tell you how much this means to me." Those were platitudes, meant for anyone else's ears, and Jos knew that, but still, the tiniest shadow of something flickered in her eyes.

Alden cleared his throat. He had an agenda to get the day going smoothly and standing there and chatting about how Jos was Eden's hero wasn't high on his

priorities. He probably had more instructions that Eden needed to follow, more things she had to learn, people she had to meet, or more paperwork for her to fill out, but instead he turned to Jos.

“We’re changing things up tonight. I moved a few things around on the schedule and we’re doing a show on pregnancy loss awareness. The whole month of October is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness and we’ve never done anything for it. I thought it was only fitting that we get some people in. Tomorrow we’re doing the new gym that opened up six locations around the city.” Alden pointed at the ceiling. “They have acro-yoga and swings and such. Fascinating.” He looked at his watch. “You have half an hour. If you want to go over anything ahead of time, just ask.” He left then, striding away and pulling out his phone as he went. Before he left the big, open room where the set was located, he was already talking to someone.

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Eden's heart had been hammering before, but now it felt like it was moving through molasses. She felt like Alden had created a flash flood and then just walked away like nothing had happened. But then, he was a man. He was a man who had clearly never been touched by the issue, and he delivered the message with total coldness and disinterest. He'd showed more passion talking about the fucking gym, for shit's sake.

Eden remembered exactly what Jos had said to her when she'd asked her to tell her something no one else knew. She knew Jos had had a miscarriage, and that it hadn't been very long ago, and Alden had treated her like it hadn't happened at all.

Eden was scared to look at Jos, and she found her standing very still. Her breathing was shallow, concentrated, the kind of thin

g people did when they were holding themselves together by a thread and they didn't want anyone else to know.

"Are you okay?" That was probably tone deaf too, but Eden didn't know what else to say. There were people around. People who might not already know what Jos had gone through. People who she wouldn't want knowing if she hadn't told them already.

Jos gave Eden a confused look, and then shifted back into her neutral façade. She even graced her with a smile that was so fake it put Eden's teeth on edge. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" Her voice was more fake sugar and it made Eden feel like someone was drilling a hole through her skull.

Her chest ached. Her heart hurt. It hurt for Jos. It hurt because their boss was a total

dickweed who thought he could do and say whatever he wanted and that it didn't hurt people. Eden had worried about being on set with Jos. She'd been so scared that after sharing crazy passion together and being booted from her house the next morning so unceremoniously, it might be awkward as hell to work together. Now, she was faced with this, and it made her concerns from that morning seem trite.

"Well, we had better get our microphones on and get up there," Jos said. "They'll want to fiddle around with lighting and whatever else since we haven't had two hosts for a very long time."

"Oh, they—we did a run through already." Eden pointed at the set.

If it was possible, the room seemed to freeze over. Jos gave her an icy look, but it was gone in an instant, buried under the pretty veneer she was so used to scraping together. "Right. Great. Well, we should still get up there. Make everyone else's jobs that much easier."

"Alright."

Eden followed her. She sat down in one of the hard, modern black chairs that was so square it actually bit into the backs of her legs and tuned out what was going on around her. They were sitting side by side, but Eden felt like they were worlds away from each other. Not only that, but there were also crazy walls between them. Walls around Jos. She'd walled herself in and walled everyone else out. She was walking out with a double impenetrable fortress wrapped around herself.

Eden didn't have to look at Jos to be hyperaware of her presence. It was hard not to be aware of someone who thought the most intimate moments they'd shared were a mistake. Jos had done a magnificent job of making it clear that nothing would ever happen between them again. She'd killed any longing that Eden had. Or, at least, Eden thought she'd had. She'd been grouchy and hurt until Alden dropped that news

about the interviews they were doing on Jos, and she'd gone so still.

She was hurting. It was so obvious, but she would never acknowledge that hurt or show a second of weakness. Eden had been filled with all the desire she thought she'd spent days squashing as soon as she saw Jos again and now, she was filled up with so much compassion that it took all her strength not to launch herself out of her chair and hug Jos.

She would react badly, Eden was sure of that.

The minutes ticked down fast and before Eden knew it, they were live. She was doing her first real TV thing in years, and even then, her internship hardly counted. She was aware that so many people would kill to be in her spot, and she was probably going to be roundly hated by most journalists out there for getting this hand up, something she most certainly didn't work for or earn or deserve, at least in their opinion. She didn't like that people were going to be jealous of her and not like her over this. She didn't like it one bit.

She was thinking about all of that the whole time she was reading the teleprompter and asking questions. She barely managed to hold it together through the two interviews they did. Her nerves were a mess, and her emotions were riding too close to the surface. And Jos? She was stone. Cold. Hard. All while somehow being warm and personable and a great host.

God, Eden had a lot to learn.

If she hadn't been watching Jos so closely, she might have missed the way her face drained of color beneath her makeup several times during the hour. An hour that must have been torture for her. She grabbed the arm of her chair several times, as if to steady herself, and held it in a white-knuckle grip, but it was the hand facing away from the camera, blocked by Eden sitting there. If Eden hadn't been watching, she

wouldn't have seen that either. But she was watching.

Jos was not okay. She was not okay, and she lived alone. Did she have any friends? Eden didn't know. Would she confide in anyone? No. Eden did know that.

After their first show was over, she dodged the praises being heaped at her like she'd done something to deserve it and scuttled off to her dressing room. She changed quickly, hoping to beat Jos out of there, but she heard fast steps clicking past her door and knew they belonged to Jos. How, she wasn't sure. It was like an extra sense she had. A gut instinct. The same one she used to make a good story happen.

She grabbed her purse with her keys in it and raced out of the room, leaving it a mess, but she would deal with that tomorrow. She figured no one would say anything anyway, and she hated herself for that thought. She burst through a door at the end of the hallway and ended up outside in the parking lot. The sun had sunk down hours ago and the night was black, big double posted lights illuminating the parking lot behind the studio.

For one panicked moment, Eden thought Jos had already left, but then she spotted her on the other side of the parking lot, walking to a car that was hard to miss, even in a lot with other expensive vehicles parked all around. Shoulders rigid, back ramrod straight, blonde bob perfect, it was definitely Jos.

"Jos, wait!" Eden yelled. She took off running, her flats scraping over the parking lot's dark pavement, shadows chasing her as she went.

The shadows of the night were probably nothing compared to what Jos was going through. Probably not even close.

Chapter 10

Eden

Jos reeled around from the door as soon as she heard Eden approaching. She was not at all approachable, but Eden ignored the lump of fear that settled in her stomach when she saw the open hostility on Jos' face. It was even more shocking for not being the neutral studio expression Jos was so careful with.

"Are you okay?" Eden asked again. It was a stupid question. A bad one. As a journalist, she should do better.

"They're trying to force me out," Jos hissed, shocking Eden by being truthful. Her lips curled into a sneer. "This is what they want. They want to do this to me. Stick pins in me until I can't fucking breathe. Until I don't want to breathe."

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“What?” Eden was so confused. “I’m sure that they...it’s just that...this month happens every year. I mean, of course it does, but a lot of people don’t know that the whole month is dedicated to, well, yeah. There are millions of people who have broken hearts because this happened to them. It was an important show to do. I’m sure no one meant to hurt you.”

“No? Then why are you out here looking like a kicked puppy?”

She wasn’t going to rise to it. If Jos was angry and hurt, then let her blow off steam. Her words weren’t going to cut through Eden’s skin. Jos was barely even looking at her. She was lashing out and it would have been at anyone who had dared follow her out. She was boiling with fury. The air was hot with it. Hot and metallic with rage, and all of it tainted by the unmistakable undercurrent of pain.

“Because I can tell that you’re not okay. I know what you told me, and I’m sorry that you’re hurting. That’s not right.”

“Not right? Do you think anyone cares about what is right and not right?”

“Honestly, I hope so.”

“That’s right. You’re still young and fresh enough that you’re not jaded.”

“Actually, I said that this industry was shit. You were the one who convinced me it wasn’t. Is there something I don’t know about? Why do you feel like you’re being attacked?”

Jos' hand froze on her car door. She was a great, raging storm about to break wide open. She looked totally unsuited to driving and Eden rushed forward. She stopped at the cold look Jos gave her and didn't come any closer than a foot. She did hold out her hand. "Give me the keys. You shouldn't be driving when you're upset like this."

"Suddenly you know me and what's best for me?"

"No. I just...please Jos, don't leave like this. You look like you're going to explode. If you got in an accident and hurt someone, you'd never forgive yourself. Let's just go somewhere and talk."

"I don't want to talk about anything. The only reason you're out here is because you know far more than you should. I told you that in a moment of weakness, and you're already out here exploiting it."

Jos tried to open her car door, but Eden stepped forward and slammed it shut with a hard shove of her hand. "I am not exploiting anything. You can rage at me if you want. I know it's not really me that you're mad at. I haven't done anything to you. I don't want to do anything to you. I'm just here as a friend, because God knows it looks like you need one."

Jos tried to wrench the car door open, but Eden kept her hand there. She could feel the tension building in Jos, feel the way her body stiffened dangerously, and she felt like she was pushing her to something, to a breaking point that was going to get ugly.

Eden didn't want that to happen here. Not in the damn parking lot of the building where they both worked. Not in some place that was overly public. Jos would never forgive her, and Eden wasn't sure why that mattered, but it did.

More than that, Jos hadn't left Eden standing at the curb of some pub, waiting on a cab that might not have materialized, when she was so drunk that anything could

have happened to her. Eden felt like she owed her, and she was going to repay the debt no matter how angry Jos was with her for interfering.

“Let me drive you to your house. I’ll get a cab back here for my car.”

“I’m fine.” Jos spat the words. Her face was doing something funny. Arranging itself into a mask of blankness, of numbness, where there was nothing to be read. She was shoving the pain and the anger deep down inside herself where it couldn’t be touched.

That was more frightening to Eden than anything.

“Jos,” she prodded. “Let me drive you home. I’m not going to take no for an answer. You’re going to have to run me over if you want to leave this parking lot.”

“I’d do it with pleasure.” She was lying. There was no heat in it. Her voice broke at the end, and she swallowed hard. She raised her head, and her eyes were so hard, so full of pain that Eden’s heart stuttered and died out. In the next instant, she raised her hand and silently handed over the keys.

Eden slid in on the driver’s side. She had to press the button on the side of the seat to get anywhere close to the wheel. Jos was already tall. How the hell did she drive in heels?

Jos slid into the passenger seat and slammed the door. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window.

It had been a good long while since Eden had driven a car this expensive and her heart raced, but she was far more worried about the woman next to her.

“I don’t know the way,” Eden admitted. She waited while Jos furiously punched her address into the car’s GPS on the big screen in the dash. She said nothing. The silence was oppressive. Eden’s worry filled up the car. Jos wouldn’t look at her. She refused to see the care or concern on Eden’s face. She hated accepting help. She hated being vulnerable.

Her words played over in and over in Eden’s head all the way home. They’re trying to force me out. This is what they want. Eden needed to know what that meant. She needed to know what she’d just put her name to, what job she’d just taken, and what was really going on. It was more than Jos was telling her. She needed to know if she’d been lied to. Tricked, somehow, into taking a job she didn’t even really want.

More than anything, she needed to make sure Jos was going to be okay.

Eden knew enough about unhappy people to know one when she saw one, and Jos had let her armour slip. She wasn’t happy. She wasn’t fine. This was about more than what happened at work. This was about something bigger, something so much bigger, something Eden could only guess at. She wasn’t sure what she’d do if Jos wouldn’t give her answers. Jos was closed off, shut down.

Eden parked in the triple garage and killed the engine. She’d told herself she wouldn’t leave until she could do it without her conscious being stabbed at by guilt.

It looked like she'd be staying a while.

Jos pretty much threw herself out of the car. Her eyes were so blue and wide that Eden nearly gasped when Jos turned around to slam the door. She kicked off her pumps in a shocking fit of...something...and stalked across the garage's pristine concrete, over to the house door. She punched in a code and threw that open far too viciously.

She didn't stop there. As soon as she was inside, Eden trailing after her at a safe distance, she tore off her blazer and ripped at the top buttons of her blouse like it was too confining and restricted her breath. Her shoulders heaved as she drew in great gulps of oxygen, but it didn't seem like anything was getting to her lungs.

Was she having a panic attack? Eden had been on the street, talking to people, witnessing the harsh realities that came along with being homeless, for a long time. That meant everything from what people did when they were extremely high to overdoses. A major part of the book she'd written, of every story she'd wrote, was the way mental health played into the equation. She'd seen panic attacks before. The way Jos was breathing...

Eden rushed forward and got in Jos' space enough that she couldn't help but see her. She still gave her room to breathe. She didn't dare touch her, though she wanted to reach out and set a hand on her shoulder. No matter how they'd left things last time, Eden was desperate to make things better, even if she knew she couldn't make them alright. Jos' obvious pain settled like a fist in her chest and turned her stomach into a battleground of apprehension.

“Jos. You need to take a breath. Not like you’re doing.” Eden demonstrated by breathing in slowly, then letting the air out slowly. She felt like she was suffocating too, the minute Jos’ eyes flew to hers and she was sucked into that vortex of an emotional storm.

“Breathe?” Jos rasped sarcastically. It was almost a hiss. She was pissed. Better pissed and breathing than having a full-blown panic attack. “I didn’t tell anyone about the miscarriage. I only told the people who I had to tell that I was pregnant, and they didn’t want to do anything with that information until it was convenient for them. I told my boss, Alden. You met him today, but you probably met so many people that he didn’t stand out. He told his boss, and so on, but no one but them knew. Do you understand?”

Eden didn’t. Not really.

“No, of course you don’t. Why would you? You’re untouchable. Your name makes you untouchable. Heaven help them if they ever want to fire you. The clapback would be enormous.”

Eden ignored that. Her dad wouldn’t do anything to anyone who wanted to fire her for a legitimate reason. But what if it wasn’t? What if someone tried to edge her out and used something extremely personal to hurt her and make it obvious?

“I still think the story was just...that it coincided with the timing of the actual...”

Jos’ eyes blazed hot fire, shutting Eden the heck up. She let out a yelp when Jos’ hand grasped her arm. Suddenly, she was pulling her, tugging Eden along so fast that she could barely stay on her feet. Her hand was hard and firm, but it didn’t hurt. It wasn’t the hard grip that made Eden afraid, or even the urgent speed they were traveling.

It was that Jos didn't say anything. She was like a tropical storm, ready to burst over them and raze them both to the ground. The vibes she gave off were strangely not so angry. She was...God, Eden didn't even know what she was. She was a contradiction of emotions, but she could feel the tide turning. That hurricane was no longer a force of rage. That hurricane was sad. Immeasurably sad.

Jos stopped in front of a closed door on the top floor. Eden hadn't even noticed it when she was up there before. Then again, she'd been slightly drunk on whisky and Jos, and in the morning, she'd been pissed. It was just a door. A door that probably had anything behind it. An office.

But it wasn't anything.

Fuck, it was so far from anything.

Jos twisted the handle and shoved the door in and there was no computer, no neatly contained and forgotten about storage, no boxes of Christmas ornaments or knickknacks. The room was smaller in comparison to the rest of the house, but it was still expansive. It was done in neutral colors, yellows and grays and creams, a high contrast to the overwhelming white in the rest of the place. There was an espresso hued crib with a soft yellow baby blanket draped over the side. A rocker with another, larger blanket covering the seat. A changing table that matched the crib with super tiny little articles of clothing folded below.

A nursery.

Jos' hold on Eden's arm unwound and so did she. She unspooled like thread, collapsing against the hallway wall, her face turned away from the room.

Eden stepped forward and carefully closed the door. She didn't know what to say. She wasn't going to mention anything about the studio again. If someone had given

Jos that story for a reason, because they wanted to hurt her, that was appalling. They'd timed it perfectly. Even more devious.

It disgusted Eden if it was the truth, but she couldn't know for sure. After their guest speaker today, Eden was more aware than ever what an important topic it was to talk about. How so many people went through it alone and suffered for years and years after. Other people needed to hear that message. People who were grieving, who didn't know how to find help. People who weren't aware. People who loss had never touched that way. It was important for everyone.

People like Jos.

There was no right thing to say, but Eden took a chance. Jos showed her that room for a reason. She hadn't wanted to, but she did. It was like wrenching whatever healing had gone on off of a festering wound and exposing it for another layer of salt. Eden wasn't salt. She wanted to be anything but salt.

She touched Jos' hand gently

. Almost as if she didn't want to frighten her off. She let her hand keep going, smoothing up Jos' arm. Jos didn't move. She didn't pull away or fight Eden off. She was so tense, her body rigid, every muscle like stone. It was like wrapping her arms around a statue, but Eden did it anyway. She muttered something soothing, how sorry she was, and ran her hand over Jos' back in small circles. She wished she could tell her it was going to be okay, but she didn't know that. She couldn't know that. It was clearly not okay right now. She didn't believe in platitudes, and she hated being fake more than anything.

She didn't stop comforting Jos because Jos didn't tell her to. Eventually, she took a risk and wrapped her arms around Jos' neck and hugged her tightly, pressing their bodies together.

Eden knew she would have cried if it was the other way around, but Jos didn't cry. She didn't make a sound. Her heart had to be broken, but she wasn't letting any of it show.

What kind of control did that take?

The only indication of sorrow she gave was a harsh breath, drawn in through aching lungs. When she pulled away just an inch and looked into Jos' face, she saw every bit of that nameless, aching pain gnawing inside Jos. It was there, mirrored in her eyes, before she blinked, shutting it down, closing herself off.

Jos stepped back, but she wasn't letting Eden go. She grasped her wrists and twisted her, pinning Eden to the wall with the full length of her body. She stretched her arms overhead, Eden's wrists high against the wall, leaving her open and defenseless.

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She tilted her chin up, waiting, her lips parted on a rough, shaky inhale and then a gasp. Jos stared at her with those cold, hard eyes. She was going to turn away. She was going to let her go. She was going to go close herself off and suffer alone and drown in a pain that no one had any idea about.

Eden wasn't going to let that happen. She might have been pinned against the wall, but she arched into Jos and leaned forward, and it was just enough that because Jos didn't pull away, she could find her lips and capture them with her own.

Chapter 11

Jos

Eden wriggled against Jos, loving the power play. Loving everything she shouldn't. Wanting everything she shouldn't. No, that wasn't Eden. That was her. It was both of them. Neither of them were strong enough to resist whatever this was, and it rankled. It did so much more than annoy Jos that this woman with the perfect body and the pretty little face and the sassy spirit and eyes that saw too much and a heart that actually, legitimately cared too much, was someone she couldn't just let go of. Someone she couldn't chase off or send running out the door.

Jos kissed Eden obnoxiously, like it was obvious that she wanted to own her, to remind her who was in control, but Eden twisted against her in desperation, kissing her back, literally lapping up every single second of it. Jos knew she should push Eden away. That's how she kept herself safe. It wasn't bringing her to her home and showing her the damn nursery. What was she thinking?

“You should go,” she snapped near Eden’s ear. She couldn’t help dragging her lips there, tasting her, inhaling her shampoo. Pressing in just a little closer, just to feel her softness, to feel her heart. To feel all the things that shouldn’t matter. Her words were making a mockery of her. Making her feel weak when she needed to be strong.

Right. Strength after nearly having a meltdown over the nursery. After spilling the details of my darkest time to her. And now is the time to be strong?

She couldn’t undo what she’d done, but she could send Eden away. Before anything else went down. Before things got even more out of control.

“I’m not going.” Eden turned her head and tried to pull her wrists free where Jos had them pinned over her head, but she kept her that way. She braced a knee between her legs, knocking them apart, and Eden moaned. It scrambled Jos’ brain, that low, husky sound.

“You’re not very smart, then. And here I’d heard such good things.”

“You want to play mean?” Eden asked. “You want to insult me? Go ahead. I can take it. I can take it because I know you don’t mean it and you need to vent, and you need this.”

“A little hero. Look at you, so sweet. Saving the world.”

Eden shook her head. Her eyes glittered with fire, stealing Jos’ breath when she looked into them. It was a mistake. All of this was a mistake. She knew it, but she wasn’t letting go of Eden.

“No,” Eden said firmly. “Just you.”

“One fuck at a time,” Jos snarled, trying to drive Eden away with her meanness.

“I’ll take what I can get.”

Eden jerked hard, tearing her wrists free. She cupped Jos’ face almost frantically and crashed their lips together. The kiss was crushing, so consuming that Jos wasn’t just scared for her sanity, she was scared for her soul. She was afraid of this woman and what she could do to her. How she could tear down all her carefully constructed walls. She couldn’t go inside herself and hide when she was with Eden. It wasn’t just uncomfortable, it was terrifying.

Jos clung to Eden, unable to let her go. She kissed her back, thrilling when her tongue swept into her mouth to stroke hers. She kissed her brutally, swiping her teeth along Eden’s lower lip until she moaned. She didn’t break the skin. Didn’t make her bleed. She was careful. She didn’t want to hurt her. Except that Eden, for all her guileless sweet innocence, clearly wanted some degree of pain.

She dropped her hands to Jos’ hips, grasping them tightly. She steered her down the hall, towards the big bedroom. Her bedroom.

This was going to happen. They were going to happen. Again. Not when one of them had had a little too much to drink. Not because it was a mistake, a spur of the moment thing, but because it was real, and they both wanted each other too much to stop.

They worked together. That was a huge red flag raging in front of Jos’ face and still she couldn’t stop. She couldn’t even make herself care about the danger Eden represented. How she’d just made her open up and tell her things so easily, as if that was something Jos did, as if it didn’t cost her everything to do it.

Jos took over, turning Eden so that she wasn’t the one leading. She pushed her into the bedroom, tearing her hands off of her hips and planting hers on Eden’s instead. She dug her fingers in hard enough to leave marks and Eden just gasped and cupped Jos’ face again and kissed her like she was a lifeline. She stole her oxygen, replaced it

with her air. She'd heard her confession and she was easing the sting with this. With the one thing that could reach Jos when nothing else could.

Jos stopped just inside the bedroom. She flicked on the light because if they were doing this, she needed light. She'd do this with Eden. No, not with Eden, but for Eden, then she'd send her on her way. Messy and mussed and sated. She'd tell her that it could never happen again, and this time, she'd mean it. She wouldn't strip herself down. She wouldn't lay herself bare. She'd give Eden this because she wanted it and they both needed it too much to deny, too much to stop, but she wouldn't endanger herself in any way. She wouldn't strip herself bare in any sense of the word.

When the lights illuminated the space, Eden gasped at where they were standing. In front of the full-length mirror Jos had mounted to the wall.

"Take your clothes off," Jos commanded silkily. "I want us both to watch."

"Just that? Just taking my clothes off? That's what you want us to see?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a brat?"

Eden's eyebrows furrowed. "I'm not a brat."

Jos hated that she liked the sound of the word on her tongue. "Undress."

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She thought Eden might give her more sass, but she tilted her chin and her eyes blazed, and she did what Jos asked. She removed her blouse first, undoing the buttons steadily, like she was stripping at home for no one but herself and she wasn't in any particular hurry to get the thing off. She wasn't trying to be sexy, and that's what made what she was doing so hot.

She slid the fabric off her shoulders and worked at her pants next. She stepped out of them clumsily, and her cheeks flushed pink. Jos nearly groaned. She was aching between her legs. Aching everywhere. Her nipples were so hard they could have cut through the fabric layers of her bra and blouse. She wanted to get on her knees and worship this woman. She wanted inside her. She wanted to fuck her until they were sweaty and screaming, twisted up and tangled in each other, lost to anything but that moment.

Not going to happen. You've lost enough of your shit this evening as is.

There was a reason Jos didn't really let people in. Not because it was easier. That was cowardly. It was much, much harder to keep the world at bay. She'd trusted too eagerly before. Too innocently. She'd had the notions of kindness and trust and care stripped from her a long time ago.

What she'd had with Sandra? She never wanted to admit to herself that it was more of an agreement. They were playing at being married. Playing at caring about each other. They wanted companionship without too much meaning behind it, but Jos had liked the illusion. Or maybe that was just her.

Sandra was the one who asked for the divorce. She was the one who left. She was

angry at Jos. She was hurt. Maybe she'd always hoped for more. It was something Jos couldn't give.

She'd never once wanted to try.

Until now.

“What are you thinking about?”

Jos snapped back to the present and nearly cursed when she realized Eden had stripped off her bra and panties and she'd missed it. She was standing naked, her smooth body with her sleek muscles and golden skin, her dark nipples pert and her legs slightly parted. Nothing about the way she was standing was overly sexual, but Jos let her eyes feast on the vision of the goddess before her and watched a warm blush tint Eden's skin. Her fair skin blushed so prettily. That pink fired Jos' blood, made her heart pound, made her even wetter between her legs. Her panties were probably soaked.

She prowled closer, angling in so that she could look at Eden more closely. When she parted her legs with her hand, tra

ling her finger up her warm, shapely thigh, a map of unbelievable smoothness, she knew she was soaked when she found Eden soaking too. She was so wet that her thighs were wet.

Jos parted her folds with her fingers, holding her open and looking at her. At the beads of moisture gathered there. It made her hungry. Not the kind of hunger that a person feels for three squares a day. The kind of feral hunger that came to a person after they were starved for days on end. She knew. She'd once been that little girl.

Fuck that, I am not going there.

Jos shut down the memory, filing it away. She dropped to her knees and Eden's eyes widened.

"What are you doing?" Eden gasped.

"What does it look like?" Jos spread Eden's legs wider by slapping at the inside of her thighs. Eden gasped, but Jos had really just tapped her. It was more a gasp of pleasure, a gasp of daring, a gasp that said she knew she was fucked because Jos wasn't going to have any mercy. A gasp that said she finally realized Jos still had all the power, even on her knees before Eden. "Should I stop? Get up?"

Eden's hands tangled in Jos' blonde tresses and pulled her face to her. Hard. "No," she groaned. "God, no."

"Then watch," Jos commanded. "Watch yourself in the mirror. Watch while I eat this pretty pussy, but mostly I want you to watch yourself. Watch yourself as I pleasure you."

"Fuck," Eden growled. She didn't untangle her fingers. She grasped Jos' hair tighter, until her scalp burned, which was just right.

She grasped Eden's hips and attacked her pussy. She ate at her wildly, taking her fill. Eden was sweet. She was salty and musky and sweet. A perfect three-course meal all wrapped up into one extraordinarily beautiful package. Jos wasn't any wilting flower, and she wasn't into doing things halfway. She sucked Eden's clit until her hips bucked and rolled against her, until she was gasping and begging, her hands even tighter in her hair. She scraped her teeth over that sensitive little nub, pulling away just as Eden started to tremble.

"Watch," she commanded.

“I’m watching,” Eden ground out. Her voice didn’t sound at all like hers.

“No. Look down and watch while I fuck you with my tongue. I want you to watch me fucking that tight little pussy. Watch.”

“Oh God.” Eden shifted just a little. Her chin turned down. Their eyes met because Jos looked up to make sure Eden obeyed. She spread her further apart with her fingers and she darted her tongue into her entrance. “Jesus, fuck,” Eden gasped.

Jos thought that maybe she liked her mouth the best when they were doing this. When she was cursing because nothing else would do. Because the pleasure was too hard, too much, and never enough.

“You taste so good,” Jos purred. “Oops, where are my words. Divine. You taste divine.” She darted her tongue into Eden’s entrance again, filling her. Eden moaned. She was starting to shake, and that wasn’t going to cut it.

No, she wasn’t getting off that easy. She was the one who had pursued Jos. She had followed her here, come into her home and pried secrets from her. Secrets you gave freely. Either way, she was going to pay the price.

Jos ripped her mouth away and Eden whimpered. She tried to force her face back there with her hair, but Jos reached up and untangled the strands from the other woman’s fingers. She stood and kissed Eden firmly, letting her taste every bit of her musk.

She whimpered when her salty arousal hit her tongue. Jos’ body was straining and vibrating, about to explode. If she put her hand down her panties right now, she’d be more than soaked. All it would take was one tap of her finger against her clit and she’d shatter.

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“Stay right there,” Jos commanded while she tried to get herself under control. Losing her shit like this was not an option. “I want you to watch while I fuck you. While I make you beg and plead and come on my fingers.”

“Oh fuck,” Eden groaned.

“Not very journalistic of you. Where are your words?”

“I have none,” she whimpered. “I have no words.”

Jos made a tsking noise in the back of her throat. “Let’s see if I can help you find them.”

She circled around Eden, trailing her hand over Eden’s flat stomach, splaying her fingers at her hip. She stood behind Eden, who was just a few inches shorter than her. She was wearing nothing, and Jos was still in her heels. Without them, she’d actually be shorter than Eden. Not now, though, and now was what counted.

She let Eden watch her hand as she smoothed it over her belly and down her hip, down to her thighs. Eden threw back her head, but Jos growled in her throat. “No. Watch.”

Eden’s eyes snapped back open. She was eager to obey, and that made Jos feel lightheaded. All the blood in her body rushed between her legs. Her clit wouldn’t even need to be touched at this point. She could get off on watching Eden come.

It wasn’t what she’d been going for, and it unnerved her a little, annoyed her to no

end, and strangely enough, delighted her as well. She'd never thought that losing control over her own body was a perk. No, her life had always been about control. Over herself. Over her emotions. Over her memories.

"Jos," Eden cried when Jos smoothed two fingers over her clit. She soaked those fingers, lubricating them in Eden's arousal. She was so wet, so swollen and plump and pink. The taste of her was still in Jos' mouth and her body wasn't just out of her control. It was so much more than that.

Jos pushed her fingers inside slowly, carefully. She wanted Eden to watch every single second of her filling her. She didn't expect to be so affected as she watched Eden watching herself in the mirror. Eden's eyes were on Jos' hand between her legs. The way she moved her fingers. The way she fucked up into her so nice and slow. Her breaths were a wreck. She was moaning every single time Jos slid in and out. Her hips were rocking into Jos' hand. Slower first, then almost violently. She was close. She was shaking. The orgasm was building for her.

And Jos watched it all. She watched every single emotion that flickered over Eden's face. She couldn't admit to herself how it slayed her. How it made her want to shred off all her clothes and spend the entire night with Eden in bed. How she wanted to, just once, lose control completely.

That happened already. A few nights ago. It won't happen again.

Oh, and it's not happening now?

Jos ignored the annoying voice inside her head and focused instead on what she was doing. Eden was even closer now. Her body was straining against Jos. If she wasn't standing behind her, Eden probably would have fallen over. When Jos intensified the rhythm, Eden closed her eyes and threw back her head, leaning on Jos completely. Jos should have commanded that she open them and watch as she came, but she

didn't. She let it go. She watched Eden's face. Watched as all the tension in her muscles suddenly let go as that tight coil inside her snapped and she found her release.

Jos was stroking up into her hard, hitting Eden's G-spot on a few of those passes. Her thumb was on her clit, massaging small circles. She was writhing and moaning through that orgasm, fucking back and into Jos' hand because she'd given it to her. She'd given Eden that pleasure and she was the one giving it to her still, letting her ride out those waves by letting up just a little. She was the one massaging her clit after, relentlessly chasing those aftershocks. It was her hand that was slick and wet, soaked in Eden's arousal, in her come. She was the one holding Eden up.

It was all her.

And fuck, she wanted more.

Jos was an expert in denial, and she was going to deny herself now. She withdrew her hand, wiping her fingers on Eden's thigh. She bent and picked up Eden's clothes. She didn't shove them at her but held them out.

"You need to get dressed and you need to leave. This can't happen again," she commanded. She liked the authoritative sound of her voice. She liked how it didn't wobble, not one bit.

Eden's lips did. They trembled. Her eyes found Jos' and the amber flecks in them burned bright. She wasn't angry an

d she wasn't offended. She had Jos' number. She knew exactly what she was doing. That she was putting distance between them, forcing Eden out.

"Because we work together?" Eden's voice was wobbly. She didn't even try for

bravado.

“Yes. Among other things.”

Eden crossed her arms, reaching for the clothes. “What other things?”

“Other things that don’t concern you.”

She stared Jos down. Hard. It was the kind of stare that saw too much. Revealed too much too, but Eden didn’t care about that. She didn’t need to be strong, and she didn’t need to worry about things like soft spots and hidden weaknesses and all the ways a person could slip a knife into them.

She might have thought that she’d grown up rough, with photographers hounding her and people using her for her daddy’s money, but she had no idea. The hurts she’d suffered were small and she was able to get over them. She was able to be a normal person. A good person. A sweet, innocent girl who Jos should have pushed away from the first because she’d already gone too far.

Jos didn’t want to care, but she didn’t want to hurt Eden either. Whether that meant she cared or not and was a bit of an ironic, catch twenty-two statement; it wasn’t something she was going to examine.

“This is the last time, then?”

“That’s what I said.”

Jos expected surrender. Capitulation. Tears. Instead, when Eden reached for her clothes, she threw them to the ground and lifted both brows in challenge. “If this is the last time, then I’m not leaving until it’s a good one.”

Jos rolled her eyes. “So greedy.”

“For both of us.”

Chapter 12

Eden

That was two orgasms that Jos gave her and tried to chase her away after. Eden wasn’t going to let her do it this time. She wasn’t going to let this be the last time either, but she wasn’t going to discuss that with Jos right now. She clearly wasn’t in the right frame of mind, and she wasn’t ready. She was holding herself at bay, holding herself back, when she clearly wanted Eden.

She wasn’t imaging it. Eden knew she wouldn’t get any answers if she asked Jos why. She wasn’t going to seduce her either. She wasn’t going to take anything from her. She wanted to give her something back. Something she clearly needed. She just wanted to make Jos feel good and she wasn’t leaving until she did.

Not because she cared about fairness. Well, she did, but it wasn’t just that. It was that Eden just cared. Period. She couldn’t say why. Couldn’t even say how far that care

extended or what it meant, but it was there, and she couldn't let it go or drive it out of herself like she'd tried for the past few days when she'd been angry and hurt at being chased away.

Before she realized that Jos chased people away for a reason.

That nursery hidden away was just one of many reasons, she was guessing.

"I don't think you know what you're saying. You need to put on your clothes and go."

Eden faced Jos with more determination than courage. She crossed her arms over her chest. She wasn't embarrassed that she was naked and Jos wasn't. She wanted to rectify the situation. "And if I don't?"

"Don't be childish," Jos huffed.

Eden practically purred. "Childish is the last thing I'm being."

She grasped Jos and pulled her in, kissing her hard. Brutally. Kissing her with all her energy and furious intent, all her softness, might, strength, and surrender. She kissed all her contradictions into Jos and, as she expected, she softened just a little, but it was enough.

Eden let out a growl of hunger that was magnified somewhere in Jos' throat when she made a sound of desire that filtered straight through Eden's bloodstream to the needy spot between her legs. She'd just had a mind-blowing orgasm, but she wanted more. She wanted so much more.

She backed Jos until her legs were against the bed. She arched against her, tearing at her clothing. There was no going slow. And Jos wasn't telling her to leave. She

wasn't pushing away her hands. She was fumbling with her clothes too. It gave Eden a momentary thrill when she realized Jos wanted this every bit as much as she did.

The lights were still on. Eden thrilled at that too.

Her skirt went next. Her pumps were kicked off. Her blouse. She was wearing a lacey camisole underneath that Eden wanted to sink her teeth into and shred apart. She'd never had urges like that before, but she was having them now. Instead, she grasped the hem and yanked it over Jos' head. Her bra came next, torn away by both of them, and then her panties followed. Eden tugged them down Jos' legs so hard that she made another noise. Eden liked those noises. She licked them off Jos' lips and tucked them away to savor later.

She grasped Jos in her arms, and they fell on the bed together. Eden wasn't dumb enough to think she'd end up on top, but she'd pushed Jos backwards and Jos had grabbed her when they fell. She was momentarily there, but of course Jos spun, taking that from her. Honestly, Eden didn't care. She wanted Jos so badly that she was willing to take her however she could get her.

Jos arched against her, and Eden arched up, pressing their hips together. She ground on instinct, and Jos straddled her, bearing down. She was wet. Fuck, she was soaking. Eden hissed at the warmth of her skin meeting her own.

She reached up and guided Jos' breast, a perfect globe that filled up her hand with a nipple that was already hard, to her mouth. She didn't suckle gently. She bit down, using her teeth, until Jos cried out.

Eden tucked her hand between them, fitting herself between Jos' legs. She found her clit, which was as hard as her nipples, and gave it one hard flick. She imagined going further, further than what they'd done in front of that mirror. Further than anything she'd ever done with anyone. She'd never been into the whole spanking or strapping

thing, but with Jos, she thought she might be. She imagined that sting of pain mixed with the fierce pleasure after, and she nearly came even though she was the one with her hand between them, plying Jos.

She pinched Jos' nipple with her other hand. "Is this good?" Eden panted. "Is this what you like?"

"It doesn't matter what I like," Jos ground out. "Don't stop."

"Is that a yes and you just don't want to tell me?"

"If I didn't like it, would we be doing this right now?"

"I don't know. You hold yourself pretty distant from everyone. I think you did want this, but you were going to try to get me to leave all the same."

Jos let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Very perceptive. I think you might have more brains than I gave you credit for."

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Ouch. “Thanks a lot.” Her tone was dry and teasing and Jos got that. She worked her hips up and down on Eden’s hand, taking the orgasm from her before she barely had a chance to give it. She didn’t want things to be over so fast, for Jos to just go through this mechanically. She wanted more time with her. She wanted to talk to her, but sweet nothings and soft cuddles afterwards didn’t seem like something Jos was willing to go for.

Work with what you have.

“It’s okay, Jos,” Eden dared to say. “It’s okay. You can let me give you this. It’s not going to make the world implode. Let me make you feel good.”

“It’s dangerous,” Jos hissed.

Eden nearly laughed until she realized Jos was serious. “For who? For me? Because we work together?”

Jos wasn’t going to answer her. She didn’t like repeating herself. Eden slipped another finger inside Jos’ tight passage, surprising her, and she gasped.

“That’s right. You’re not the only one who likes to play naughty. I like it too.”

“Fuck, it feels so good.” That was an admission Eden hadn’t expected Jos to make.

She was riding Eden’s hips, riding her hand, with three of Eden’s fingers inside her. Eden thrust gently, filling her over and over. She was so wet that her fingers slipped in and out easily, messily. She loved the sounds they made together. She used

her other hand to run her fingers through Jos' hair when she shifted, pulling back, throwing her head back. She ran them over her face, touching her, grounding herself, bringing Jos back to her.

"Please kiss me," Eden whispered. Begging. She knew Jos liked that word. Please. Jos didn't want to listen to her. She was writhing against her fingers, working her hips. Her breasts swayed so close to Eden's face, the nipples so tight and pert that they begged to be sucked. Eden did, alternating between each one. She did it roughly, a little vicious, until Jos lowered her head and claimed her mouth instead because the pleasure was more than she could take. Or more than she was willing to take.

Without warning, Jos tore away and stretched out over Eden. She rolled over, pulling her to the side, so that they were face to face. Eden could barely catch her breath. Jos was so beautiful. So sexy. Still so closed off, but she'd take what she could get. Whatever Jos was offering, she would take.

Jos hooked her leg around Eden's and ground their hips together. Eden gasped at the friction and Jos made a low whimpering sound of pleasure in her throat.

"I need to be inside you," Eden said as though she was dying. She'd never heard herself sound that way.

"Fuck me, then," Jos snapped, but the heat was all wrong. She was barely hanging onto her control, Eden realized. "Touch yourself when you fill me up with your fingers."

It was the hottest thing anyone had ever said to Eden. She complied, slipping two of her fingers inside Jos, then adding a third. She pumped hard and fast, loving the way Jos' tight walls clamped around her digits even before she came. Eden snaked her hand between her legs and while she created a steady rhythm, thrusting in and out of Jos, slowly at first, then picking up the tempo, she stroked her own clit. She was

sensitive from the first orgasm, but not sensitive enough stop. It hurt, but the pain was a good thing. A sweet, feral thing that was growing inside her with every passing second.

Jos was shaking. Eden knew she was holding back, so she worked her harder, setting a punishing rhythm. She did what Jos had done, curling her

thumb over Jos' clit and pressing down while she pumped her fingers faster and faster until Jos exploded. It startled Eden, the way she cried out, her body tensing, the soft, animal mewls that were torn from her throat as her hips rocked and her legs locked around Eden's hips. The inner spasms against her fingers were so hot that when Eden circled her own clit again, working it harder, it was only a few seconds before she was hurled into her own orgasm.

She'd thought the last one was good, but this one tore her apart. She was coming with Jos, coming at the same time, their bodies a sticky mess, their hands damp with their come, slipping and sliding and working at each other, crying out their pleasure. This was them, twisted together, skin to fucking skin, and it was beautiful.

Eden wasn't even halfway to a comedown from that wild, mind-numbing pleasure when she knew she wasn't just going to leave. She wasn't just going to quit this. She'd fallen down a hole, a stupid rabbit hole like everyone always said, and there was no climbing back out.

She didn't even for once consider that it was pathetic that a few orgasms were enough to liquify her into a gooey, aching mass that was crushing as hard on Jos as she had when she was a teenager. Or harder. Because now she'd had the real Jos. She'd seen glimpses of the woman Jos didn't show to anyone else.

That meant something.

It meant Eden wasn't going to let go and just walk away.

She was so much more than a few orgasms in too deep. She was just in too deep period.

Chapter 13

Eden

“So what are we if we're not dating? Because I'm assuming we aren't going to start dating.” Eden waited until they were both capable of making words and forming actual coherent thoughts before she asked the question.

It was a daring question. Probably too daring. Too much too fast. But she couldn't chance that Jos would just chase her away again. She couldn't let her call her a cab and kick her out the door. If she let that happen this time, there was no coming back from it.

“No.” Jos rolled her eyes and rolled away. She lay there, staring at Eden from a few feet across the bed with a look that Eden couldn't decipher. She wasn't just walling herself off again. She was, but it was something more than that. Jos was a journalist through and through and she was looking at Eden like she needed to pick her apart to find out whatever story was hiding below.

Eden took a chance. “Then we're just kind of people who work together and sometimes have sex?”

“No. This isn't happening again. I mean it. It can't.” There was less heat. Less certainty. Less of a desire than there should be to push her away, and Eden latched onto it. She'd always believed in being honest, even if it was hard. Even if it felt impossible.

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Eden wasn't sure Jos was ready to talk about the nursery and everything else that had happened, but she couldn't leave without trying. She didn't want sex to be a distraction or a tool. She wanted it to be so much more than that. A connection.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but you're going through something that was horrible and traumatic. You're not okay. After what I heard today, I believe that can last a lifetime. I've seen people. People on the streets. People who have lost everything. I know you aren't ever going to end up homeless, but I can see the same suffering and it's horrible. I know that almost no one asks for help. I know you don't want to ask for help, but do you think it's more? I know you don't talk about your past. The whole world knows that, and for some reason, they've left it alone. No one digs and digs and digs like they do to other people."

"Maybe because there are juicier things to distract them. Or maybe I gave just enough that everyone was satisfied. People usually are, if you give them the bare facts. That's all they ever want. If they have that, they feel like they know you. That they have some kind of ownership over you. Everyone knows I grew up in foster care. Am I messed up from that? Maybe. Do I need to talk to someone about it? No."

"But what about...? Even if you don't want to talk to a therapist about the miscarriage, maybe you should talk to someone else."

"Who? The family that I don't have?"

Jos was being purposely cruel because that was how she silenced people and pushed them away, but Eden wasn't going to let it happen. She'd allowed Jos to have her way, to chase her out of her house last time. She wasn't going to easily again, even if

she couldn't say why she was digging in her heels so firmly.

Because I'm stubborn. I'm not a quitter. Because I have a bleeding heart that wants to save everyone and help everyone.

It was more than that, but Eden couldn't start to explain that to herself. It wasn't the right time. This wasn't about unpacking her own feelings.

"Friends?" Eden suggested softly.

Jos snorted. She turned her face to the window and looked at the gauzy fabric blinds. "I don't really have friends. More like people I know and can stand for brief periods of time."

"Because your job is your life."

"Because people generally aren't worthy of being trusted."

Eden didn't know if that was truth as Jos saw it, or if she was being baited into an argument. She didn't rise to it either way. "You could tell me."

Jos rolled off the bed, making a noise of disbelief low in her throat. "That might be the worst idea yet."

"You showed me the nursery."

"Because you were annoying me, and I thought it would make you shut up and leave."

"Well, I didn't. And you kissed me back. That aside, I'm here and you did show me, and you told me at the pub about it, so I know. If you're going to talk to anyone

about it, it might as well be me.”

Jos stormed to her walk-in closet and threw open the door. She stepped in, disappearing, and Eden held her breath. Maybe she’d pushed too hard. She would be soft and tender with anyone else, but Jos didn’t want that. Jos didn’t need that. Maybe soon. Maybe more than she knew. But not at the moment.

She appeared a few minutes later wearing leggings and a yellow tunic. Her hair was a mess and the clothes had been hastily thrown on, but in the glow of the lamp, she’d never looked more beautiful. Surprisingly, she was also wearing the most open, vulnerable expression that Eden had seen. Like she was close to admitting defeat. Not close to collapsing, or giving up, but letting someone else in.

Eden wrapped the sheet around herself and scrambled off the bed. Everyone made it look so easy in movies, but she’d wrapped herself so tight she could barely move her legs. She tried to take a step and tripped over the cloying excess of fabric, nearly launching her face right into the tallboy dresser a few feet from the bed. She righted herself and snatched up the sheet at the bottom, holding it on in one hand, and raised her head.

Jos’ brow was arched. The expression on her face told Eden she thought she looked ridiculous, but there was something soft there too. Something like reluctant affection.

They stood there, having a stare off to end all stare offs, until Jos folded her arms over her chest. “There’s nothing to say. I wanted a baby. I never thought I did, but then I decided that maybe I should before I couldn’t. My ex-wife, I thought she wanted a family too. It turned out that I talked her into it. There were things I thought were important. Things I thought I should do. I never wanted to do what everyone else was doing, but I did it anyway. Got married. Thought about children. I went through the IVF, and then things fell apart with me and my ex-wife.”

Eden didn't know what to say. The best thing was probably not to say anything. She clung to the sheet, her chest caving in at the dead, flat tone Jos was using, and let her continue.

"The whole world knows that, though. I found out I was pregnant right after we decided we were separating. The baby was...I don't know. It was something I thought I should do and experience, something I hadn't done. I never really thought about what would come after. About being a mother. I thought I'd have it and then Sandra would stay home

and I'd go back to work. That I'd only take a few months off. That's what she wanted. Security. A name. That's why she married me. I always knew that. We made it work anyway. I wasn't looking for love. We were compatible. I guess I convinced myself that was the same thing."

"I'm sorry," Eden whispered, because it felt right, and she was. Her parents might not have been perfect, and their money made things harder, not easier like everyone thought, but they were always a family. She knew what real love was. Growing up in foster care, had Jos ever known that? Not just the love of a parent, but the love of anyone?

Jos went on like she hadn't heard Eden at all. She was looking through her now, like she was speaking to the air. "I got pregnant, and when I was three months along, I told a few people, who I felt obligated to tell. Things had changed and I was looking at taking maternity leave. The baby wasn't Sandra's. She never saw it that way and she didn't want to be a part of that. It was just me and I actually wanted to be a mom. I was excited. I saw myself doing all those stupid things after. Those, what are they called?"

"Playdates? Or joining a nursery group? Hanging out with other moms?"

“Yes, all of that nonsense.” Jos’ hands curled into fists at her sides. “I wanted it. I could imagine myself actually doing it. I signed up for birthing classes, all that crap. I had someone come in and paint the nursery. I bought that furniture and I even put it together. I never get excited about anything. Not anymore. But I was excited about that.”

Eden had asked for this. She’d asked Jos to talk to her, but she never imagined she would open up like this. It was so sad. The things she was saying were heartbreaking, but she was saying them in a completely bored and detached tone, refusing to feel it, even if she was being brutally honest.

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“And then, it happened. I was on my way to work, and I felt warm and wet. I went to the bathroom and there was blood. I called in sick. Went to the hospital. I thought I was far enough along, but there is no safe zone or safe time. I went back to work the next night. I had to tell Alden because I’d told him about the pregnancy in the first place. He didn’t know what to say. I know he relayed the message because, well, never mind. That’s not important.” A shadow flickered over her face. Something close to regret, but then it was gone. Smoothed back out into the professional, detached mask that she’d worn the entire time she was talking.

Eden hated it. She’d never been talked to that way before and she’d interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people who were homeless. She’d interviewed people while they were high. While they clearly needed help and were suffering from conditions she couldn’t begin to understand or name because she wasn’t a doctor.

“I think that maybe we should sit down,” she whispered, her voice thin and reedy.

Jos’ eyes flicked to her and there was a flicker of surprise there. Because she was still standing there? Because Jos hadn’t realized she was saying anything at all, it all just came out in a rush? Because she had so much practice at being a professional while she went somewhere else in her mind? Because she didn’t allow herself to feel and think and grieve? Was that a reaction from childhood, or just part of her job as a journalist?

“I think we should absolutely sit down.” Eden proved it by stumbling over to the edge of the bed and collapsing. She fought the sheet until it loosened its hold on her, but she felt no less smothered. No less compressed.

She held out her hand on instinct and Jos stared at it like it was a viper, but then her face changed, and something shifted. She wasn't softer on the outside, but she did walk over and sit down next to Eden on the bed without touching her. She folded her hands in her lap.

"I shouldn't have told you any of that. I didn't want to. I don't know why I did it. I just couldn't stop talking. Kind of like how I couldn't stop anything I shouldn't have done with you."

"Do you feel better?"

"Not one bit."

"Oh. I..." Eden searched Jos' face to figure out if she was lying, or even using a very dry sense of humor, but she couldn't tell. It was impossible to tell. Jos had shut back down and if she didn't want to let someone in, she made sure she didn't. She probably wasn't going to get anywhere pursuing that route, so Eden tried something else. "So, your main argument against me coming here again is that we work together?"

"That, and I'm old enough to be your mother," Jos huffed. "It's a biological possibility."

"So what? My parents are ten years apart."

"Ten. Not sixteen. And before you use the whole age is just a number line, there's something else that matters more than the fact that we work together and more than any age gap."

Eden's hands shook. "What's that?"

“The fact that I like being alone. I’m freshly divorced. Happy that way. I have no desire to be in any kind of relationship with anyone. Probably ever again.”

Eden swallowed hard past the giant lump in her throat. She was a fighter, though, and she was far from giving in without at least understanding what Jos wasn’t saying. And what she was. And what she might actually want to be saying instead. With her, it wasn’t straightforward, and it wasn’t easy. Eden knew those things and that was probably more than the world would ever know, and for some reason that made her hope. What she was hoping for was still in question.

“But I’m here,” she dared to say. “I’m here and you just told me those things and they weren’t easy.”

A muscle in Jos’ jaw jumped. “No. They weren’t. But that was a moment of weakness, and it won’t happen again.”

“It wasn’t weakness.”

“It still won’t happen again.”

“What won’t? Having me here or telling me anything?”

“Both.”

Eden still wasn’t going to admit defeat, because there was something Jos wasn’t saying. It was written in the gaps of all the things she put out there because she thought she should or because she thought she had to. Eden didn’t imagine it was because she actually wanted to. She could be wrong, but she took the risk anyway. “I think it’s because we work together that we should stick together.”

Jos gave Eden a look that she couldn’t begin to start picking apart. It was filled with

conflicted emotion, all while being blank behind that. Like a door that opened up to another room and another room and then nothing, but it was maddening because there was something behind that door. It was just unreachable.

“At work maybe. I think everyone needs to stick together and work together. If people did that everywhere, it would be a much better world.”

“But we can. You and me. We’re going to be cohosts. I’ll make sure nothing like what happened today ever happens again, accident or not.”

Jos gave Eden a sad smile that she didn’t expect. It made her feel like she was bleeding out on the inside and could do nothing to stem the loss. “I don’t think that’s up to either of us.” The hardness in her voice couldn’t hide the raw edge. “But it’s a nice thought anyway.”

Chapter 14

Jos

It had been two weeks since her meltdown in the studio parking lot and so far, Jos had been good to her word. She hadn’t slipped up again. She hadn’t allowed her feelings to rise to the surface in a complicated melee she couldn’t understand or control. She wasn’t sure what happened, except that it had happened with Eden and that nothing, not one more thing, could happen with her again. Jos had been nothing but professional at work.

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She had to admit that it was hard to maintain a personal distance when Eden was so easy to like. She'd charmed everyone at the studio. Nothing at all like the girl who sat down across from the coffee shop with Jos, ready to go to battle. She was kind, compassionate, empathetic. She cared about people, and she remembered all the small details. She was good with names and never forgot one or a face, even if she had never been told that person's name. She was never late for work, even though she talked about the work she was still doing with the homeless people in the area of the city where she lived. She was flawless, effortless, undeniably beautiful, and she could read a mean teleprompter.

She'd make an excellent replacement for Jos one day.

That day might be coming sooner than Jos thought. She'd signed a contract, but she wouldn't put it past the head honchos to try to push her out, to make her want to quit, and then it would be her decision. They wouldn't have to pay severance, and there would be no bad blood on their side of things.

Nothing else had happened, but Jos would be lying if she said she wasn't holding her breath.

Maybe it had been just a coincidence, but she still didn't think so. It felt too personal and too painful to think so.

Jos couldn't help but steal a glance over at the chair just down from her, where Eden sat getting her makeup done by Kathy, a makeup artist hired just for her. She also had a brand-new hire to do her hair and the guy was fantastic. Eden didn't just look beautiful every night on set, she was transformed into a goddess.

When Joe finished with Jos' hair and makeup, he stepped back and gave her a look that she'd never seen before, and he'd been doing her hair and makeup for years. It was on the tip of her tongue to demand an answer to why he was looking at her that way, but she bit down on the inside of her cheek, determined to ignore it, until she turned around and looked into the mirror.

"Joe!" Jos couldn't help her shrill tone. "What the heck did you do to my makeup?"

Joe hadn't gone with the usual. No wonder he was looking at her like that. She looked like a cross between a racoon who had been eating overripe crab apples and was drunk on the fermented fruit and a sixty-year-old woman who was going for a late thirties look by caking on the makeup so thick that it looked like cement

. And that was doing racoons and sixty-year-old women a disservice.

Joe ran a hand through his hair, looking awkward and embarrassed. "Alden asked me if I could change things up a bit. They're adjusting the lighting on set too." He frowned. "Sit back down. Maybe I need—"

"Whoa." Suddenly Eden was standing over Jos, biting down on her bottom lip and sawing it back and forth with her top teeth. Jos still got a tingle that shot up her spine, even though she was horrified over what Joe had just said. Eden turned to Joe. "That's not a good look. I think you should take it off and go for something else."

Joe and Jos looked at Eden with equal expressions of shock. No one talked to Joe that way. But Eden wasn't being demanding or mean. She was still sweet and smiling, and then she did the wildest thing and started listing off ideas, suggestions, and techniques. She was going on about the latest trend before she brought out her phone and turned it around for Joe to watch something. A video. She was playing a video for him.

Jos couldn't speak. She couldn't get out a single word. She was so appalled by what Joe had done. Okay, so maybe it wasn't what he had done, so much as what he'd said and tried to do. Joe was nice. He didn't mean it. But Alden? Jos felt sick. Acid coated the back of her tongue as her stomach rolled. They were trying to say that she looked old. The message couldn't be clearer.

If they wanted me gone so badly, why did they agree to a three-year extension on my contract? Because they wanted Eden Rutherford that badly and they didn't think they could get her themselves? Because they had a plan all along to force me out despite the extension?

Joe began wiping the makeup off, but Jos barely felt a thing. She came back to herself, the numb horror and shock of what had just played out wearing off to be replaced by the terrible warmth of embarrassment that anyone had witnessed that.

Except there was no one gaping or gawking at her. Eden was supervising, her own makeup half done, but still looking like a regal, elegant queen, and Joe was getting different products lined up. He had a new and determined expression on his face.

Jos bit the inside of her cheek again until she tasted metal. Did the powers that be have any idea what kind of monster they could unleash by giving Eden power like this? She was basically untouchable. Not that she'd ever use that for anything but good. They were just lucky Eden had a good heart and that she would never let that power go to her head.

It took Jos a moment to realize what they heck she'd just thought, but she knew it was true, even if she didn't know Eden very well.

After Joe was finished, Jos turned around, dreading the mirror in a brand-new way, and for her, the mirror was starting to be something that was unkind, something that showed her the face of a stranger, of a woman she was so critical of because she

might have a new wrinkle or a new line or a strand of gray peeking through the blonde. Her mouth dropped when she saw Joe's do-over.

"Oh my God." The words escaped her before she could stop them. She leaned in closer to the bright lights, lights which hid very little at all and never lied.

She'd never looked better. Her makeup was light and fresh. She looked at least five years younger, but it wasn't just the youthful glow that she was busy analyzing. The blue of her eyes was brought out by the new shade of shadow. The darker, more daring smoky eye that Joe had executed perfectly. The drunk racoon was gone, thank goodness. The foundation was light and gave her a perfect, airbrushed look.

"Is that a good oh my God?" Joe was holding his breath. Why? Did he think she was going to snap at him? She'd never blasted out orders or used a harsh tone on anyone she'd worked with in her life. She didn't believe in being mean, and being a snappy toad never got anyone very far. She'd always tried to be fair. Always.

Jos' throat was thick and burning, so she just nodded. Joe let out a muted sound of triumph and started cleaning brushes and packing up his things.

She was still looking at herself in the mirror when Eden bent down beside the chair. Jos couldn't help it. She felt like she had to defend herself against Eden's kindness. It was too much. It was always going to be too much.

"I really don't need you to have my back," she said quietly, so no one else could hear.

Eden was close. Too close. She'd had to lean in to hear what Jos was saying. She smelled like coconuts and jasmine. An odd combination that somehow worked for her. It worked for Jos too, warming her body and sending another shiver racing down her spine.

“Yes, you do,” Eden corrected. “We’re friends and we’re women, and women should stick together as a sisterhood instead of competing with each other. And we’re cohosts. That’s a huge reason to have your back. If you look good out there, I look good out there.”

Jos whipped around in the chair, nearly knocking Eden over, but she found the younger woman grinning at her like the devil himself. She knew that would get a rise out of Jos and she’d said it because humor was a good thing. It was a good tool to use to relieve crazy thick tension. Jos’ throat got a little bit tighter and a little bit hotter.

Eden stood up and clapped her hands together. “In two days we’re doing an interview with three different local shelters. One’s a women’s shelter and two others are in the neighborhood where I live. We’re shooting the footage tomorrow.”

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“We’re?” Jos choked back her incredulity. She was amazed. Not only had Eden somehow got what she’d promised her and then had to basically beg Alden to forgive her for suggesting, she was actually going out and calling the shots instead of Jim or Christina, Tina or Jack.

Eden nodded, her dark hair flying all over the place she was nodding so furiously. “I’m so excited. This is exactly what I wanted. I kind of doubted that it would happen, but this is so important. So many more people are going to be aware of the ways they can help those shelters and the massive need for them and how so much more still needs to be done.”

This wasn’t the opportunity of a lifetime for Eden. No, she wasn’t going out and doing something that Jos herself really hadn’t been allowed to do. She wasn’t breaking new ground or setting a new trend or making a statement. She was so passionate about what she believed in that she didn’t even realize the crazy amount of privilege she was being given. How everyone from the camera crew to the editors, the talent finders to the producers, the executive producers and beyond, basically everybody at the whole place, was moving broadcast heaven and earth to give Eden what she wanted.

Jos braced herself for the huge wave of loathing and terrible jealousy that should have hit her. She was ready for the impact of her bitter feelings to find purchase and dig in, but nothing happened. There was just a gentle swell of something in her chest. Something she might have called pride if she allowed herself to feel things like that. Which she certainly did not because feeling anything tender and soft had never gotten her very far, and in this industry, those feelings were misplaced.

When they finally got out onto the set, Jos sat down and went through everything like she was on autopilot. She did everything by routine and memory, even the interview sections. If their guest for the evening, a woman who had opened a new and trendy garden center, noticed, she never let on. Jos was too in her head to even care about the woman's overly shiny smile and enthusiasm at being on TV, or how her garden center was probably overpriced and carried things that helped no one and really didn't matter at all. She used to notice those things. When did she stop having those thoughts? When did she stop caring and just get on with it?

After, Jos wanted to make a fast escape out to her car and back to her house where she could let her guard down and process what had happened. Process what the heck was going on with her.

She wasn't annoyed or even very surprised to see Eden striding across the parking lot towards her. Instead of shoving herself in her car, shutting the door, and peeling out of there like she hadn't seen anyone, Jos found herself curling away from the very means of her freedom.

The soft spot she was quickly devel

oping for Eden had to go. She had to cut it out and bury it where she could no longer find it. Soft spots made a person weak, and weakness was not a luxury she'd ever afforded herself.

Instead of hardening herself and firming up her resolve, she found herself hesitating, then turning around. She didn't sigh. She didn't try to scare Eden off with a frown—not that it would have worked anyway.

"I just wanted to thank you," Eden said, not at all breathless after powerwalking across the whole parking lot in heels.

“Thank me?” Jos stared at her. She had no idea what Eden was talking about.

“For the story. I know you probably talked whoever needed to be talked to into letting me do some of my own ideas. This means so much to me. I can’t even tell you. And I know it was all you.”

Eden was wrong about that, and Jos was going to tell her. She wanted to tell her everything, but she knew she couldn’t do that. Why not? It won’t affect your contract now. Jos swallowed hard. Her throat was doing something funny again. But she’ll hate me when she finds out that I lied to her for my own benefit.

“It wasn’t me,” Jos said. It was all she could say, and she hated that.

Eden shook her head and planted her hands on her hips. Clad in a cherry red dress and a black blazer, her raven hair glossy under the streetlights and her skin bathed golden, she took Jos’ breath away.

No one had ever stolen her breath before Eden Rutherford.

It was unnerving, what she did to Jos’ lungs. And the rest of her body.

“Let me take you out for dinner.”

Jos’ brows shot up. “It’s kind of late for that, isn’t it?” Really? That’s the best protest you can muster up?

“For a burger, then.”

Jos didn’t eat burgers. She most certainly didn’t eat fries or milkshakes or whatever else accompanied them. She knew she should say no. She should just get in her car and go home. To her empty house. To her empty rooms. To the total quiet and

stillness that she often craved. “Alright.”

She wasn’t sure who was more surprised. Scratch that. Jos knew she was definitely the one who was far more floored. Eden just looked happy. “Do you want the address, or do you want to follow me there?”

“Better give me the address.”

“Okay. As a backup. And you can follow me.” Eden said it like she was afraid Jos would change her mind halfway there.

She nodded and her stomach twisted and tightened again. The heat was back between her legs, insistent and throbbing. She couldn’t ignore it and she definitely couldn’t pretend it was something else. She could insist that she was only doing this for Eden because she owed her one for the makeup thing tonight. And for lying to her. She would suck it up and pay her penance and she would eat that burger and she would get on with it.

That was the only option, wasn’t it?

Chapter 15

Eden

Eden didn’t think she stood a chance in hell at getting Jos to go for food with her, let alone a burger, but she’d extended the invitation anyway and now they were sitting across from the world’s most massive burgers.

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“I don’t think these are the world’s most massive burgers,” Jos said, staring at the menu dubiously. “Can’t they get sued for making a claim like that if it’s proven false?”

“I think most people take things like that with a grain of salt.” Eden picked up her knife from the little packet with the fork and napkin attached and sliced the burger into four pieces. There was no way she was going to try to embarrass herself by picking it up and eating it like that. What did people call it? Double fisting it? Or maybe that was something else. Something she would never say out loud because it was probably one of those dirty things that really meant something quite extreme.

“Some people are assholes, though.” Jos stared her burger down. “Even if I cut it like you did, I don’t think I’ll be able to get half of that in my mouth.”

“Take it apart. I don’t mind.”

Jos did just that, picking off the bun, pulling off bacon, lettuce, avocado, onion, tomatoes, and probably six pounds of sauces. It was a good thing sides were optional. Who the heck could eat that huge burger and fries?

Eden had done some research on places to eat close to the studio. The diner they were sitting in, a family establishment with booths that lined the walls, tables in the middle, and fairly ugly carpet and wallpaper all around, had rave reviews. One person had termed the burgers “die happy food,” so Eden thought she’d give it a try.

“Oh wow.” The first taste was pretty much burger heaven.

“Yeah. I have to admit it’s pretty good.” Jos stabbed another piece of meat with her fork and added a few extra toppings from the many scattered around her plate.

“So...” Eden wasn’t sure it was a good time to broach what she wanted to talk about, but maybe there would never be a good time. What she wanted to ask Jos was about the makeup, of course, but she chickened out. “So, I’m really happy that I’m going to do that piece in a few days.”

Jos’ fork paused. “I can’t believe they’re sending you out. That’s not usually something that’s done.”

“Well, it’s just clips. Most of the show is the interviews in studio.”

“I realize that, but generally they send a different reporter. Anyone else.”

“I was pretty adamant.”

“Hmm. Well, if Alden listens to you, that would be a first. He’s a nice enough person, and I think, at heart, he really is a good guy, especially outside of work, but listening? That isn’t his strong suit.”

Eden didn’t really want to get into gossiping about her coworkers, especially the ones that were her bosses. She trusted Jos, and she didn’t think she was trying to trap her. She wasn’t sitting there wearing a freaking wire, ready to record her saying stupid things about the people above her, for goodness sakes. Jos wasn’t a rat. She wasn’t a tattler.

She wouldn’t have pressed so hard for Eden to take the job if she wanted to get her fired. Gossiping just also wasn’t polite, and it wasn’t something Eden ever indulged in. Instead of leading into what she really wanted to ask, she thought that maybe it was best to steer the conversation in a different, but maybe connected direction.

Jos was smart. She'd catch on. She'd probably be furious. Hopefully she didn't start throwing food in retaliation.

"I think the show is getting more and more important topics." Eden tested the water with that. "It's more like how it used to be. When it first started."

"I didn't know you watched it." Jos cut a tomato slice in half and ate that alone. She chewed slowly, watching Eden with enough intensity to make her squirm in the bench seat.

"Oh, well, I didn't. Not really. I mean, I used to. I guess. Kind of. When you first started. I followed your career. That's not a secret. You already know that." She was blushing. Shit, she was blushing, and Jos was totally taking note. She was kind enough not to stick pins in.

"The powers that be wanted to improve ratings. They wanted to shake things up. That was part of the reason they wanted to hire you. Bring in a fresh face and new ideas. Maybe this is part of that. Or maybe they're just looking for a way to get rid of my ass because my makeup and the lighting make me look old and aging isn't an option for anyone who wants to stay relevant, and relevant is what they want."

That was the second time Jos had said that she thought she was getting edged out. Eden wanted to ask about the makeup thing and what happened. The fact that Jos brought it up didn't help her breathe a sigh of relief.

Jos blinked. "There's something about you that makes me say things I shouldn't. When I'm talking to you, I can't stop talking. It's a problem."

Her candor surprised Eden. "Like right now?"

"Yes."

Eden was starting to get ideas about Jos, and that wasn't a good thing. She was starting to realize that Jos thought she was walled up and she tried to be that way, but she'd started to let her guard down and she was finding it refreshing instead of just horrifying. Maybe she thought she'd gotten it wrong all that time. That she thought she was one type of person, but it turned out it was actually quite nice to be someone else even if she should hate it.

Eden realized Jos was handing her enough ammunition, enough of her secrets, to do some serious damage in her personal and professional life, but she didn't entirely know why she was doing it. She couldn't ask. Jos would just give her that carefully practiced blank expression and shut down harder.

"Have you ever thought about what you would do after?" Had she asked that before? Eden couldn't remember. She was going for benign, and she was harping on something she'd probably definitely asked already. Like a dummy. "I mean, retirement would be okay, wouldn't it? You have lots of money. You wouldn't even have to stay here."

"I don't know." Jos studied her plate, but she wasn't eating. There was a long pause, and just when Eden was sure she should say something to change the subject, Jos did it again. Provided her with a more open, honest answer than she ever expected. "I gave up everything for this job. Everything, including my marriage and my dreams of a family, which I didn't even realize was a dream until it was taken away from me. I put it off so long it's probably not even possible anymore. I haven't even thought of trying again. I'm clinging to this damn job like it's a lifeline."

Her eyes shot up and found Eden's. There was so much naked anguish in them that Eden dropped her fork. It fell to her plate, making a loud clatter, then rolled off the table and dropped onto the floor. She didn't bend to pick it up.

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“There has to be more.” She believed that. She wasn’t just saying it to try to soothe Jos’ brutally hurt feelings over work and the pain she was carrying around with her since her miscarriage. Other pain too, pain she hadn’t told Eden about. She was sure there had to be something. Wasn’t there always something? More than one thing. A lifetime’s worth.

“I’ve made myself so busy

for over twenty years. I can’t learn to relax now. Relaxing leads to thinking and thinking leads to—”

“Nothing good,” Eden finished. “At least not a certain kind of thinking. The overthinking kind of thinking.” She swallowed hard, her uneaten burger getting cold in front of her. She didn’t care. “You could go somewhere else; I’m sure lots of places would be happy to have you.” She grinned and looked away coyly, trying to lighten the conversation. “You could always go back to being a real journalist.”

“What does it say about you that you’re on TV now too? You have noble intentions, but I’m sure you’ll start selling out like I did sooner or later. Maybe in six months. Or a year from now.”

You’re different.

Eden nearly choked on the words. She would never say that out loud. Thank goodness for her split second filter. But Jos was. She was different than when Eden had met her. Was this what she was like when she trusted someone even just a fraction? Eden wanted to know. She wanted Jos to trust her all the way. She wanted

to know what she was like without the walls.

“You could blog. Or, no, vlog. Even better.”

Jos snorted. She picked up another tomato slice off her plate and flung it across the table. It landed on Eden’s plate with a wet smack.

Her mouth nearly dropped open, but she kept it together by sheer willpower. “Thanks,” she muttered. She picked up the slice and munched on it even though she couldn’t stand to eat them without something else most of the time. “I have to admit that I thought it would be kind of weird at work since we slept together, but I guess people do that all the time.”

Jos tensed.

“I like working with you,” Eden added quickly, trying to keep her confession lighthearted. “I like the job more than I thought I would, actually.”

“Give it time. It will sour, I’m sure.”

“For someone who tried so hard to get me to take the job, you don’t seem very happy about it now.”

Jos shrugged. She lowered her eyes quickly before Eden could read anything there. “Maybe I’m just more honest now that I have what I wanted. That I got the suits what they wanted.”

“They used you, then.”

“Don’t they use everyone? Everyone gets used at some point by someone. It is what it is.”

“Is it really all that bad? What about making a difference? If I can keep picking my stories and the interviews and topics, even just once a week, keep working with everyone to make it happen, that would be worth it to me. I’m still doing my work on the side. I’m writing another book and the first one hasn’t even come out. Maybe everyone will hate it.”

“No.” Jos didn’t look up. “No, everyone will love it the same way that everyone loves you. For a rich girl and someone who is entirely too chipper, you have a strange charm.”

“That’s high praise coming from you.” Eden was completely serious. “Actually, coming from anyone. But especially you.”

It means way more coming from you. She didn’t say it, but Jos probably understood. It was a miracle she didn’t kick Eden under the table. She didn’t react at all, but that was also Jos’ way.

It was very hard to catch her off guard. The things she gave, she gave of her own free will and not for any other reason.

It made Eden feel even more honored that she’d been the one to hear those admissions just now. “Maybe we should sleep together again,” she blurted. She, on the other hand, had a very bad habit of speaking her mind. The split-second filter thing didn’t always work.

Jos’ head snapped up. “No.”

“It didn’t ruin anything yet.”

“No.”

Eden felt her body come alive in a hot rush. She was all heat and raw awareness, tingling between her legs. It was so much more than just desire. She didn't want to just sleep with Jos. She wanted to spend more time with her.

Okay, so she wanted the sex too, and actual sleep. Real, intimate sleep where she could lie beside her all night and listen to her breathe and feel the warmth of her body and know they were close. And a good morning. She didn't want to be chased away again, stuffed into a cab that Jos had ordered with a heavy dousing of regret before she was sent on her way.

"This place is good," Jos said. She was clearly done discussing the whole sleeping together thing, and Eden was okay with letting it drop.

That didn't mean she wasn't going to pursue Jos. "Told you," Eden announced smugly. She bent down, picked up her fork, blew on it, and continued eating.

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She wasn't all spoiled rich kid, and she was going to prove it. She could flagrantly deny the five second rule, eat things she'd dropped on the ground, depending on where the ground was. She worked her buns off getting where she was getting because what she was doing mattered, but Jos needed more than that. She needed to see that Eden was willing to stand up for her when she had to. That she was willing to fight for her when it mattered. That she wanted to see Jos the way Jos didn't let other people see her.

She wasn't sure how to fully get there, all the way under Jos' skin, but she was going to keep trying. It was a darn good thing she was tenacious, and that quitting wasn't an option. Maybe one day Jos would see it that way too.

Until then, Eden would just deal with the amount of raw, chaffing need she felt every single time Jos was near. She'd continue to come alive and have to keep suppressing it. She wouldn't melt into a puddle of unfulfilled desire. She could keep working together, keep being professional. She wouldn't implode.

She'd keep chipping away at all that ice Jos had encased herself in over the years until she thawed and let her in.

Chapter 16

Jos

Jos was breathing an uncharacteristic sigh of relief after stepping off set for the night. She pulled out her earpiece and headed towards her dressing room. She'd spent an entire sleepless night after the burger with Eden.

Annoyed at her own inner conflict, at the voices and thoughts she couldn't silence, she'd finally gotten out of bed at six in the morning, giving up on sleep. She'd worked out in her home gym for two hours, hoping she could exhaust herself and silence her mind with physical exercise. She'd hit the shower and tried a nap, but she was still too restless to sleep. By then, her bedroom was illuminated with sunlight no matter how tightly she closed the blinds.

She needed blackout curtains, that's what she needed.

When was the last time she'd lost sleep over anything or anyone?

Jos actually knew the answer to that. When Sandra left, she'd slept just fine. Her thoughts were messy and disordered and her life was plunged into chaos—and she didn't like it—but she'd always been able to fall asleep after an hour and sleep soundly.

After she'd gotten home from the hospital, after the miscarriage, she hadn't slept, but that was entirely different. She wasn't restless then. Just sad down to the marrow of her being. The sadness felt like she was sick. She was exhausted. She ached. Her body had been through something terrible, but even after she healed, that sadness lingered. Often, it was that exhausted grief that drove her to find the blackest parts of sleep so she could escape from it.

Whatever was going on with her now was different than anything she'd felt before.

She couldn't wait to get to her dressing room, change into her clothes, and head out for the night. She was exhausted, but she also felt strangely exhilarated and at war with herself, which meant she was probably in for hours of tossing and turning. She hated the contradiction. How could her body be so tired and yet her mind still refuse to shut the heck up?

It was only made worse when Eden passed by her in the hallway. She turned her head and smiled at her as she went next door, shutting herself into the adjoining dressing room. The studio wasn't huge like some were. They didn't have personal assistants and there wasn't a mad rush of people ready to do their bidding. After San Jose's Evening Edition was over, there usually wasn't much action going on until ten, when the late-night staff came in, a

nd then much later, around three in the morning when people arrived for the morning positions.

Jos breathed deeply, telling herself that she wasn't inhaling Eden's scent. She wore the most delicate perfume. Whatever it was, it smelled like flowers, and it blended with her shampoo, which was unusually fruity. Tropical. Rare flowers. Rare tropical flowers. That's what she was like. Like going to an island getaway somewhere where there were no people and no problems and just endless greenery surrounded by turquoise waters and blue skies.

Are you kidding me? Who are you?

Jos made it to the safety of her dressing room and shut the door behind her. A rack stood on the far end with different outfits wrapped in their dry-cleaning sleeves. Her own clothes were hung on two different hangers on the rack, but instead of walking to it and retrieving them, she collapsed into one of the two hard leather and chrome chairs by the door.

She leaned forward, dropping her head in her hands. Her eyes stung from lack of sleep, but her brain was relentless. It tormented her with everything she couldn't stop thinking about the night before.

What was Eden Rutherford doing to her? She was dangerous. She stirred up a mire of emotions that Jos wasn't ready to deal with or admit that she even felt. It wasn't just

easy to like Eden. Everyone liked Eden. She was sweet, outgoing, kind, motivated, driven, and had an infectious laugh to match her personality. It was more than that.

When Jos talked to Eden, she got this strange sense that Eden would understand. If she told her anything, she'd understand. When she was with Eden, Jos knew that she was seen. She was heard, and she was accepted the way she was without having to be anything else. Eden saw under the layers. Eden saw into the past. Eden saw into the future. She was like no one Jos had ever met.

It was so much more than the fact that they were physically compatible on a level that Jos had never experienced. Even there, Eden made Jos want things she had never wanted with someone else. She made her want to let down her guard and be tender. She'd never made love to another person in her life, but she found herself wondering what it would be like with Eden.

Eden made Jos question everything she'd built for herself. Her career. Her safe life. Her normal life. Eden was dangerous. She was the newer, younger, prettier, thirstier, better connected, kinder Jos, and it was so obvious that she'd be hosting any show that was lucky enough to have her for years and years. Long after Jos was gone.

Jos should dislike her. She should be wary of her. She absolutely should not be wanting to spend more time with the woman who had been brought in to one day kick her out. Her head was still on the chopping block, but for once, Jos found it hard to care.

She found it hard to focus on her job and career when she wanted to think about someone else. About Eden Rutherford. She'd come into Jos' life and turned everything upside down. She was bringing Jos to life again. Making her thaw out. Making her feel again. It hurt. It felt like real pain, both mental and physical. And yet, she felt strangely herself, strangely at peace, even when her body was a battleground of conflicted thoughts and twisting emotions.

What is happening to me?

Eden made Jos want things. That was probably the most dangerous part of everything. Jos knew that if she wasn't careful, she'd take a blind step right off the precipice she was standing on.

A soft knock at her door ripped her from her thoughts. She was slammed back into her body, which was currently melted into the hard chair at an awkward angle. Her head snapped up too hard and she had to reach back and rub between her shoulders as fire shot up the column of her neck. She barely managed to suppress a groan as she got out of the chair and walked to the door.

She pulled it open. and when she found Eden there leaning against the doorjamb in a pair of dark skinny jeans rolled up at the ankles, a set of black ankle boots with blocky heels that made her already statuesque figure that much taller, and a dark blue blouse that was the perfect color for her flawless complexion and dark hair, her mouth went bone dry.

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That pillar of fire in her neck travelled down her spine to heat her body, but it wasn't a sharp pain. Just the delicious warmth that often accompanied being in the same space with Eden.

"Alden just sent me a text," Eden said. "He wants to see us in his office."

"A text?" Jos reached out and gripped the doorframe. Her heels suddenly felt far too high. She wished she could kick them off. "He has your number?"

Eden shook her head. "No. Work phone." She gave Jos a questioning look. Of course it was her work phone.

"Right. That's strange, he didn't send me a message."

"He didn't?"

Jos pulled her phone out of the pocket of her blazer. "No."

"Oh. Well, I...do you think it's about choosing something for next week? Because I was thinking that a feature on mental health would be a perfect follow up to the show tomorrow."

Jos wanted to shake her head, but stranger things had happened. "How was it today?" She felt like an asshole for not asking before.

Eden's dark eyes lit up with that fire that Jos so easily recognized as the flames of passion. Not bedroom kind of passion. Life passion. Even still, it was sexy as hell and

Jos' tired body came to life, reviving instantly.

"It was amazing. Oh my God, everyone was so good. I was worried they'd be nervous being on camera because the people who are giving interviews tomorrow on the show are the ones who usually do that kind of thing, and everyone is just a regular person. A lot of them are volunteers. Everyone was great, though. No nervousness. I think peoples' passions really came through. I can't wait to do the interviews tomorrow. I gave Alden my questions this afternoon when I got back here and I—"

"Your questions?" Not only was Eden picking her stories and basically doing the job of the talent finder, the show's coordinators, and the producers, she was also designing her own questions, basically directing the whole flow of the entire hour. It made Jos' head swim to think about how much Eden had taken on. She probably should have been jealous about the crazy amount of extras Eden was getting, just because of who her parents were, but Jos wasn't jealous. She was so far from jealous that it scared her. If anything, she was freaking impressed. The warmth in her chest was something new to her and only reinforced the fact that she needed to get her act together.

"Yeah. For tomorrow." Eden nodded like it was a completely natural thing to come in as a green as grass journalist and host a major show in a prime spot, and not just stop there, but do everyone else's jobs as well and do it all with a genuine, effortless smile.

It would be incredibly silly to develop feelings for a woman half her age, the very same woman who should be her rival, Jos told herself. She'd been telling herself that since last night. They'd slept together twice, but that's all it was. Neither time had been planned, and that made it kind of an accident. They could move on from that. Feelings were another thing altogether. Jos was not going there. She wasn't.

"I guess we should go and see what Alden wants," Jos said quietly.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been called to Alden's office with a co-worker. Then again, it had been a long time since she'd actually had a cohost.

"It's probably to go over last-minute stuff for tomorrow."

Eden moved away from the door, giving Jos room to step out. She was smiling so naturally that it dazzled something in Jos, nearly blinding her. It made her chest ache too, but she refused to think about that.

She had her doubts about what Alden wanted. None of this was normal, but then, nothing about what Eden was doing was normal either. They said they wanted to shake things up. And they'd done just that by bringing Eden on. Jos would make sure that no one, including Eden, ever knew it had shaken her up too.

She had to put a stop to whatever was going on with her.

The sooner the better, because nothing was going to happen between them. Nothing could happen between them. There were rules that couldn't be broken and lines that couldn't be crossed. Jos was sticking with that. She had to.

Rules were there for a reason. Society's rules. The invisible and unwritten rules and codes of conduct of their jobs. Her personal rules. Rules kept things orderly. Rules protected herself and everyone else.

No, she wouldn't be breaking them anytime soon.

Chapter 17

Eden

"There aren't any rules against it," Eden said flatly, careful to keep any emotion from

her voice even though she was slightly shocked and taken aback.

They'd walked into Alden's office together and sat down in the chairs in front of his desk. The air felt glacial in there and it was more than just the air conditioning. It was the man himself, one of her bosses, giving off the chilly vibes.

He'd set down a series of photos without saying a word. Photos of her and Jos eating burgers last night. Someone had taken them from outside, and since they were sitting by a window, they'd had a clear shot. That someone, Eden knew, had to have had a good camera. She was experienced enough with this kind of spying to know those weren't cell phone shots. Who would be walking down the street, in the dark, carrying a camera with a telephoto lens?

This is my fault. I'm dragging Jos into this. It's me they want. Me and my family.

"We were having dinner," Jos said, her tone flat, almost like she was bored. It was carefully measured, and Eden had a feeling that underneath it Jos was anything but calm and controlled. She could see how rigid she was, how she'd sat up straight and drawn up into herself all at once. On the outside, she was once again flawless, but Eden knew her better now. She knew there was other stuff going on beneath the surface.

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Am I just hoping that she feels something? For me?

“We’d finished the show and were starving. I wanted to try a place close by that sounded good,” Eden said, taking the blame, if there was any blame, onto herself. “We’re cohosts and we’re friends. I’m not sure why having a burger at a family restaurant together would be an issue. Or why someone would want to photograph that.”

Anyone who wanted to photograph people who had money doing something that might turn into a story somehow or could be spun into one—like a new love interest for Joe Rutherford’s daughter—would have sold those photos to the highest bidder or used them to secure a big fat bonus for themselves at their own tabloid or publication.

Something about Alden having those photos wasn’t right.

Jos obviously thought so as well. She picked up the photos, her nose wrinkling in disgust as she thumbed through them and set them down.

“What is this, Alden? You’re having us followed now?” she sneered. “Hoping that a friendly burger would turn into something you could use against me for some reason? Or are you hoping for a big payout in some other sense? A story that isn’t a story. Just because we’re both gay doesn’t mean there’s anything going on between us. And even if there were, there isn’t anything in our contracts that would prevent that.”

Alden shrugged. “You’re right.” He was using that same chilly, unfeeling tone that stabbed at Eden like a freshly sharpened blade sunk between her ribs. He wasn’t like

Jos. His demeanor wasn't professional. It was straight up cold and uncaring. Eden hadn't seen that from him before. How could someone flip a switch just like that?

Even Jos seemed surprised. She gave it away with the slight parting of her lips when Eden's eyes flicked to her quickly.

"You're right, there aren't any rules about fraternization here," Alden said. "But how would it look if that's how the story came out? This isn't just a warning about being more careful or how it's a lucky thing I have friends in high places. You both have reputations to maintain, and so does this studio. You're cohosts now and that would be, well, it could be spun in any direction. It's my job to be concerned and to hold the studio's best interests above anything else."

He seemed more human when he blinked. His face softened just a little, and Eden was pretty sure he meant what he was saying. Or at least he'd convinced himself that he did.

That didn't mean she had to like it.

"It was just a burger," she said again.

Alden shrugged. "Please be more careful. Like I said, this is a warning. Innocent or not, you of all people, Miss Rutherford, know how things like this can get out of hand."

"I thought you'd be of the mind that any publicity is good publicity, scandal, lies, or not."

Alden frowned and Eden wished she could take that back. She wasn't being fair, and she knew it. She hated having to hide what she thought and felt. She wasn't any good at it. It made her feel false, and she was basically lying. That wasn't just a burger, it

wasn't just a dinner, and she knew it. And she was still hoping for more.

"If you can't be careful, we'll be forced to take action and change the rules around here, or shuffle things around." Alden's eyes flicked to Jos. They didn't even touch on Eden. "The morning news desk needs a new anchor. Charles is retiring next month." He let that threat hang in the air.

Eden had been working at the studio for two weeks and Jos had been there for over a decade, and that was how Alden was going to talk to her? He was going to threaten her with losing her own show and being chucked onto some shit ass shift in the middle of the night that no one cared about, and no one watched?

Jos had probably been there for years and years before Alden worked at the place. Eden didn't know that for sure, so she wasn't going to sling that arrow, but she didn't want to let Jos get threatened like that either.

Alden wasn't finished. He leaned back in his chair and smiled at Jos, but it was the kind of smile that a wolf gave the deer he'd just cornered before he finished it off. "You do have a contract extension for three years, but it doesn't say the studio can't make changes to your shifts as we see fit." Alden crossed his arms. "That's all. Just a warning. I'm sorry if it came across as harsh, but I was surprised and I knew this needed to be dealt with immediately. You both understand where I'm coming from, I'm sure."

Jos was a boiling, seething pit of rage beside Eden. She could feel the hot waves of her anger radiating off of her. She turned her head and dared to look in Jos' direction, and she was astounded that she could be sitting there with a neutral expression when she was so clearly pissed off and had every right to be. Eden expected a fight. She expected Jos to stand up for herself. Instead, she nodded and gave Alden a tight-lipped smile.

“I understand.” She pushed back her chair, gave another short nod, and walked briskly out of Alden’s office.

Eden was too stunned to move at first. She wanted to go on a tirade, to let loose and let Alden know what she thought about him, the studio, his threats, and those stupid photos, but there was something else tugging at the back of her mind. Something that made her tongue feel like lead and her chest feel like it was going to explode. Instead of picking a fight with the man who could not only fire her but make Jos’ life a living hell, Eden kept her temper in check, picked her battles, or more the timing of them, and nodded before she said good night and left that obnoxious office and the even more obnoxious man in it.

She headed down the hallway, walking fast. She had to find Jos. She had to ask her what that meant.

A three-year contract extension.

That was the thing that was nipping at Eden’s brain. It was nibbling away at her chest, eating her up because it didn’t sound right. Alden hadn’t thrown those photos of them out there by chance, and he hadn’t mentioned Jos’ contract by chance either.

“Jos, wait!” Eden caught up with her at her dressing room. Before she could say anything, Jos grasped her arm and pulled her inside, shutting the door hard after her. She twisted the lock in place and started pacing.

Eden wasn’t sure which part was more frightening. The fact that Jos’ eyes were wild, snapping blue sapphires, or the look she had on her face. It was the kind of raw, horrible expression that was often reserved for giving someone extremely bad news. Like doctors after surgery or cops showing up at a person’s door kind of bad news.

Eden’s heart stopped beating, then plummeted to the bottom of her chest. She nearly

smacked at herself there, where the organ was last located, to make sure it was still there and give it a restart.

“What’s going on?” Eden finally forced out. “Jos, you’re acting weird. Why are you pacing? You’re like a caged animal. It’s scary. Can you please tell me what’s happening?”

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Jos kept pacing like Eden wasn't even there. Leaning back against the wooden door for support, Eden gnawed at her lower lip to keep herself from blurting something silly. It didn't work. She wasn't able to keep her racing thoughts to herself.

"I think you might have been right about Alden."

Jos spun around. She raked her hand through her hair almost angrily. Her nostrils actually flared she breathed in so hard. "You think? He's doing it blatantly now. He wasn't just threatening me. He was the one who got those photos. He probably paid someone to take them. God, it's sickening." She snorted. "Here I thought he actually wasn't a bad guy. That he was decent and could even be nice. That he cared. The only thing he cares about is his job. I guess it's his ass on the line. He clearly has orders to make me quit."

"Why would he do that? You're the whole reason this studio gets such good ratings. You pretty much built the show up from nothing. They can't just find someone to replace you."

Jos went deadly still. Even Eden realized how stupid that was as soon as she said it.

"Can't they?" Jos asked. Her sudden and total calm was eerie. She didn't just look like a storm about to touch down. She looked like she was right in the eye of it and that peace was going to blow wide open. "Don't you think they already have? They got what they wanted. Now they want me out."

"But the contract. Your contract. He was talking about you signing a three-year..."
Oh fuck. No. No, no, no, no, no. Eden's hands balled into fists at her sides. She

needed to lean even harder

against the door. This is not happening. This is not freaking happening. “Jos, please tell me they didn’t make you bring me on, and your reward was a contract extension. Please freaking tell me that.”

Jos’ left eye twitched. Her lips thinned out. Eden’s pulse pretty much flatlined and then her heart was kickstarted with a painful jolt that left her breathless.

“Yes, that’s what they offered,” Jos said, voice devoid of emotion. “If I got you to work here, they agreed to extend it. If they fire me, they will have to pay me a huge amount of severance. It’s much easier for them if I pack up and leave myself.”

“Are you...? No, you can’t... You lied to me? I should have known that you weren’t there out of the goodness of your heart. Jesus, I don’t even know what’s true and what’s not anymore. Do you care about anything at all?”

Jos stood ramrod straight. She looked wrecked at having to admit the truth. It was more than just guilt. Now she was so quiet and still that it was actually kind of scary. Eden watched as Jos cleared every trace of emotion from her face. Before she straightened and pulled herself to her full height, it looked like she’d been sucker punched. Her eyes were the last to wall off, but Eden saw it.

The mirror sheen there that seemed to say, you have every right to hate me. Is it wrong that I want you not to?

That flash of emotion was quickly blinked away. Eden expected a quick surrender, but she obviously didn’t know the first thing about Jos. Instead of pelting her with her words, she seemed to have woken her up. Jos’ eyes blazed with a new light, and her face was nothing but steely determination.

“I do. I do care about some things. My job, for one. I loved it. It might not be saving the world, but I did it because I enjoyed it, not because it came with a good salary or because I wanted the public’s approval and attention and validation, but because I care. I do. Not everyone can be this hero and spend the rest of their days doing it. Some people never had a stable anything when they were younger and maybe they crave that. Maybe they crave normal. Maybe they want that mundane existence that you scorn with all your youthful vigor and accumulated twenty-six years of life experience. Maybe what you term as selling out actually means everything to them. Maybe those people are like me. I never wanted money or fame or the stupid house. Those things were just a bonus. I wanted somewhere I could belong. Somewhere safe. Normal. I haven’t lost myself. I haven’t lost myself at all.”

Eden was floored. Jos’ honesty punctured through her anger, leaving her wrung out and weighed down, but if she’d lit a fire under Jos, Jos had lit a fire under her, and she wasn’t going to let her make a grand speech and shift all the guilt onto her and walk away like that. She wasn’t going to let her honesty run her through. She couldn’t. Not for herself and not for Jos.

“I don’t think you were craving normal,” Eden said carefully. She pulled herself off the door and faced Jos down with every bit as much fire and steam and bravery. “You weren’t going for mediocre. You were trying to carve that out for yourself the whole time because you were missing something inside you, and you thought it would fix you. Did it? Are you happy? Or are you still just as empty now that you have it? Because I think the things you really want, real love, the kind that knocks you flat on your ass, has nothing to do with your job. You can’t go for mediocre all the time. I think you were scared. You were scared to let things matter. You settled in because it was easy. You married someone you didn’t love because it was easy. You were looking for that safe spot and you found that shelter and you’ve stood under it for so long that you’ve forgotten what it feels like to take a chance on anything anymore.”

Jos stalked forward. “You don’t know the first thing about me!” she hissed.

They were still in the studio and the walls were only so thick. While Eden didn't care who heard what she was saying, it was obvious Jos wanted to keep things private.

It was clear that Eden was salting all of Jos' hidden wounds, but she couldn't stop. She needed to keep pressing. She needed Jos to hear her and wake up.

"Sometimes you have to put yourself out there and carve yourself in half, open yourself up to the point where it hurts. You just have to trust. You can't do that halfway, and it's never going to be enough for someone like you. I'm sorry that you had a terrible past, I really am, but you never should have shot for ordinary. You were extraordinary, Josella Frank. You were my freaking hero."

It was getting hard to talk past the thickening in her throat, but Eden swallowed back the tears stinging her eyes and kept going. "If you love what you're doing now, then I'm truly sorry I said all that stuff. I just think you could have been so much more. It wasn't time wasted, because there's still so much more time. Just because you were awesome, then you took a break, doesn't mean you can't get back there. If you wanted to leave this place, I would come with you in a heartbeat. I would quit if that's what you wanted me to do. I would. But you were never going to ask. Were you ever going to tell me the truth?"

Jos blinked like Eden hadn't just gone on a massive whirlwind of a monologue. Like she hadn't just reached deep inside herself to try to find the right words and give them to Jos. Like she hadn't just served up her own heart and apologized as well, even though she was the one who had been lied to. Like she hadn't just offered to follow someone who was kind of still a stranger anywhere she damn well chose to go.

Eden actually expected her to say something, even if it was cutting and mean, but Jos wouldn't be Jos if she was predictable. What was predictable was that she shut herself off. She grabbed the jacket that matched the pencil skirt she had on and threw it on over her blouse. She grabbed her purse off the table in the corner and palmed her

keys.

“You’re just going to leave? Just like that? Without saying anything to me at all?” Eden wanted to step in front of the door to block it, but she didn’t dare. She didn’t want to trap herself in with Jos at this moment. Not with the tension in the air so thick and choking. She was scared that Jos would shove her out of the way and walk past her.

It was humiliating to watch Jos leave, walk right past Eden, without responding or giving her an answer of any kind. She didn’t even look at her as she walked out the door.

Eden wanted to race into the hallway and fling something heated at Jos as her heels clicked down the hall. Something like, I’m freaking done chasing after you, and I’m done trying to help you, and I’m done with everything in general, and I freaking take that part about following you anywhere back.

Instead of being childish and doing the worst thing she could do, Eden swallowed back the words, her anger, her disappointment, and her tears.

She could be done and not cry, couldn’t she?

She could. At least until she got back to the privacy and quiet of her crappy little apartment.

Chapter 18

Jos

Jos had made it a point for so long not to feel anything that when she did, it was like a storm hitting, breaking over her all at once. Not just a regular storm, but a shit show of a storm with lightning, torrential rain, hail, snow, high winds—pretty much anything that could drop out of a sky was dropping on her.

She wasn't just angry. She felt scalded. Like her rage had burned her up from the inside and left her hollowed out. That had passed during the first twenty minutes she'd spent driving around aimlessly. She was left with a numb sensation, but that passed too, and then she was all raw and exposed wounds. All the shit from her past was opening up. Eden's words scorched through her, exposing scars that had never really healed at all.

Jos knew Eden was right. She knew it with every aimless block she passed, every mile she drove without a destination. She'd left the studio with the intention of going straight home, but somehow that hadn't happened.

Everything was out there between them now, yet Eden was the one who had apologized to her. She set Jos straight. She had her number down to the very last freaking digit. Eden was the one person Jos had never been able to wall herself up against. She was the one person who made Jos feel like maybe all those walls weren't even necessary.

When she was with Eden, Jos felt like she could be anything and anyone, but most

importantly, she could just be herself, even when she wasn't entirely familiar with who that was. She didn't need to be the Josella Frank that the whole city and state and maybe even half the country thought they knew. She didn't have to be the Jos Frank she'd created in her own head. She could just be Jos. And with Eden, just Jos was far more than enough. With Eden, Jos didn't have to pretend. She had the crazy idea that if she told Eden everything, she'd somehow understand, even though she was cosseted and cherished from the moment she was born.

Jos gripped the wheel tight in both hands and let her eyes rove down the dark street. A lit-up sign caught her eye and she let out a small gasp. She'd never forget that little hole in the wall coffee shop where she'd met Eden for the first time. She was in Eden's neighborhood without even realizing she'd driven there.

Of course I am. I knew I was coming here the whole time.

She hadn't just been driving aimlessly. She'd been driving right for Eden. Maybe her whole life she'd been driving straight to Eden without even knowing it.

Over the past few weeks, some of Eden's passions had clearly rubbed off on Jos, but it wasn't just that. Jos didn't want to let Eden go. Yes, she'd lied to her, but she'd been the one to storm out. She'd been the one to shut down and shut Eden out. That was what she did. It was what she was good at, even when she'd been the one to wrong someone and she should have been the one apologizing. Was she supposed to do that for the rest of her life? It was an utterly exhausting thought.

Eden had offered to follow Jos anywhere and everywhere.

And Jos had just flat out ignored that and walked away.

I have to make things right.

Jos had panicked. She was losing herself and she was afraid of losing Eden, which was silly and crazy because they weren't together. And then Eden had said that she'd quit her job. That she'd go anywhere.

She could fall in love with me if I let her.

I could fall in love with her if I let myself.

Eden had accused Jos of not being happy, and she'd been one hundred percent right. The only thing Jos had wanted throughout her life, more than anything else, was to be loved. When she realized she didn't know how to lov

e in return, she realized it was impossible. She'd built her whole life around denying the very thing she needed more than anything.

Before, it felt like she was being strong, that she was holding herself together, that she was forging ahead. Now, she wanted to laugh at herself. She wanted to cry. She wanted to change, and she wanted to try and she wanted to do something.

Jos pulled over at the curb beside a row of meters that were mostly empty. A set of ancient office buildings and an endless sea of convenience stores, tiny restaurants, and odd little shops lined the block. She left the car running and pulled her phone out of her purse. She didn't know Eden's address and she wasn't going to call someone at the studio to ask for it. That would be too much of a risk, even if someone would have given it to her, and chances were they wouldn't.

Thinking about risks made her burn with anger at Alden's betrayal. Of all the stupid, sneaky things someone could come up with, it would have to be those photos. It would just have to freaking be that.

Jos would deal with that later. Right now, she couldn't allow herself to be distracted.

Her anger dissipated and she felt deflated. Her chest felt hollow and dangerously full all at the same time. It felt like there was no oxygen in her lungs and far too much.

She stared at her phone's bright screen for a second before she brought up Eden's name and sent her a text asking for her address.

A few seconds later, dots bounced at the bottom underneath the blue bubble with her message. She let out a small huff of laughter when Eden's response came through: an emoji hand that was flipping someone off.

Jos typed another message. She told Eden that she wanted to come over and apologize.

Eden sent her another finger emoji.

There was no way Jos was taking no for answer. The one thing she hadn't lost over the years was her persistence. She tried again. This time, she used the word please. Eden responded with two finger emojis. Jos wasn't going to stop. She hit the call button and put her phone to her ear. She listened to the phone ring and ring, until it went to Eden's voicemail.

Jos sighed. She didn't know what to do or say. This was foreign territory for her. She sat there for a moment before she finally typed a text telling Eden that if she didn't answer her, she was going to do something drastic.

The dots started bouncing right away and when Eden's message came through, this time at least it wasn't an emoji. Jos actually laughed when she read the message.

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Like what? Can it be telling Alden and the studio to go fuck themselves? Oh wait, they aren't live. That's so disappointing. They'd just edit it out. Can you still do it anyway?

Jos typed a maybe, then asked again if she could come over and talk. She waited. The screen stayed silent, no dots. But then they finally appeared, and this time, there was a number and a street. Eden wasn't cruel enough to send Jos somewhere else.

When she pulled up in front of a white stucco apartment building, which wasn't nice and wasn't not nice either, she knew Eden would be there. She wedged her car into a spot that was barely big enough half a block from the building. The sidewalk was crumbling in front, the windows looked tiny, and the glass door to the lobby had bars on it. The buzzer was smashed, and half the buttons were missing.

Jos didn't need to text Eden that she was there. Eden suddenly appeared behind the foggy glass. Maybe she'd been there the whole time watching. It made Jos' heart do something funny. She reached up to rub the spot, then lowered her hand. Her heart had been doing funny things for days. Weeks. Ever since she'd met this woman. She wasn't going to be able to rub that sting away. Not now. Horribly enough, she realized she might never be able to ease it away.

The sight of Eden did something to her. Not because she was beautiful, even though she was. She took Jos' breath away. It was her eyes, which were so dark, glowing with those tiny pinpricks of light, like those little lanterns people floated up to the skies and down rivers. Little lanterns of hope.

They weren't going to talk in the entryway to the building. Eden didn't say anything

when Jos didn't say anything. Eden opened the door and Jos followed. They went up a set of stairs and down a hall to a battered wooden door. Eden pushed it open. Her apartment was mostly whites and browns, but that was all Jos could see past the sheen of tears she'd been holding back for the better part of four decades.

She dragged in what air she could, but it was shaky at best. It smelled like cinnamon. No, gingerbread. Like a candle was burning somewhere. Jos' hands were shaking, so she curled them in at her side.

"Do you want tea?" Eden's voice was calm. A lighthouse in the storm that hadn't let up since the day they'd first met.

"No."

"Coffee?"

"Only if it's as bad as that place we first went to."

Eden laughed. "No, it's not."

"I don't need anything." Jos blinked hard. Furiously. She was afraid to let the tears fall. Afraid that if she did, that old adage about never stopping would come true. She didn't like to be a cliché.

"You can cry if you want." Eden, as always, saw past everything Jos was trying to hide. She reached out, her fingers skating along the back of one of Jos' curled fists. She eased her hand open, eased it into hers, then led Jos, who was still blinded by the tears she was trying to hold back, into a plain living room.

The carpet was old, and the walls were white, but the couch was an expensive leather sectional. Probably Italian. Jos liked furniture. She knew good furniture. Eden had

apparently not been able to leave all the trappings of her old life behind, but that was probably her parents' insisting. She imagined Eden rolling her eyes. Smiling, laughing, tossing her hair in a sassy way, then relenting because it made her mom and dad feel better and she didn't want them to worry, because while she wanted to live her own life, she loved them fiercely.

That was the only kind of way that people like Eden loved.

I want that. I want to be worthy of that.

Jos hit the couch hard. It was equally as hard as her momentum. It wasn't at all comfortable. Eden sunk down with grace beside her. She didn't release her hand. Jos stared at the wall, at a TV stand and a huge TV that was paused on a romantic comedy. A cheesy one. One of the worst.

"You like this?"

Eden snorted. "Believe it or not, it's my favorite."

Of course it was. Because Eden was a normal person with normal emotions. She knew how to care. She knew how to live. She wasn't damaged from childhood on. She had passions that she chased. She had enough sass to fill up the entire world, but she could be soft and gentle and nurturing. She deserved so much better than what Jos knew she could ever offer.

"Stop," Eden commanded firmly. She tapped Jos' chin, turning her to face her. "Stop thinking so much. You're obviously upset, because your emotions are showing all over your face. I can read every single one of them. You came to talk. You came to tell me something. So, say it. I want to hear it. I want to know why you're here."

Her words might have been harsh and demanding and unyielding, but it was what Jos

needed. Someone to tell her the truth. Always, always the truth.

“It might sound incredibly stupid,” Jos said. Because I was the one to chase you away and tell you no and keep you at bay. “But I missed you.”

She took a shaky breath. The tears were doing more than threatening. They were quickly becoming a reality she had no hope of controlling. Through the shine, she could see Eden’s face. Swimming, but still beautiful. She watched the pulse thrum at the side of her throat. She watched her lips part and her eyes kept on shining with so much tenderness.

“That’s not stupid. Not at all. I missed you as well.”

“But we work together. We see each other all the time.”

“That’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not.” Jos lowered her eyes. “I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lied to you. I should have just told you about

the contract extension. You know now that my job is the one thing I’ve clung to all these years, and I knew you wouldn’t take the offer if I told you that I was going to benefit from it.”

“I might have.”

“You wouldn’t have, because it would have been wrong. Instead, I let you think I was good. That I cared. That I really was there because I wanted to make a difference. And I sold you on that too. I made you feel guilty. I basically tricked you into working at the studio just to save my own ass, which was just delaying the inevitable.”

Eden’s hand swept up over Jos’ chin until her thumb pressed against her lower lip. “They don’t realize what they’re giving up. They have never understood the value of you, and so they don’t deserve you.”

Jos wished she could keep lying to Eden the same way she’d lied to everyone else just by living, because that’s what her life had turned into. One giant lie. Instead, when she opened her mouth, the truth came out.

“You’re the first person who has seen me. I grew up in foster care. Everyone knows that. When I was thirteen, I ended up getting adopted. Everyone thought it was a happy ending. It was a nightmare. The father in the household was hardly home. He worked all the time. I don’t think he ever wanted to come home. The mother didn’t work. She was seen as a saint for adopting and fostering all these unwanted kids, but she was cruel. She was all about discipline, but it was the fucked-up kind of thing where what you did was always wrong. That house wasn’t a house of love. It was a house of fear. She’d starve us. Beat us. Whip us with a real fucking whip. She was careful. Just enough that none of us ever had to go to the hospital. She knew where to leave bruises that hurt for weeks but weren’t easy to spot. The hunger was the worst. Sometimes the thirst. She’d punish us with sleep deprivation. It was always pain,

pain, pain.

“When I graduated, I wanted to leave it behind me. I’ve never gone back. Never once contacted any of my adopted brothers or sisters. I couldn’t even fucking think about it. I shut it out and I did what I’ve always been good at. I went inside myself to that numb place where I didn’t have to feel or think and that’s how I got through college. That’s how I made a name for myself. All those dangerous places? I wasn’t even aware of where I was half the time, I was so far inside myself. I’ve always been good at lying. Lying to the whole world. But I can’t lie to you. I don’t want to lie to you. You are the first person I have ever wanted to tell the truth to.”

She stopped, aware that Eden’s hand had fallen away from her face. Aware that she was sitting back on the couch, her arms wrapped around herself. She’d frozen her with those awful words. She’d just given her the base facts. Just a few minutes’ worth of a lifetime of pain and sorrow and degradation.

“My birth mom had me for a few years. Until I was four. I hardly remember anything,” Jos went on. She tried to retreat to that place of numbness that was so familiar, and it worked just enough that she could keep talking without being overcome by the feelings that should have matched her words. “I have never, ever in my life been in a position where I can remember being loved. You accused me of being too normal, of that being my sell out point, but it’s what I thought I wanted.”

“Jos, that was stupid. I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“No, you did. Because normal isn’t what I want. I want to know what it’s like to be loved. I want to love someone. I don’t know if I can. I might be broken, I—”

An anguished cry was wrung from Eden, and she launched herself at Jos. She wrapped her arms around her neck and held her tight, hauling her up against her so fiercely that Jos tumbled forward, and they both nearly fell off the couch. She was

shocked at the ferocity of it. The intensity. The way her arms wrapped around Eden, and she realized that her cheeks were wet. Hers. Eden's. They were both crying.

Eden didn't have to tell her that she wasn't broken. She didn't have to tell her that she forgave her for lying to her. She didn't have to apologize for what she'd said, or for anything. She didn't have to do or say anything, because her touch was so much more than enough. They didn't need words. They needed each other. Jos needed Eden more than she realized it was even possible to need another person. Not just want. Need. Nothing in her life had ever been more important than this moment.

She wanted to change. God, she wanted it. She wanted to open her mouth and instead of all the screams and the pain she'd been keeping contained inside herself for the entirety of her life, she wanted there to be something else. Softness and laughter.

And truth.

Eden was truth.

Eden felt like home.

And she welcomed Jos with her soft touches, a hand soothing gentle circles on her back, the other on her hair, while she turned her face and let her sob against her shoulder. She didn't just sob. She wept. She wept until she was broken and aching and then there were still more tears to spend.

"I'm right here," Eden told her. Kept whispering gentle reassurances over and over again.

For once, it wasn't the numbness, the shutting everything out, that made it tolerable to take a breath. It wasn't what made it possible to look into Eden's eyes and the salty tear stains on her cheeks. It wasn't what made it possible to hold still while Eden

cupped her face and kissed her gently. It was feeling it all, unlocking that deluge, that made it possible to respond to that kiss. To come alive.

It took Jos forty-three years to learn what it meant to surrender. She was afraid of it. Of tenderness. Of the one thing she wanted more than anything else. Even just the possibility of love was terrifying. She was broken down now, breaking down, and there was so much more to come. So much more that she had to work on.

This time, she didn't turn away. She didn't shut herself off or sink into numbness. She left the crumbled stones of her walls where they were and leaned against Eden. She closed her eyes and let her see everything, every bit, exactly who she was.

Chapter 19

Eden

Eden held Jos until she calmed. She was weeping. Crying like it was the only thing she could do that would force out all the things she'd kept locked up for so long. Eden was afraid Jos would get control of herself and disappear into that place where she couldn't be reached and that would be it. She'd check out and then she'd leave the apartment.

When Jos first threw herself at her, Eden had been so still, so shocked, afraid that if she twitched even a muscle, Jos would get up and leave and the spell between them would be broken, but it wasn't true. Jos didn't want stillness. She didn't need stillness. What she needed was something real. She needed comfort.

Eden wanted to offer it. To say the right thing, but everything she thought was soaked in horror. It was like being drenched in cold oil, choking and thick. That was Jos' life. That was her reality. So, for the longest time, Eden said nothing. She just wrapped Jos up in her arms and rocked her, soothing her, because she wanted with all her being

to be what Jos needed, and she didn't know what else to do.

It wasn't until Jos looked up at her, blinking swollen and red eyes, that she realized she could give her the things she needed more than anything. Tenderness. Compassion. Comfort. The openness of her heart.

"I'm so sorry," Eden whispered as she smoothed circles over Jos' shuddering back with her hand. The other she had wrapped around her shoulder while Jos tucked her head there and breathed in shuddering, heart wracking sobs. "I'm sorry I said those things to you. Anything I said. I'm sorry I said that you lost your fire. That I called you a sell out. You did so much good, and I had no way of knowing it was a coping mechanism. That you didn't feel fear because you wouldn't allow yourself to, because you'd lived through the worst kind of terror for years. I didn't realize you had to have a coping mechanism, that you had to train yourself to go so far inside your body that no one could see you or touch you or hurt you. I'm so sorry you had to do that. None of it was your fault. I know you don't need me to tell you that, but none of it was."

Eden couldn't imagine the pain Jos had lived with. The fear. The shame, even. She'd had to banish all those things like it was a past life, like she hadn't lived it, like she was a different person, because it was the only way she could move forward.

Now it made sense, what she'd said about craving normal. Eden had no idea before then. She still had no idea now what it would be to endure those things.

Jos finally raised her head and wiped at her eyes viciously.

“I should leave,” she said on a shaky whisper. “I should just stop this. You should not have to be saddled with someone like me. Someone who doesn’t know the first thing about love or care or tenderness. You should be with someone your own age. Someone who grew up like you did. Someone not so fucking damaged.”

Eden felt a spark start blazing. The same spark that had been burning bright since the first time she’d met Jos in person. She’d known how dangerous that could be, how a spark could lead to a fire that was impossible to put out. That spark was burning bright in her and she panicked at the thought of losing it. Of it going out and everything being plunged into darkness.

“No.” She shook her head and cupped Jos’ face. “No.”

“No what?”

“No, I’m not going to let you back out on me now. I do care about your past because it’s hurting you. I do care that you get healthy and maybe that will take a long time for you, but that’s okay. What I do not care about is that you’re older than me. No one is perfect, but I think people can learn how to be perfect for each other. I’m a patient person, and as you might have noticed, I’m quite persistent. I’m not giving up on you and I’m not quitting this. I said I would follow you anywhere, and I wasn’t just talking about work.”

Jos blinked and took in a breath that shuddered and rattled thro

ugh her chest. “I know what you were talking about.”

Eden stood slowly. She held out her hand and waited. “The first thing we’re going to do is have a shower. Together. Let that warm water wash away some of the stress of today. In that shower, I’m going to wash your hair for you and worship every bit of your body with my lips until you feel clean. Then, I’m going to tuck you into my bed and I’m going to sleep beside you until morning. We can talk about what we’re going to do then. Us. Together.”

“And how do you know that would work out? Maybe all of this is just a giant exercise in futility.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.” Eden knew how painful it was to be under another person’s skin. How even people with a relatively normal background, people confident in their ability to be with someone else, could be rattled when they met someone and discovered a connection so potent and unexpected they felt flattened by it. “Will you come with me? Just for a shower. That’s all we have to talk about now.” Eden kept her hand extended. She was more than willing to wait. She’d wait all night if that’s what it took.

Finally, Jos stood. She clasped her hand and Eden brushed her lips over the knuckles. Jos inhaled sharply, but she didn’t pull away.

Eden walked her to the bathroom. She flicked on the light in the small place. It was so different than what she’d had growing up. So plain and so ordinary. A regular-looking bathtub with a showerhead. That was it.

She never broke eye contact as she started to unbutton her blouse. She worked with steady hands, shedding the fabric. She kicked off her flats and her jeans went next. She shimmied out of her panties and then she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra.

Jos stood there, watching everything, transfixed and utterly paralyzed.

“Can I undress you?” Eden asked softly.

She had no way of knowing what Jos was thinking, but one thing was for certain, and that was that she never wanted to do anything to hurt her. Never. She wasn’t going to shoot off her mouth about things she knew nothing about, and she was never going to assume she knew someone’s story.

Jos nodded. She still seemed numb, but Eden knew that wasn’t it. She wasn’t moving because she was still processing everything. She’d been locked inside the cage of her body for a long time, by choice, and no crazy transformation was going to happen overnight.

Eden was so careful. She treated Jos like she was delicate as she stripped her blazer away and got to the white blouse underneath. She worked the buttons open like they were precious. She unzipped her skirt with care and gently urged her out of her pumps. She left her underwear on and turned around to start the shower. When she’d got the water running to the right temperature, she turned around and found Jos naked.

“I’m scared,” Jos admitted, and God, she sounded it. She looked it. She looked like a completely different person. All her confidence was gone, but in its place was something else. Something sweeter, with fewer hard edges.

“I know. Me too. Everyone is, and that’s perfectly normal.”

Eden could see Jos fighting with herself. She didn’t pretend now that she knew what was going on in her head, or the conversations she had with herself in the privacy of her own mind. She was angry with herself for ever pretending to know.

Jos moved first. She stepped past Eden, brushing the floral shower curtain aside, and got under the hot spray. Eden climbed in behind her. She watched with hunger that she couldn't conceal as the water beaded over Jos' body. Her nipples were peaked, and her skin grew flushed under the spray. Eden was counseling herself to have some control and look away from the spectacular sight of creamy skin and curves when Jos turned and grasped her shoulder, pulling Eden in until they were pressed against each other.

Their mouths found each other's automatically, crushing together in a kiss that left Eden's knees shaking and weak. Jos kissed her hungrily, like there wouldn't be a tomorrow, like this night was it for them, but Eden knew she wasn't trying to say goodbye. She wouldn't let her. She would fight for their tomorrow and the day after that and all the ones after that.

"Let me wash your hair," Eden panted. She nipped Jos' bottom lip, suckling it into her mouth.

"That's not necessary." Jos' eyes blazed.

"I know. But I want to. It will feel nice. That's why people go to salons, isn't it? Just for the hair washing?"

Jos bit down hard into her bottom lip. At her sides, her hands shook. The water sprayed over her shoulders, and even though the building was pretty shitty, the water heaters were good. It would be warm for a good long while yet.

"If I open up, you might not like what you find."

Eden reached for the bottle of shampoo. A gift from her mom. All the things in her shower were gifts from her mom. The shampoo was some expensive thing with oils in it that smelled like a tropical paradise.

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“It’s okay. I want all of you. I’m not going anywhere. The good. The bad. I’m not bailing.”

She squirted a dollop of the green tinted liquid into her hand. It was thick, with little bubbles, like a wrong-colored honey. Eden smushed her palms together and lifted her hands. She brought them to Jos’ damp hair and began to work the shampoo into the strands. Jos closed her eyes and didn’t so much sigh as she shuddered.

“I’ve spent my whole life fighting my own self and all my ghosts. I don’t know how to stop. I don’t know if I can stop. I have rules. Rules that have kept me alive. That kept me sane. Rules about not wanting anything. And you make me want to break them all.”

Eden’s hands froze and her heart snapped in two. Hope was a stupid, wild thing, and it reared and kicked inside her, battling to get out. She made her hands work again, lathering the shampoo. Jos’ eyes stayed closed. Her face was serene, which was the only indication she liked what Eden was doing.

“If you want to break those rules, you should break them.” There she was, giving advice again when she knew nothing. “If you want to lay it down, if you want to rest, then you should.”

I’ll be here. I’ll keep you safe.

“Peace,” Jos whimpered. “That sounds nice. But trite.”

“I’m not talking about peace.” Eden worked her fingers a little harder through the

soft, soapy strands. “I’m talking about something we can find together.”

Jos froze. Her muscles tensed up, her fight or flight response going into overdrive, but Eden grasped her shoulders in her slippery, soapy hands and drew her close. She kissed her, tenderly and sweetly, until Jos relaxed. She melted, going soft against Eden. She directed them under the spray, massaging the water through Jos’ hair. Jos was softer than she’d ever been. A whimper escaped her throat at what Eden was doing. Their bodies pressed together, skin slick and hot.

All the strings of Eden’s heart were being plucked. She was like a finely turned harp. It was a lot for her, but for Jos, it must be unbearable. She wasn’t running. She was closing her eyes and melting into Eden’s touch, and she was staying.

“I was hurt by the people who were supposed to care about me. All of them. Every single one.”

Eden learned closer. She put her mouth at Jos’ collarbone and licked away the water, tasting her skin. “I’m sorry.” It was pathetic to not be able to find any other words. She found Jos’ eyes open, watching her. She cupped her face, her fingers feathering over her tapered jaw. “I will probably hurt you if we do this. Not intentionally. But abuse? I would never abuse you or break your trust. The good would outweigh the hurt by a thousand times, if it could be measured, but math was never something I was overly good at, so—”

Jos kissed Eden into silence. Her lips were warm and demanding and the painful cramp in Eden’s stomach coiled into desire instead.

“Instead of the stupid things I’ve said,” Eden whispered, breaking the kiss to grab the bottle of conditioner, “let me tell you what I know to be true. You are kind. So brave. You are beautiful. You understand the value of the smallest things. I can tell by how you’re blushing and

turning away from me that you don't want to believe me, but I won't let you do that." She slicked her hands through Jos' hair, starting at the ends first, then moving up until she massaged the roots, massaged her scalp. "You're a survivor. I know that's what everyone says, but it's true. You're on the other side of that shit now and you're a treasure. Even if it takes years, I will personally make sure you learn to believe it. You were my hero, Josella Frank. You're always going to be my hero."

Eden gently moved Jos back under the water's spray and used her hands to rinse out the conditioner. She let her do those things, not in surrender or because she was done fighting, but for some other reason entirely.

Eden bent down and reached behind Jos, shutting off the water. She pushed back the curtain and grabbed the fluffy purple towel off the rack. Jos sighed when the soft terrycloth hit her skin. Eden tucked the edges underneath Jos' arms, then set her hands at her waist and guided her out of the tub.

"You're sleeping here," Eden said. Not commanding or authoritative, but also not a question. Jos nodded. She let Eden guide her to the bedroom, and it was a testament to how exhausted she must be that she wasn't fighting it.

Eden pulled back the sheets and, stripping the towel away, tucked Jos between them. She used the towel on her own hair and wiped away most of the water droplets on her skin before she turned out the light and padded over to the bed. She slipped in beside Jos, who turned over on instinct and let Eden wrap her arm around her. She tucked her close, holding her.

She knew better than to think sleep would come. It wasn't going to get there for either of them, but holding Jos like this was something Eden had never dreamed of. She'd never dreamed Jos would allow her to do it. It didn't feel real, like she was swimming in and out of consciousness.

“I’m undone by you,” Jos said to the darkness. “I have no idea how to manage this.”

“Don’t manage it.” Eden’s arm tightened. She breathed in the tropical scent of Jos’ hair as she leaned in closer, resting her head on the same pillow. “Don’t stop it. We can figure it out together.”

“Together.” Jos tried the word, finding it unfamiliar, which made Eden ache even more furiously. “You don’t have to.”

“I absolutely don’t, but I want to.”

“You want the things I make you feel.” Jos stiffened. “It’s just a giddy crush.”

Eden splayed her fingers on Jos’ waist, turning her softly so that she had to face her. The room was dark, but not totally. The blinds were only so good and the lights from the living room and bathroom rushed through the cracks under the door and around it. The shadows on Jos’ face weren’t a trick of the light. Now that she was looking at her, Eden was ready.

“That’s not what I want. It’s not a crush. I want all of you. Every dark and dirty and gorgeous and beautiful bit. I am yours, Jos. Please let me want you.” It was some kind of miracle that her voice didn’t break before she got to the end, because her eyes welled up with tears.

Jos traced the path of the tears down Eden’s cheek as they fell, smoothing the droplets away with the pad of her thumb. She looked at Eden like she was a stranger, someone she was seeing for the first time.

“This is probably a mistake. Just a series of mistakes, one after the other, that we should stop.”

“No. Not us. This isn’t a mistake.”

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“I’m sorry,” Jos said again, but before that self-loathing could creep into her voice, Eden stopped her.

“Don’t apologize for the things you had to do to survive.”

“I don’t like to talk about my past, and the future isn’t something that we...that we can...it’s not going to work.”

“It is,” Eden argued furiously, like she could make Jos believe her just like that.

“I feel like every inch of my skin is flayed open and bleeding.”

“It’s not,” Eden soothed. “Let me show you it’s not.”

She needed Jos to tell her yes. To give her permission. She wasn’t going to force her touch on her. She couldn’t soothe the hurts that were bone deep by a brush against the skin, not if Jos didn’t want it. She couldn’t offer comfort if she wasn’t willing. She needed to hear it.

Jos was moving into her, grasping her face and bringing her close, before the rush of a word, yes, fell from her lips. The word burst between them, a star beam of light, a bright, full moon, powerful and hopeful. When their lips met it was beyond anything Eden had ever known, not just feeling or connection, but an unbreakable bond. It was surrender, but not her own. That wasn’t what Jos wanted or craved now.

“Yes,” Jos whispered again. “Please, Eden. I need you.”

Chapter 20

Jos

Those were her words, a plea and a prayer falling from her mouth, and even though she could barely believe it, Jos knew they were true. She needed Eden more than she'd ever needed anything. What she needed was to harden her heart. To go back to that place inside herself where she wasn't scared or vulnerable, where she wasn't that sad little girl, and nothing could ever hurt her again.

I can't fall in love with her. I won't fall in love with her. Love doesn't have to be on the table. Even as she thought it, in her aching, wounded heart, Jos knew she was a liar. Everyone loved Eden. She was easy to love. She was easy to fall for. She was easy to want.

And Jos did. She wanted her. She wanted Eden to be hers.

Eden kissed her sweetly, so sweetly. Like she wanted to give her all the peace and quiet and calm she had in every atom of her being. She wanted to turn that physical and transmute it into that seal of their lips. Jos couldn't take it. She wanted all that sweetness. She wanted to open herself up to it and feel it, but she wanted more.

Eden's hand cupped Jo's face. She kept kissing her gently, until Jos was ready to tell her that she needed more. To ask her for more with the hungry movements of her lips and her tongue and the roll of her hips that was changing from a swell to a tidal wave.

She waited for the surge to come over her. The craving of power, of wanting to be in control, of needing to be in control because she had to control something because that was the only thing she could do in her life. She had to take that power back for herself, so she wasn't a victim. She had to take and take and take and maybe that would fill up the endless hole inside herself, but it never came. It never materialized.

That hole felt small and far away, and she wasn't trying to fuck herself back into feeling something she could bear. She felt it. Far more than she'd ever felt before, and it was painful and horrible, and somehow, it wasn't terrible at all. It didn't crush her. It didn't kill her.

Jos gasped into Eden's mouth and the kiss intensified, until they were devouring each other. It was almost like Eden was afraid to touch her, so Jos captured her hand and guided it down, until it rested on her breast. Eden acted out of instinct. She cupped Jos' breast, rolling her fingers over the nipple until it was beaded and hard and Jos' hips lurched forward, slamming into Eden's. She kissed her fervently, like it was going to be her last chance, with more passion than she knew was possible for her to feel.

All of it was echoed lower, in the way Eden toyed with her breast, so sweetly and innocently, wanting to give her pleasure without the roughness, without the pain, and the way her hips rolled against Jos' own, searching for purchase, searching for a way to ease the tension and pressure and sheer delight building there.

Jos grabbed Eden's hips and did what she had never done with anyone. She swung her around so that she was on top. Eden straddled her with ease, staring down at her with wide, sparkling eyes and swollen lips.

"Is this okay?" She paused, breathing hard. "If it's not okay, we don't have to—"

"It's okay," Jos said firmly. She didn't honestly know it was okay until the words were out, and then she knew they were true. She was on the bottom and Eden was on top and she was okay. She wasn't going to lose her shit. It was okay to give up this much control, and maybe more.

"Okay." Eden bent her head and cupped Jos' breast. She suckled her nipple into her mouth.

Jos' head fell back against the pillow, grinding into it. She was wet everywhere. Her wet hair there at the pillow. Eden's wet, warm mouth and her soft lips working her nipple in a maddening rhythm. She was wet between her legs, soaking there, slicking down her thighs. She wanted to close her eyes and revel in the sensations, all brand new and not nearly so frightening as she'd always thought they would be, but she couldn't. She couldn't stop watching Eden. She was transfixed.

Eden trailed kisses lower, over Jos' ribs and belly. She didn't stop until she was between her legs. She looked up at Jos, not asking for permission, but asking her to watch, and it was so dirty and sexy that Jos could have come just from the expression of awe and rapture on Eden's face.

Eden cupped Jos' breast with one hand, plying her nipple, pinching just enough to make Jos moan, and with the other, she spread Jos apart for her mouth. She didn't kiss her gently or easily or warm her up or work her up into anything. That wasn't what Jos needed, and it wasn't what Eden needed either. She ate at her furiously, licking her, suckling her clit, darting her tongue inside Jos' entrance, kissing her with open mouth kisses that were wet and noisy and so deliciously erotic that Jos' hips rose off the bed and slammed back down over and over.

"God, Eden..." She couldn't catch her breath. She was nothing but craving and need, and all of it made sense. Everything in her life, every shitty

part and the horrible pain, the moments of fear and hunger and all the loathing and the hiding, made sense because she wasn't hiding anymore. She wasn't in pain. She wasn't tortured, at least not in that awful way. She was spiraling and falling, yearning and aching, and so broken wide open for Eden to see, and that was the way she should be. She couldn't take it back even if she wanted to, because Eden had crawled up inside her chest and she was wrecking her and healing her.

Eden drove Jos crazy, drove her the brink, and then, when her hands tangled in those

long, raven tresses and yanked hard, slamming Eden's face down against her, holding her there, she made her come. She made her come with two fingers inside her and her tongue on her clit and her whole presence, her joy, her spirit, her safety, wrapped around her like a warm, invisible blanket.

After, Eden raised her head and kissed her way back up Jos' body. She stretched out overtop of her, curve to curve, their skin warm and sticky, their breaths hot and heavy and out of sync, and she kissed her. Jos loved the taste of herself on Eden's lips. She loved the way her muscles shook, and her body trembled beneath Eden's.

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“Fuck,” Jos breathed as Eden grazed her teeth along her lower lip. She knew what Jos needed, and maybe it wasn’t all rough and being the one in control like she’d thought it had to be, and it sure wasn’t all tenderness and softness, because it wasn’t enough, but it could be something in between.

Something that was a mix of both but could still be fiery and hot and tender and perfect for them because they weren’t perfect apart, but together, it felt like they got close.

Eden knew it. She knew exactly what Jos was feeling and what she needed. She rolled to the side, arranging their legs together so that she could grind against Jos with the perfect amount of friction. She did it again and Jos whimpered. Eden brought her hand between them. She was the one calling the shots, and it was good and right and wonderful to be at her mercy.

She ground against Jos as they faced each other, her breath sweet against Jos’ lips, hot and ragged. They ground together, their hips working in tandem. Eden’s fingers slowly circled Jos’ clit. So gentle. Hardly there at all. She was already so sensitive, the last orgasm far from faded. It hurt, but it was delicious. The kind of pain that made her set her teeth against it even as she welcomed the flood of it into her bloodstream.

Her body hummed and sang for Eden’s touch, and she let it. She didn’t shut down. She didn’t retreat. She marched bravely forward, letting Eden take and give.

Eden dropped her head and claimed Jos’ nipple, biting down until she moaned.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” Eden moaned. “I love your taste. I love having my fingers inside you and feeling you come on them. I love the sounds you make. I love how you take me and how you make me feel. I love it when you’re hot and commanding and saying dirty things to me, and I love when you’re sweet and pliant like this. I love making you feel good.”

“Yes,” Jos practically sobbed. She was wild with it. Not the feral kind of wild like she usually felt, just a good wild. A contained wild. A beautiful wild, like Eden said.

She was beautiful. Right here, her past didn’t matter. It did, but it also didn’t, because Eden knew it and she wanted her and she wanted to show Jos, to help her believe, that she was and could be whatever she wanted. That she could get past that. That it most certainly hadn’t broken her, and she never had to go to that place again.

Eden kept going. She didn’t let up. She didn’t stop until Jos felt like she was drowning in pleasure. Until she felt like she was going to explode. She made a sound that she’d never made before, a broken, ragged sob, but it was pulled from the depths of somewhere good. And then she was coming, the pain and the pleasure bubbling over her and bursting until she was losing her mind. She was coming so fucking hard against Eden’s hand, against Eden, and then Eden’s moans joined her own and she came with her. They writhed together, spiralling out of control at just the friction of each other.

Jos’ eyes closed against the force of the pleasure. While she rode out the waves and caught her breath and gathered up the exploded pieces of her brain, she felt that the place in her chest that had been broken and shattered and ground into dust was slowly being pieced back together. The ashes were being gathered up and assembled back into pieces which then could be repaired into a living, working organ.

“Jos...” Eden stroked Jos’ hair back from her face. She was still breathing hard, and even in the dark, Jos could see the flush on her cheeks.

It was the expression on her face, the glitter in her dark eyes, that made her catch her breath. There it was, burning between them. Everything they'd said and done since they'd first met and all the things they wanted to say and do until the end of fucking time.

It didn't make Jos panic. It made her feel partway back to being whole. It made her feel safe. Overwhelmed, but safe.

Jos slid her arms around Eden and pulled her in, cradling her body against hers as she turned them so she could wrap her up entirely with the length of her body curled around hers.

There were no words. They didn't need words. Maybe they didn't need words ever again. Some connections were deeper than that, than everything that needed to be said or had already been said. There was just this. The intimacy that Jos had always denied herself, knowing it could break her. Knowing that it could make her weak, put her on her knees, put her cascading down the tunnels of the past. She didn't think she'd survive it.

But that was then.

She wasn't back in the past. She was here in the present with Eden, and when she nuzzled her nose into the crook of her neck and Eden wriggled harder against her, she knew she was finished with that. She couldn't shut this woman out. If it brought her to her knees, then so fucking be it. She was moving forward, and nothing mattered but that. Not her job. Not the way she thought being successful and surviving was her own unique form of a fuck you to what had been done to her, not everything she'd clung to before.

"I have something I need you to help me with," Jos whispered against Eden's soft, fragrant skin.

“Anything.” Eden sounded sleepy, but she turned her face into Jos, giving her better access to her neck. Her hand curled over Jos’ and she pushed it into her chest, holding it snugly.

“I have something I need to write tomorrow. It’s important. Will you help me do the research?”

“Yes.” Eden’s fingers curled around Jos’. “Yes, I will.”

Chapter 21

Eden

Even knowing what Jos was going to do, it was still shocking for Eden to be sitting on set, the lights glaring down on her, the cameras ready to roll. Their guests for the evening were in the waiting room just outside the door. She was so nervous that her hands were slick with sweat and she had to wipe them inconspicuously against the beige wide-legged pants that wardrobe had provided for her. The pumps were half a size too small, ridiculously high, and killing her feet.

It gave her a surge of joy to think that she was never going to do this again. That this would be her last night here. The real joy she felt was knowing that Jos was coming with her.

They’d woken up that morning, twined together, and Eden had never been so happy. Jos had been hurt so badly in the past that she didn’t believe she was capable or maybe even worthy of love. It wasn’t love that was the issue, Eden thought. Jos had so much love to give and she deserved so much in return. She’d trusted that the people who should have taken care of her would do it. They hadn’t. She’d trusted her ex-wife, and she’d left her. The latter wasn’t as simple as that, and relationships were hard, and Jos was shut down. Eden wasn’t laying blame. She had no idea if anyone

had ever told Jos that they loved her and meant it.

If she was the first, she was going to make it count.

They'd done their research together, over cups of coffee at her apartment. Jos had written out what she was going to say, and Eden had been right there in the room with her, at a safe distance, not reading over her s

houlder, but supporting her silently.

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After Jos was done, she looked broken but determined, and Eden had been determined to show her with her body what Jos probably wasn't ready to hear in words yet. She made love to her for hours before they'd showered together, a shower that Eden wouldn't ever forget, and they'd left for the studio at the same time.

Eden had been worried about Jos' car, parked out there on the street, since broken windows and stolen items were a regular occurrence, but it had survived another night.

Now, she was on set, waiting for Jos. Jos was never late and the cameramen and crew gathered around to make the magic happen knew that. There was a murmuring echo already going through everyone behind the scenes. They had a start time, and they were live with a few seconds' delay.

Jos walked out at the last possible minute. She looked like a queen, wearing her own clothes. She'd gone home to change into something more comfortable after leaving Eden's apartment. She was wearing jeans, which Eden was surprised to find that Jos even owned, and a white blouse. She stepped up on set, in flats no less, and took the seat across from Eden.

More than a few jaws hit the floor. There was no time for them to haul Jos off the set and have her get changed. Her makeup was natural, her hair basically untouched after the shower. She looked raw and fresh and absolutely lovely. Eden's heartrate picked up, but it wasn't from nerves. It was all Jos.

They got the signal, no matter how rushed and also reluctant it might be because no one knew what was going on, and they started rolling. The teleprompter came on and

Eden did the intro to the show while Jos sat across from her, one knee crossed over the other in a causal and relaxed pose.

When it was her turn to speak, Jos ignored the teleprompter completely. Eden's chest felt like it was full of a raging wind storm. Screw the butterflies, she was going to get blown away by her own emotions. She had so much anxiety and adrenaline that it was going to make her keel over.

Jos started speaking and her strong, clear voice grounded Eden. Jos was looking right into the camera, but Eden was looking at her, giving her silent support and willing her to be strong, even if she didn't look like she needed it.

"I want to thank everyone for their support over the years," Jos started. "This city has been so good to me. People have been so good. You've supported me and made it possible for me to have the career that I've had. I've enjoyed this job more than I can say, but I also have to say that the Jos Frank the world thinks they know is basically a lie."

There were actual gasps from behind the cameras and the lights, but what could anyone do? Shut off the camera and stop the broadcast?

"The truth is..." Jos paused. She blinked. She didn't look at Eden, but it was clear to her that she wanted to. "The truth is that I have only ever told one person the truth about me. The whole, entire truth. I vowed that the public would never know that part of me. I thought that being someone else meant keeping myself safe because I wouldn't have to revisit those memories. That somehow, if I didn't go back there, they couldn't hurt me. That they were the past and the past was done, but that was a lie. They still hurt me. Every single day. Every single day, I am still a scared child waiting for the pain."

It was more than just stunned gasps now and gaping people. There was someone

running off set. Someone who could easily be heard on camera, but they didn't care.

"There are so many children out there, in foster care, adopted, or not in foster care at all, who live with hunger, fear, and abuse on a regular basis. Who live with the product of violence. Who know true terror more than they will ever know a real childhood. I was one of those children."

Jos paused, letting that sink in.

"There were times in my life where I didn't think I was going to survive. I actually thought I was going to die. Terror like that stays with a person. Forever. I was in foster care and then was eventually adopted. The family was loving on the outside. Normal. They were like heroes in the community. I'm telling you that if you see something that doesn't look right, ask questions. Ask the hard questions. Do the work. Don't just turn your back and do nothing. Apathy is the hardest thing you will ever have to swallow. For me, it's not the pain. It's the shame. Shame that I allowed these things to happen to myself. That I never spoke up. That I lived in fear and never told a soul. I'm forty-three years old and I have never told anyone, until yesterday."

This time, Jos did look at Eden. She gave her the gentlest, encouraging smile and that was all it took. Jos turned back to the camera and said what she needed to say.

"I never told anyone how three of my fingers were broken by being pulled back too far, back and back until they snapped. I've never told anyone that I was forced to sleep in the dirt crawl space under the house. That I was starved to the point where my body started to shut down, then fed so much that it was dangerous. That food was a weapon and a tool that was used against me and the other kids in that house. I never told anyone that the scar I have on the inside of my thigh wasn't from an accident. It was from being tossed through a glass window. I believed all the lies I was told. That if I said anything about the bruises that were so strategically placed, they weren't visible, that I'd be the one to pay. That I'd go back into the system and there were

worse things out there. I believed that being locked in a closet for three days straight because I had stayed home 'sick' was somehow my penance because I had done something wrong.

“When I turned eighteen, I left and never went back. I was one of the youngest, but I still left my foster sister behind, and another girl. That woman didn't spare any of her punishments for her own blood. I'd like to ask their forgiveness. That I didn't do anything. That I never did anything. I had older foster siblings and I'm sorry to them too. That I've never contacted them to ask if they were okay. I've kept myself apart from everyone. I buried the past and I reinvented myself. I'd like to think that they watch me sometimes, and they see that I'm successful and thriving and they cheer because that's for all of us. She didn't break me. I'm still here. But I'm not.

“I was living half a life. I've clung to this job like it could save me. I have never allowed myself to care about anyone else, not really. Never get attached. Never let your guard down. Never have feelings or emotions because that is a weakness. I was wrong. That's not the way to live life. That's cowardice. Not feeling anything at all? That's not strength.

“So, if possible, I want my story to help all of those out there who are struggling. I want to give a voice to those who can't speak out. There are people who can help. And to all the victims of abuse out there, whatever your age, I want to say that I'm sorry for your pain and that you're not alone. Suffering in silence is the worst thing you can do. There are places and people who will help. If this ever makes it to broadcast, there will be a list of numbers on the screen and on our website. I also want to announce that I'm going to be stepping back from being in the public eye and focusing on healing and finding happiness. I have made more money in my lifetime than I knew what to do with it, but I know what I'll do with it now. Support these places that are listed, because I believe in them and the work they do. Thank you for supporting me over the years.”

Jos stood just as Alden came careening around the corner. He stared her down, chest heaving. Not even he would jump up on set, on camera, or tear it away. He would lay into Jos in her dressing room or corner her in his office, but now that he knew it was no good, Eden could see the anger in him at having lost like this.

Jos hadn't been sticking it to him or the studio or anyone else. She'd been telling her story the way it needed to be told. She wanted to help anyone else that she could, inspire people with her message. She wanted change. She wanted what happened to her to never happen to another child again. She knew she couldn't stop it and that change was hard and slow, but she wanted this moment, this last chance. She'd gotten it, and Alden couldn't stop it, and that felt like a loss for him, even though it wasn't a one upping situation.

Eden slowly slid off her headpiece and detached the equipment from the back of her pants. She stood up on those towering heels that were hell on her feet, and she walked off the set. She didn't stop until she went right past Alden and put the equipment in his hands. "I also quit. And I'm not sorry for it."

She kicked off those godforsaken shoes and left the set, left Alden and everyone else behind. She walked down the hall to their dressing rooms, where Jos was waiting. She had her purse slung over her shoulder and that was it. That was all she was taking, all she wanted from this place. Eden ducked into her dressing room, changing quickly into her own clothes and her own blessedly comfortable shoes. She met Jos back out in the hallway.

"Jos, you stop right there!" Alden's voice boomed down the hallway as he sprinted towards them. "You think you can pull this shit and everything will be okay? I will make sure you never work in this city, or this country, or anywhere else every again. Not in this industry. You are done being a journalist."

Jos just rolled her eyes. She'd spent a lifetime giving everything she had to this place,

and it was so painfully obvious now that even though she'd loved her job and made it her priority, this was always how it was going to end. Well, maybe not like this, but she was always going to leave with so much less than she'd given. Empty handed in a way that was heartbreaking.

"You do that, Alden," she said dryly. "I think you'll find that your influence doesn't extend nearly as far as you think it will. Thank everyone for everything, and I really mean that. I'm going to enjoy working freelance from now on."

Eden didn't need to say anything, even though she was tempted. She tucked her hand in Jos' and together they walked out of the building. They didn't stop until they were in the parking lot, standing in front of Jos' car.

"You were so freaking brave in there and I'm so proud of you,?"

?? Eden told her. "More than proud. I am so excited to start whatever it is that we're starting. Together. This is your life now."

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“No.” Jos cupped Eden’s face tenderly. “This is our life. You opened yourself up to me to teach me how to do that. You made me see all the things I was making myself blind to before. I won’t do that again. From now on, this is us. I might be slow at learning, slow and painful, but with you beside me—”

“I’m not going anywhere. Slow and painful or not. You turn me inside out, Jos. You have for longer than you’ve ever known. You inspired me to be what I am and who I am today. You’ve inspired thousands of men and women you don’t even know just by being who you were. Even if you had to be tough, you were still you, and that’s special. You’re always going to be a hurricane that could level me. You’re always going to take my breath away. I am so crazy excited to call you my girlfriend. I am so freaking excited to call myself yours.”

“You’re so good,” Jos sighed. “So trusting, and you believe in the good things. You believe that they keep coming. You have this crazy amount of hope. Even for the areas in this city that seem hopeless. For the people the world forgot. You see things that no one else sees. You are the sun, Eden. You are the freaking sun.”

Eden cupped Jos’ face right there in the parking lot outside the studio where they no longer worked. She kissed her slowly, sweetly, lingering over her lips, kissing her until she was breathless, and Jos was laughing shakily after.

“Then be my moon,” she told Jos. “Be my partner.”

“Yes.” Jos tilted her face up and kissed her again. “Yes, Eden. You don’t just complete me. I’m not looking for you to do that. But you give me hope that I can find a way to complete myself.”

“Jos?” Eden asked.

“Yes?”

“Now that we’re free to do whatever the heck we please, do you want to get a burger at that diner again? Because the last one, those obnoxious photos notwithstanding, was very, very good.”

“I think it was the company I enjoyed more than anything,” Jos admitted shyly, and Eden’s head swam. There was no way she’d ever get used to this. To this level of awesome wonderfulness in her life.

“We can go anywhere, then,” Eden amended. “Anywhere.” That was a beautiful word. A beautiful prospect. The start of something that they could create together.

“I’m good with the diner.”

“Then I’ll meet you there?”

Jos nodded and grinned. “I’ve left my car windows to chance often enough, but here, if anywhere, is where they’ll get smashed.”

That shouldn’t have made Eden laugh, but it did. She laughed and kissed Jos again, basking in the happiness they were already finding and creating together.

Epilogue

Eden

“Good morning, love of my life. I’m waking you up at the lovely time of three in the morning because Alex just exploded in his crib and Ginny won’t stop crying. I know

this is my shift, but I'm going to lose my mind here. Oh, and don't worry. Poo has been dealt with. It's just crankiness that needs to be dealt with and rocking to be done."

Jos blinked up at Eden with tired, grainy eyes. "Are we crazy for doing this again?"

"At least we're not having twins this time."

"Ha. So you think."

The first time Eden was pregnant, they'd used Jos' eggs. After two years of dating, they'd done what Jos probably promised herself she'd never do again, and they'd gotten married. Jos wanted a family so badly.

Eden knew how hard the whole month of October was on Jos. The miscarriage wasn't something she'd ever forget, and she still grieved for the baby she'd lost. Eden grieved with her every year, and at every other time of the year when that pain struck and held like a fist.

She was there for all of Jos' pain, all of the hard nights, the nightmares, the exhaustion after her sessions with the therapists she'd seen to get over the trauma that had been done to her as a child, the fresh pains of going off on their own and doing freelance journalism after being on TV for so long. She'd been there through all of it, which meant she'd also been the one to get every single one of Jos' smiles, her laughter, her tears of joy, and all her plans and hopes for the future.

Jos was forty-six when they were married, and she was ready to start a family. They'd gone through IVF, which Eden would never admit was rougher than she thought it would be, and they were shocked to find out they were having twins. Those twins were now just over a year old.

Whoever said that the first year was the hardest and it was easier after that had never dealt with two babies who slept for a few hours at a time at most. The past year had been such a rough ride that they'd taken to doing shifts and they hadn't deviated from that, or neither of them got any sleep.

And still, through it all, they'd decided to do IVF again, using Eden's eggs this time, and Eden had just found out the week before that they were pregnant again. What were the odds of having twins again? Probably as good as the first time, considering how they'd been implanted. Two more babies was almost beyond fathoming, but even if they did end up having twins, Eden knew their lives would be just as crazy and sleep-deprived and perfect as they were now.

Jos rolled out of bed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good." Eden rubbed her stomach. "Perfect. I feel totally fine. Other than that, my ear drums are going to blow out."

"That's why we sleep with earplugs. So we can get sleep. We should take to wearing them awake too." It wasn't a joke. They really did have to use the ear plugs.

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“I’m just not as in demand as their other mommy,” Eden joked. “Neither of them will settle with me.”

“It’s because they don’t like having to fight for arm space. I guess they got enough of that in the womb.”

“Ugh. You’re telling me. It felt like a war zone in there half the time.”

Jos rubbed her eyes, and despite the early hour and the fact that she had a deadline to meet the next morning, she walked with Eden back to the nursery where two very cranky one-year-olds were waiting.

“I’ve already fed them. They’re just crabby that they have to compete for attention. That’s why they try to out-scream each other.”

“I know. I wasn’t kidding about the dual arms thing.”

“We’re spoiling them,” Eden said. “Catering to their every demand.”

“You know what?” Jos winked as she picked Alex out of the crib and rocked him. He folded into her immediately. His sister did the same in Eden’s arms. They were both quiet the minute they were rocked around the nursery. “I couldn’t imagine anything better.”

Eden looked at her wife, then at the two perfect babies they’d created. It was her love, her patience, her desire, her strength, her resilience, the fact that she’d survived everything in her life, and even her eggs for these two children, that had brought them

here.

Jos walked the room slowly. She had the magic touch. Eden felt like she was less of a natural mother herself, even though she'd been the one to be pregnant, but she didn't worry about that either. Jos showed her. Even though Jos hadn't done it before, she showed Eden. Guided her. Loved her. She was so patient with her. She was the perfect lover. Caring. Kind. Nurturing. Protective. Smart. Witty. And still blazing hot and bossy in the bedroom.

"They're almost asleep," Jos whispered a few minutes later. "Should we try to set them down?"

"Setting them down is like throwing a carton of eggs up in the air and trying to catch them before they all fall and smash."

"You're right. Okay. A few more minutes."

"I don't know if it will make a difference, but thank you for helping get everything under control. You should get some sleep. You're going to be exhausted tomorrow and you have to finish that story and then we have the charity function."

The charity gala was in benefit of a women's shelter. It was just one of the many charities they suppo

rted. Eden's first book had come out, and as predicted, it had become a best seller. She'd followed it up with another book, filled with stories from her time interviewing and working with the homeless. Then she'd written the hardest thing she ever had to write. Jos' story. They'd technically written it together, and it was heartbreaking, but it was also beautiful and hopeful because it was their story. It was Jos' story and then it was theirs. Their life together. Their journey.

Jos still went to therapy every other week, or more as she needed it, and writing the

book had been part of that process. Jos had looked up every single one of her adopted and foster siblings. She'd met with two of them in person and talked to the others regularly online. She'd come so far. So freaking far. Eden used to think she was proud of Jos, but proud didn't even begin to cover it.

One word couldn't encompass how she felt for this woman. Not even the word love was fully adequate.

"You have that look on your face like you'd really like to lay these babies down so they can hopefully set a new record of sleeping for two and a half hours in a row while we catch up on our sleep before the craziness starts all over, but once we get to the bedroom, you're going to ditch the idea of sleep because you have other ideas instead."

Eden stifled a laugh because she didn't want to wake their sleeping children. "What kind of ideas would those be, wife?"

"The kind that involve a lot of spice and not a lot of sleep."

"Ooh, I think I could agree with you." Eden and Jos set the babies in their cribs at the same time and held their breaths.

It looked like they were going to get lucky. There was no crying. No one woke up. No one even so much as twitched. After all that crying, they were both out cold.

As soon as they were back in the room down the hallway, Eden stripped off her clothes. She wasn't sexy or slow about it. She basically just tore them off and ran for the bed. Sleep was precious these days, but time together was even more so.

The bed was still Jos' huge one. The house was now both of theirs. They'd painted the walls. Got rid of all of the white. Ordered different furniture. They'd made it a home together. A home that Eden's parents visited regularly for dinner and even

more so now that the babies were here. They loved being grandparents so much.

Jos peeled off her pajamas and switched off the light. She climbed into bed with Eden and wrapped her arms around her. It was a chaste, sweet position, but it wouldn't stay that way for long.

“So, about the spice level. I was thinking three hot peppers tonight. With a side of your palm on my bottom,” Eden whispered.

Jos bit down on her shoulder to smother a giggle. “Three hot peppers, hmm?”

“Well, I am sleep-deprived and need a good waking up.”

“I can do that,” Jos said, kissing away the sting of the bite with her sweet lips. “I can definitely do that.”