



Trashy Foreplay

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Description: Never flirt with temptation. Never lust after what I can't have. And never, under any circumstances, screw a married man again.

By the time this story is told, I'll have failed at all three... With my heart and reputation in ruins, I can't afford to make another mistake. Boarding a flight to Seattle is supposed to give me a clean slate, but from the moment Cash Montgomery slides into the seat next to mine, I'm captivated by his steel eyes that see too much. I ache for this stranger in a way I've never ached for anyone.

But I didn't know he was married, and I sure as hell didn't see the curveball fate had in store. My clean slate in Seattle isn't so clean after all because my new boss is the man forbidden to me. And the only man I want. The only man I'll do anything for, even if it means breaking the promise I made to myself when I fled my old life in shame. I wasn't supposed to fall for a married man, but I did.

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1. It's the End of the World - Jules

It all comes down to a fucking toothbrush. The absence of it rips a hole in my heart. No, that missing toothbrush obliterates me, scattering any chance of hope I have that he'll come back. Clutching my chest, I stumble from the bathroom back to my pitiful spot on the bed, but nothing lessens the sobs holding me hostage to this devastation. It sears and consumes. Makes breathing hard as hell. I can't see past it, and the idea of going on with this gaping hole in my soul seems impossible.

I hear the front door of my apartment creak open, and the sound busts through my pain-induced neurosis. Sweat drips down my cleavage. It's ten in the morning, but the temperature has risen to a humid ninety degrees, thanks to Oklahoma summer heat. It doesn't help that the air conditioner decided to take a crap yesterday.

Fisting my hands over my chest, I watch the bedroom door—the one he left ajar when he stormed from my life an hour ago. Footsteps pad down the hall, and I curse that sliver of hope that makes my breath catch in my lungs.

I know it isn't him—I fucking know it—but my naive heart speeds up anyway. The footfalls halt, and someone pushes the door all the way open. My sister stands in the hall, somehow impervious to the heat that's making me sweat buckets. She's put-together as always despite her ebony hair twisting into a messy bun. She's not wearing any makeup, so I figure she must be on her way to a photo shoot. I wipe my eyes, hoping she's in a rush on this Sunday morning and won't notice that I'm falling apart at the seams.

“Oh, Jules.” She crosses to where I'm sitting on the bed, and the mattress dips under

her weight as she settles next to me. “Chris told me you guys broke up.” Her perfect brows furrow in sympathy, but the tone of her voice belies her words. I love my sister. I do. But everyone knows she can be on the self-important side. Even so, just the fact that she’s here when she has somewhere else to be warms my aching heart a little.

“You saw him?”

She seems taken aback for a second. “Um, yeah. At the gas station. He looked like hell.”

The pain of the morning leaks from my eyes, no matter how hard I try to hold it back. “He just...”

Left.

Shaking my head with a snuffle, I dash the salty despair from my face. Will the tears ever stop? I’ve been heaving sobs since Chris made it clear no amount of bargaining or begging would stop him from leaving. The last words we said to each other were the biggest blow, and they torpedo through my mind now.

If you love me, you’ll stay.

Then I guess I don’t love you enough for this shit, Jules.

“He’s gone, Brit.”

“Maybe he just needs some time to cool off.”

I shake my head. That’s what I’d told myself until I spotted the toothbrush holder with only one left in it.

Mine.

Sitting there alone like me.

And I'd known. Chris never took his toothbrush when he "needed space." He'd disappear for a day or two, but not his toothbrush. That fucker would remain in its rightful place on the bathroom counter next to mine, where it belonged.

Until today.

He'd packed every fucking thing he owned, down to that damn toothbrush.

"What happened?" she asks, brushing a few strays of blond hair from my damp cheeks.

I don't know what to tell her. The guilt's been eating me alive for the past two weeks. All the gory details are going to come out soon anyway, and I'll have no choice but to deal with the blowback. But finding the words to explain what I'd done...

It's hard as fuck, because I have no conceivable explanation.

"It's my fault." I really do need to get this off my chest, and Brit is the closest thing I have to a confidant since my best friend moved to Seattle a few months ago.

"You can talk to me." Her hand settles on my shoulder, and I wonder if she can somehow hear the struggle going on in my head.

"Remember when Chris and I took a break a couple of weeks ago?"

"Yeah," she says with a nod. "He took off for a few days. But you worked things out, right?"

“I...” My breath hitches. “I made a huge mistake, Brit.”

Long lashes flutter over her wide sea-blue eyes, but she doesn’t say anything. Brit can be patient when she tries.

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“God.” I shudder out a breath before burying my face in my hands. “I’d do anything to take it back.”

She rubs a comforting circle between my shoulder blades, and when I raise my head, I don’t find a smidgeon of judgment in her expression. Only wary curiosity.

“What’d you do, Jules?”

“I got wasted.” That’s significant enough on its own, since I rarely drink. A beat passes in which the words try to lodge in my throat, thick as molasses. “I...I slept with Perry.”

Perry Reynolds. My boss. My gorgeous and persistent married boss.

I wish like hell he hadn’t been there at the bar that night. He’d been surrounded by his usual crowd, including his partner at the firm. Darlene, who hates my ever-loving guts and happens to be his wife’s best friend.

He’d kept his distance at first, but I remember him moving closer with each drink I poured down my throat.

Maybe he’d felt sorry for me because of the way I’d sat alone, drowning my sorrows in the bottom of a glass. Okay, more than one glass. More like eight or nine. Shit, to be honest, I can’t remember how much I drank that night. In fact, I recall zilch after he hopped onto the barstool next to mine.

But the following morning...well, the memory of waking next to his naked hotness in

a hotel room is ingrained in my mind.

The people at work would accuse us of heading there all along, of stumbling headfirst into a secret and shameful romp in the sheets. From the day he hired me, the office grapevine took us through the wringer, whispering about the heated vibes between the boss man and his latest assistant. But I never had any intention of acting on the harmless flirting between Perry and me. Besides, screwing unattainable men is far from my style, and I had Chris.

Had.

I choke at the thought.

“It’s really over,” I say, my voice little more than a strangled whisper. A single moment of weakness on my part ended up being the final breaking point in my relationship with Chris. He isn’t coming back.

Brit stands and pulls me to my feet. “So you made a mistake. Get over it, baby sister. Life happens.”

I raise my brows, stunned by her harsh tone, though it isn’t the first time she’s spoken to me like that. “Tell me how you really feel, Brit.”

Dropping my arm, she gestures toward my pathetic state of undoneness, from the blotchiness I’m certain is coloring my cheeks to the faded yoga pants hugging my hips. “You’re a mess, Jules. I’m only telling it like it is.”

“If this is your idea of cheering me up, you missed the mark by a fucking mile.”

She despises when I drop the F-bomb. So does Mom, for that matter. They believe speaking such words is unrefined. Just as I expect, Brit purses her lips.

“I didn’t come here to cheer you up. I came here to get your ass moving.”

Whoa. When Brit cusses she isn’t messing around.

“I’ve gotta go into the city for a shoot,” she says, checking the time on her cell, “but as soon as I’m finished I’ll come pick you up. We’ll get our hair and nails done.”

I sink into the mattress, overwhelmed by the thought of doing anything other than crying into his pillow for the next decade. It’s the only thing of his I have left. “I can’t.”

She crosses her arms, and the hard planes of her face cause my stomach to plummet. I recognize that look—it’s a look few people escape.

“Snap out of it,” she says, placing a hand on her hip. “You and Chris have been at each other’s throats since you moved in together. I’m not surprised you slept with someone else. Don’t you think it’s time you moved on? Everyone saw this coming.”

She has good intentions. At least, that’s what I tell myself as she twists the knife in a little deeper.

“Everyone but me,” I mutter.

“Love makes us blind. Trust me. This is for the best.” Brit hikes the strap of a leather Gucci bag high onto her shoulder, and I cringe to think of how much she spent on it. “I’ll be back, Julie Bean.” Her tone says what her words don’t—be ready, or else.

After she prances out the way she came, I drape my bed with a groan and bury my nose in the pillow that smells like Chris.

I hate that childish nickname, probably because Mom and Brit have a way of making

me feel like I'm ten-years-old again. The only time it doesn't irritate me is when Dad uses it. Then again, he's the only one in my family who doesn't go out of his way to push my buttons. Mom and Brit like to railroad me. They are too much alike. Blunt and abrasive. Same dark hair and startling blue eyes. Identical lithe figures with curves that screamfuck me.

The doorbell rings, and I groan again. No doubt it's Mom. They usually come at me in stages. If Brit is the lightning, then Mom is the thunder. I push off the bed and drag my feet all the way to the front door. The least she can do is barge in like Brit—then I wouldn't have to leave my bed of desolation. I pull the front door open, and my brain screeches to a halt.

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Perry leans forward, bracing both hands on the doorframe. His brown eyes, normally warm with a seductive glint, narrow on me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, retreating a couple of steps. The way he sizes me up is raising the hair on the back of my neck.

“We need to talk.” Letting go of the doorframe, he crosses the threshold into my apartment, and I take a few more steps back. The door slams shut behind him. “I thought we had an understanding, Jules.”

We haven’t spoken of that night, not even once, almost as if we’d come to a silent agreement.

“We...did.”

He brushes his fingers against my cheek, and his knuckles are soft, free of the callouses Chris has from working in construction. Perry has the hands of a man who crunches numbers for a living. “You’re a mess,” he says, and I wonder if he and my sister are reading from the same script.

“Thanks for pointing that out.” I turn away with a scowl and head for the kitchen. Whenever I get nervous, I always fight the need to keep my hands busy, but it’s a battle I’m losing now. I feel him lingering behind me as I open a cupboard. A second later, I close it and move on to the fridge, unsure of what the hell I’m doing.

Avoiding. That’s what I’m doing.

“I’ve been dealing with this shit storm all morning. How the hell did this get out?”

Jumping from the sharp sting of his words, I grip the refrigerator handle and stare at a jar of pickle relish, mustard, and an open package of hot dogs that are going bad. The milk is probably sour as fuck. Forget hair and nails. I need to go grocery shopping.

“I don’t know, Perry.” And I don’t. How am I supposed to know how my boyfriend caught wind of my drunken one-night stand? Between the tears and yelling, I asked Chris, but that only lit his anger on fire. “I was alone, remember?”

Shoving the door shut on the fridge, I whirl and face Perry, and it’s weird how he doesn’t seem so appealing to me anymore. His eyes are dull and boring, and his blond hair has no life to it. He’s good-looking, sure, with defined muscles hiding underneath his suits. But now I question the reasons behind my initial attraction to him. The truth, especially when it crashes into you in the form of self-awareness, is ugly.

I’d thrived off the attention. The desire in his eyes. The way his voice strummed my insides. My relationship with Chris deteriorated long before I fucked up and slept with another man. Even though we’d been on a “break,” it still felt like cheating to me.

Never mind the fact that Perry is married. I can’t even wrap my head around my actions, and I’ve never been so ashamed of myself. New tears sting my eyes, and I lower my gaze to the shitty linoleum floor, toeing a crack that’s been bugging me since Chris and I moved in.

“Jules,” Perry says, his tone softening the slightest bit, as if he senses the eruption of tears on the horizon and is tempted to head for the hills. “I’m just trying to figure out how this happened. Did you run into anyone that night?”

“Just you and your usual crowd.”

Darlene was there, and if I have to take a guess, she springs to mind first.

“I trust them. I’ve known them for years. No way did any of them leak this.” He folds his arms, and the way he stares me down hits hard. He thinks I told someone.

Seriously?

“Tell me you don’t think it was me.”

“If not you, then who else? Tell me who could have opened their big mouth?”

“Darlene, for one!”

He shakes his head, dark eyes resolute. “She’d never hurt Vicky like that.”

“Maybe she’s jealous,” I shoot back, taking a guess.

His silence confirms my suspicion. He fucked Darlene, too. His wife’s best friend. His business partner, for fuck’s sake.

But I’m not much better. I slept with my boss. My fucking boss.

I feel sick. Sick and small as I wonder how I ended up here. Cheating on my boyfriend, sleeping with a married man...I don’t do shit like this!

“You’ve gotta go,” I say, pushing him out of the kitchen and toward the front entrance.

He twists the doorknob, his jaw rigid. “I think it’s best if you resign.”

Of course he does.

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“I guess I fucked myself in that hotel room, right?”

With a long-suffering sigh that could rival my mom’s, he steps onto the front stoop. “I didn’t want it to come to this. You’re great at your job. You’ll have a new one in no time. I’ll give you a good recommendation.”

I gape at him, floored by his attitude. By noon today all eleven hundred people in Whiskey Flats will hear of my transgression.

They’ll call me a slut.

The pearl clutchers will stone my reputation to a bloody pulp.

But Perry? Well, he’s a man, and everyone knows how men are. They’ll look the other way when it comes to him, but not me. Hell no. Nobody will dare hire me until long after this scandal simmers down.

“Be realistic,” he says, obviously taking my silence for resistance. “My wife won’t have you working for me.”

“Then I guess you have nothing to worry about. Consider this my resignation.” I slam the door in his face, and a few seconds later my ringtone goes off in the bedroom. The chorus of “It’s the End of the World As We Know It” by R.E.M. filters down the hall.

Great. My mother.

I stomp back to the bedroom, most definitely not feeling fine.

In fact, as that song loops its emotional destruction, Mom's call going unanswered, I feel the walls close in. My chest grows tight with panic, because even though Chris is gone, his presence is inescapable.

In the apartment we shared for three years. In the town where we grew up together. Suddenly, everything takes on new meaning, and I see memories through the acute haze of pain. I won't be able to glance at the burger joint down the street without remembering all the times we hung out there, chomping away at the biggest fucking burgers you'll ever find. And the sight of the old theater where we gorged on cheap movies as teens will slice me open to the bone, leaving me exposed and bleeding.

Until Perry, Chris was my first. My one and only.

How did we lose our way? In the midst of arguments, tears, and too many "breaks" to count, we somehow drifted apart.

My cell falls silent, and I stand frozen as a feeling I've never experienced before rises inside me. I know I won't be able to escape that, either.

For the first time in twenty-two years, I want to runaway.

No, I need to.

I pick up my cell and dial Lesley in Seattle.

2. You Poleaxed Me at Hello - Cash

I'd recognize the small of that back anywhere. If the familiar curves of her tight little body doesn't clue me in, the tramp stamp at the base of her spine sure as hell does.

It's a simple inscription of the word "love" inked into her skin with sprawling strokes. She got the tattoo when she was sixteen to spite her father.

I still remember when I saw that ink for the first time. She'd worn a skimpy bikini that day on her sweet sixteen, no doubt displaying her rebellion for her father to see. He noticed it, all right. Saw her as nothing but a disobedient young girl.

Not me. She'd stepped out of her family's pool, water dripping down tanned skin as those tiny pieces of red material emphasized curves too sexy to belong to a young girl, and that was the moment I saw her as more than the daughter of my father's best friend.

The memory rips through me, and no matter how many times I tell myself to stop torturing my eyes, I can't stop staring at the photo on my phone. I have no idea who sent it to me, but the visual makes me want to burn the image to ashes. She's straddling some faceless guy's lap, obviously naked, and he has his arms snaked around her. Anyone with two eyes can see they're fucking. I can't make out his face, which just pisses me off more.

A text message flashes across the screen, and I ignore it as a monotone voice comes through the speaker overhead, announcing final boarding for flight 291 to Seattle. Instead of heading for the gate, I battle with myself in the men's room. My palms are a sweaty mess at the thought of getting on that plane while this relentless rage courses through me.

I don't like flying.

Truth is, I despise giving up that kind of control—the kind that leaves one vulnerable to other people's errors. But since I stepped up as CEO of MontBlake, hopping on a plane several times a month has become the norm. I'm a hands-on guy, detail-oriented, and no way in hell was I prepared to trust anyone else to see the Denver

project through to the end. CEO or not, my first love will always be architecture.

Too bad I didn't account for my wife turning into a cheating bitch. A pang of guilt knifes through me at thinking of her in such derogatory terms, but it's short-lived. Maybe if I'd seen her betrayal coming, I'd be more equipped to handle the anger boiling in my gut.

All I want to do now is smash my fist through a wall. Any wall will do, even the grimy one in this bathroom. Hell, the grime on the tile doesn't even bother me, nor does the thought of broken and bleeding knuckles. My hands curl into fists at my sides, and only the fact that I'm standing in an airport bathroom stops me. This day will surely go down in history as the shittiest day of my life, and I'm not up for going to jail on top of it.

Besides, I refuse to give her the satisfaction.

At this late hour, the restroom isn't overly crowded. A few men come and go, shooting me sideways glances, but I'm too busy pacing as I imagine the upcoming confrontation with Monica to pay them much attention. However, the reflection of the crazed man in the mirror gives me pause. This stranger looks like me, with familiar gray eyes and dark hair. Rage, hurt, and betrayal play across his face, and I shouldn't be taken aback, but I am. This guy looks like a tool, ragged around the edges and older than twenty-nine.

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I'm disgusted with myself, because deep in my gut I sensed something like this going down for a while. I push my left hand through my hair, and the sight of my wedding band smacks me in the face. What a farce that piece of jewelry is. I work the gold band from my finger and pocket it.

Then I inhale a deep breath.

A late flight is the only thing standing between me and the confrontation I crave. Turnabout is fair play, and now she's the one who won't seemecoming. In fact, she's probably fucking him right now in our bed, secure in the belief that her secret is safe and she has until tomorrow night before her idiot of a husband returns home.

Despite the distance she's put between us these past few months, I resist letting go of the hope that my marriage isn't a total sham, and that some part of the woman I married loves me too. It slices me too deep when I dwell on how quickly things changed, of how she morphed into a frigid version of the woman I thought I'd known. Thought I loved.

Goddamn it...still love.

A man in a business suit joins me at the sinks, and I catch the questioning glance he aims in my direction. I'm a disaster, no doubt about it. The photo of her with another man came through just as I'd stepped out of the shower back at the hotel. I'd thrown on a pair of slacks and the first shirt I found before tossing my scattered belongings into a carry-on. Peeking at the watch on my left wrist, I grimace. If I don't get my ass moving, I'll miss my flight.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm the hurricane roiling inside me, I grab the handle of my carry-on and leave the restroom. My cell dings again as I rush toward Gate 47. Sidestepping a woman who appears as rushed as I feel, I pull my phone out and glance down at the screen with a frown.

Monica: Why aren't you answering my texts?

Oh, she is pissed. Her words alone don't hint at her anger, but I can hear her tone in my head as I stride through the airport. Before I give in to temptation and forward her the incriminating photo I found in my inbox, I set my phone to vibrate and stuff it back into my pocket. She'll get no warning from me.

I reach the gate with three minutes to spare. As I swipe my boarding pass, a vibration goes off in my back pocket. Probably another text from her, but it could easily be about work too, even at this late hour. Cursing under my breath, I fish for my cell again as I cross the jet bridge.

Kaden: How did the grand opening go?

Boarding the plane, I return the flight attendant's greeting with a quick nod as I shoot off a reply to my brother.

Me: Went off without a hitch.

Can't say the same for my personal life. I shove Monica's betrayal to the back of my mind, determined to keep it there until I'm able to drop my anger into her lap. After what she's done, she deserves an in-person verbal lashing.

I make my way to my assigned row in first class, distracted by Kaden's text, and push my carry-on into the storage bin above. Letting my computer bag slide off my shoulder, I stow it under the seat in front of me before sliding in next to a blonde

whose attention is glued to the small window at our right.

My palm vibrates with another text.

Kaden: Glad to hear it. Got any plans tonight?

I swallow a groan, already knowing where he's going with this, and I'm in no mood to explain my early flight home on top of it.

Me: Nope, just bed.

Kaden: Too much work and not enough play makes you cranky as fuck. You gotta live some of the time, little brother.

Little brother. He loves throwing that in my face, even though he's only six minutes older.

Me: I'm beat. Talk to you tomorrow.

I switch the phone to airplane mode and slip it back into my pocket. That's when a hot tingle travels through me. Even before I turn my attention to my flight companion, the power of her stare sends electric shocks through my system, beginning in my arms and firing off in my legs.

Jesus. Those eyes.

They're large and round and outlined by thick, long lashes. Something about them draws me in, and for a crazy second, I swear I see myself in her gaze. Her bottomless pits of seductive chocolate overflow with the same kind of pain rioting through me. She's a complete mess, going by the red rimming those mesmerizing eyes.

In my entire life, I've never had such a strong reaction to a complete stranger. But as the seconds pass, matching the thudding beats of my heart, I'm paralyzed. The last thing I expected when I boarded this plane was to fall headfirst into another poleaxing moment.

Fuck me.

Consider me poleaxed.

3. Fate's Connection - Jules

This day has been nothing short of a disaster. I've come to the conclusion that fate is playing a wicked joke on me. The short flight to Denver was delayed, and that led to me missing the connecting flight to Seattle. So I ended up roaming the airport for hours, mostly fighting tears. I'm not used to being on my own, and now that I am all I want to do is go back and crawl into bed forever.

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But I can't.

Returning home will surely hurt more than pushing forward. Once I reach Seattle, things will be all right, and this crushing weight on my heart will ease up.

At least I got a consolation prize for the hours I waited stuck between the past I'm leaving behind and the future I hope to find; the airline upgraded me to first class. Letting out a long sigh of relief, I sink into the comfortable leather seat. I'm more than ready to put this hellish day behind me, even if hurtling through the air at five-hundred miles per hour isn't my idea of fun.

Most of the passengers in first class have already settled into their seats and are waiting for takeoff, but a few clutter the aisle as they stow carry-on luggage. I avert my attention to the small window at my right, my nerves over flying already kicking in, and watch two men load luggage into the baggage compartment. From the corner of my eye, I notice the movement of bodies as more people board the plane and head toward the back. The seat next to me remains empty, and I'm beginning to hope I'll get the row to myself.

Of course, that's when he slides in next to me.

He's tall enough that even first class doesn't accommodate his legs comfortably. I can't help but ogle his forearms. I have a thing for forearms, and my mind immediately goes to Chris and the definition of his muscles.

Don't go there. Don't think about his arms or anything else about him.

With a mental shove, I send Chris spiraling to the back of my mind. That's a good place for him right now, especially since I have no intention of having a meltdown on this plane. I go back to studying the stranger beside me. He's wearing charcoal slacks and a navy button-up shirt, left untucked with the cuffs rolled up. A guy doesn't need an eight-pack or bulging biceps to catch my eye. He just has to have sexy-as-fuck forearms, and this man does.

His entire body exudes masculinity, making these first-class seats seem small. Mr. Sexy Stranger owns the space, texting single-handedly as he pushes his fingers through thick dark hair, disrupting the longer length on top. The gesture is quick and rigid, as if something is irritating him. I'm openly staring now, my gaze drifting over the stubble along his strong jawline. Good God, he's a fine specimen of a man.

My face amps hotter by the second. I've never experienced such a strong gravitational pull toward a stranger, and after everything that's gone down today, the fact that it's happening now unsettles me.

It's the stress. It's finally making me crack, making me turn into a total lunatic.

He angles his head my way, and our eyes lock. My heart stops. Time suspends. Holy shit. I'm a deer caught in the high beams of a speeding car at midnight.

Blind-sided.

Paralyzed.

His eyes are the color of steel, a shade so deep they resemble the most ominous of storms. He raises a dark brow, forehead crinkling in surprise, and I come back to myself with a mental jerk, realizing how stupid I must look right now. And how unkempt I am from all the crying I did as I wandered for hours through the airport. I pray to God the concealer I applied in the ladies' room hides all traces of my epic

breakdown.

“Hi,” I manage to say, practically sighing the greeting. My face flushes, and I quickly look away, utterly mortified.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Maybe exhaustion stole my sanity. Or maybe it's the situation. No names, no attachments, no disgraceful scandals. We'll part ways as soon as the plane lands in Seattle, and I'll never see this man again. The anonymity of the situation has to be the reason I'm reacting to the stranger next to me as if he's a demigod.

“Fear of flying?” the demigod says, his voice laden with a sexy timbre that sends chills through me.

I return my attention to him and...fuck...those eyes. “I-I'm sorry?”

A smile ghosts across his face, revealing a dimple in his right cheek.

“You seem a bit...” He trails off, gesturing to my fingers, which have somehow found themselves wrapped around the armrest. “Terrified.”

Terrified is an understatement, but I'll take it since the alternatives don't make a shred of sense. Letting out a breath, I loosen my grip and shoot Mr. Sexy Stranger a weak smile.

“Maybe a little. Me and flying...we don't have a great relationship.” I can count on one hand the number of times I've flown, and I'll never be comfortable with putting my life in the hands of fate.

Fate. There's that word again.

But the term fits because flying feels a bit like rolling the dice and hoping for the best. Statistically, I know traveling by air is safer than driving a car, but logic can be a funny thing when feelings are mixed into the equation.

He buckles his seat belt. “There’s nothing to it. If they didn’t make us wear these things,” he says, pulling the strap tight across his thighs, “I wouldn’t bother.” Dipping his head toward me as if he’s about to impart a great secret, he adds, “Between you and me, I don’t like flying either.”

“Oh, well that makes me feel much better.” But I can’t stop a grin from teasing the edges of my mouth.

He shrugs with the same partially hidden smile he graced me with a minute ago.

The flight attendants begin their pre-flight check and go through the safety information I’m sure frequent fliers tire of hearing. As the plane starts to taxi, I settle into my seat and attempt to relax my hands in my lap.

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But after we hit the runway and tilt skyward, I grip the armrests as if they're the only things stopping me from hurtling to certain death. Only three hours until we land in Seattle. Three more hours to a fresh start.

A warm hand slides over mine, and my gaze crashes into his.

"You're doing great." He leans closer, talking above the engines of the aircraft. "The takeoff and landing are the worst. Just a few more minutes and we're home free."

My heartbeat is thundering in my ears way louder than the noise of this deathtrap of a plane. I'd blame it on anxiety from flying, but truth be told, it probably has more to do with his warm hand on mine. His fingers and knuckles are free of calluses, just like Perry's.

Except my boss never made my heart race this fast, and he never made me feel like he gave two shits about me. The difference is a stark slap in the face. This man doesn't even know me, but I sense genuine kindness in him.

Why didn't I recognize Perry's arrogance? Was I nothing more than a conquest to him? Why did he leave his group that night and sit next to me? I've never asked myself that last question until now, and it irks the fuck out of me that I can't remember much about that night.

"So, what's taking you to Seattle?" he asks, and I wonder if he wants to know for real, or if he's just making conversation. Or maybe he brought it up to distract me, since I still haven't unfurled my fingers from the grip I have on the armrest.

A hard swallow dislodges the past from my throat. “I’m visiting my best friend. She moved there a few months ago.”

“Have you ever been?”

I shake my head, and he gives my hand a comforting squeeze. I like his touch too much, which is just...crazy.

“Now’s a good time to go. We don’t get as much rain this time of year.”

“I’m excited to see her,” I say, but my voice cracks. He makes me nervous—possibly as nervous as flying does—and I don’t understand why. I draw in a ragged breath, but the higher the plane climbs, the whiter my knuckles become. It isn’t until the seat belt light goes off that I let go of the armrests.

He pulls away, but his touch has seeped into me, and the phantom heat of it lingers long after our hands return to their respective places.

The flight attendants make their rounds and take drink orders. They also hand out towels. I stare at the rolled-up damp cloth, confused until I figure out from watching other passengers that I’m supposed to use it to freshen up. I wipe my sweaty palms on the warm cloth, and the man at my side quirks an amused smile.

“What?” I say, affording him a sideways glance. “I’ve never flown first class. This is like...a life-changing experience.”

God, this whole day is altering the course of my life.

“Life-changing, huh?” He lifts a brow. “Wait until you taste the food.”

We both laugh, and my embarrassment over not knowing what the fuck I’m doing

vanishes. This gorgeous man somehow sets me at ease with a quirk of a brow and a little laughter. I spy his left hand and am relieved to find it empty of a wedding band, so I decide to let this surreal trip through the air wash away the heartbreak of the day. I want to lose myself in his presence.

“You live in Seattle?” I ask.

“Born and raised.”

“What’s it like living there?”

“Well, the weather sucks most of the time and traffic is horrendous, but it’s a beautiful city. It’s home. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.” He shifts in his seat and eyes me. “Where are you from?”

“A small town on the outskirts of Oklahoma City.” Unwittingly, my thoughts drift back to the place I still consider home, even though I have no intention of returning to the disaster I left behind anytime soon. The magnitude of what I’m doing hits me all over again, and I can barely believe I went through with this insane idea.

I didn’t tell anyone I was leaving. Only Lesley knows of my plans. Shortly after tossing a bundle of clothes into a suitcase, I’d turned my cell off, growing tired of hearing how the world was coming to an end. Mom wouldn’t stop calling until I answered, but I hadn’t wanted to deal with her bullshit. My thoughts drift to my sister, and I imagine her standing on my doorstep after her shoot ended, confused that I wasn’t there waiting.

My eyes sting again, and this time I’m not sure I can stop them from purging the hurt. Suddenly, the obsidian void beyond the window is fascinating. It’s a lot safer to look at than the man at my side.

“Hey,” he says, his voice so soft I barely hear him over the constant drone of the engines. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh,” I mumble, nodding and holding my breath. But the back of my throat aches with unshed emotion.

Fuck. Don’t break down now, Jules.

“You don’t seem okay.”

Panic wraps around me. For the first time in my life, I’m about to stand on my own two feet. No Chris. No family. I’ll have Lesley, which is definitely a comfort, but it isn’t the same. I want...no, I need to find my way, and I’m absolutely terrified of failing.

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If I hadn't drunk myself into a night I couldn't take back, would Chris and I have made it? As much as we fought, I honestly don't know how long we would have lasted. And for the first time since he walked out on me this morning, toothbrush and all, I question if maybe...

If maybe him leaving was for the best.

If maybe it's fate.

My heart revolts at the thought, ricocheting an ache through my chest that makes it hard to breathe. Fear of the unknown shrinks my lungs, and though I'm not prone to panic attacks, I wonder if I'm about to have one now, 35,000 fucking miles in the air.

His touch is back, shooting warmth through the thin sleeve of my T-shirt where his hand rests on my shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Jules," I say with a hard swallow.

"Can you breathe for me, Jules?"

I like the sound of my name coming from his lips. Deep and soothing. Nodding, I suck in a breath, dragging it to the bottom of my lungs, and risk a peek at him. He's turned toward me in his seat, dark brows furrowing in worry.

And his hand...

God, he's still touching me, and I'm the worst kind of person because I don't want

him to move away. But he does, and I blink as my heartbeat slowly calms.

“I-I’m sorry. I’ve just had a really bad day.” I almost laugh at the understatement.

“I can relate. Count me in on the Bad Day Club.” He lets a beat pass then exhales.
“Feel like talking about it?”

I’m saved from answering, as the flight attendant stops by with our drink orders. She gives him his bourbon before handing me a soda. I clasp both hands around the glass and look down into the bubbly dark liquid.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“You’re welcome,” she says. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

Silence is always awkward between two people who don’t know each other, but the quiet that settles over us now takes it to a whole other level—an exciting yet scary one. From the first moment I looked into his eyes, the earth seemed to stop. And when he touched me, bringing me back from the edge of fear and despair, my body came alive. Why I feel safe enough to confide in him, I’m not sure, but maybe I just need to break the disquiet.

“I’m not just visiting my friend.”

“I sensed a story there,” he says, and the weight of his scrutiny tingles down my spine.

I sip my soda and watch the nothingness outside the window. It’s easier to talk when I’m not facing him. “My life kinda fell apart this morning. Next thing I know, I’m on a plane.” A lengthy pause goes by. “I’m not going back.” I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince him or myself.

He lets out a low whistle. “That’s a gutsy move.”

A mocking laugh rumbles in my throat. “It’s a cowardly move.”

“How so?”

Biting my lip, I shoot him a furtive glance. “I fucked up, and instead of dealing with the consequences, I ran away.”

“I wouldn’t peg you for the type of person not to own up to a mistake.”

“Oh, I own it completely. But I can’t make it right, and I can’t take it back. Apologizing didn’t matter. He left anyway.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“As of this morning, my ex-boyfriend.”

He falls quiet for a few moments, and I wonder if he’s judging me. Coming to certain conclusions like everyone in Whiskey Flats will undoubtedly do.

That I’m a slut. A cheater. Someone without morals.

But that’s crazy thinking. He doesn’t know me well enough to judge, and I didn’t tell him all the dirty details.

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“How long were you together?”

“Since high school.” I don’t mention the on-again off-again nature of my relationship with Chris.

“I’m sorry, Jules.”

I shrug, but on the inside, I melt from the way he says my name. Part of me wants to know his name, and part of me willingly falls into the safety net of anonymity. After I step off this plane, I know I’ll always remember him as my sexy stranger.

“Do you believe in fate?” I look at him then, holding his seductive gaze with a boldness I don’t feel. But I cling to the facade anyway, losing myself to this surreal feeling of looking into a stranger’s eyes and not seeing a stranger at all. Something deep inside me responds to him in a way that confuses me. Rattles me.

I sink into the idea that I somehow know him.

He blinks after a few seconds, and the moment is gone. “Fate...like in a higher power?”

Tilting my head, I shrug a shoulder. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Right now, I want to believe in something as nebulous as fate. I want to believe that I’m meant to be on this plane heading for the unknown. That the destruction of my life this morning had a purpose other than to grind my heart to dust.

“Can’t say I’ve given it much thought,” he says. “But I’ve gotta admit that life threw me a curveball today, too.” He takes a long drink of the amber liquid in his glass, finishing it off. “I wasn’t supposed to go home until tomorrow, but here I am...” His voice fades, stolen by a note of pain, and the way he stares at me hijacks my breath.

And I’m curious. More than curious. I’m downright intrigued by this guy.

“What happened?” I ask. But I can already tell he doesn’t want to talk about it. We don’t know each other—we’re just two hurt souls who happened to collide in midair. It’s random and odd, and this surreal feeling is fucking with my head. And yet, despite the palpable weight of his silence, I can’t help but push him.

“It goes both ways, you know,” I say, refusing to waver.

“What does?”

“Talking about it.” I bite my lip for a few seconds before plunging ahead. “Maybe we landed in these seats together for a reason. I think you need to get it off your chest as much as I did.”

His hands clench then unfurl. “You’re very perceptive.”

“I’m also a good listener.”

And too fucking nosy for my own good.

“I might need another drink for this.” He raises his empty glass to get the attention of the flight attendant. After she takes the tumbler and goes to fetch him another drink, a couple of long minutes go by before he speaks. “She’s cheating on me.”

There’s a note of disbelief in his words, finality even, and I wonder if saying it out

loud just cemented that statement of ugly truth in his mind. He seems as stricken as I'd felt this morning as I watched Chris leave, powerless to stop him. The heat of my shame crawls up my neck and spreads over my cheeks. Whoever she is, she'd hurt him the way I hurt Chris. The irony leaves a bitter taste on my tongue.

"Maybe it's not what you think."

Maybe she got wasted and made the biggest mistake of her life.

"Pictures don't lie, Jules."

Ouch. I can only imagine how devastated Chris would have been if faced with visual evidence of my betrayal. I cringe just thinking about it.

"I had tunnel vision when I got on this plane. I couldn't see beyond confronting her, but now I'm not so sure." He drags a hand through his adorably mussed hair. "I'm so damn unprepared for this."

"Facing it head-on might help you move past it." I shoot him a sheepish look. "I'm sorry. It's really not my place to tell you what to do." For one, I don't know him. And two, I'm not the best example of facing shit.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he says. "You won't offend me, I promise."

The lonely and sad note in his voice rips my heart wide open. If I could punch the bitch who'd hurt him, I would. The hypocrisy in that doesn't escape me. Maybe I should start with the bitch in the mirror first.

"I think you should wait until you talk to her before making any rash judgments."

"Trust me, no rash judgments here."

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“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” A tick goes off in his jaw.

“Do you know what you’re going to do about it?”

“Not a clue.” He clears his throat, and I think he’s going to say more, but he doesn’t.

God, how I want him to say more. Is he going to leave her? Give her another chance? The fact that I’ll never know eats at me.

We fall into silence for a while. The flight attendant brings more drinks and even a light snack. But I can’t eat, so I nibble, way too conscious of how close he’s sitting. The sleeve of his shirt brushes my arm every time one of us moves.

Who knew the caress of fabric had the power to cause goosebumps?

I should move away, but I don’t.

He doesn’t either.

It’s almost as if a magnetic force is bringing us together. The air grows thick. All around us, passengers are either asleep or glued to their devices, but this gorgeous stranger and I have found a private bubble where electricity sizzles. He has me captivated, his nearness humming above the roar of the engines and lulling me into the first speck of serenity since Chris left.

I should have known it wouldn't last. Lightening streaks through the sky, and the plane hits a spot of wicked turbulence. For a few heart-pounding moments, I straddle the line between hyperventilating and not breathing at all. The aircraft lurches again, and I turn to him in a panic, my breaths coming fast and shallow. His face is mere inches from mine.

"It's okay," he says with a huskiness that turns me to mush. "These planes are engineered to withstand lightning."

My heartbeat goes into overdrive. I dart out my tongue, wetting my suddenly dry lips, and that's when he lowers his gaze to my mouth.

Another spot of turbulence brings us forehead to forehead.

"Oh, God," I rasp, closing my eyes.

Adrenaline courses through my veins, and the thunder of my pulse drowns out all sound. I'm terrified from the air pockets we keep hitting, but in this moment, I'm mostly afraid that if I open my eyes, he'll see the truth.

That I'm falling hard 35,000 feet above the ground.

"Just so you know," he says, sliding a hand along my cheek. "I've never wanted to kiss someone as much as I want to kiss you right now."

Oh wow. His voice is tortured, and when I finally lift my lids, I find his at half-mast.

He tangles his fingers into my locks, leaving me trembling and aching to feel his mouth on mine. I can't speak, so I don't even try.

"Jules...I don't normally do stuff like this."

“Do what?”

“Kiss strangers on planes.”

There is something so wrong about this. Sooff. Not to mention dangerous. Like diving into an empty pool.

Or boarding a plane that’s heading into a storm.

“You don’t seem the type,” I whisper as his breath warms my lips.

And he doesn’t, despite the fact that we’re an inch apart, our mouths aching to taste while his hand tugs on my hair, angling my head back.

“I’m not.” His fingers loosen their grip, and something inside him seems to deflate as he lets out a sigh of defeat. “So I’m going to chalk this up to high-level emotions and...”

“And?”

Cursing under his breath, he pulls away completely.

4. The Touch of Your Hand - Cash

And a temporary moment of insanity.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, horrified by my unforgivable actions. I’ve known this girl for a couple of hours, but it feels longer. A sheen of inquisition deepens her brown eyes, and I’m positive she’s wondering what the hell is wrong with me.

She isn’t the only one.

Smoothing her palms over jean-clad thighs, she turns her attention to the window. It’s a move I’m coming to recognize as a nervous one.

Pull it together, man.

But the ensuing silence, which was comfortable before I lost my head and almost kissed her, is stifling. I raise a hand to tug at my tie, except I’m not wearing one. The constriction around my neck and the tightness in my pants is all her doing.

The plane hits more turbulence, and the seat belt light comes back on, followed by a reassuring message from the pilot. My flight companion isn’t reassured. She holds the armrests in an impressive death grip, and I’d give anything to cover her hand again because she seems so damn scared.

But I don’t dare touch her. She brings out a weakness I hadn’t realized I possess—the ability to feel something for a woman who isn’t my wife. Guilt lances deep, staggering in its searing truth. I could justify my lapse of judgment by placing blame

on Monica's infidelity, but I won't.

My wife's shitty actions have no bearing on my own. I'm attracted to this beautiful woman with eyes the hue of sable, and hair that falls in soft sheets over her shoulders—gorgeous honey-blond hair I'd love to sink my fingers into again because I've never touched strands that silky.

Hell.

Dragging air into my overworked lungs, I force her hair and eyes from my mind. But my dick refuses to settle down, so I place my hands in my lap to hide the erection that won't quit.

"Tell me about your friend in Seattle," I say, desperate to break the silence. Honestly, I couldn't care less about her friend at the moment, but we both need something to shatter the awkwardness that's fallen over us.

"I met her in—" Another jolt of the plane cuts her off.

Jesus. What is it about this girl that brings out my protective side? My hands are tight balls of frustration in my lap. I'm a few seconds away from brushing my fingers over her skin again. I want to take away her fear. More than anything, I want those arresting eyes of hers back on me.

"You're probably wishing you weren't stuck with a total basket case right now," she says.

To hell with it.

I grab her hand and entwine our fingers. "Not at all, Jules."

Her attention lowers to our hands for a few seconds before she meets my eyes. “You’re very kind.”

I’m very messed up in the head, but as long as my touch soothes her nerves, I’ll keep touching her.

“I’ve flown a lot. Trust me, this kind of turbulence is normal, especially during a storm.” No way will I tell her that I hate it as much as she does. “You were telling me about your friend,” I remind her.

She lets loose an exhale that disrupts the fine blond strands framing her cheeks. “I met Lesley in college. She majored in business like me, but she’s a free spirit.” A smile I can only describe as fond shapes her lips. “She moved to Seattle to chase her dreams. Joined her brother’s band.”

“Another gutsy move. I can see why the two of you are friends. So what about you?” I say, lifting a brow. “Got any dreams you’re chasing?”

“I’m boring. My last job was in an office.”

Boring, my ass. Everything about her intrigues me. There’s an air of mystery shrouding her, and maybe that’s why I’m so entranced.

“I wouldn’t call you boring,” I say with meaning.

She dips her head but still can’t hide the pink tinting her cheeks. Relaxing her free hand against the armrest a little, she says, “At one point, I wanted to be a writer.”

“Yeah? Did you ever explore that?”

“A little. I wrote a few short stories in high school.”

“So what made you go into business instead?”

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“My mom, I guess. She hated how much I had my nose stuck in a book. Pretty much shot that dream down the drain from the get-go. She wanted me to be more like Brit. Model material, basically.” She pauses, shaking her head. “That’s my sister. Sorry, I guess I’m rambling.”

“Ramble away. I don’t think we’re going anywhere for a while.”

“Very true,” she says with a laugh. “I guess by the time I hit college, I went for practicality instead. Either way, my mom wasn’t happy with my decision.”

I can relate to the complexities of family all too well. I wouldn’t be married and running a corporation right now if it hadn’t been for the pressure my father put on me for as long as I can remember.

“What do you do for a living?” she asks a few moments later. “Wait, let me guess.” She narrows her eyes, studying me. “I’m picturing you in a business suit, sitting in one of those swanky high-rise buildings. Am I close?”

“You’re not far off. I run a company, and I also have a background in architecture.”

Surprise tugs her brows toward her hairline. “Wow. I’m impressed. I don’t think I’ve ever met an architect before. What kind of buildings do you design?”

“Hotels. But I’m not part of the design team anymore.” Not since taking on the responsibility of CEO, that is. “I work on blueprints.” Clinging to the anonymity between Jules and me, I squeeze her hand in a dick-like move, hoping to distract her from further questioning. “Feeling better now?”

She nods, but her attention veers to our laced hands again. Reluctantly, I untangle our fingers and put some space between us. But it's too late. Her warm eyes tell me what she doesn't say.

It isn't only turbulence that has her strung. Sexual tension buzzes between us, growing with each mile through the air, with every minute we sit close together talking.

Touching.

I think about the possibility that Monica isn't the only one at fault here. When was the last time we had sex? Definitely before she bought that new comforter I'd spotted in the photo—the one she'd fornicated on top of with some other man.

And the last time we made love? Even longer. There's a difference, and I can't remember the last time we connected with genuine intimacy. Work keeps me busy. Expansion has been great for the company, but maybe not so much for my marriage, since we've shared a bed but little else for the last few months.

For the first time since laying eyes on that photo, I ask myself a difficult question.

Did I push her into it?

I give myself a mental kick. I'm not the one who put a lock on our sex life. I don't know why she's been so cold and distant lately, but it's time to rip off the bandaid. Our marriage has been in trouble for a while, and I've been too busy—too careless—to take serious notice.

Until that damn photo blasted my phone. Sharp pain pierces my chest at the thought. This isn't what I imagined when I married her.

“Now I think I’m the one who needs to ask if you are okay.” Jules’ voice pulls me from the dark place I’d tumbled into.

Perceptive, indeed.

“I’m fine,” I say, leaving it at that.

She shifts in her seat and faces me, propping herself against the arm of her chair.

“What’s your favorite thing about Seattle?”

I drag a hand through my hair, exhaling pent-up tension. “I’m not sure I could narrow it down to just one thing.”

“Top three then.”

“It’s lively. People are always on the move, and you can get around downtown without a car.”

“What else?”

“Coffee. Need I say more?”

“I don’t drink coffee. I’m more of a tea person.”

“Jules, this is very distressing news. Seattle is crying right now.”

“Hey, don’t blame the rain on me,” she says with a laugh, and I can’t help but smile.

“Okay, tell me one last favorite thing.”

“I’d have to go with nature. When the sun does shine, there’s no better place. The Cascades are less than an hour away.”

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An adorable furrow seizes the space between her brows. “I can’t picture you camping and hiking and doing all of that outdoorsy stuff.”

“Don’t judge a man by his clothes.”

She lowers her eyes, and I feel the heat of her gaze at my throat, where I’d left the top two buttons of my collar undone. Then her attention drifts to my slacks.

“It’s hard to imagine you in jeans.”

I’m hard, period. Christ, I hope she doesn’t notice.

“So,” I say, swallowing past the thick lump of desire clogging my throat. “Think you’ll stick around and find some favorites of your own?”

“I hope so,” she says, her voice softening. “I can’t go back home.”

I want to ask why. There is so much about this woman I want to know. What she does for a living. What she does for fun. What kind of music she listens to.

The sounds she makes when she comes.

Jesus.

Clearing my throat, I lean forward and nod toward the window. “Looks like we’re getting close.” A glittering blanket of lights breaks through the dark, and for a long while, Jules gazes through the glass, seemingly relaxed. But when the pilot

announces descent into Seattle, she stiffens beside me. Holding her hand seems natural by now, and yet the spark of awareness that shoots through me as I lace our fingers together isn't. I ignore the buzz zapping along my skin and focus on trying to keep her calm.

"We'll be on the ground again in no time," I assure her.

She lets out a nervous huff. "I could've used you on my flight to Denver earlier."

"Was the turbulence bad?"

"Not as bad as tonight."

Silence settles over us for several minutes as the aircraft decreases in altitude. We bank left, and she squeezes my hand. I surpassed maintaining personal space long ago. As I return the tight grip of her fingers, I lean into her, hyper aware of the warmth radiating from her skin, and watch the lights of the city from over her shoulder. That glittering ground comes closer with each second that goes by. I think she might be holding her breath.

"Jules, breathe." My words drift across her cheek, and I'm certain she's shivering. She lets out a shaky exhale as the wheels touch the runway with a jolt, gripping my hand to the point of pain. As soon as we're safely on the ground, and the plane begins to taxi, she releases my hand before giving me a sheepish smile.

"Sorry if I crushed your fingers."

"I'm not complaining."

We lock eyes for several heated moments, in which time seems to freeze. It isn't until the seat belt light dings off that the spell is broken. As passengers start to move, I

unbuckle and grab my computer bag, then stand to fetch my carry-on. Adrenaline is coursing through me, and I'm not sure if it's from the woman I just spent the last three hours with, or from the impending argument I'm expecting with Monica.

"Do you have luggage up here?" I ask Jules as I pull my bag from the overhead bin.

Gripping a large purse between her dainty hands, she shakes her head. "I checked my suitcase."

She seems so small and scared sitting in that seat. I wasn't lying when I called her gutsy, and I'm finding her more alluring for it. Because it takes guts to be brave and vulnerable at the same time, and she does both with such openness that it makes my heart clench. Stepping back in the aisle to give her room, I gesture for her to go first.

"Thank you," she murmurs with an endearing shyness as she slides over and stands.

Hell, she's tiny. Her soft hair spills down her back, almost reaching her ass.

Her ass...

Don't even go there.

We shuffle along until we reach the exit, and I follow her across the jet bridge, the wheels of my carry-on drowning out the mad pace of my heartbeat. She's done something to me.

Made me lose my head.

As her hips sway in an understated way—a way that screams she has no clue how sexy she is, or how her petite frame is a damn weapon—I wonder how I'm going to

part from this girl who draws me in and tumbles me in the eye of her storm.

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All too soon, we step into the airport. As we come to a stop near baggage claim, she darts a shy glance my way. “Do you have luggage you need to get?”

“No. I travel light whenever I can.”

Her eyes seem to dim, and I’m positive the polite curve of her lips is laced with sadness. “Well...I need to grab my luggage.” A beat passes, heavy with things left unspoken. “Thanks for keeping me from freaking out up there.”

“You’re welcome.”

She takes a tiny step backward, toward the baggage claim area. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I force out, wanting to say more.

Like don’t go yet.

For a few stolen seconds, I imagine us getting coffee, or in her case tea, and talking the night away in a quiet corner of one of the airport cafes. And I pretend I’m not married, and Jules...

She didn’t just break the heart of someone who probably doesn’t deserve her.

I can’t see her cheating, but I’m pretty sure she did, and she’s torn to pieces over it. Regret is thick and rancid, and it’s wafting off her in fumes. It fucking reeks because it means she still wants him. She’s so shattered by what went down that she flew

halfway across the country to escape it.

If Monica displays a tenth of that kind of regret, maybe I can find it in my heart to forgive her. That's a big maybe. Regardless, I have no business feeling this way about someone I just met.

She shuffles her feet. "I should go."

"Yeah."

But neither of us move.

I tell myself to turn and head for the exit. To put an end to this crazy night. Instead, my feet eat up the few feet between us until we're standing close enough to touch. "You asked me if I believe in fate."

"Do you?" She tugs her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Until tonight, I didn't."

"But you do now?"

"I think so." Curling my fingers around the nape of her neck, I lean down and brush my lips across her cheek. "I hope you find what you're looking for, Jules." I pull away, and her eyes are huge and bright with an unmistakable sheen. Before those orbs pull me under, I turn on my heel and walk away without looking back.

5. Three Simple Rules - Jules

We're a couple miles up the highway before Lesley's maniac driving pulls me from my sexy stranger induced stupor. My cheek still radiates heat from the spot where he

kissed me. I remember how his hand felt at the nape of my neck, and how the rugged scent of him made my head swim. I grow warm between the thighs just thinking about it.

“How was your flight?” Les asks, her voice instantly landing me back in reality.

“It was okay.”

And terrifying and exhilarating—an experience I wish I could do over again, just to see him one more time.

“You sound exhausted,” she says, swerving around a slower moving vehicle.

I grip my seat as she zips up Interstate 5 in her VW Bug. She’s gotta be doing twenty over. Traffic isn’t too heavy, but the scattered cars sharing the five-lane highway are moving along at a steady pace. Lesley races around them like she’s a professional driver on a closed course.

“Any chance we can get there in one piece?” I ask, only halfway ribbing her.

“Have you lost faith in my driving?” She quirks an indignant brow at me, but amusement plays on her dark-painted lips. Pink streaks her black locks. Her style has always been on the punkish side, and she’s embraced it here in Seattle.

“I think I’m still on edge from the flight.”

“Thought you said the flight was alright.”

“There was some turbulence.”

And a lot of hand-holding, not to mention an almost-kiss that was panty-melting. God, what would it have felt like to have those lips on mine? I’ll never see my sexy stranger again, so there’s no chance of ever finding out.

“Okay, I’ll be good and slow down,” she says, conceding with an exaggerated sigh. “But only because I know how much you hated every minute of that flight.” As Lesley eases up on the accelerator, she shoots me a questioning look. “So...you gonna tell me what happened back in Shit Town?”

She hates Whiskey Flats. She hates Chris even more.

“Promise no ragging on Chris?”

A shrug of her shoulder is all the promise I’m getting. “What happened, Jules?”

For the next ten minutes, I tell her why I fled Oklahoma. Keeping her eyes on the road, she chews over every word as the windshield wipers swish back and forth on the glass.

“I can’t believe that motherfucker walked out on you like that.”

“Can you blame him? I slept with another man.”

“Yes, Jules. I can blame him. In fact, I think he had it coming. He neglected you. He fucking messed with your head every chance he got. The jerk made you feel like a

nag for wanting what any girl wants from her man.”

“He’s not a bad guy,” I say, wringing my hands. “Maybe we just weren’t meant to be.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. Finally.” Swiping her dark bangs back from her face, she shoots me a pointed look. “Because a real man puts his woman first. Chris didn’t. He cared more about drinking and goofing off with his buddies. He never fucking grew up, Jules.”

“Still, that’s no excuse for what I did.”

“Okay, so you made a mistake. It’s not the end of the world. But knowing you the way I do, you think it is, and you’ll punish yourself over it forever. Trust me, Chris isn’t worth it.” Lesley is accelerating again, her irritation with my ex dumping lead into her foot.

“Les, you’re speeding.”

“I always speed.”

“Well, I’d rather you not do it while you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry. I’m...outraged on your behalf.”

I bite back a snort. How ironic, considering I’m the one in the wrong. But Lesley won’t ever see things the way I do. After all, she’s the one who caught Chris kissing another girl at a party once when he was shit-faced. He’d groveled the next morning, and I’d forgiven him. Truth is, I’d been too scared to stand on my own without him, so I’d convinced myself it was only a bump in the road.

But Lesley is stronger than me, and she would call it game over if anyone ever treated her like that.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says after the silence stretches too long. “Chris is a dumbass. And Perry’s a sleaze. Why him? I’m just curious.”

“I don’t know,” I say with a shrug. But my gut is burning with shame. “The worst part is, I don’t even remember it.”

She reduces speed before taking an exit and heading down a tree-lined street. “You don’t remember fucking your boss?”

“I don’t remember, Les. Nothing. It’s a complete blank.”

“How much did you drink that night?”

“Too much, apparently.”

Lesley makes a right turn then pulls into a driveway overrun with three other parked vehicles. She comes to a stop behind a pickup, nearly kissing the bumper. “I’ve never even seen you drunk, let alone blackout wasted.”

The night is eerily quiet after she shuts off the ignition, and her words seem to echo in the dark between us. Soft rain pitter-patters on the roof of the car, but not even that drowns out the roar in my ears. The fact that I don’t remember unsettles me more than I want to think about.

“Chris and I had a huge argument.” I don’t mention how it was over money, or how his drinking escalated the past few months. He’s never carried his weight since we moved in together, and that’s just one more reason Lesley hates him. “We both said some really hurtful things, and after he took off...”

“You decided to bury your heartache in a glass?”

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“Yeah.” Looking back, I can see it clearly now. We’d been heading for an epic breakup for a while. A permanent one.

I just hadn’t wanted to admit it, even to myself.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but you’ll get past this, Jules. Just give it some time.” Lesley moves to open the driver’s side door, and I take her cue and do the same.

Seattle is cooler than Oklahoma. And wet. Rain beats down on us as she pulls my suitcase from the trunk of her cherry red Bug. I inhale the chilly breeze, closing my eyes to the rugged smell of trees and rain and earth. It makes me think of my sexy stranger and how he likes the outdoors. I wonder if he hikes in the rain.

“You would have to pick now to run away from home. Last week, the weather was killer.”

“I don’t mind the rain.”

“Then you’ll fit right in.” She heads up the walkway to a home that looks big enough to house four members of an up-and-coming band, though the paint is faded and peeling in spots. We reach the porch, and Lesley pushes the door open. I take the handle of my suitcase from her after we enter the foyer.

Though the outside of the house is on the rundown side, the interior is tidy. A group of guys are lounging in the living room, taking up the worn sofas and comfy chairs as they fiddle with their instruments. I can imagine Les up on a stage with them,

pounding on a set of drums.

“Guys, this is Jules. Be nice or else.”

I’d recognize Lesley’s brother even if we hadn’t already met before he moved to Seattle. The resemblance between them is hard to miss; he’s got the same inky black hair as Les. A few locks drape over his brown eyes as he plucks the strings of a bass guitar. He gives me a nod in greeting. “Nice to see you again, Jules.”

Before I can respond, another guy waves at me from a beanbag chair. He looks way too comfortable sitting there, one hand circling an open beer bottle. “What a gorgeous name you have.” His dark eyes are busy wandering over my body.

“Garen,” Lesley warns, “her eyes aren’t on her chest.”

Garen flashes her a cheeky grin. “Good thing I wasn’t looking at her eyes, Les.” He raises his gaze and his smile widens. “Not to say I don’t like ‘em because they’re as gorgeous as your name.”

Biting back a laugh, I roll my eyes.

“Chill out, man,” the third guy in the group says from the back of the room. I’m struck by how his dark blond hair sticks up in every direction. He comes across as wild and sexy, yet the way he’s strumming a shiny black guitar tells me he isn’t into bullshit. Maybe it’s the severe line of his mouth, or the slow motion of his fingers over the guitar strings.

His eyes are startling and bluer than the sky, and they’re latched on to Lesley. It’s an intense stare, one full of chemistry. “I’m Zander,” he says, swerving his gaze to me for a few seconds. “But you can call me Zan. Everyone else does.”

“It’s nice to meet you guys. I appreciate you letting me stay here.”

“We don’t turn away friends,” Garen says. “Especially cute blond chicks.”

“Oh my God, Garen. Put some duct tape over it already.” Lesley picks up a throw pillow and launches it at his head. He ducks, then flips her the bird with that obnoxious grin of his. Obnoxiously endearing.

“Jules is beat, so we’re gonna crash,” she says, grabbing my arm and ushering me toward a long, dark hallway. “See you bozos tomorrow, ‘kay?”

“Yep,” Zan says, his attention lowering to his guitar again.

As she leads me down the hall, my suitcase rolling on the rustic hardwood floor behind me, the shadows seem to reach for us from every direction. A shiver rushes through my veins. I despise the dark, especially when I’m exhausted.

Halting at the end, she pushes open a door and flips on a light. “This is it,” she says. “The bathroom is right across from us.” She points to a closed door on the other side of the hall, then gestures toward where we just came from. “Zan is in the next room over. My brother and Garen share the attic upstairs.”

“Where do you guys practice?”

“In the garage. It’s a kickass setup. We were lucky to find this place.”

“It’s great, Les.” And I mean it. Despite the nervous flutters in my gut—a side effect of uprooting my life so suddenly—I’m excited to call this house home...for now, anyway.

Until I can find a job. Then I’ll have a leg to stand on when I go apartment hunting.

Money isn't a problem for a few weeks, thanks to the inheritance my granny left me last year when she passed. It's not a lot, but it's enough to finance a nervous breakdown that transplanted me halfway across the country.

Lesley closes the door, shutting us off from the strains of music interspersed with the kind of trash-talk guys do.

"They seem cool," I say, setting my suitcase against the wall.

"They're pretty awesome." She shoots me a smirk. "But watch out for Garen. The dude can sing a woman right out of her panties."

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“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

She laughs. “Yeah, right. You think Leo would let me date a musician? Be glad you don’t have an older brother.” She spreads a sheet over a twin air mattress. “This is the best I can do. Hope you don’t mind sharing a room.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” And I don’t, despite an overwhelming flood of homesickness hitting me all at once. “It’ll be fun. We’ll talk shit like old times.”

She must have heard the sad note in my voice. “C’mere,” she says, opening her arms. I go willingly, needing comfort from my best friend more than I realized. This is why I flew out here. Les is the sister I wish I had, because Brit and I have never been close—not like we should be.

“We’ll talk shit as much as you want.” She tightens her arms around me for a few more seconds before I pull away. I blink rapidly, willing my eyes to stay dry.

“I just...I had to get out of there, you know? I felt like I was suffocating.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay. Have a little faith, because I’m telling you, Jules. You’re gonna love Seattle.”

The corners of my mouth tilt up in a weak smile. “I need to find a job first.”

“I’m likethis”—she crosses her fingers—“with the manager at Java Juice. The tips aren’t bad either.”

I laugh, because she is the manager.

“Thanks for the offer, but you’ve already done enough. I need to learn how to stand on my own two feet for a change.”

I never want to feel so devastated again, and ensuring that doesn’t happen means focusing on me—on ‘Jules’ instead of ‘Jules and Chris’. I’ve been part of a duo for so long that I’ve forgotten how to be my own person. I need to find myself, because I never really did when I was with Chris.

Hopefully, I can find the version of myself that doesn’t blindly walk into trouble; the kind of girl that can follow three simple rules:

Never flirt with temptation.

Never lust after what I can’t have.

And never, under any circumstances, screw a married man again.

This should be easy enough, right?

6. Dangle - Cash

The sky is spewing buckets by the time the cab pulls up to Mont Tower. The skyscraper stands forty-seven floors high, a glass high-rise sparkling like a beacon in the downpour. The rain doesn’t bother me, but it does make me think of tea and silky blond hair.

I pay the driver, grab my carry-on, and enter the lobby through the revolving glass doors. The night concierge greets me by name, and I give him a quick nod as I make my way across the marble tile to a bank of elevators. A swipe of my keycard gains

me access to a private lift, and the ride to the top ratchets up my anxiety. The closer I reach the penthouse I share with my wife, the closer I am to confronting her.

Will she deny it? Burst into tears and beg for forgiveness? There's no telling with Monica. Her moods swing back and forth as much as the weather does; one minute warm and breezy, and then chilly with the shadow of cloud cover.

The elevator comes to a smooth stop, and the doors slide open with a nearly soundless swoosh. I'm thankful for the quiet arrival as I step into the foyer of our overpriced home. I should know, since MontBlake owns the building. She wanted the exclusive luxury at the top, and I would have hung the moon to give it to her.

Making as little noise as possible, I leave my luggage in the foyer, slip off my shoes, and pad toward the grand living room, but my gut roils at the thought of catching her with him. Rain beats in a muted onslaught against the windows. That wall of glass takes up one side of the condo and rises two stories high. I'm about to climb the spiral staircase that leads to the second floor when I spot her sitting alone in the dark at the far end of the room.

She's lounging on the divan, one elbow propping her up as she stretches her long legs across the velvet cushions, her robe parting to reveal a creamy thigh. As she sips on a glass of red wine, the city lights provide the only illumination. She doesn't see me at first, and I'm taken aback by the worry pinching her features.

"Monica?"

She turns her gaze on me. "I called the hotel when you didn't answer my texts. They said you checked out." With an arch of her accusing brow, she stands in a fluid motion, silk robe billowing around her smooth legs. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming home early?"

Gauging her expression is like decoding a puzzle. I tilt my head for a better angle, but her face is a porcelain mask. A dark curl escapes her up-do, and the longer I stare at her, refusing to answer her question, the more she purses her full, luscious lips. She's refined grace, sex, and class rolled into a delicious, curvy body she hasn't let me touch in months.

And for the first time since she froze me out, I'm in no hurry to.

She lowers her gaze to my fly then immediately looks away. No doubt she thinks the heavy bulge behind my zipper is her doing. She has no reason to believe otherwise—has no clue that a pair of brown eyes are haunting me. I've had a perpetual hard-on for the last four hours. I can still smell Jules, still feel the warmth of her breath on my lips and the softness of her skin under my fingertips. The memory of her is imprinted on my being, shadowing me home in disgrace to confront my cheating wife.

In that moment, I feel as guilty as Monica should feel. I might have held back from kissing Jules, but my mind has fired on all cylinders since I left the airport. I've mentally undressed her at least a dozen times.

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Dragging her gaze back to my face, my wife brushes that stray curl from her blue eyes, and the humongous diamond on her ring finger catches the lights shining through the windows. “Is everything okay?” she asks, pausing long enough to bring the wine glass to her lips. “I was worried when you didn’t text me back.”

Rage, hurt, and lust collide in my gut. I don’t know whether to shout at her, strangle her, or throw her down and fuck my anger away. My throbbing dick votes for the third option, though Jules’ face is the one flashing in my mind.

I’m seriously fucked in the head, and it’s all Monica’s fault. The need to conquer is a life-force inside me. I span the distance between us until I’m close enough to detect the heat of her body.

“Why wouldn’t everything be okay?” I say, my voice teetering on a lethal edge as I cup a hand around her chin, holding her with enough strength to set her on alert without hurting her. “I missed my wife, is all.”

Her eyes widen, shooting disbelief at me, as if she picked up on my sloppy deceit. “I missed you too.”

Liar.

I loosen the sash on her robe, and a small part of me revels in the breathless gasp that puffs off her sinful lips. Her generous tits spill into view, and I imprison a nipple between my thumb and forefinger, fighting the urge to pinch until she cries out in pain—until her knees buckle and she begs for forgiveness in the same breath she begs to take my cock in her mouth.

“Cash, stop.” Shock washes over her features at my bold moves. I can’t remember the last time I rolled her pretty nipples between my fingers, let alone manhandled her.

“I can’t touch you?” A low growl emanates from the back of my throat, and I flex my fingers around her jaw.

“I’m not in the mood.” Even as she denies it, she thrusts her tits toward me.

“Your body begs to differ.”

“You should’ve told me you were coming home,” she says before nibbling on her lower lip—a move she knows drives me crazy.

“I wanted to surprise you.” And catch her in the act.

“Well, I was too worried about you. Now I have a migraine.”

Her treachery freezes my veins, but it’s a contradiction to the flames bursting alive on my skin. I’m all mixed up—a cocktail of fire and ice over this woman. Sex with her was amazing before we got married, but she did a turnabout shortly after the ink dried on the goddamn paper.

“Let me go, Cash.”

Instead of dropping my hand like I normally would in the face of her rejection, I scowl at her. My chest is rising and falling too rapidly. I increase the pressure on her nipple, but it’s negligible; just enough to make her wince without pulling away.

“You lethimtouch you. You let him do a helluva lot more than touch you.”

Her eyes go wide, and I have to give her credit because she smooths her expression in

the next instant.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, stumbling out of my grasp.

“Don’t play stupid.” I cross my arms, otherwise, I might wrap my hands around her slender neck. “Tell me you didn’t think you could fuck another guy in our bed and get away with it.”

“How can you even think that of me?” Her tone is indignant, and if I hadn’t seen the evidence for myself, I might fall for her lie, because she’s that good of an actress.

“You sure as hell haven’t been fucking me, so who’s the lucky asshole, Monica?”

“No one!”

I withdraw my phone and enter the code to unlock it. Bringing up the photo of her with some unknown guy—because that fucker’s face is in complete shadow—I thrust it into her line of sight. “Pictures don’t lie.”

With a tilt of her chin, she stares down at the photo. “That’s you and me, Cash.” Now she’s glaring at me. “And I don’t appreciate you taking photos of us having sex. It’s tacky.”

“You haven’t let me touch you in months, so don’t even try it.” I stalk forward, hating how she doesn’t back down. “Do you want a divorce? Is that it?” I cringe to think of the fallout. Not only will it break my heart, but the dissolution of our marriage won’t be a private matter. Instead, it’ll be messy and in the public eye, bringing bad publicity to the merged companies of our families.

“No,” she says with a shake of her head. “A divorce is out of the question anyway.”

Her casual dismissal sucker punches me. She's standing before me, a stoic shadow of herself, telling me she doesn't want to end this. But it's not because she loves me—her tone implies that much.

“The guy you're fucking. Do you love him?” My question hangs between us, going unanswered as I study this woman who's become a stranger. She should be begging for forgiveness. Instead, her mouth forms a stubborn line that's all too familiar.

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I grit my teeth. “You’re not going to deny it?”

“I’m not dignifying it with an explanation.” She gestures at the phone I’m grasping in my hand—just as I’m grasping at the last thread of our marriage. “You can believe whatever you want, but you said it yourself. Pictures don’t lie.”

I grab her by the nape, and the wine glass slips from her fingers. The jolting sound of shattering glass is a precursor to the beginning of the end. It twists in my gut with a freshly sharpened blade.

“Why are you doing this to us?” I bring my face dangerously close to hers. “God knows I love you, Monica. But if you’re gonna screw around on me, I’m done.”

She yanks free of my hold. “Things aren’t that simple.”

“No, they’re very simple. We’re either in this together one-hundred percent, or we’re not.” Family expectations and mergers be damned, because I can’t go on playing these mind games with her anymore.

“If you think I’ll let you walk away without a fight, you’re wrong.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Take it however you like, Cash. But I know how much this company means to you and your family.” She folds her arms over her chest. “You’re stuck in this marriage as much as I am. We both knew it going in.”

“The only difference is I loved you!” I launch my cell at the wall of glass, watching it ricochet before dropping to the floor with a thud. The window remains untainted by my rage, but the phone is another story. It’s lying on the marble, bruised and beaten. Undoubtedly broken.

Thick silence stretches between us. I clench my fists, my chest heaving while she stands poised in front of me.

As if she didn’t just smash my heart into tiny shards.

“I’m tired,” she says, sidestepping the puddle of wine and broken glass at our feet. She climbs the stairs, and I watch her go, my mouth agape. Her indifference is confusing. It’s fucking killing me, and I don’t know what else to do but cling to the rope on which she’s got me dangling.

7. Baby, Come Home - Jules

“Hi there, gorgeous. Sleep well?”

His voice registers before the naked, wet chest does. The one I just ran smack into. I rub at the sandpaper in my eyes, and that’s when I find Garen’s mouth tilted up in a sexy grin as water drips from his dark hair. I focus my attention on his face to keep from following the direction of those drops of water cascading downward. The guy’s got some impressive muscles, not to mention ink, and I’m not impervious. But I am afraid if I lower my gaze, I’ll discover he’s buck naked.

I stumble into retreat-mode, and my spine hits the door behind me, still open from barging in without knocking. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries,” he says, moving past me with a wink. “It’s all yours.”

I spy a towel wrapped around his waist as he shuts the door behind him, and I let out a breath of relief. A minute sooner, and I would have walked in on him in a state of total undress. As I take care of business, I mull over the fact that I'm sharing a house with a bunch of guys. A house with a single bathroom. This could get tricky, if not downright embarrassing.

Wide awake now, I go back into Lesley's bedroom and find she's already left for the day. Her bed is made, and a note sits on top of her black comforter. A glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand sends my heart into a tailspin. It's past ten already.

I've lost the whole morning, and I still need to scour the Internet for job listings. Not to mention figure out how public transportation works here in Seattle. A couple of long strides brings me to her bed, and I grasp the piece of paper she left for me.

Didn't want to wake you. Grabbed a ride with Zan, so the Bug is all yours today.

Xoxo, Les

A buzzing sound goes off near the clock, and that's when I spot her car keys next to my vibrating phone. I let out a weary sigh. I'll have to face the music sooner or later, so I might as well get this over with. Besides, I don't want to freak out my parents any more than my abrupt disappearance yesterday undoubtedly did.

I grab my cell, but it's not a photo of my mom or dad or even Brit flashing on the screen. It's Chris. I stare at the image of his face for a few seconds before finding the courage to swipe my thumb to the right.

"Hi," I say, nervousness winding around my throat.

He doesn't answer right away, and I can't help but wonder if he butt-dialed me. Or maybe he thought he was calling someone else.

“Hey, babe.”

Nope, he meant to call me. But what’s even more shocking is his tone. It’s nonchalant, as if our relationship didn’t just turn to dust yesterday.

“What do you want?” I ask, running through several possible scenarios. He wants to yell at me some more, or maybe he’s got a secret toothbrush hiding somewhere that he wants back. Or maybe—

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“I thought we should talk,” he interrupts my mental tirade. “I’ve calmed down a lot since yesterday.”

Is he fucking serious? He made it clear he wasn’t coming back. I would have put money on him never wanting to speak to me again after the things he said. I deserved his anger, but his callous words hurt like hell.

And I can’t do this anymore. The realization knocks me sideways, and I crumple to my makeshift bed, sitting cross-legged on the air mattress. Yesterday morning, I felt as if my life were over. But now...

Now, I have some clarity. A promise of a fresh start, no matter how scared I might be to venture down that uncertain, exciting path.

“Jules?”

“So talk,” I say.

“Look, can we not do this over the phone? Where are you, anyway? I heard you quit your job.”

I bite back a scoff. More like forced into resignation, but whatever. People will spin it however they want, and that only reminds me of my reasons for leaving. “I’m not there,” I say.

“Well, no shit, Jules. I’ve been here waiting for over an hour, and you weren’t answering my calls, so I was about to go looking for you. Can you just come home so

we can deal with this shit?”

I count to five, willing my voice to remain calm and collected because his attitude is digging under my skin. “I mean, I’m not in Oklahoma.”

The silence on his end is deafening, but I hold off prodding him for a response. Part of me expects the eruption. Prepares for it, even.

“What the hell?” he shouts. “What do you mean, you’re not in Oklahoma? Where the fuck are you then?”

I’m tempted to ask how he could miss the empty closet and dresser, not to mention the disarray I left in my wake, but I guess he’s not as observant as I am. He probably didn’t even miss my fucking toothbrush. “I’m in Seattle.”

“Damn it, Jules. Now’s not the time for you to go on vacation, especially to visit that bitch. She’ll just fill your head with poison.”

“Actually,” I begin, brimming with anger over what he just said about Lesley, “she’s letting me stay with her and the band while I look for a job.” I leave it at that and wait for what I said to sink in.

“Babe...no.” His voice evens out, and I recognize the tone all too well. It’s one he uses when he wants to get his way. “You gotta come home. Running away isn’t going to fix this. I love you. Please, Jules.”

The desperation in his words tugs at my heart, making me tighten my hold around the phone. The part of me that still loves him is whittling away at my resolve. It would be so easy to go home, to fall back into habits as comfortable as an old pair of shoes. Safe shoes. The kind without spiky heels that have the potential to trip me up.

I wouldn't have to worry about disappointing my family any more than I already have. Wouldn't have to worry about selling the car I left behind, or hiring someone to clean up the mess I left in the apartment.

And things would be okay for a while. Chris and I would be the best versions of ourselves until our wants and needs take us in separate directions. Then the screaming would start. The mistrust and mistakes. Our love has become as poisonous as a belladonna; a blooming beauty that has the power to kill the soul with one little taste.

"We're toxic together," I say, my throat thick with sorrow and hurt and regret. So much regret. "All we do is hurt each other. I can't do it anymore."

"Are you doing this because of the marriage thing?"

I'd laugh if I wasn't so emotionally battered. For three years, I waited for him to put a ring on it. Now it's clear to me that he never intended to.

"No, Chris. I just...I think this is for the best. For both of us."

"Don't do this to us." God, he sounds desperate. "Stop and think about it first."

Oh, the fucking irony. I said something similar to him before he walked out on me.

"I have. I was a wreck yesterday. I thought of nothing else, Chris."

His heavy sigh drifts through the line. "I've made mistakes too, babe. I was way too hard on you. I realize that now. Can you just come home so we can talk about this?"

"I can't."

"Then I'll come to you."

“No, you won’t.” Chris flying halfway across the country to “fix” us is inconceivable. He loves me, but not enough. He said it himself, and I actually believe it now. Heartbreak bands around my chest, a life-sucking reminder of the agony of yesterday. “I’ve gotta go. The apartment is paid for through the next thirty days, so if you need a place to stay—”

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“Get your ass on a plane, Jules. This isn’t funny.”

“Do I sound like I’m laughing? You ripped my heart out.” A long and heavy beat passes, during which I fight for composure. “Maybe you did us both a favor.”

“I can’t believe this.” The knife’s edge of his words blasts my ear, making me wince. “You fucking cheat on me, slutting around with your boss, of all people, and I’m the one begging you to come back?”

And there it is. The side of Chris I tried ignoring all these years. The exhausting game of emotional ping-pong. The never-ending guilt trips. The blame, and always...always on me.

“No, Chris. You’re the one who packed up and left without giving me a chance to apologize, let alone explain.” Before he drags me into a battle of wills neither of us will win, I end the call with a jab of my finger to his smiling face on my cell. Thirty seconds later, he calls back. Shit is going to hit the fan, and it’ll reek all the way here from Oklahoma, because I know the next call will be from my mom.

Sending Chris to voicemail, I let out a long sigh before pulling her up in my contacts list. Better to go on the offensive when it comes to my mother.

8. The Interview - Jules

Finding a job is tougher than I thought it would be. Sure, the opportunities are plentiful, but there’s also more competition. For the past three weeks, during every job application and interview, Mom’s scathing disapproval followed me around like a

destructive shadow. She laid into me over the phone the morning I called her and told her where I was.

Seattle? Seriously, Julia?

Do you really think you'll make it on your own, halfway across the country? You don't know how to be alone. When have you ever been alone a day in your life?

Running away is cowardly. It's beneath you. Chris dumping you was the best thing that could have happened, as was getting fired from that retched job. That boy did you a favor, so stop acting like a child and come home.

No doubt, she thought her sharp words would be enough to get me on a plane back to Oklahoma, but truth be told, my first phone call home only drove me to succeed.

No fucking way am I going back. If I have to take Les up on her offer and work in a coffee shop for a while, I will. Not that there's anything wrong with that. The issue is my pride...and possibly my aversion to all things java. The main reason I'm determined to push forward is the voice in my head whispering that I have something to prove to the world.

But mostly to myself.

As I enter the atrium level at Mont Center, my heels tapping across the immaculate floor, I'm still in shock I was called up for an interview here. I submitted my resume on a whim, despite being ridiculously unqualified to work as an assistant for a CEO of such a well-known conglomerate. And don't get me started on my lack of experience. I doubt The Powers That Be at MontBlake Holdings will appreciate the two years I worked for a small accounting firm in the midwest.

And yet here I am, striding across the first floor of the elaborate atrium like I belong

here. Like I have a shot in hell of landing this job, never mind my fear that Perry will bust any chances I have at working as an assistant again. He promised to give me a good recommendation, but no one's hired me yet, so I'm skeptical.

Jabbing the button for the elevator, I can't help but gawk at my surroundings. A vaulted ceiling rises several stories high. The space overhead is monstrous and full of sharp angles. It's an asymmetrical masterpiece. But I would expect nothing less, considering the company's track record when it comes to the design of buildings and hotels.

Patrons meander in and out of the various boutiques as the rich aroma of coffee wafts through the air, mingling with the fresh scent of plant life. My favorite part is the towering wall of windowpanes where the sun beams through. A person could lose a whole day in this place, shopping, sipping tea, and reading a good book while curled up in one of the overstuffed chairs scattered throughout.

As the doors to the elevator slide open, I can hardly believe I'm interviewing for a position as the CEO's assistant. I'm sure I'll exit the building in the next hour as jobless as when I entered, but at least I can say I tried, because I sure as hell don't have the luxury of giving in to my insecurities now. My living situation feels more crowded every day. I have no idea how Les can handle living surrounded by guys all the time, but if I have one more bathroom incident with Garen, I'll lose my shit.

The guy seems to know exactly when I'm in there, and the fucking lock on the door doesn't work. I wonder if he broke it just to have an excuse to walk in on me. Maybe it's payback for my faux pas my first morning there.

I don't think so, though. Garen Ashmore has a voice as seductive as sin, and a body to match. The problem is he knows it, and ever since I moved in, he's had his sights set on me. When he's not too busy banging anything in a skirt, that is.

The elevator dings on the thirty-eighth floor, and the doors part before me to reveal a sleek reception area. Floor-to-ceiling windows stand to my left, offering an up-close-and-personal view of downtown Seattle. I stride across spotless white marble and approach the young brunette behind the reception counter. A wall of slate tile stands behind her, providing a contrasting backdrop to the floor that seems too clean to set foot on.

“Welcome to MontBlake,” she says with a welcoming smile. “How can I help you?”

“I have an interview with Mr. Montgomery. I’m a little early.” Better to be early than late, is my motto.

“You must be”—her manicured fingers dance over the computer keyboard—“Julia Harley?”

“Yes, that’s me. But most people call me Jules.”

Real smooth. For fuck’s sake, Jules. Calm the hell down.

Her smile doesn’t slip. “Mr. Montgomery will be with you shortly, Jules. Feel free to take a seat.”

I settle into a wingback chair and try not to twiddle my thumbs, or bite the nails off of them. Someone offers me something to drink, but my stomach is one giant knot, so I decline. While I wait, I people-watch. The reception area is a busy place, but all activity seems to stall when a woman with striking black hair steps off the elevator. Everyone in the vicinity takes notice as she crosses the room, the tap-tap-tap of her heels sounding off a purposeful echo. Luscious, curly locks cascade down her back, and her red power suit is obviously designed by someone important.

This woman, whoever she is, doesn’t buy things off the rack.

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“Hello, Mrs. Montgomery,” the receptionist greets her with the same warm smile she graced me with.

“My husband is interviewing today, yes?”

“Yes, he is, Mrs. Montgomery.”

“Clear some time on his schedule for me after his next interview,” she says quietly, her voice a melodious lilt.

So this is the CEO’s wife.

“Of course. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, thank you, Beth.” Mrs. Montgomery boards the elevator, her head held high, and I can’t help but speculate on what kind of man it takes to land a woman like that. I’m guessing he’s older than she is, probably middle-aged at least. Undoubtedly handsome. Driven and successful. And loaded.

Someone like her views wealth as a necessity. Even so, I don’t get the sense she’s a snob. If anything, she comes across as polite, despite being straightforward in her interaction with the receptionist. A phone rings, breaking through my assessment of Mrs. Montgomery. The call is short, and after Beth hangs up, she turns her attention to me.

“Mr. Montgomery is ready for you now. His office is right through that door,” she says, pointing to the first door down the hall.

I try not to let out a nervous breath as I rise to my feet. He might be ready for me, but am I ready for him?

Don't blow this, Jules. Fake it 'till you make it.

I enter through a door that reads Cash Montgomery, CEO in etched gold, and my attention is drawn to the wall of tinted glass that looks out over the city and Elliot Bay. The windows wrap around an entire corner of the office. Jesus, the view is breathtaking. I have a hard time tearing my gaze away, but when I do I take in the man sitting behind the desk.

He's scribbling something on a pad of paper, his head dipped, and on some subconscious level I recognize his thick dark hair, because my heart thrashes against my ribcage.

"Ms. Harley, thank you for..." Lifting his head, he trails off as our eyes connect, and the earth slams to a halt. Utter shock blankets his face. The time and space separating us seems to shrink, because I fall into the steel of his gaze as swiftly as I did the night I met him. The weeks melt away, and I'm back sitting beside him, 35,000 feet in the air, his hand covering mine.

His breath on my lips. His fingers gripping my hair. The warmth of his goodbye kiss burning my cheek.

Our time together on that plane crackles between us, paired with confusion and lust so strong it almost consumes the entire room.

"Close the door," he says, clearing his throat. "Please."

My hand shakes as I push the door shut. I turn to face him, and our isolation is a blast to my senses. We're alone, blocked off from the bustle of people who have no idea of

the magnitude of this moment. And my reaction to him is just as potent as it was three weeks ago. Possibly even stronger, as I've built him up in my mind since then. I fantasized about him every night as I drifted off to sleep, thought about him everywhere I went. Some irrational part of me even hoped fate would intervene, and I'd catch a glimpse of him. Just once.

I'm practically in love with a fucking apparition of a memory, except the ghost of the man is very real, and he's rising from behind the desk. My lips part at the first sight of his tall body encased in a suit he makes look good. In many cases, the suit makes the man, but not my stranger. His broad shoulders fill out the jacket perfectly, never mind the tailored fit of those slacks that hug his manhood.

His hair is a little longer than I remember, and he brushes it back as that stormy gaze ping-pongs between me and his desk...where a wedding photo of him with the stunning brunette sits.

As if to taunt me.

Oh my God. She's hiswife.

Clearing his throat, he gestures toward a chair. "Please, have a seat."

I'm not sure how my feet eat up the floor without making me stumble, but I manage to reach the chair without tattooing the word fool onto my forehead. I have a million and one questions ready to roll off my tongue, but I can't find my voice.

Weakness seizes my knees, and I grab the back of the chair, refusing to sit down just yet. Reclaiming his seat on the other side of the desk, he runs a hand through his hair. That's when the sight of his wedding ring blasts me in the chest, and I manage to squeeze the single most important question past my constricted throat.

“You’re married?”

His wince is slight, but he can’t hide it. “If you’ll sit down, I’ll try to explain.” He’s eying me as if I might run from the building any second.

I’m tempted to keep my feet planted where they are, but damn it, I need answers as much as I need a job. Even more disturbing is how I want to sit and drink in the sight of him for the next decade or so. I lower into the chair and scoot to the edge, as if preparing to take flight, and force my eyes on him. Direct eye contact is a must in this situation, because he holds too much power over me.

If, by some twisted miracle, he does hire me, this is going to be a disaster of epic proportions, never mind the ratio of well to truly fucked.

“I don’t understand, Mr...” I trail off, his surname catching in my throat. It seems so...impersonal. “I thought we...on the plane...you’re married?” I ask again, my voice rising to a high pitch. This man flusters me to no end, and I’m certain two pink spots are spreading across my cheeks.

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“It’s Cash,” he says with a meaningful glance that shoots warmth over my body. “My name is Cash.”

There are other jobs out there—there has to be. Because I can’t do this. Not again, and certainly not with him. The pull I feel toward him is too strong.

I jump to my feet, and my purse smacks the front of his desk, making that fucking wedding photo vibrate. “Thank you for your time, but I can’t do this. I’m sorry.” I scurry to the door until the command in his voice halts me.

“Sit down, Jules.”

A thrill travels down my spine, and a vision of him ordering me onto my knees flits through my mind. Where the fuck did that thought come from? I’m not even good at giving head—a shortcoming Chris never failed to point out. I gulp before turning around, knees shaking, and make my way back to the chair I just vacated.

“I know it’s a cliché thing to say...” he begins, leaning forward, “but it’s not what you’re thinking.” His fingers form a steeple under his chin, and I wonder if he’s as rattled as I am. I can’t tell by looking at him, which makes me question what else he might be hiding. In fact, when I think back to our time in the air, I’m sure he’s a master manipulator.

Because I had no fucking clue he was married. None. I knew he was involved with someone. But married? Fuck to the no.

“You’re right. That is a total cliché. You’re gonna have to do better than that.”

“My marriage is complicated, Jules.”

Damn him for using my name again. Every time he does, the core of my sex pulses. The faster I get out of here, the better, and yet I can’t help but push back. “I imagine kissing strangers on planes would complicate a marriage.”

“I didn’t kiss you.”

“But you wanted to.” My accusation settles between us, heavy with the ring of truth.

“Yes, I wanted to,” he admits, “and I would have if things were different.”

“Meaning, if you didn’t have a wife waiting for you at home.” I feel like such a hypocrite, considering I cheated on Chris, but I can’t stop the rush of betrayal from flooding my system. It’s illogical, irrational, and it’s close to choking me.

“I wasn’t sure I had a marriage to go back to. If you remember, I’d just found out she was cheating on me.”

“So that makes it okay?”

“No,” he says, eyes on his fingers as they collapse and entwine on the desk. “It doesn’t make it okay. What I did was out of line. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“How can you promise that? We had a...a connection.” If he denies it, I might go crazy on him. And I’m not crazy. There’s no way I imagined the hunger in his eyes. “Tell me I’m wrong,” I challenge, gripping the arms of the chair. “Tell me those hours weren’t as real to you as they were to me? Tell me—”

“They were,” he interrupts, a soft plea in his tone.

“But you’re married!” I cover my mouth with a trembling hand. How the hell did I get stuck in this sadistic loop of déjà vu?

Please, please, please have a good reason. Don’t be a slime ball.

God, the thought of him being a first-class douche is too much. Whether it makes sense or not, I fell hard for him in a matter of a few hours. Call it rebound. Call it insanity. It’s probably a mixture of both, but I can’t deny that I feel something for him.

Cash.

He’s no longer my sexy stranger. He has a sexy name. A sexy life. A sexy job. And a sexy wife I’d fuck if I were into women. I hate myself for admitting that.

He better have a damn good reason for omitting his matrimonial bliss.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know,” he says, pulling at his tie. “It was hard enough talking about her affair. It didn’t occur to me to share more than that. C’mon, Jules. Did you expect to see me again?”

I dreamed of it. Wished for it. But... “No.”

We’re saved from further discussion by the swish of an opening door. His wife stands with one hand cradling her hip. There’s no warmth in her glacier blue eyes, and despite the fact that I basically hate this woman now, I hate it more that she’s looking at him like that.

“I need to speak with you,” she tells him. “I’ll come back when you’re done here.”

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He doesn't even offer her a verbal acknowledgement. He merely nods his head, avoiding her eyes the whole time.

She prances through the door, letting it close in her wake, and I reevaluate my earlier assessment that she's polite. And it isn't due to jealousy, though I can't deny that a dizzying amount of emotions are storming through me, and one of them might be a little green. The biggest reason for my mistrust of that woman is the way she walks—with a calculated sway to her hips. I recognize manipulation when I see it, because I've witnessed it many times in Brit.

Cash clears his throat, bringing my attention back to him. He's holding my resume in one hand. "You were my first pick out of the candidates HR sent my way."

Were.

I'm stuck on his use of the past tense, and struggling to switch gears as fast as he had. "I don't have much experience, and I only have an associate degree."

He quirks a brow. "Are you trying to talk me out of hiring you?"

It would be the sane thing to do.

"Not at all. I'm just being upfront with you," I say, uncertain if I meant the double meaning in that sentence or not.

He either doesn't pick up on it, or he chooses to ignore it. "A bachelor's is preferred but not required. And I like that you don't have a lot of experience. I prefer things are

done a certain way, so I don't mind training you." Something about that statement makes him visibly gulp. "Besides," he says, setting my resume back on the desk, "your previous boss sang your praises."

"Probably because I fucked him, to which he repaid me by asking for my resignation."

Cash holds my gaze, his eyes brimming with smoldering ash. "Do you always talk about your sex life during job interviews?"

"Nope. This is a first."

"Your old boss sounds like an ass. I hope you handed him his."

This interview is an epic fail, a mockery of professionalism. But we tossed propriety out the window the instant I walked through the door.

"He was a mistake." My lungs seem to shrink, and I draw in a deep breath until the suffocation subsides. "I don't plan to go down that road again."

Cash settles back in his chair, dark brows pulling together as he fingers his chin. The line of his jaw is cut from granite. "What are your top three strengths as an employee?"

"I thrive under pressure, can multitask without sacrificing work quality, and despite what you might think of my personal life, I have good work ethic."

A sigh puffs off his lips. "You have no idea what I'm thinking. If you did, you would have left already."

I can no more leave this office than he can push me out. I'm the magnet to his steel,

the yin to his yang. A force of nature brought us together, and we can neither defy nor define it.

“What would you say is your biggest weakness?”

“Married men, apparently.”

One in particular, and he’s sitting across from me with a glower on his gorgeous face.

“I’m trying here, Jules. Do you want the job, or not?”

“I want to go back in time and know you’re married.”

Had I known, I wouldn’t have flirted. I wouldn’t have lost myself to his voice and touch, and I definitely wouldn’t have ached for his kiss. A fucking kiss that should have never been a possibility, because even though I didn’t know he was married, he did.

“Jules...” he says, pushing a hand through his mussed hair. “An apology will never be enough for my behavior that night. If you take the job, we’ll keep things professional.”

Doubt plummets to the bottom of my gut. “I’m not sure I can.” Meeting his eyes is impossible—not after admitting in a roundabout way that my feelings for him are lightyears away from professional.

“You’re right,” he says, his voice strangled. “Working together is just asking for trouble, but professionalism aside, the thought of you walking away again is...” He’s shaking his head, as if trying to find the right words, but none are needed.

I know exactly what he means. For all the confrontational shit I’ve flung at him, I feel the same way.

“Ask yourself how you ended up in my office, of all places.”

Fate.

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I crash into the storm of his eyes, unable to brake in time. The damage is done, and if I'm honest with myself, I was headed for destruction the instant I decided not to run the other way.

“Accept the job, Jules.”

There's that tone again—a deep and commanding timbre that vibrates straight to the delta of my thighs. My mind is galloping ahead of me, imagining him using that tone as he bends me over his desk. The attraction I had to Perry was mild compared to this. It was minuscule and lacked depth—in truth harmless, until we somehow ended up in bed together.

But the chemistry between Cash and me is all-consuming, awakening me in ways I never believed possible. In ways I never knew existed. In ways I never knew I wanted. The energy surrounding us is scorching, and I'm too far gone to heed the warning licks of fire.

“Okay,” I say as I imagine my life going up in flames.

This man is going to be the death of me.

9. Bathroom Break - Cash

For the second time in a month, I'm thoroughly...poleaxed. It's the most appropriate word I'm able to come up with, since the object of my obsession just left after agreeing to work for MontBlake.

Forme.

Of course, she had questions. Like how long would it take to train her, when would she start, and why hadn't I told her I was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company? She seemed to have a very accurate memory of our time on that plane.

For every one of her questions, I had one of my own. Only I couldn't ask them. Doing so would be intrusive and personal.

Like did she love her previous boss?

How long did the affair last?

Did his wife find out?

Is he the reason she left Oklahoma?

No, she was heartbroken over the boyfriend—I remember that much. So the boss must have been the mistake she was talking about. I let my thoughts drift back to the last half hour, to her wide, deep brown eyes and the way she nibbled her lip. How she stared at me as if I'm the next mistake she's going to make.

I'd give anything to dig underneath her exterior, to unearth her secrets and desires. But I won't, even if it kills me. We've catapulted too far over the line of professionalism as it is, and it's going to be hell to fight our way back to the right side of the equation, to the sum of boss and employee, minus a whole shitload of trouble neither of us want. That's the way it has to be, since I'm blatantly ignoring the professional and right thing to do.

Which would be to send her on her way.

Hell, I might as well stop breathing. Watching Jules walk away a second time will gut me. No matter the right or wrong of it, she's lived under my skin ever since I laid eyes on her. And the way she looked at me today...

Too fucking tempting.

I shouldn't have hired her.

How the hell did this happen?

I glance at my watch and realize I've been sitting in a daze for the last twenty minutes. I've got emails that need sorted and answered, phone calls that need to be returned, appointments that need to be made, not to mention putting travel plans into motion. All of this shit piled up because my last personal assistant up and left last week without notice.

What I need is Jules.

I'm also behind on finalizing the building plans for MontBlake's newest hotel. Ironically, it's scheduled to begin construction in Oklahoma City soon. I don't have time for this raging hard-on, compliments of one Jules Harley.

But God, she's sexy. Bold. Blunt. She speaks before thinking, which can be a bad thing, but on her it's a damn aphrodisiac.

Shaking the rails loose on that train of thought, I attempt to get my mind in the right headspace before she returns. I sent her down to HR to get the paperwork rolling, deciding not to have her sign a nondisclosure agreement about her knowledge of my marriage troubles. Having that document in place is company policy on such matters, but there was no way I could ask that of her. I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

She's the only one who knows, other than the private investigator I hired and the unknown person who outed my wife's affair. Regardless of how little I actually know Jules, my gut tells me I can trust her.

Cursing under my breath, I check my watch again, remembering that Monica wanted to talk to me. Jules should be back in an hour or so, but my wife could show up in five minutes or five hours.

And I've still got a hard-on to deal with. I push to my feet and make my way to the private bathroom off the office. Once inside, I lock the door and cross to the toilet. I've got my pants unbuttoned and unzipped in seconds, and I'm leaning over the porcelain bowl, one hand pumping my cock as images of Jules play through my head.

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My perverted mind has her bent over my desk, legs spread, her palms flat on the surface as I wind her golden locks around my fist. With every desperate stroke of my hand, I imagine thrusting into the hot, wet glove of her body. And her voice? Jesus, her seductive voice is begging for more.

Harder, Cash.

In this fantasy that's way too vivid, I bury myself to the hilt, my fingers gouging her hips, teeth scraping over the slope of her shoulder. The scene plays out in my head like a porno as I let the pressure bust me wide open. I groan, loud and unrestrained, as I spurt cum into the toilet water.

I'm so fucked, and I definitely shouldn't have hired her. But nothing her was about as possible as not thinking about her.

Every time the skies open and rain beats down on me.

Every time I grab a coffee and overhear someone order tea.

Every time a damn plane sounds overhead.

A quiet knock intrudes on this private and forbidden moment. I tilt my head toward the locked door, ragged breaths rushing from my mouth as I prop myself against the wall.

"Cash? Are you in there?" Monica never bangs on a door, or outright yells, or cries out when she comes. Not that she's come for me in months.

“I’ll be right out.” I clean myself up then put my clothes back in order.

I bet Jules would cry my name. I have no doubt she’d writhe in my arms. Moan her pleasure into my mouth. Let me fuck her while holding her captive in my gaze. Forehead to forehead with the lights on. Eyes locked together in surrender, spilling all our secrets. Fingers grasping, clawing, then lacing together as we hold on for the ride. The feminine curve of her spine speaking the language of ecstasy.

I switch on the faucet, and the rushing sound of water brings me back to reality. Monica is tapping on the door again, her soft voice calling my name. After I finish washing my hands, I open the door. Those blue eyes used to seduce me with a single glance. Now they spit nothing but cold-hearted rejection.

“What is it?” I ask as I push past her. I take a seat behind my desk, sparing her an annoyed glance. “As you can see, I’ve got work to do.”

“Before you make your decision on a PA, I wanted to give my recommendation for Lydia Hirsch. She mentioned the interview went well. She’s highly qualified, Cash.”

Tilting my head, I narrow my eyes. “Is she a friend of yours?”

She works her jaw, hesitating. “Yes, but I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t put our personal issues before business decisions. She’s a solid choice and deserves a chance.”

“Ms. Hirsch is certainly qualified, but she’s not a good fit for me. Besides,” I say, waving my hand. “I already filled the position.”

“That was fast. Who did you hire?”

“Does it matter?”

“Per the terms of the merger, you’re required to consult me on anything business-related.”

“Hiring a personal assistant hardly falls under that condition.” I sit back and cross my arms. “You want a rundown of the financial statements for last quarter? Details about the Oklahoma City project? I’ll have my new assistant send you those particulars, along with anything else you require.”

Her brows knit together. “You might be CEO, but I’m chairperson. This is a partnership.”

“Like our marriage is?”

Her silence speaks volumes.

“We’re sleeping in separate bedrooms, Monica. How about we do the same here at work? You can see yourself out of my office now.”

“You can be a real asshole sometimes.”

“Do you really want me to respond to that?” I ask, lifting a brow.

“Don’t bother.” She pivots on her heel and exits my office, letting the door shut with a bang. That’s the angriest I’ve seen her in a while.

I stare at the closed door for a few moments, the wheels in my head turning. During the past few months, I’ve slowly come to the realization that Monica never does anything without a reason, and if she wanted her friend working directly under me, there must be a reason why. I pull out my cell and dial my private investigator.

He answers on the fourth ring, and I get right to the point. “It’s Cash Montgomery.

Have you found anything yet?" I ask, tapping my fingers on the desk.

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“Not yet. The sender’s email address was a bust. Whoever sent the photo doubled up with a VPN and a proxy server. My tech guy’s still working on it, though.”

“And the photo?”

“Same. Got an expert analysis taking a closer look.”

“I don’t know if this is important, but Monica wanted me to hire someone she knows as my PA. She was very insistent, and furious when I told her I already filled the position.”

“You got a name for me?”

“Lydia Hirsch.” I spell it out for him. “Maybe there’s something there.”

“I’m on it.”

“Let me know when you’ve got something.”

I end the call and rise to stand in front of the windows. The sidewalks are busy, the streets busier. There isn’t a cloud in the sky, but I feel one hovering over my life. As I watch a ferry make its way across Elliot Bay, I think of how there’s someone out there who wanted me to know about Monica’s affair. Someone who captured her betrayal in a photo but left behind no evidence in our condo. My instincts tell me the digital footprint of that email will lead back to the asshole who’s fucking my wife.

Cash put me to work after I returned from HR. He gave me a quick tour of the thirty-eighth floor before showing me the office I'd be working in for the foreseeable future...assuming my employment here works out.

That was four days ago, and so far, I've managed to do my job without tripping all over myself. My workspace is the next room over from his corner office, and knowing he's on the other side of that wall has been more distracting than is good for productivity.

Thank God it's Friday. A little distance is exactly what I need to get ahold of myself after this whirlwind week. Once I'm finished handling his schedule, fielding phone calls, and running errands, I spend the remainder of the day sorting emails and coordinating travel plans. The fact that he's going to Oklahoma City soon squeezes my heart a little—it's an unwanted reminder of the heartbreak I left behind in Whiskey Flats.

The end of the day arrives quicker than I expect it to, and I'm heading toward the door to Cash's office when I spot him exiting the elevator. The sight of him is still a shock to my system, and I let my attention fall to the file in my hands.

"I compiled the info you wanted," I say, holding out the folder. "Is there anything else you want me to do before I go?"

He doesn't say anything at first, and that prompts me to raise my eyes to his. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was silently laughing at me.

"I'm sure I can come up with a few ideas," he says, his teasing tone throwing me off.

"Um...okay. I can stick around if you need..." I trail off, taking in his black T-shirt. "You changed your clothes." The words tumble from my mouth before I can stop them. Cheeks flaming, I shoot a surreptitious glance around us, thankful that most

people have already gone home, no doubt eager to begin the weekend.

“You seem like an observant girl,” he says, his mouth curving into a grin that puts that irresistible dimple on display, “but I’m pretty sure this is the same shirt and jeans I put on this morning.”

Is he fucking with me?

I narrow my eyes and study him. Something is definitely off. No, something is missing.

Widening his grin, he holds out a hand. “I’m Kaden, the boss man’s brother, and you must be new.”

I’m pretty sure my mouth is hanging open, so I force it shut as I slide my hand into his. And that’s the instant I know; he’s definitely not Cash because the electric shock I get from touching my new boss is absent.

“I’m sorry,” I say, breaking the handshake. “I didn’t know he had a twin brother.”

“No need to apologize. It’s a mistake people often make.”

“Well, I can see that happening a lot. The two of you are nearly identical.” Identical except for the way they each affect me.

“Nearly...as in I’m better looking?” He’s still smiling, obviously teasing, but I’m struck with how different he is from Cash. He’s openly playful, where his brother’s sense of humor is hidden under layers of intensity and a serious demeanor.

And Kaden’s eyes might be the same stormy color as Cash’s, but they don’t smolder. They don’t send my heart into palpitations with a single glance.

Footsteps sound behind me, and I sense Cash before he speaks. “You wish you were better looking,” he ribs his brother, and I wonder if the presence of him will ever stop tingling down my spine. “I see you’ve met Jules.” His palm grazes my lower back, and the contact is light and brief—the type of touch acquaintances share without a second thought. The fleeting warmth of Cash’s hand shouldn’t make me clench my thighs together, but that’s what the brush of his fingers does to me. Even worse, I’m not sure if he realized he touched me at all.

“We haven’t met officially, but I’m sure she’d like to stab me since I let her think I was you for a minute. Sorry, little brother. Couldn’t help myself.”

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I turn to my boss, folder in hand. “I was on my way to give this to you.”

“Thank you.” His voice is deep and soft all at once, and I swallow hard as he takes the file from me.

“I figured you’d want to approve it before I fax it over.”

“I trust your judgment,” he says, handing me the file without taking a single peek.

“You’ve done great this week, Jules.”

The air is thick with tension, and I sense there is so much more he wants to say. But neither of us are able to go there. Not now. Not ever.

“I’ll just send it off then,” I say before heading down the hall. Their voices fade, but I make out Kaden mentioning a birthday dinner coming up at their parents place. As I insert the documents into the fax machine, tapping my nails on the counter as I wait for the papers to go through, I wonder when his birthday is, and how old Cash will be. I’d put him in his late twenties.

By the time I reach the reception area again, Cash and his brother are nowhere in sight. I’m not sure why I’m disappointed. The less of him I see, the better. Especially if he’s going to touch me every time we come into contact—which is going to be a lot. There’s no getting around that. Interacting with the man is part of the job.

But damn, the heat of his touch is still burning the small of my back. I escape into the safety of my office and stand against the door for a few moments, one hand on my chest as my heart flutters out of control.

It's then I admit I've been fooling myself all week. There's no way this will work.

He gets under my skin like no other man. Not Chris. Not Perry. There's something about Cash that annihilates my will to do the right thing. When I look into his eyes, the world fades away. Professionalism and propriety are fruitless.

And that wedding band on his finger doesn't matter to the furious pace of my heartbeat. But it matters to the side of me that isn't led around by my treacherous heart. Taking a deep breath, I force my feet to move to my desk. After I file away the folder and grab my purse, I head for the door.

This will get easier with time. It's only been a few days. Eventually, the butterflies will stop. They have to, because wanting a man I can't have absolutely sucks, and I swore to myself I wouldn't do this again.

I open the door and halt in my tracks. Cash is exiting his office, alone. The shadows of emerging twilight have seeped into the building, and no one else is around to offer a buffer between us. We both freeze for a few seconds, as if cast under a spell.

Cash breaks it by tilting his head toward the elevator. "C'mon, I'll walk you out."

Giving a slight nod, I follow him. "I would have never guessed you were a twin," I say as we wait.

"Guilty as charged." His smile puts me at ease, and I finally relax in his presence.

Maybe this won't be so bad. Maybe we can set aside this insane attraction and find solid ground.

Ground that doesn't involve us rolling around on it naked.

The ding of the lift evaporates that dangerous fantasy. “You guys must be really close.” There’s a bit of envy in my tone. I’ve tried for years to relate to Brit, but Mom pretty much brought a hammer down on any chance of that happening. They’re the tight duo, and I’ve never been allowed inside their world of shopping, hair, and all things fashion. Mom gave up trying to groom me for “greater things” a long time ago. And in her language, greater things meant a rich husband and a size two figure.

Cash gestures for me to go first. “We were close growing up, but the last few years we’ve followed separate paths. That’s life, I guess.”

“Did you ever switch places when you were younger?”

“No,” he says with a laugh. “We were tempted a couple of times, but Kaden and I worked too hard at differentiating ourselves to blow it by confusing people.”

“That makes sense. The resemblance is astonishing.”

As the elevator starts to descend, Cash gives me a heated look. “Did you really think he was me?”

I nibble on my lip, thinking back to that initial, strange encounter with Kaden. “I thought you changed clothes at first, but something was...different.”

“Different how?” He’s leaning against the other side of the elevator, holding onto the grab-handle behind him with both hands. I watch as his fingers flex around the metal bar, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s holding on so tightly because he wants to close the distance between us. God knows I do.

I force my gaze to his. “We promised we wouldn’t do this.”

“Do what, Jules?”

God, please stop saying my name like that.

I'm convinced he can make a woman come with words alone.

“Cross the line.”

Dragging a hand through his hair, he mumbles something that sounds like a curse. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I bite my tongue, because I’m too close to telling him that I’m far from uncomfortable. If anything, I’m blazing from the inside out in the most delicious of ways. I eye him for a second as the numbers count down above the doors. Part of me wishes we can stay in here alone for hours.

“I saw your wife today.” Bringing her up is like claws on a chalkboard to my sanity, but considering the sexual tension between us, a dose of reality is much-needed.

“That would make one of us.”

“She seems very busy.” I’ve only spotted her a handful of times all week.

“She is. We barely see each other at all, at work or at home.” His steely gaze is pinning me to the wall. “But I see you.”

Line crossed.

My pounding heart doesn’t seem to give a shit. A ding announces our arrival on the atrium level, and I’m saved from having to reply. Ever the gentlemen, he allows me to go first.

“How are you getting home?” he asks as we weave a path to the front entrance.

“My friend is picking me up.” Lesley’s been giving me a ride all week, but hopefully that will change soon, since I’ve begun hunting for apartments in the downtown area.

He follows me through the sliding doors of Mont Center, and we come to a stop on the sidewalk out front. Lesley is idling in a no parking zone, texting while she waits.

“That’s my ride.” I point to the shiny red Bug.

“I guess I’ll see you on Monday then.”

“Yeah,” I say as he takes a step toward me, and I’m reminded of that moment in the airport when he kissed me on the cheek. But instead of reaching for me, he shoves his hands into his pockets and says goodbye with a simple nod.

Truth is, he doesn’t have to say a word. We want each other, and that’s not going to go away, no matter how much I kid myself it will. As I slide into the passenger seat of Lesley’s car, I mentally kick myself for accepting the job.

Wanting what I can’t have sucks, all right; it’s sucking away my resolve to do the right thing.

11. Chance Encounter - Jules

“I can’t believe you’re not going to be my roomie anymore.” Les flops onto the mattress in my new bedroom with a dramatic sigh. “You didn’t have to move out so soon, you know.” She’s over the moon about my new job, but the end of our slumber party is making her sad.

Truth be told, it’s making me a little sad too.

Hanging up a dress in my dinky closet, I shoot her a smile. “It’s much closer to

work,” I point out. “Besides, I had to find my own place eventually.”

“I know. I just thought eventually would be a while longer. God, I’m going to miss your face first thing in the morning.” She takes a look around my bedroom. “You know, this place is kinda small. Are you sure you’re going to be okay here?”

“Seriously, Les?” I laugh, raising an incredulous brow. “I’ve had my shit all over your room for the past few weeks. Why are you not celebrating getting your space back?”

Lesley sits up suddenly. “Hey, that’s a fantastic idea. We should go out tonight,” she says, her tone brightening. She switches gears as fast as she drives. “Let’s celebrate, ‘kay?”

“Tonight?”

“Jules, it’s Saturday, and we haven’t hit the club once since you’ve been here.”

That’s true. I’ve been too busy busting my ass at MontBlake, trying to stay busy in order to make a good impression, but also to minimize contact with Cash. It’s almost been two weeks since he hired me, and instead of the heat between us sizzling out, it’s only gotten hotter.

“So where are we going?”

“Club Shadow. Zan’s been trying to get the band a gig there.” She shrugs. “Maybe I’ll have better luck. I’ve seen pics of the owner. He’s a hottie for sure.”

“All right. Count me in.”

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“Sweet!” Jumping to her feet, she snatches a red dress from the bed. “You should wear this. You’ll have every guy in the place drooling.”

“Why do people say that? It’s not like the sight of drool is sexy.”

Rolling her eyes, she pushes the dress into my hands. “Just be ready by eight.”

“Okay, boss. Will do.”

“Speaking of...” she says, glancing at her watch, “I’ve gotta put in a couple hours at work today. Accounting bullshit.”

I walk her out, and after she gets into her Bug and disappears down the alley, I go back inside and resume unpacking. My clothes and personal items don’t take long to put away, since most of what I own came with me in a large suitcase, and the apartment came furnished. But I did buy other necessities with what little money I had left over from my savings after paying a deposit and three months rent on this place.

And maybe Les is right. Maybe this huge step should be cause for celebration. This is all a little surreal—the new city, new job, new me. A version of myself I didn’t know I was capable of finding. A me that can make it on her own. A woman, despite what Mom says, is capable of being alone just fine. I’m liking this new woman.

But I’d like her a lot more if she’d quit lusting after a married man.

I still have a few hours to kill before Les comes back, so I step outside and lock up

the apartment, excited about exploring the area. A gentle breeze drifts through the vestibule, and I don't miss the Oklahoma humidity at all. In fact, with each day that passes, Seattle feels a little more like home instead of a place I'm visiting. I descend the stairs and head down the alleyway as the sun breaks through fluffy white clouds. Those rays warm my skin, and I'm flushed by the time I end up at Pike Place Market.

Taking in the weekend bustle with a secret smile, I step into the busy market, overwhelmed by the expanse of fresh food and handmade crafts as the lilting melodies of street musicians filter in from the sidewalk. I feel like a child on Christmas, wanting to sample everything. Touch and taste everything. Experience everything. I'm eyeing a display of berries when I sense a presence behind me.

"Hello, Jules." His tone is deep, and it tingles down my spine. He doesn't say anything else, but he doesn't have to. I turn to face him, preparing myself for the shock that electrifies me every time I lay eyes on Cash.

Once again, I remind myself that he's my boss, and fucking married, but nothing stops the smile from spreading across my face.

Even worse, he's wearing the same excited grin.

"Hi," I say as a wave of heat washes over me. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"I stop by most Saturdays."

My eyes are masters of treachery, and they take him in from the casual wind-tossed state of his dark hair to the running shoes on his feet. Jesus. Cash in a suit is dangerous, but seeing him in a T-shirt and shorts is lethal.

I'm gawking and helpless to stop it, so I word-vomit the first thing that comes to mind. "This place doesn't seem like your kind of scene." As soon as the words leave

my mouth, I want to snatch them back.

Or kick myself. Possibly both.

An amused smile pulls at the corners of his mouth. I tear my attention away from such dangerous territory and lock my eyes on his, which isn't much better because everything about this man has me aflutter.

"That came out wrong."

"It's okay," he says with a laugh. "I know what you mean."

Does he? I'm skeptical as he crosses his arms, stretching thin cotton over the muscles his suits fail to accentuate. For an insane second, I think about running my fingers over his biceps.

Get a fucking grip, Jules.

God, how I'd like to.

"Even pretentious guys like me are susceptible to the charms of a Seattle tradition." He shoots me a look full of mischief.

"You are not pretentious."

Swarms of people are passing by, and Cash steps toward me to clear out of their path. "Have you been here before?" he asks as he grabs a small container of blackberries. He's so close that his breath rustles the top of my head, and the woodsy scent I'm ashamed to admit is as familiar as my own perfume floods my nose.

"Uh..." Blinking, I snap out of my stupor. "Today is the first day I've made it down

here.”

“That’s criminal.” He moves toward the cashier, and I follow without thinking.

“Why’s that?”

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“Well, it’s been five weeks since you moved here. That’s about five weeks too long.”

He’s poking fun at me, but I can’t get past the fact that he remembers the exact amount of time I’ve been in Seattle.

After he pays for the berries, he pops one into his mouth. “Walk with me for a while? I’ll share.” He holds the container toward me, and I pick up a berry, my fingers trembling the slightest bit. We step onto the brick street and meander around the various food carts on the sidewalk.

“How are you liking Seattle so far?”

“I’m loving it. I think I could really call this place home.” Peeking at him from the corner of my eye, I reach for another berry, and my arm brushes his, skin to skin. Even with the breeze, it’s too warm out to blame the eruption of gooseflesh on the weather. We walk in companionable silence for a while, popping berries every few steps. “Where are we going?”

“Where do you wanna go?”

Sliding the fruit between my lips, I try to shrug with nonchalance, but I’m sure I fail. Or maybe he doesn’t notice how nervous I am, since his attention is on my mouth.

“You been to the waterfront yet?” he asks, and my heart skips a beat because I don’t think I’m imagining the uneven quality of his voice.

“I haven’t.”

“You’re racking up the felonies today.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s criminal,” he reminds me. “You might call Seattle home now, but that doesn’t mean you should skip the tourist experience.” He tilts his head toward Elliot Bay. “Want to check it out?”

“Sure.” I’ll do anything he asks if it means I get to spend more time with him. I shove the fact that he has a wife to the back of my mind. I’m convinced my good friend Denial lives in that area of my brain.

The sidewalk is busy. Even so, we stroll toward the waterfront closer than is necessary. Closer than is appropriate. Before long, a Ferris wheel looms ahead of us.

He gestures toward the giant ride. “You up for it?”

I glance at the monstrous wheel. This whole encounter feels like it’s straddling the line we’re trying hard not to cross, but I can’t bring myself to break away from him. Being near Cash is so intoxicating, it’s addictive.

With a nod, I let him usher me through the tide of bodies to the ticket booth, where I lose the battle of trying to pay for myself. He insists, and we shuffle into the short line. As we wait for the next gondola, his presence behind me sends a palpable wave of heat over my backside.

I convince myself the warmth flushing my skin is from the sun, but as we board, I know I’m fooling myself. Not even the summer heat could light me up like this. A flutter of excitement goes off deep in my belly as I slide onto the bench. He scoots in beside me, and though we have the gondola to ourselves, he chooses to remain at my side.

Maybe he's worried I'll have a panic attack. Or maybe he can't fight this uphill battle any more than I can. The need to be near him is inescapable.

Fuck. The only thing scary about this ride is the fact that we're confined in a private setting, utterly alone.

"You should see the view at nighttime," he says.

"I bet it's spectacular."

As the gondola moves a few feet forward, he rests an arm along the back of the bench, and his hand lingers next to mine where I'm holding onto the seat. We aren't even touching, but no one's nearness has ever affected me like his does. As the ride sends us higher, I'm taken back to our brief time on the plane, and suddenly, I wish he had kissed me. At least then I could have tasted him under the umbrella of anonymity. But that ship has sailed, and it hurts something fierce to know we'll never get that chance again.

"Wow," I say, leaning toward the glass doors. I peek at the ground and watch the movement of people shrinking in size as we climb skyward. To my left, I spy the Space Needle, but the rest of the Seattle skyline stands like a panoramic picture in front of us.

Cash looks over my shoulder, his chest brushing against my back. "So, you're afraid to fly but not afraid of heights?"

The scent of his aftershave fills my senses, and I catch myself swaying into him. My pinky twitches toward his hand, and not even the sight of his wedding band has the power to shatter this moment between us. Will he touch me the way he did on the plane if I tell him I am scared? But I'm not a liar by nature, and there's no way I'm going to lie to him.

“Probably lacks logic, but no. I love heights.”

He inches his hand closer to mine. “What is it about planes that scare you so much?”

“The unknown, maybe?”

“I think it’s perfectly logical, Jules. Planes are pretty much at the mercy of chance, the skill of the pilots, and even Mother Nature. You never know when a flock of birds will take out an engine.”

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“I’m so glad we didn’t have this conversation up there,” I say, nodding heavenward.

He laughs. “I figured I’d spare you the terror.”

“You made me feel safe.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and I hear him inhale a quick breath. Slowly, his hand slides over mine.

“You made me feel the opposite.” He dips his head, and his breath teases the space behind my ear. “You still do, Jules.”

We’re stalled at the top of the wheel. I’m afraid to move, and it has nothing to do with the distance to the ground below, or the way the gondola is gently rocking in the wind. I feel as if I could sit here forever with him, frozen in time. Barely breathing.

Just soaking up the heat of his breath on my neck and the sound of his voice in my ear.

He breaks the spell by removing his hand from mine. As the Ferris wheel begins moving again, he puts several inches of space between us.

“I promised I wouldn’t put you in a precarious position when I hired you.” A heavy beat passes. “I’m going to do my damndest to keep that promise, Jules.”

There’s a note of reluctant determination in his tone. The selfish girl in me curses his resolve, and for a moment, I’m weak enough to wish he’d break his promise. Weak enough to break the promise I made to myself.

I want his hands on me—and more than just a brush of his fingers on the back of my hand or drifting over the small of my back. Fuck no. I want him naked and on top of me, taking me with the passionate fervor I somehow know is burning inside him. I’ve never craved dominance before, but something about the quiet authority in everything he says and does calls to me.

We’ve gone a full rotation on the wheel, and we spend another whirl in silence until I can take it no more. The silence or the worry plaguing me.

“Is this going to work? Because I just signed a lease on an apartment. I need this job, and if you think it’s a bad idea, I can—”

“Jules, stop.”

I fall quiet, not even questioning the gentle command in his tone.

“If you’re uncomfortable working directly for me, I’ll transfer you to another job with equal pay. It’s not your fault we met before you walked in for that interview.”

“It’s not your fault, either,” I point out.

“No, but I don’t ever want you to feel uncomfortable. Your job will never be in jeopardy because of how I—”

He breaks off abruptly, and I scoot to face him, completely uninterested in the view at this point. Not when Cash is sitting beside me, on the cusp of admitting his feelings for me. I’ve known it since that night on the plane, just as I’m sure he’s known how I feel, but we’ve never come right out and said it.

We’ve tiptoed around it, but we’ve never voiced the forbidden.

I study his expression, cataloging the resolute furrow of his brows and the unwavering line of his mouth. And that's where I falter. That's where I allow myself to wish he'd bring his tempting mouth down on mine.

Obviously, he has no intention of going there.

"Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Jules?" His voice is a soft caress to my senses, and I find myself nodding.

Agreeing even though every fiber of my being revolts at the truth behind his words.

He's married. I'm his employee. And that's that.

"I understand," I say, tingling under the steel of his gaze. Everything we're not saying flows between us as the last leg of the ride passes. The gondola comes to a stop, and we finally break eye contact.

He falls into step beside me after we exit, and we head back toward Pike Place amid the flow of foot traffic and the constant swoosh of cars on the freeway overhead. A few minutes later, we stall on the brick road in front of the market.

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his shorts. "Is your place close by?"

Chewing on my lip, I nod.

"I'd walk you home, but..."

"It's okay," I say, shuffling my feet like a fool. "You're my boss, so..."

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Something about my words seems to bother him, because he takes a step toward me, brows furrowing. “I’d like to think we’re friends.”

“Me too.” No matter how impossible that notion seems.

Friends or not, allowing him to walk me to my apartment is out of the question. It doesn’t have to be spoken by either of us; we both know if he walks me home we’ll be tempted to end our time together in my bed.

“Thank you for today. I had a lot of fun.” I want to ask if I’ll see him again next Saturday, but I bite back the question.

“Me too.” He runs a hand through his hair, and my attention is drawn to those long, lethal fingers. God, how his touch would set me on fire. My resolve to do the right thing would disintegrate so easily.

“I’ll see you Monday at work,” I say, slowly backing away. Thirsting for an escape from my own desires.

“See you Monday,” he says with a nod.

Somehow, we manage to turn at the same time and walk away from each other, and I wonder if it was as difficult for him as it was for me.

12. Club Shadow - Jules

That night, Lesley shows up twenty-five minutes past eight because she’s never given

much consideration to punctuality. I'm dressed in the red number she said I should wear, my face made up, club-style. Right before we head out the door, she talks me into doing one shot with her—just to loosen me up.

“You are rocking that dress,” she says as we make our way down the road toward the club. Her brown eyes lower, taking in my legs then my feet. “Especially those shoes.”

The heels are a nice touch but not the most practical for walking. My feet ache when we arrive at Club Shadow. After standing in the long line of people waiting to get inside, we reach the front, and I hand the bouncer my ID. It's been so long since I felt this good about myself. Confident. Sexy. Ready to have a little fun with my bestie. Yep, the pre-club shots we threw back before walking down here are kicking in.

The bouncer lets us inside, and the place is packed. As I follow Lesley through the crowd, I take it all in. The long bar taking up the back wall, and the stage to our left. Blue and red lights beam down from the vaulted ceiling, and that's when I notice the second floor. It's dark up there, obviously a private place for VIPs since a bulky guy is manning the bottom of the stairs, where a rope sections off the space from the rest of the club.

“I heard the owner is here on Saturday nights,” Lesley shouts above the rock music as she scores us two seats at the bar. After we settle in, she takes in the scene. A throng of people crowd around the stage, dancing and belting out the lyrics along with the lead singer. Tattoos sleeve his arms, and his hair falls into his eyes as he owns the mic. Sweat dampens the front of his tee under the hot lights.

Lesley grabs my shoulder then points with her free hand. “That's the owner. What did I tell you? Hottie at four o'clock.”

Swerving my attention to where she's pointing, I feel my heart stop. The guy Lesley is hoping to get a few minutes with isCash.

And he's heading directly for us.

For me.

But as soon as he comes within a few feet of us, I realize it isn't Cash—it's Kaden. I'm not sure how I know the difference, but I do. My heart resumes beating as he stops in front of me, his warm smile taking hold of his face.

"Hey, Jules."

I don't need to glance at Les to know she's staring at Kaden and me with her mouth hanging open, stunned at this new development. I'm also stunned. In fact, I'm so shocked that I can't get my vocal cords to work.

Lesley saves me by leaning forward and extending her hand. "I'm Lesley," she says above the guitar solo that's ripping through the club.

Kaden tears his eyes from me long enough to greet her. "Nice to meet you, Lesley." He winks at her before settling his attention on me once more. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too," I say automatically.

He leans forward, and his arm brushes my shoulder as he gestures for the bartender. "Hey, Shane! Give these ladies whatever they want tonight. It's on the house."

"You got it, boss."

The music falls silent, and the band announces a short break. Kaden slaps the countertop before stepping away. "We'll catch up in a bit, okay?" he says to me. "I need to take care of something, but I'll be back, so don't go anywhere." He

disappears between the bodies, and through my stupor I hear the bartender ask what we're drinking.

"Vodka and cran," Les says.

"I'll stick with water."

"You sure, sweetheart? You heard him—it's on the house."

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“I’m sure, thanks.”

After the bartender goes off to fetch our drinks, Lesley turns to me and grips both of my arms. “I had no idea you knew the owner.”

“I don’t really know him.”

She quirks a brow. “Well, he seems to know you.”

“Okay, I met him once. He’s my boss’s brother.” Just thinking about Cash gets my blood pumping. Our run-in today at the market left me in a state of chaos. That whole encounter feels like a dirty secret I’m keeping.

“Wait, hold up a minute. Are you saying that hot-as-fuck man is related to those Montgomerys?”

“Kaden is Cash’s twin.”

“Jesus, Jules. Imagine being the bologna in that sandwich.”

I imagine it all too well, but Kaden isn’t part of the picture, which leaves me baffled. How the hell can two men who are near replicas of each other, down to the timbre of their voices and the storm in their eyes, affect me so differently?

“Control yourself,” I say with a nervous laugh, hoping she won’t catch on to how I’ve imagined all kinds of things with Kaden’s brother. “You’re here for business, remember?”

“Damn straight! You’ve gotta talk to him for us. It’s obvious he’s into you.”

“Talk to him...?” No way is she asking what I think she’s asking.

“Yeah, hook the band up. Please?” She bats her long lashes at me. “If anyone can get us a gig here, it’s you.”

Fuck. After everything Les and the guys have done for me, I can’t tell her no. But the thought of asking Kaden for anything fills me with unease. Just like she picked up on Kaden’s interest only minutes ago, I also felt it from the moment we first met at Mont Center. If only he were Cash.

If only Cash weren’t married.

If only...

“C’mon, Jules. Pleeese. I promise I’ll never call you Julie Bean again.”

I burst out laughing. She called me that once, and after learning that it was a pet name my sister gave me, she swore to never do it again. “No need to pull out the big guns, Les. I’ll talk to him.”

She dances in her seat, squealing her excitement. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. This is meant to be—I can feel it.”

Shane places Lesley’s drink on the counter before setting a tall glass of ice water in front of me. “Sure I can’t get you anything else?” His mouth is wide and sensuous, and if I weren’t so hung up on a man I can’t have, I might find the bartender attractive.

“I’m sure.”

“Holler if you change your mind,” he says before moving away to tend to other clubbers.

I turn my attention on Lesley again. Sipping her drink, she looks at me with teasing eyes.

“What?” I ask, raising a brow.

“You’ve got ‘em eating out of your hand tonight, Jules. What’s your secret?”

Mentally, I scoff. Maybe I’ve got a flashing neon sign on my forehead that says only interested in unattainable men. Seems like it’s human nature to chase what you can’t have. “I’m not the only one. A certain brooding guitarist only has eyes for you.”

She almost chokes on her drink. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

The mirth in her expression disappears, and I almost feel bad, except that turning the conversation on her takes it off of me.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says, but as she sets her drink down on the counter with a frown, I know that she knows exactly what I mean.

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“I’m talking about Zan.” I soften my tone. This must be a touchy subject for her, otherwise, she would have told me by now. Just like I would have told her about Cash...if the situation weren’t so sticky. “He’s got it bad for you, Les. And I’m not blind. I’ve seen the way you look at him too.”

She facepalms with a groan. “If you’ve noticed it, then the guys probably have too.”

I shake my head as the band members return to the stage. “I don’t think so. The only one who might have picked up on it is Leo, but that’s only because he knows you as well as I do.”

“That’s the worst-case scenario! Garen probably won’t give two fucks, but Leo will give Zan hell if anything happens. It could tear the band apart.”

“Is that why you haven’t done anything about it?”

“Well, yeah. That, and Zan and I haven’t really...talked about it.”

Kind of like Cash and me. We both know the attraction is there, but neither of us are willing to put it into words because the two of us can’t be.

It’s then I realize that Les and Zan are also in a forbidden situation. Leo is protective—make that overprotective—and he won’t handle his bandmate hooking up with his little sister very well.

Lesley’s attention darts over my shoulder, and when I turn I find Kaden heading for us again. She grabs my hand and squeezes. “We’ll talk about my lack of a love life

later. Go work your magic.”

With a gulp, I hop down from the barstool and meet Kaden halfway. The first strains of a haunting rock ballad begin, and I shout above the speakers. “Is there a place where we can talk?”

With a nod, he gestures for me to precede him toward the staircase leading up to that mysterious place on the second floor. Just like his brother, he’s a gentleman and allows me to go first. The hired muscle at the bottom of the stairs nods at Kaden as he steps to the side to let us pass.

My heart gives a nervous thump behind my breastbone as we climb the stairs to the VIP area. The space is in eerie shadow, yet inviting too, with scattered comfy sofas and chairs grouped together. I spy the stage from the edge of the railing, and the dance floor looks like a zoo of a party from this angle.

Kaden ushers me to a couch and doesn’t sit until I do. He settles next to me, keeping a respectable distance, yet close enough to have a conversation over the music, which drifts up to us at a tolerable level.

“What’s up?” he asks.

As I meet his eyes—eyes that look so much like Cash’s yet they’re not—I wring my hands in my lap. “I hate to ask this, since you hardly know me, but my friend would sacrifice her firstborn to land a gig here.”

Tilting his head toward the busy floor below, he asks, “Your friend down there?”

“Yeah. She’s in a band. They’re really good. I’ve heard them play. If you’d consider talking to her—”

“I’m happy to give them a listen,” he interrupts, “if you’ll go out with me.”

I blink a couple of times before I’m able to find words. “Like a...a date?”

“Exactly like a date. You know, where two people go to dinner or a movie, or all the above.” He’s teasing me, his eyes bright and crinkling around the corners. For a second, I can almost forget he’s not Cash. The feeling is fleeting, and so alarming that I unwittingly scoot away from him by a few inches. Going out with Cash’s twin would just be...

A whole new level of low. Sick and wrong. I can’t look at Kaden without thinking of his brother and wishing he were him. And I like Kaden too much to do that to him. I don’t know him well, but he seems too nice to jerk around. He’ll never be a substitute for Cash.

“I...I can’t. I’m sorry.”

He leans toward me, invading my space in a non-threatening way. “It’s only one date, Jules. I won’t bite, I promise. Unless you want me to.”

Jesus, what am I getting myself into?

“You’re my boss’ brother,” I point out, hoping that will deter him.

“That’s true, and I can’t help that. Is Cash an ass to work for? I can try to look less like him, if that will help.” His eyes are laughing at me again. He’s at ease in his own skin, confident in his charming smile and flirtatious personality. Normally, it might work on me, but the problem isn’t that Cash is a mean boss.

Quite the opposite, actually.

And that's the problem, but I can't tell Kaden that.

“One date?”

“One date,” he says.

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“As friends.”

“I’ll take it. Maybe once you get to know me, you’ll want to be friends some more.”

I can’t help but laugh. This man is too likable. But worry is already nagging me because I know I can’t offer him more than friendship.

“Okay,” I say with a bit of reluctance.

“Fantastic. I’ve got a thing next weekend that I’m in desperate need of a date for.”

I cock a brow. “You? Desperate?”

He puts his hands up. “Okay, okay. Desperate is pushing it a little. But I’d love for you to come along. Say around seven on Friday?”

Before I can give him an answer, he rises to his feet. “Looks like I need to talk to someone about a gig.” With a wink, he gestures for me to precede him back down the stairs.

Shit. What did I just agree to?

13. My Dear Friend Loneliness - Cash

There’s nothing but disquiet at the dining table. Monica is sitting across from me with her usual wine glass clutched between her fingers, but wherever she is mentally, it’s not with me.

“What did you do today?” I really don’t give a shit what she does with her days, but if one of us doesn’t speak and break this intolerable stalemate, I might go insane. We’ve spent the last few weeks avoiding each other, especially on the weekends when work doesn’t dominate the day and evenings. But tonight, we’re actually sitting down to a meal together, and I wonder what’s the point if we’re just going to eat in silence?

“I went to the spa,” she says, setting her wine glass on the table. “After that, I went shopping. Bought a new dress for your birthday dinner next weekend.” Her voice is almost monotone as she pushes linguini around on her plate.

I twirl some pasta around my fork. “I don’t know why my parents are going to all of this trouble.”

“Thirty is a milestone, Cash. It should be celebrated.” She flicks her bright blue gaze in my direction. “What about you? Anything interesting happen today?”

“Mostly just caught up on work.” Yesterday was definitely the better day. I’m still on a high from the time I spent with Jules. Those stolen moments with her are vivid in my mind, refusing to leave me alone. I’ve become addicted to the inviting warmth of her brown eyes. The shy curve of her mouth. The pink tint high on her cheekbones. Just brushing my fingers over the back of her hand gave me a goddamn hard-on.

Maybe if my wife hadn’t morphed into a stranger, I wouldn’t be so hot for another woman. Deep down, I know that isn’t true. And I can’t help but wonder if I would have reacted so strongly to Jules on that plane if I hadn’t found out about Monica’s affair hours before.

Shamefully, I have no doubt I would have. I can’t explain the rhyme or reason behind this connection I feel to Jules, but it’s very real, and it’s so powerful it’s amplifying everything broken between my wife and me.

“I talked to your mother yesterday,” Monica says, her soft voice bringing me back to the here and now. “She sounded excited about the dinner.”

“You know how my mom is. She loves putting on a good dinner party.”

Monica’s fork stalls halfway to her mouth. “I thought it was going to be a small gathering.”

“It is. I talked her into a simple family get-together.”

“Oh, well that’s good.”

My thoughts exactly, since pretending to be a happily married couple in front of a bunch of acquaintances is about as appealing as swallowing broken glass. Bad enough we have to do it in front of our parents and my brother.

I keep my negative thoughts to myself. For some reason, Monica is being on the agreeable side tonight. A flutter of hope busts past the hardened shell of my heart, as this is the first time we’ve talked in weeks without an underlying aura of animosity tainting every word spoken.

“Maybe we should begin the celebrating tonight.” I eye her carefully, dissecting every nuance of her expression. For once, the mask is gone. It’s just the woman I vowed to spend the rest of my life with sitting across from me. She isn’t wearing makeup, and her hair is gathered in a messy bun, but she’s never looked more beautiful to me. If I try hard enough, maybe this night will feel normal. “We never opened that bottle of wine from our wedding.”

She lowers her head, and I watch her guard go back up, helpless to stop it. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. We both have to get up early tomorrow.”

My fork slips from my fingers, hitting my plate with a silence-shattering clink. “Are you still fucking him?”

She lets out a breath, and she actually has the nerve to look exasperated. “I’m not sleeping with anyone.”

“So you ended the affair?”

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We're engaging in a standoff on either side of the dining room table. It's a ridiculous oblong monstrosity taking up space with too many empty chairs, but at least we're not so far gone that we're sitting at opposite ends yet. I pin her with a stare full of unwavering challenge.

Go ahead and lie to me again. I dare you.

"I'm not going to do this with you." She stands and grabs her half-eaten plate of food—dinner I had the audacity to cook for her in hopes of getting past this road block she's put between us.

Because I'm at the end of my rope, and sick and tired of grasping at the fraying threads. I shouldn't feel anything for another woman, but I do, and the longer Monica shuts me out, the more I want to say fuck it and throw out everything I've ever lived by.

I jump to my feet and round the table before she makes it far. Her fingers loosen around the expensive china, and I take the plate from her before setting it on the table with a calmness I don't feel. Crowding her personal space, I palm her cheeks, hell-bent on stopping her from retreating this time.

"Let me in. Whatever it is, just let me in."

Her lids flutter shut. "I was wrong to marry you."

I take a step back, my hands falling from her face. "Why would you say that?"

“Because neither of us are happy.” Her eyes pop open, and I find her blue orbs glistening with unshed tears.

“I was happy,” I bite out with a glare. “And you were happy. Until you fucked someone else.”

She looks away, and that tells me everything I need to know. She might as well just admit to fucking around on me, because her continued silence is more incriminating than that photo.

“Why can’t you be honest? Is it that hard to tell the fucking truth?” I’m getting too worked up, my chest heaving as I fist my hands at my sides. Slowly, I unfurl my fingers and will the rage to cool.

“The truth won’t change anything,” she says, her voice little more than a soft whisper.

I gape at her, stunned. I have no idea what I expected her to say, but that’s the closest she’s come to admitting her wrong-doing. “Look at me.”

Clenching her teeth, she drags her gaze back to me.

“All I’m asking is that you meet me half way. If you made a mistake, just tell me. We can’t work through it until you do.”

“There’s nothing to work through.” She crosses her arms, and the ice is back in her eyes. “The only mistake I made was marrying you.” She turns her back on me and leaves the dining room, and her debilitating statement hangs in the air, the black cloud of her cruelty threatening to douse me with pain.

I push it down so deep I’m not sure it’ll ever resurface. Her infidelity didn’t destroy

us. Neither did her lies. No, the ice around her heart—refusing to crack, let alone thaw—is the final nail in the coffin of our marriage.

My mind is nothing but chaos as I gather our dishes. Seconds later, I hear the click of the door to the master bedroom, echoing all the way downstairs. She's locked it, I know she has, because I've tried the doorknob more than once these last few weeks, determined to get through to her. Even if it means sitting in quiet anguish to watch her sleep. To let her know I'm still here.

Waiting.

But she won't let me in, emotionally or physically. The walls she's erected between us are too high and thick, and I can neither hurdle nor bust through them.

After the dinner clean-up, I settle into bed with nothing but utter silence greeting me in the spare bedroom, and I've never felt so alone. I finger my cell, thinking of Jules and how eager she was for the touch of my hand yesterday. How simple things are with her, despite the complications we face every day at the office. I'm not sure how something can be so easy and difficult at the same time, but that's how it is with Jules.

Wanting her is downright wrong. But being with her is as easy as breathing. Before I talk myself out of a very bad idea, I pull up her name in my contacts and text her a question I've wanted to ask since I watched her walk away in the airport.

Me: Would you have let me kiss you on the plane?

I already know the answer, but I want...no, I need her to admit it. To acknowledge it. And I don't give a flying fuck if I'm playing a risky game. My heart is pounding too hard to care about the dangers of crossing such a precarious line as I wait for her response.

Please, for God's sake. Text me back.

Six agonizing minutes pass before my cell vibrates in my palm.

Jules: You know I would have.

Letting out a long breath, I settle against the headboard and wonder if she's in bed, too. Is she wearing practical but entirely cute pajamas? Or is she naked, her sinful body a temptation between the sheets? Is her hair twisted in a messy up-do—the kind I've spied her wearing a few times since she started working for me—or is it wild and free, falling over her dainty shoulders in golden waves?

I envision her silky locks splaying her pillow, and my dick throbs, heavy between my legs. Thickening and growing the more I think about her. I'm headed straight for trouble, but I can't seem to stop myself. Maybe we were fools to believe we could leave this line uncrossed.

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Maybe if I were fucking my wife right now, I wouldn't be fucking with disaster.

Me: I loved spending time with you yesterday.

Jules: Me too. I can't stop thinking about you.

I hesitate, fingers hovering above the on-screen keyboard.

Me: I was wrong to ask for friendship. We're crossing all sorts of lines here, Jules.

Jules: The lines are getting blurry, aren't they?

A smile tugs at my lips. I adore her easy-going spirit. Despite the heaviness underlying this whole exchange, she manages to bring out the light.

Me: They are. I don't know about you, but I might need glasses.

Jules: You'd look sexy as hell in glasses.

Me: You'd look sexy as hell with a paper bag over your head.

Jules: Way to be original.

Now she's got me laughing on top of being downright horny. And it feels good to laugh. Hell, it feels good to be wanted.

Me: I'm an architect. I'll leave the wordsmithery to you.

Jules: Is that even a word?

Me: See? I'm hopeless.

Jules: Hopelessly irresistible. But I'm just an assistant, so what do I know?

The seconds on my wristwatch sound off in my ears as I think of how to respond. There's so much I want to say to her. And so much that I can't.

Me: Do you really want to know what I think?

Jules: Always.

Me: The moment I laid eyes on you, I swear a lightning bolt hit me.

Jules: That's a little better than the paper bag line.

Good God, this woman. She actually stuck her tongue out at me via emoji.

Me: Your turn then, Miss Originality.

Two whole minutes go by before she responds. I know, because I counted every second.

Jules: I felt the same way. No one's ever affected me the way you do. You could hold my hand forever, and I'd be happy.

Jesus, I'm a goner. Beyond gone. There's no chance of salvation for me—not when she says things like that.

Me: I know I promised we wouldn't do this, but I want you so damn much. I wish I'd

met you a year ago. You're the right woman at the wrong time, and I don't know what to do with that.

As soon as I hit send, part of me wishes I can erase and rewind. Take back this entire conversation. We're poking a rattler, and the strike will come fast and poisonous enough to kill. A few minutes go by, and I'm guessing she wised up and put her phone away. I wish I had the fortitude to do the same. The thought has barely finished when another text comes through.

Jules: You're married, so there's nothing to be done about anything.

She's right, but hell, how the utter truth in her words rips through me, as jagged as a serrated knife. I close my eyes and let out a ragged breath. I have no idea how I went from being devastated over Monica's infidelity to falling for a woman I barely know.

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But that's exactly what happened. Something inside Jules spoke to the center of my being, almost as if our souls crashed into each other at first eye contact. I swallow hard, second guessing my next message to her, but in the end, I send it because I need her to understand.

Me: My marriage is a mess. I don't even know if she's still cheating on me. She won't talk to me.

Jules: But you have a marriage, and that's all that matters.

My fingers are flying over the digital keys, tapping out words that are only digging my shameful hole deeper.

Me: What if I didn't?

Jules: But you do.

Me: Humor me.

Jules: If you weren't married, I'd be all over you.

Simple words, yet the images they conjure are X-rated. In my mind's eye, I see her naked and straddling my lap, lowering herself onto my cock as her luscious hair falls in sheets around my face.

Me: Fucking hell, Jules. You've got me so damn hard.

Jules: I wish I was with you right now.

Me: What would you do if you were?

Jules: Things that would make it very difficult to look you in the eye at work.

Me: You're killing me. I hope you realize that.

Jules: I didn't, but it's a powerful notion. Does it torture you to know I'd put my mouth on you?

My unfaithful cock is about to get off on this conversation alone.

Me: Hell yes.

Jules: I'm not very good at it, but I'd want to be with you.

Two seconds later, she sends an embarrassed emoji, followed by another message.

Jules: I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm saying these things!

Me: Don't ever be sorry. Your honesty means the world to me. I love how you speak your mind.

Jules: That's what you do to me. You make me feel safe enough to spill my guts, even embarrassing shit.

Me: What makes you think you're not good at it?

Jules: My ex said I sucked, and not in a good way.

Me: I'm calling bullshit. Just looking at you gets me hard. What kind of man says something like that to his girlfriend? He didn't deserve you.

I swallow past a lump of guilt before adding what I don't want to admit, but I think she needs to hear it. Or I need to say it. Either way, it's the absolute truth.

Me: I don't deserve you either, even if I were free to be with you.

Because what kind of man marries one woman and ends up lusting after another? The circumstances don't mean shit. All I'm accomplishing is widening the ravine created by Monica's deceit, not to mention playing with Jules' heart.

Me: I don't want you to get hurt.

Jules: Too late. But I did it to myself. I was wasted when I fucked up in Oklahoma, but I was sober when I walked into your office for the first time. I knew better, and I still took the job.

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My breath catches in my lungs. Dread thuds to the bottom of my gut. I'm stuck in a marriage that's crashed and burned, sleeping alone in the guest bedroom, and now I've got the hard-on from hell due to a woman I can't have. This is insanity.

Me: We're heading for trouble, aren't we.

No question in that—just a pure statement of fact.

Jules: Yeah.

Me: I had no business texting you tonight. The blame is on me, Jules. If you want to pretend this conversation never happened, I understand. We'll never speak of it again.

Jules: It would be the wise thing to do, wouldn't it?

Me: Probably.

Hell, there's no "probably" about it. I messed up big time, from the very first message I sent. No, from the instant I gave in yesterday and asked her to go for a walk with me. My phone is utterly still, the absence of her texts tossing me back into unbearable loneliness.

Suck it up, man.

I'm halfway to setting my cell on the nightstand when it vibrates in my palm.

Jules: Goodnight. Maybe I'll see you in my dreams.

“Goodnight,” I whisper, choosing not to say goodbye via text. If I had my way, we’d never say goodbye at all.

14. Emotional Affair - Jules

Breathless. That’s what I am the instant our eyes lock the following morning. If anyone saw us behind the closed door of his office, they’d only see two colleagues greeting each other for the day. They wouldn’t know how we exchanged little pieces of ourselves last night.

Shoving my nerves down, I set a cup of coffee on his desk for him, and he turns that stunning smile on me like he normally does.

“Thank you,” he says before taking a cautious sip of the hot java. “You have no idea how much I needed this.”

“You’re welcome.”

He always has a seat waiting for me on the other side of his desk. I slide into it, tablet ready in my hands.

“I have a meeting in an hour,” he says, dragging his fingers through his dark hair. “I think it’s a good idea that you come along to learn the way I do things. You might need to step in for me while I’m gone next week.”

Gone in OKC. So close to my hometown but so far away from me.

“Of course. Do you want to go over the agenda now, or should we do that after the meeting?”

“Now’s fine.” He grabs at his tie, and I bite back a grin. He’s already shed his jacket

and rolled up his cuffs. By the end of the day, he'll have that tie removed. For someone who looks so fucking sexy in a business suit, he doesn't handle the constriction of them well.

I pull up his schedule for the week. It's packed full of meetings and appointments, but the one this morning is absent from the calendar. "I'm sorry," I say, stricken with embarrassment. "I must have missed this morning's—"

"No, Jules. You're doing great. It's an emergency meeting with the Board. Apparently, the projections on the expansion plans aren't good enough for a couple of the members." He sounds beyond irritated, and I don't blame him because we worked on those projections for hours last week before his quarterly meeting.

"Is there anything you need me to do to prepare?"

"Compile everything we have on the expansion projects for the quarter. They want more details, we'll give them more details." We go over his schedule before I rise to do what he asked, but he halts me as I reach the door.

"Jules?"

His "boss" voice is gone, replaced by the sensual timbre I hear in my dreams. That tone thickens the air with longing, making me grow warm between my thighs. I glance over my shoulder. Seconds pass, and each one feels like a lifetime to the beats of my heart.

"Thank you," he says, his stormy eyes flickering to my mouth.

Last night, I told him he was irresistible, and that couldn't be more true than it is now. He's a collision of casual and authoritative behind that desk. The epitome of sexy-as-fuck. But when he drags his gaze to mine again, the loneliness he usually hides is as

clear as the blue sky on the other side of that wall of glass.

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I want to go to him. The urge is a force I can barely fight.

He's fucking off-limits, Jules.

Married.

And my boss.

They say history has a tendency of repeating itself. I'm afraid that's going to end up being the case with him.

"I'll be back soon with that info." I scurry from his office, my pulse pounding in my ears. It doesn't matter that we didn't bring up the texts; they refuse to be forgotten, and that becomes more apparent throughout the day. Meetings, emails, phone calls, coordinating schedules—all of it is a shitty distraction from what I feel every time he looks at me.

Because the things we confessed the night before, and even things we didn't, flood back every fucking time.

Just like our run-in at the market, those texts sit between us, nothing but tempting morsels of secret and stolen moments I can't help but cherish. I've never tasted his lips, have never felt his hard muscles against my soft curves, but we're definitely having an affair—only it's the emotional kind.

And that's worse than if we were fucking like horny teenagers. Fucking can be done on a purely physical level. Chris and I were more than familiar with the practice of

emotionless coupling—just two bodies rutting between the sheets. We were young when we got together, neither really knowing what the hell we were doing. Our love was innocent and new, but it didn't go deep enough to flourish over the years. Something was always missing—that spark they talk about in movies and write about in books.

It took a chance encounter with Cash to realize how powerful chemistry is. We've barely touched, yet what is blooming between us is far deeper than lust or desire.

And it feels like the dirtiest form of cheating ever.

The work day ends later than I'd like it to, and as I wait for the elevator, Cash comes to a stop beside me. I try not to look at him. Try not to fidget as his nearness washes over my skin like a tangible caress. Someone passes behind us, their heels clicking across immaculate white marble.

Neither of us speak.

We've spent big chunks of the day together in the same room, but we had the distraction of work and other people to keep us company. To keep us in line. Now, as those elevator doors open and we step inside, I'm as nervous as I was when I first entered his office this morning.

My heartbeat flutters fast as the doors slide shut. As we start the slow descent to the bottom, I lift my gaze, meeting his head-on, and the yearning I find in his eyes is so powerful that I grip the bar behind me as a lifeline.

Being alone with him is fucking dangerous.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

He has no idea.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me of a different kind of hunger since I didn't have time today for a proper lunch. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Want to grab dinner?"

I arch a brow. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I'll be on my best behavior, Jules."

He will be, but what about me? A day doesn't go by that I don't lose my head around him. Especially when he looks the way he does now, with his hair mussed from running his hands through it all day, jacket and tie gone, and cuffs rolled up.

He walked into the building this morning looking like an executive, but he's walking out sexily disheveled. And he's asking me to walk out with him.

"What about your wife? Isn't she waiting for you at home?" I know she left Mont Center hours ago. Over the past few weeks, I've noticed that she isn't the type to put in extra hours.

Not like Cash does.

"The last thing I want to do is go home right now, Jules. It's just dinner, I promise."

When it comes to him, it's neverjustanything. But as usual, I'm powerless to say no. As we arrive on the first floor, I wonder what would happen if he really touched me. If he came on strong enough to leave no doubt about his intentions.

Would I be able to resist him?

To resist what every fiber of my being is aching for?

I honestly don't know.

Exiting through the glass doors of Mont Center, we fall into step, side by side. He chooses the restaurant, and we begin the short walk there in companionable silence. I never feel the need to fill the air with useless chatter around him. Even when I'm nervous as fuck, my heart beating too hard, and palms sweaty, being around him feels natural. It feels right, despite that damn ring on his finger.

As soon as we reach our destination, he opens the door for me.

"Just so you know," I say, catching his gaze, "I'm paying for myself, so don't even try arguing with me."

An amused smile plays on his lips. "I'll keep that in mind."

The restaurant is a mixture of classy and intimate, but what I like most is the unique ambience I've begun to associate with Seattle; laid back and artsy with a touch of grunge. The lights are dim, casting a warm glow over the square tables outfitted with simple white cloths and tea candles. The place is brimming with people, some locals, and some tourists. I don't think there's a person here who isn't engaged in conversation.

Being a Monday night, the wait isn't long. The hostess leads us to a table on the terrace overlooking Elliot Bay, and the spice of Italian cuisine has my mouth watering.

"Have you been here before?" he asks after we're seated.

“I haven’t, but I like it.”

“Kaden turned me on to this place. It’s been one of my favorites ever since.”

“I ran into him Saturday night at his club.” I pick up my menu, deciding not to bring up my upcoming “date” with his brother. Hopefully, it’ll be nothing more than a casual outing as friends. Not even worth a mention.

I’m still not sure why I agreed to it in the first place, other than I seem to have an issue telling people no lately.

“He mentioned you and your friend stopped by.”

Flicking my gaze over the top of the menu, I study his expression, but if Kaden told him about our upcoming date, Cash doesn’t show it.

“Les and the guys have been trying to get a gig there for a while. I had no idea your brother owned a club.”

“It’s that whole separate paths thing I was telling you about. The family business didn’t interest him, much to our father’s irritation.”

“Parents can be a bitch sometimes. My mom hasn’t spoken to me in weeks. She’s not happy that I moved out here.”

“Why not?”

“Control, maybe? She likes to meddle. My sister goes along with pretty much everything she wants.” I shrug. “I’ve always butted heads with my mom.”

The server stops by our table, offering wine, but I decline.

Alcohol and married men don't mix for me.

We give the server our dinner orders, and after he leaves us alone again, Cash picks up our conversation as if it's the most natural thing in the world. "I know what you mean. Kaden and our father have never seen eye-to-eye."

"What about you? Do you get along with your parents?"

He frowns. "For the most part. I've always followed the plan my father laid out for me. I imagine if I veered from it, things would get tense."

"Your father sounds headstrong."

"That's putting it nicely. My mom had to strong-arm him into stepping down as CEO. He had a heart attack last year."

"That had to have been scary."

"It was. It happened right in the middle of the merger with Blake Holdings. The doctors said he was taking on too much and needed to slow down."

"So you took his place in the company?"

"Didn't have much choice. It was going to happen at some point anyway."

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The despondent note in his tone tugs at my heart. I know he loves his job—especially when he’s working on expansion projects. Those days tend to end long after the sun sets, because he’s too caught up in blueprints to take notice of the time.

Those are the days I stay to help him, even after he tries to send me home.

The server returns with our plates, breaking through the heaviness of our conversation. Cash ordered risotto, and I opted for lasagna. We’re quiet for a few minutes as we eat, gazes flicking up every so often and crashing together.

And this is starting to feel more like a date instead of a dinner between two colleagues, or two friends, even. I think about this Friday and my date with Kaden.

If I can only let my guard down long enough, maybe it’ll be fun. The thought makes me want to groan. Going out with Cash’s brother is too much of a bad idea to be considered fun. But he held up his end, since the band is playing at his club in a couple of weeks, so I need to keep my word and suck it up. Who knows, maybe it won’t be so bad.

Maybe some nothing-serious-kind-of-fun is what I need. Am I even the type of girl that can do that? I have no idea, but I think it’s time I find out. Because pining for a man I can’t have is more than pathetic. It’s unhealthy and wrong.

And dating a carbon copy of him is right?

I squash that annoying righteous voice into a pancake.

“I can hear the wheels turning in your head,” Cash says with a teasing smile. “What’s on your mind, Jules?”

“Things I shouldn’t be thinking about.”

His eyes darken, following the movement of my fork as I shovel a bite of lasagna into my mouth. After swallowing, I lick the sauce from my lips. My mind is screaming retreat, retreat, retreat! But my mouth has other ideas, because my next words betray me.

“What are you thinking?”

“That I want to be that fork.”

I bring another bite to my lips. He’s openly watching me eat, his mouth slightly parted as storm clouds fill his eyes. His foot nudges mine under the table.

We should stop this. We’re several levels past flirting. We’ve fallen headfirst into eye fucking each other across the candlelit table. And now we’re playing footsie like fucking teenagers.

“Just dinner, you said.”

“That was my intention.”

“Was?”

“My intentions go out the window when it comes to you.”

“I think that’s something we have in common.”

Which makes our behavior irresponsible.

“I’m sorry, Jules.” He pulls his foot away. “Seems I’m saying that a lot to you lately.”

“You’re not the only one at fault here. I said yes to dinner.” A heavy beat passes as I weigh my words. “And I answered your text last night.”

He lets out a long exhale. “I shouldn’t have sent it.”

“We have a lot of ‘shouldn’ts’ between us, Cash. All we can do is move forward.”

As if coming to a silent agreement, we drop the subject and finish our meals. The end of our time together approaches, and instead of prolonging temptation by ordering dessert, he asks for the check.

And he pays the whole damn thing, despite my protests. If I’ve learned anything about Cash these past few weeks, it’s that he has a stubborn streak as strong as our attraction to each other.

“I can walk you home,” he says as he ushers me out of the restaurant.

Jesus, if that’s not asking for trouble, I don’t know what is. He can’t quite meet my eyes, which tells me he’s thinking along the same lines as I am.

Privacy.

Bed.

No clothing.

No coming back from that.

I shake my head. "I can get home on my own."

"I have no doubt that you can, Jules." He closes the few feet between us and twirls a lock of my hair around his finger. "Thanks for tonight."

"Shouldn't I be thanking you?"

"How about we call it even?"

"Deal."

The sun is setting, washing the sky in swirling pinks and oranges. People move around us on the sidewalk, but time might as well stand still as I meet his eyes. Sexy and vulnerable is a dangerous combination on a man.

With a hard swallow, he pulls back. "Goodnight, Jules."

He's already walking away, and I try to tell him goodnight, but the words stick in my throat.

15. The Perils of Dating - Jules

My hand trembles as I apply mascara. He's going to be here any minute, and I can't help but vacillate between going on this date and calling it off. The rational part of my brain can't comprehend that I'm about to go on a "friend" date with Cash's brother. His fuckingtwin brother. As I jab the wand into the mascara tube, I wonder how the hell I got myself into this situation. Why didn't I say no?

It's only one date, Jules.

A knock on the door quiets the battle going on in my head. I shove the mascara into the makeup bag on the vanity, along with the lip gloss I already applied. Smoothing the bodice of my black dress, I leave the bathroom and make my way to the front door, where I find Kaden standing on the other side. One thing I've noticed about Kaden is he doesn't do dressed-up, yet he manages to pull it off somehow in a pair of dark blue jeans and a white button-down shirt.

He shoots me an easy smile, and God he looks like Cash. Same thick, dark hair. Same steel eyes. It trips me up every time. But Cash is smoldering intensity—serious with small doses of playfulness that shine through every now and again. Kaden, in contrast, is almost carelessly easy-going.

"You look amazing," he says, taking me in from the soft waves of my hair to the sandaled wedges on my feet, pearl-painted toenails peeking through.

"Thank you."

A moment passes as we stare at each other. He breaks it by offering his hand. "Ready to go?"

Hesitation freezes my limbs, and I try to convince myself there's still time to back out. I can tell him this is a mistake—unprofessional at best on my part, considering I work for his brother. And if that fails, I can always cough up a fib and say I'm

coming down with a stomach bug. There's nothing sexy about the possibility of a ruined night thanks to a puking date.

"Having second thoughts already?" His mouth tilts into a crooked grin. "Scared you'll want to add some benefits to that whole 'friend' idea?"

"No." There's zero chance of that happening.

"Don't make me play my trump card."

"What's that?"

"You gave me your word."

God, he just won't quit smiling, which makes it hard to say no, even if his strong-arming tactics are making me uncomfortable. I'm slightly sick with myself as I slide my hand into his. "Okay. One date."

"One date," he agrees.

I switch the lock on the doorknob before I let him lead me down the stairs to the alleyway, where a silver sports car is parked. The evening is mild, clear of rain, and I'm thankful for the low humidity, since I'm actually having a good hair day.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." Kaden opens the passenger door for me, and I lift a brow as I slide into the luxurious two-seater.

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“Playing the mysterious angle, are you?”

“Absolutely,” he says with a wink as he closes the door.

While he drives toward his secret destination, we chat about music, favorite foods, and other details that help shape a person into who they are. We share some of the little things I ache to ask his brother.

I want to know everything about Cash.

Is he a breakfast person? Or is he one of those too-busy-to-eat people who thinks coffee is a food group, so therefore should count as a meal?

Does he like pulp in his orange juice? Or maybe he doesn't like orange juice at all.

Which side of the bed does he sleep on? And does he fall asleep past midnight, or does he rise before the sun?

Fuck, he's the CEO of a huge company, so he probably does both.

I want to uncover all his secrets. All the important moments in his life, even the ones he'd rather forget.

And God, I want to be the one to help him forget.

But that will never be me. A sharp pang rips through my chest. I've got it bad—I'm beyond pretending otherwise. I've got it so bad that I'd rather see him happy with his

wife than miserable.

Which he so clearly is right now. Yesterday, I spied them leaving together in the elevator at the end of the day, each claiming opposite sides. The vibe between husband and wife was chilly enough to lower the temperature in the building by ten degrees. Not for the first time, I wonder why he's staying in the marriage when he's that unhappy.

The only answer I come up with is that he must love her enough to stay, even though she fucked up. The realization leaves me bitter and green because I wonder if anyone will ever love me enough to stay.

"You're quiet over there," Kaden says.

I come back to myself, and that's when I realize we're on a residential street on the other side of Union Bay. At least, I think it's Union Bay. Lesley showed me around Seattle during my first week here, and I recall her bringing me to a park nearby.

"Where are you taking me?" My eyes widen at the upscale neighborhood. Each house seems bigger and more elaborate than the last.

Kaden pulls into a circular driveway made of cobblestone, and my jaw drops at the enormous two-story home nestled in a thicket of trees. The house looks like it belongs in a fairytale, with its pitched gabled roof and mullion windows.

"This is my parents' house."

My heart thuds to the bottom of my gut, and I turn frantic eyes on him. "This is not an appropriate date between friends, Kaden."

"It's not a big deal. I've brought casual dates here before. My parents are always

putting on a dinner party for something.”

“What’s the occasion?” It’s bad enough he brought me to meet his parents on our first—and only—date, but if this is an important family function of some sort, that will be even more nerve-wracking.

“It’s my birthday. My mom is the queen of organized fun.” He shrugs a shoulder. “She insisted.”

I fist my hands, palms already sweating. That means Cash will be here too, probably with his wife. And despite how tempting the thought of seeing him is—especially since he’s leaving the day after tomorrow for Oklahoma City—the idea of having to swallow a whole evening of watching him wither is too much.

“This is beyond awkward,” I say, not even trying to hide my dismay. “Is your brother here too?”

“Well, yeah. We are twins,” he teases, aiming that cute and flirtatious smile at me, which does zilch to calm my nerves.

“Cash is my boss. Do you have any idea how uncomfortable this is making me?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I really don’t think he’ll mind. He’s not gonna fire you or anything.” He pulls his brows together. “You guys seem friendly enough at work.”

Friendly doesn’t even cover it. Jesus, he has no fucking clue.

“I want you to take me home.”

Letting out a breath, Kaden drags a hand through his hair, and it’s a move that reminds me too much of Cash.

I feel sick.

And stupid.

So fucking stupid.

“Okay,” he relents. “I’ll blow off the dinner.”

“No! You can’t do that because of me.”

“By the time we reach your apartment, everyone will be halfway through the main course. There’ll be no point in turning around to come back.”

I glance out the passenger window, taking in the white luxury car we parked next to. Somehow, I know it belongs to Cash. Or more likely, his wife, because it doesn’t seem like his style. He’s not hung up on luxurious things, regardless of his expensive suits and CEO title.

Underneath the money and power is a man that likes downtown Seattle because he can get around without a car. He’s the type of guy that wears gym shorts to the market on Saturdays. The kind of guy that finds joy in the small things—like going for a walk and eating berries, or brushing his hand over mine on a Ferris wheel.

“C’mon, Jules. I promise, it’ll be fine.”

I cringe when Kaden says my name. He sounds too much like his brother for it to sit right with me, because I fucking love the way Cash says my name.

“I don’t know...”

“We don’t have to stay long. We can always beg off and say we have plans later.”

Gulping back my humiliation, I answer by pushing the passenger door open. And that’s enough for Kaden, as he’s out of the car and at my side seconds later. He takes my arm in his and escorts me down the cobblestone walkway. Solar lanterns light the path to the front entrance, where potted plants decorate the porch. A gentle breeze teases the butterfly wind chimes hanging next to the arched door.

I love butterflies, and something about filthy rich people hanging something so ordinary by the front door is oddly comforting. Maybe Cash got his laid-back personality from his parents. Maybe this night won’t be as awkward and humiliating as I fear. Hell, maybe it’ll be fun.

As Kaden ushers me inside, I know I’m fooling myself. Especially when we come face-to-face with Cash in the living room. God, he looks delicious enough to eat in a charcoal button-up shirt that matches his eyes. Cuffs rolled up, of course. No ties, no suit jackets. The look is sohim.

But the hard glint in his gaze isn’t. It’s foreign and a bit frightening, and I’m one breath away from bolting. His eyes are two storm clouds as they swing back and forth between his brother and me.

“Why is your assistant here, Cash?” His wife appears from what I’m guessing is the kitchen. Standing at his side like she belongs there, with an air of sophistication I find intimidating, she backs up her question with a perfectly arched brow as she sips from a glass of wine.

“I was just about to ask that same question.” Cash isn’t addressing his wife—he’s aiming the question at me, and I can’t help but notice the accusing line of his mouth.

“Jules is my date,” Kaden says, winding an arm around my waist and pulling me to his side. I stiffen at his touch, my face flushing hot enough to bring on a sunburn.

Monica places a hand on her hip. “Isn’t this rather inappropriate?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, putting some distance between Kaden and me. “I didn’t realize we were coming here....” I trail off, unsure of what else to say. Finding the words to form an acceptable explanation is next to impossible. I’m not even sure how I ended up here. If only the floor would fissure at my feet and swallow me.

Cash swings a fierce gaze back to his brother. “I need to speak with Jules for a minute.” Giving me no chance to object, he gestures for me to precede him through the French doors off the sitting room. We enter a garden room, and I catch a whiff of the bay through the open windows. The evening is mild and smells of summer, but it has nothing on the seductive woodsy scent wafting off him.

“I’m so...sorry. This is...I mean...” Fuck. I clamp my lips shut to silence my stammering. A trickling waterfall gives off peaceful ambience, and the sound would normally calm my nerves, but it’s not working now.

“Why are you with him, Jules?”

I blink a few times, my pulse fluttering in my throat. “He asked me out.”

“He asked you out?” A tick goes off in his jaw, and he crosses his arms over his chest. I can’t tear my eyes away from his forearms. There’s something insanely sexy about his stance, the low tenor of his voice, and the way he’s pinning me under that fierce gaze that speaks one word and one word only.

Mine.

I want to be his, want to experience every nuance of the possessive vibe vibrating off his skin. The air is thick with it, our yearning palpable.

“And you said yes.”

I’m not sure that’s a question, but if it is, there’s a demand for an explanation behind it. An issuance of anger. Which leaves me gaping at him because he has no right to go all caveman on me. Not as long as that ring is still on his finger. Not as long as there is nohim and me.

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“I’m sorry if this is awkward, professionally, but you have no place getting so angry over who I date.”

“He’s my brother, Jules. Do you have any idea how much this is gutting me?”

“I think I do.” More than he’ll ever know.

Slowly, his arms fall to his sides, and an exhale of defeat steals his anger. But not the longing. It’s ever-present and inescapable for both of us. The urge to pull him near and push him away consumes me. Who knew a few feet of distance could feel so close yet never-ending, all at once?

He closes the space between us by a foot. “Jules...” My name is but a quiver on his lips, a sigh of sorrow on his tongue. The warm graze of his knuckles on my cheekbone is enough to make my knees want to give out. To make me wet.

I’m hot and achy at the core, my panties damp from the electric storm of his gaze. The aftershocks of his touch shake me apart, and the edges around us dim. This moment has trapped us in time—in a fleeting reality where nothing else exists but the two of us.

In this lone and unforgettable moment, there’s only him and me.

Until approaching footsteps thrust us into the next moment, and all the painful ones that are sure to follow. We break apart until we’re standing at an acceptable distance from each other.

“There you are,” a woman says, and I immediately know she’s Cash’s mother, because she has the same dark hair and smoky eyes as her sons. “We’re ready to sit down to dinner now.”

“We’ll be right out.”

Her attention lands on me. “And who is this?”

Silence stretches between the three of us, the seconds ticking away longer than is comfortable. “Don’t be rude, Cash,” she says with a chastising tone only a mother can perfect. “Introduce us.”

“Sorry, Mom. This is Jules. She’s my personal assistant...and Kaden’s date for the night.” His voice is strained, as if his vocal cords are launching mutiny.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Elle,” she says with a welcoming smile that sets me at ease. The kindness I sensed in Cash the first day I met him was obviously passed down from his mother.

I’m about to explain my presence when I spot movement between the open French doors. Kaden is leaning against the door jamb with both hands in his pockets, watching us.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I tell his mother. “Thanks for having me tonight.” I don’t have the strength for smalltalk right now—not when my skin is still buzzing from the brush of Cash’s knuckles on my cheek

“We’re glad to have you, Jules.”

Anxious to get the hell out of Dodge, I gesture at Kaden. “Looks like he’s waiting for me.” I give Elle a nervous smile before making my way toward Kaden. I don’t need

to glance over my shoulder to know that Cash is watching me. The heat of his gaze burns into my back, intense as the sun. But it's a good kind of hot—the kind with tingles and goosebumps and sparks of awareness between my thighs.

Kaden pushes off the door jamb as I reach him. “If he gave you any shit about us—”

“No,” I interrupt the impending tirade I sense is coming. “He was just wondering what was going on, so I told him we had a date tonight.” Arching a brow, I let my irritation glower across my face. “You might want to brace yourself for an earful later. You could have told him. Or me, for that matter.”

“I’ll talk to him,” he says, draping an arm around my shoulder. “If it’s your job you’re worried about, there’s no need.”

My job is the least of my worries.

16. Meet the Parents - Cash

Jules can barely look at me. The clinking of silver on china and the polite, hushed conversation does little to cut through the tension between us. I pray to God no one else picks up on it. She’s sitting next to my brother across the table from me, unusually quiet and subdued. I don’t like her this way, with the warmth in her brown eyes gone and the smile I adore absent from her lips. She’s far too interested in the grilled halibut on her plate.

I can’t keep my attention from straying to her every few seconds. Hell, she looks amazing tonight with the sky lit up behind her in soft pink and orange hues. The light breeze coming off Union Bay is rustling through all of that luscious, wavy hair falling around her face. And the neckline on that little black dress...Jesus. It’s modest by most standards, but it doesn’t take much to get my dick hard when it comes to Jules, and that’s exactly what the hint of her cleavage is doing to me right now.

“You have a beautiful home,” she tells my mother. “The view is amazing.”

I have to agree with her, but it’s not the expanse of green lawn or the water I find so alluring, nor the willow tree off to the side of the patio where the eight of us are seated for dinner. If anything is beautiful here, it’s Jules.

“Thank you,” my mother says. “So how long have you worked for my son?”

And that’s when she finally meets my eyes. It’s a blip in time—insignificant to anyone watching—but to me it’s everything. To me it’s reassurance that what we feel is still there, despite the fact that she’s sitting next to my brother as his date.

“Just a few weeks,” she answers.

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“Speaking of the company,” my father-in-law says, “are we any closer to becoming grandparents?” Ned Blake’s voice is deep and gruff, and his question throws me completely off guard. Monica freezes at my side, and I catch her shooting daggers at her father.

“You’ll be among the first to know,” I say, slicing a metaphorical knife through the tension his intrusive question brought on.

“Better get busy, son,” Ned says. “Never too soon to begin planning for the future of MontBlake.”

Monica scoots her chair back on the brick patio. “Please, excuse me for a moment.”

The disquiet that emerges as she disappears into the house is staggering.

“Ned, please. This isn’t the time or place.” Veronica Blake is without a doubt the mother of my wife. The woman is staring down her husband with the same cold, calculated look I find in Monica’s eyes everyday.

“It’s not like we see them often enough to have this conversation, Roni.”

What the Blakes—or my parents, for that matter—don’t know is that Monica doesn’t want kids right now. Shortly after we married, I discovered she was taking birth control pills. I didn’t understand her need for secrecy at the time, but as the months wore on, it became clear to me. She couldn’t handle the pressure our families put on us, and it was easier to take the pills in secret than deal with their disapproval.

Ever the mediator, my mother clears her throat before addressing Kaden. “How did you and Jules meet?”

“We met at the club. Her friend is in a band.” The carefree smile he aims at Jules digs under my skin. “You’re going to be there next weekend when they play, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” She returns his smile, and I want to stab someone. I don’t like her looking at him like that; it’s too close to the way she looks at me.

“Still wasting time on that dead-end venture, I see.” Dad’s voice is sharp and scathing, putting everyone on alert. “When are you going to sell that hole in the wall and come work for MontBlake? There’s still time to do something worthwhile with your life.”

“The corporate world isn’t for me,” Kaden says. “You already know this.”

“I refuse to believe it. Thirty-years-old and you’ve got nothing to show for it but a night club. Look at what Cash has accomplished.”

Jesus. Here we go again. I pinch the bridge of my nose, irritated on Kaden’s behalf. He might be sitting next to the one woman I’d give my right arm to be with, but he’s still my brother.

“Sure, Dad. Cash looks really happy with all of that responsibility on his shoulders. It must suck to work so fucking hard to live up to your unreasonable expectations.”

“Kaden!”

“Sorry, Mom. Just keeping it real.”

“You know what you lack?” Dad says, wagging his finger at my brother.

“I’m sure you’re gonna tell me.”

“Initiative.”

“How do I lack initiative? I own my own business. And business has been good, I’ll have you know. I don’t answer to anyone, and that’s the way I like it.”

“You’re thirty-years-old, Kaden. It’s time to stop throwing your life away. You’ll never find a suitable wife at this rate.”

“You mean like Cash has? Again, case in point,” he says, gesturing to the doors Monica disappeared through. “Where’s his wife now? Oh, that’s right. She’s the only smart one here, since she bolted before the usual vitriol began.” Rising to his feet, Kaden throws his fork down. “Let’s go, Jules. I’m sorry I made you sit through this bullshit. I was stupid to think we could get through one fucking dinner without going to war.”

She slowly stands, pink tinting her cheeks. And no matter how hard I try to catch her eye, she refuses to look at me.

“Kaden, it’s your birthday,” Mom says. “Don’t leave.”

“Sorry, Mom, but I can’t do this.” As my brother and Jules head for the door, she finally glances at me, and it makes me crazy that I can’t read her expression, especially since her face is usually an open book.

The silence hanging over the table in their wake is crushing.

“Thank God for Cash and Monica,” my father says. “Those two are going to do amazing things at MontBlake.”

The slam of a car door echoes through the night. A few seconds later, an engine roars to life. Unable to take it any longer, I push back my chair and stand. “Since you think everything is so perfect, maybe you should know that Monica is cheating on me.”

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My mother gasps, and Jed Blake's face flushes with outrage. But the shocking revelation doesn't seem to faze my father.

"Well man-up and put a stop to it."

I take in each person at the table. Ned with his immovable disposition, and Roni with her icy blue-eyed indifference. My dad and his superiority and pig-headed know-it-all nature. My mom is the only one I feel bad for, because she's too kind-spirited to handle the bullshit Ned and my father put her through.

The shit they've put us all through for years.

"I don't even know why I try anymore," I say. "Our marriage is crumbling. Monica sure as hell isn't happy. I'm not either. In fact, I don't see a single person at this table who looks happy right now."

As my mother covers her mouth with a trembling hand, my father rises. "If something's broken, you fix it," he says, his voice reverberating like a clap of thunder. Slamming his palms onto the table, he stares me down. "Do you hear me? Fix it, Cash."

"Got it, Dad. Loud and clear."

"MontBlake can't afford bad publicity, especially so soon after the merger. So make it right."

My gut is roiling with fury, but I hold it in. Blowing a gasket in front of my father

will accomplish nothing. He's set in his ways more than ever and refuses to address the real problem.

The only thing that needs fixing is the pathetic state of our family.

17. Hello, Jealousy - Jules

Kaden is quiet on the drive to my apartment. Even if he did feel up to talking, I wouldn't know what to say. What went down at his family's place is something I wish I could forget. He takes my hand in his as we climb the stairs to my front door. I'm tempted to pull away, but I don't. Maybe he needs the comfort of touch right now, just like I needed his brother's on that airplane.

Thinking about Cash and our time up in the air is bittersweet. For those few hours, we existed in a bubble of our own making. I'd give anything to go back to that time. Memories of every touch, of every glance burn behind my eyes. Horrified at the thought of spilling tears, I blink until I'm sure my eyes won't betray me.

"I'm so sorry about tonight," Kaden says as we stop in front of my door.

I untangle our fingers and glance up at him. "It's okay."

He's leaning toward me, one hand braced on the door next to my head, and I don't like this caged-in feeling.

"It's not okay. That was a disaster for a first date."

"It was our only date," I say, placing a hand on his chest. Inch by inch, he backs off.

"You're not going to invite me in, are you?"

“No, I’m not.”

With a sigh, he puts even more space between us. “I don’t blame you. Not after tonight.”

“It’s not because of what happened. Truth is, I shouldn’t have agreed to go out with you.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m sorry, Kaden. That didn’t come out right. I think we could be friends.”

“I’m not used to being friend-zoned.” He lightens the mood with his easy-going smile. “It’s a humbling experience.”

“I didn’t mean to lead you on. I just came out of a relationship, and I’m not ready to start something new.”

Unless it’s with a man I can’t have. And that is the pathetic state of my love life.

“No, I get it. No need to explain.” Leaning forward, he presses his lips to my cheek. “Have a good night, Jules.”

He walks away, and I escape into my apartment with my heart thumping painfully in my chest. Standing with my back against the door, I let the tears spill down my cheeks, purging everything that’s built up over the last few weeks. Kaden’s goodbye was too similar to the way Cash and I parted ways at the airport.

The night I knew him only as my Sexy Stranger.

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I miss the safety of not knowing who he is. My heart didn't hurt so much, and I didn't despise myself as much as I do now. Because loving Cash when he's not free to return that love is hell.

The flow of despair eventually slows to a trickle, and I force myself away from the door. I can't think past crawling into bed and sleeping, and hopefully waking without this crushing weight on my soul. But that seems impossible right now, so I take a quick shower, washing away the last of my tears, and only then do I climb between the sheets.

Not five minutes later, a ding sounds on my cell. I know before I pick it up that it's a text from Cash.

Cash: Tell me you're not dating my brother.

Those seven words are laced with bitter agony—I know it's true because I'm still haunted by the accusing glint I saw in his eyes tonight. Not only accusing, but possessive and jealous and betrayed. That last one bothers me the most, because you can't betray someone who isn't yours.

And that makes me madder than fuck.

Me: What if I am? Would it really matter?

Cash: That's a stupid question, Jules.

Me: Why is it stupid? It's a simple question.

Cash: There's not a damn thing in the world simple about it.

Me: That's where you're wrong. You being married makes it simple. Who I date shouldn't matter to you.

Cash: But it does.

Me: Why?

Cash: You know why. Do you really need me to spell it out?

Me: I think it's past time for spelling shit out. Maybe we both need a harsh dose of reality.

Cash: The reality is I want to kill any man who fucking touches you, especially if that man is my brother.

Me: How do you think I feel? Last time I checked, you're still wearing your wedding band.

Cash: I might have a ring on my finger, but I'm the one alone. Are you with him now? Are you going to fuck him?

My heart is thrashing too hard. Too fast. I don't know whether to be furious or ecstatic that he's this upset over the idea of me with someone else.

Me: No, he dropped me off. And to set things straight, I'm not fucking your brother. How could I do that when all I'd see is you?

Cash: Fuck, Jules. Why are you doing this to me?

Me: I'm not doing anything to you. There's nothing going on with Kaden. I agreed to one date as friends, and that was all.

Cash: Please don't lie to me. The thing I love most about you is your honesty.

Me: I wouldn't lie to you.

I'm hurt that he would even think that, but on another level, I understand, considering what his wife did to him, and what I did to Chris.

Cash: I'm sorry for acting like a Neanderthal tonight. I know I have no right to feel possessive, but I can't help it, Jules. You drive me crazy.

Me: Then I guess we're both crazy. I didn't feel right going out with your brother, but he cornered me when I asked him a favor for a friend. Going to your family's house for dinner was the last thing I expected.

Cash: I'm sorry you had to witness that circus.

Me: You should meet my family. They'd fit right in. It would be one huge circus act.

Cash: You have a way of making me laugh, no matter what we're talking about. You turn everything on its head. I don't know which way is up or down anymore.

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Closing my eyes, I let my head rest against the headboard for a few moments. I'm so tired. Tired of trying to do the right thing, of trying to convince myself I can't have him. My heart simply doesn't believe it—not when every molecule in my body belongs to him.

Me: I don't either.

Cash: Are you in bed?

Me: Yes.

Cash: There's something I've been wanting to ask you.

Me: You can ask me anything.

Cash: Do you sleep naked?

My skin flushes hot, and I sink deeper into the soft sheets.

Me: Yes.

Cash: Are you naked now?

His question courses through my veins, turning me into a trembling mess. I press my thighs together, but it does nothing to stop the ache. In fact, part of me is convinced I'll throb between my legs for the rest of my life for him. I swallow hard, fingers hovering over the on-screen keyboard as I try to decide whether to engage or walk

away. He sends another text before I can decide either way.

Cash: Never mind. Imagining you naked is bad enough. Better to not even go there.

God, how I want to go there. As I tap out a response, I convince my broken conscious that we aren't doing anything wrong. It's only words.

Me: What would you say if I were?

Cash: I'd say the thought of you naked is turning me on like crazy.

A few heart-pounding seconds pass, then he fires off another forbidden message.

Cash: Then I'd tell you to spread your legs.

My legs part, and I can almost feel the phantom touch of his hands on my thighs, fingers gently prying me open. A breath shudders from my lips as I tap out a reply.

Me: Then what?

Cash: I'd tell you to touch yourself.

My free hand twitches to do his bidding. To find release while the memory of his voice dances through my head. I can hear his words so clearly, almost as if he's whispering them into my ear.

Me: Then do it. Tell me to touch myself.

A full minute passes, and the utter silence is maddening. He probably came to his senses and put his phone away. Or his wife interrupted him. I'm green with jealousy as I imagine him touching her.

Now who feels betrayed?

Neither of us have any right to feel this way. Pining for someone you can't have is one thing—but this level of possessiveness is insane. He doesn't belong to me any more than I belong to him.

If only my stubborn heart would get onboard with that truth.

My cell rings, and I almost jump out of my skin. My hand shakes as I play with the idea of answering.

Don't do it, Jules.

I tell that annoying voice to go to hell before swiping my thumb to the right. He doesn't speak at first—only the sounds of our breathing ping back and forth.

“Jules...” He trails off on my name.

“I’m here,” I choke out.

“Touch yourself.”

The ragged quality of his voice travels through me, leaving shivers in its wake. I slide my fingers between my trembling thighs, embarrassed by the moan that vibrates off my lips.

He sucks in a quick breath. “Fuck, you’re driving me wild.”

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” I bite back another moan as I increase the pressure on my clit.

“I know, Jules. God, do I know it.”

“Then tell me to stop.” The words tumble out too quickly, my choppy breathing making it difficult to speak.

“I can’t,” he says, tortured. “But I’m going to hang up now. Ask me why.”

“Why?”

“Because if I ever get the chance to hear you come, it’s not going to be over the phone.”

He ends the call. And as I’m coming, his name a sigh on my lips, another text comes through.

Cash: You were more gorgeous than the sunset tonight. Sweet dreams, beautiful.

18. Market Confessions - Cash

She's looking at an arrangement of sunflower bouquets several feet ahead. And what am I doing?

I'm watching her like a stalker.

She hasn't spotted me yet, and I'm not sure if I should grab her attention, or duck out of the market before she sees me. It would be easy enough to disappear into the crowd.

"Those colors suit you," I say, my treacherous mouth making the decision for me.

Jules tilts her head my way, and our eyes connect. She's fingering the wrapping on one of the bouquets. "I love purple, and sunflowers are one of my favorites."

"Really?" I raise my brows. "Not roses?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Too common. Sunflowers are underrated."

So is the simplicity of touch. The breathlessness of desire. I've gone without both for too long, and it's messing with my head.

Fucking with my heart.

Meandering down the flower display, she fingers the wrapping on several of the bouquets, as if putting out feelers for the one that belongs to her. I keep pace behind her, and every few steps, she flicks her gaze at me from over her shoulder.

When she looks at me like that—like I’m a sunflower in a world of black roses—my grip on control slips a little more, and I’m close to drowning in everything Jules. I span the distance between us until I’m standing right behind her. We’re unmoving—like stones in a flowing river of bodies. And we aren’t even touching, but the chemistry between us is tangible. I wonder if her breaths are as shallow as mine.

“What else is your favorite?”

Her fingers slip from a bouquet. “Huh?”

“Flowers,” I say, feeling as dazed as she sounds. “You said sunflowers are one of your favorites. What’s another?”

“Um...” Her body sways toward me, but rather than give her more room, I rock on the balls of my feet until we’re an inch closer. “Tulips. They remind me of my grandma.”

“Are they her favorite?”

“They were. She had every color you can imagine.” She pauses, lost in her memories. “When I was a kid, I used to balance on the bricks around the flower beds. It was like walking on the edge of a rainbow.”

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The wistfulness in her voice tugs at me. “I bet you miss her.”

“All the time.”

People move around us at various speeds, some shuffling along while others dart past, too rushed to experience the beauty of sunflowers and the ghost of Jules’ tulips. Voices are lost in too many conversations, and footsteps echo in the pursuit of shopping.

None of it matters, because nothing else exists. In this moment, there’s only Jules and me.

Her magnetism, and my resolve melting like steel.

“I’m dying to touch you.”

A small gasp escapes her lips. “Then touch me.” Her voice is sultry perfection as she speaks the words I’m aching to hear.

One step is all it takes to bring my body against hers. I settle my hands on her waist before slowly moving them down to her hips. She feels so tiny in my large hands. Tender soft to my unyielding hard. And fucking hell, am I hard.

“I’m leaving for Oklahoma City tomorrow.” I slide my fingers to the waistband of her jeans. As I slip them under the hem of her shirt, a tiny shudder spreads through her. She leans into me, her back warming my front, from the top of her spine to her sexy-as-hell ass. I press my cock against the small of her back.

“I know, Cash.”

My name on her lips is the most exquisite thing I’ve ever heard. Dancing my fingers over her warm skin, I’m tempted to explore every inch. I inhale a sharp breath. “I’m going to miss you like crazy.”

“What about your wife? Are you going to miss her?”

“I don’t want to talk about her.”

“Don’t you think it’s time we did?”

“Probably, but please, Jules. Don’t ruin this moment.”

Five seconds pass, rife with her silence. “I’m going to miss you too.”

Holding her feels natural. It feels right. I gather her in the shelter of my arms, and she curls her hands around my forearms, the soft pads of her fingertips creating circles of fire on my skin. My heart is knocking against my ribcage, and I’m certain she feels every violent beat.

“I’ll text you, okay?”

She breaks free of my embrace, and we’re back to standing inches apart without touching. “What are we doing?” she asks, fiddling with the flowers again. “Nothing good is gonna come of this.”

I get what she’s saying, and as much as it hurts, I don’t blame her. Especially since she’s right. “I don’t know what I’m doing anymore, Jules.”

“Maybe some time apart will be good for us. Give us both time to think about

things...” Trailing off, she faces me with a gulp and wraps herself in the circle of her arms, as if to protect herself from me. “To think about where this is headed.”

As long as I’m still married, this is headed nowhere. It’s an ugly truth I don’t want to face. No matter what happens from here on out, someone is going to get hurt. “I know this isn’t fair to you,” I say.

Or to Monica.

That know-it-all-voice in my head is a bitch, because it’s telling me what I don’t want to hear; nothing can happen with Jules until I know where I stand in my marriage. Until I’ve given my all to salvaging what’s left of it. My father expects it. My conscience demands it. But my heart...well, that disloyal organ is already beating for the woman in front of me.

I’m fucking torn right down the middle.

“If life were fair, everyone would get what they want, right?” she says, tilting her head, blond hair sliding over her shoulder. “That would probably unbalance the cosmos or something.”

A smile twitches at the corners of my mouth. “I think the cosmos are already ten shades of unbalanced.” They have to be, to play such a cruel game. I pluck a bouquet from the display and give the attendant a twenty. “But you’re right about one thing,” I say, after we’ve wandered a few unhurried steps toward the exit of the market. “We do need to think about where this is headed.”

I hand her the flowers, and her lips part in surprise. I take advantage and kiss her on the cheek. “Don’t forget me while I’m gone, okay?”

Gazing into the bouquet, she tries to hide a smile but fails. “I couldn’t if I tried.”

19. Harsh Goodbyes - Cash

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:36 am

The next morning as I'm zipping up my carry-on, I find Monica standing in the open door of the guest room, still dressed in her robe.

"Everything okay?" I ask, wondering what she could possibly want.

"How long are you going to be gone?" she asks, wandering into the room.

"About a week, give or take."

Gripping the handle of my luggage, I lift it off the bed and set it upright on the floor next to my computer bag. But when I turn around, Monica is standing less than two feet away. She settles a palm on my chest, and for once her eyes aren't so empty when she gazes up at me. In fact, they appear brighter than usual.

"Don't go."

They're just two little words, nothing significant about them, and yet they manage to knock me on my ass. Literally. I sink to the bed, eyes going wide. "We don't talk anymore. And we sure as hell don't have any intimacy left between us, so call me confused as fuck right now. I figured you'd be glad to be rid of me for a while."

Her lower lip trembles. "I don't want you to go."

I blink, rendered speechless for a second. "I can't keep up with your mood swings."

"I know things have been bad. Let me make it up to you." She invades the space between my legs, and I clench my jaw as she drops to her knees. She's working at the

button of my pants with clumsy fingers, and my dick goes rock hard. Even though I've had enough of her mind games, my body is throbbing for the release I know her mouth can give me.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I miss you," she says, lowering my zipper. My mind blanks out completely as she takes my shaft into her mouth.

I tilt my head back, nothing but flashes of torment going off behind my closed lids. An internal war rages in my mind, and I grip her head, fingers tangling in her locks. But all I see is hair as golden as wheat. Eyes as decadent and seductive as chocolate. Damn me to hell, because I want to lose myself in her touch, shoot all my pent-up frustration into the sweetness of her mouth.

Except the woman sucking me off isn't Jules. She'll never be Jules.

One blowjob from my wife isn't going to fix our marriage. We are broken, our relationship braindead and on life support. Gently, I push her off me.

"What's wrong?" she asks, gazing up at me. Her parted lips are damp and trembling, and for once, her blue eyes aren't spitting ice. But something is definitely wrong with this picture. I yank up my zipper then rise to my feet, pulling her with me, and that's when I catch a whiff of vodka on her breath.

"You've been drinking?" For fuck's sake. It's not even noon yet.

"So?"

"So every time I see you lately, you've got a glass of wine in your hand. And now this?" I grab her by the chin and study her glazed over eyes. "I'm worried about you."

“If you’re so worried, then don’t go on this trip.”

“It’s work, Monica. I can’t just up and back out.”

“Well maybe that’s the problem with us.” She jerks out of reach. “You work too much. You leave too much. You put everything else before me.”

Her outburst stuns me, and not because of the words she tossed in my face, but she hasn’t displayed this much passion—anger or otherwise—in what seems like forever.

“If I put work first, it’s because that’s all you’ve left me with. You won’t talk to me, you won’t let me touch you. And this”—I gesture to the bed, where she had her lips wrapped around my cock only minutes ago—“is completely out of left field. What is going on with you?”

Folding her arms, she glares at me, and the Monica I’ve come to know these past few months is back. “Fine,” she says, pivoting before stalking to the door. “Go on and leave me here alone again. That’s what you do best.”

I watch her go, at a loss at what to do or say. And I don’t have time to deal with her bullshit now anyway, because I’m due to leave for the airport soon. I grab my luggage and leave the spare bedroom, shutting the light off as I go. As I approach the room I used to share with her, I’m surprised to find the door wide open. I can count on one hand the times she hasn’t locked herself inside during the last few weeks.

Stalling in the open doorway, I peek in, but she’s nowhere in sight. The bed is a mess, unmade with throw pillows scattered on the purple comforter. We haven’t shared that bed in so long that it makes what happened in the guest room even more unsettling.

The water turns on in the master bath, and I hear her moving around in there. I consider leaving without saying goodbye, but I can’t bring myself to do it, especially

after the stunt she just pulled. Her weird behavior is whittling away at the walls I've built around my heart, making way for worry to settle in.

Leaving my stuff in the hall, I cross the threshold into a room in which I'm no longer welcome. As I falter in the doorway of the bathroom, her gaze meets mine in the mirror. Tears hang on her lashes, threatening to spill from icy blue eyes. If not for the stubborn line of her mouth, I'd think she was finally about to crack and let me in.

No such luck. Ignoring my presence, she takes a pill bottle from the medicine cabinet and shakes two tiny blue tablets into her waiting palm. Her gaze flashes to mine again as she chases those pills down with a sip of water.

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Other than birth control, Monica doesn't take medicine. She's the type of person that won't even take aspirin unless absolutely necessary. I step all the way into the bathroom, dread diving to the bottom of my gut as I lay my hands on her shoulders.

"What are the pills for?"

"None of your business."

"It's absolutely my fucking business. Are you sick?"

"No."

"Then what the hell is this?" I try to pry the pill bottle from her grasp, but she whirls around to face me, fisting it behind her back.

"Don't you have a plane to catch?"

I draw in a deep, calming breath. "You said I put everything before you. Well here's me putting you first. What's going on?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

"But I am worried. First the drinking, and now popping pills? For fuck's sake, Monica! Just tell me what's wrong."

"It doesn't matter. Just go already."

“You begged me to stay ten minutes ago. Now you’re pushing me away? Again?” Dragging an agitated hand through my hair, I try not to lose my shit. But her continued silence isn’t making it easy. “I’m finding less and less reasons for us to stay together.”

Monica darts around me and leaves the bathroom, and I follow, quick on her heels. She stalks into the hall and grabs the handle of my luggage.

“Wouldn’t want you to be late.”

I take the suitcase from her, no doubt gaping at her like an idiot. Because I sure as hell feel like an idiot. “What happened to us?”

Still clutching the pill bottle, she won’t meet my eyes. Her vacant mask is back in place, any hint of tears dried up. “I don’t know.”

That makes two of us. Part of me hopes that a week apart to think things through will offer some clarity. But I’m not a total fool. Until she’s willing to let me in, my hands are tied.

20. A Frank Talk - Jules

Monday morning, I bring the sunflower bouquet Cash bought me to work because I know Mont Center will feel empty with him gone. Every time I glance at the flowers, a sharp pang tears through my heart.

I never thought I could miss someone so much. I miss those precious minutes each morning when we go over his schedule, and I miss the way his smile warms me all the way to my toes on days when I have the foresight to bring him coffee. It’s a small gesture he seems to appreciate. Maybe because he isn’t the type of boss to ask for such small errands.

But I have no one to bring coffee to this week.

No reason to feel giddy in the elevator on the ride up to the thirty-eighth floor.

At least work is keeping me busy. That's an understatement. With Cash in Oklahoma, my workload has doubled. I'm finding mid-week especially chaotic, and as the end of the day arrives, I'm more than anxious to meet Les. She's probably tapping her fingers waiting for me right now, since I was supposed to meet her for dinner twenty minutes ago.

Purse in hand, I'm passing the conference room on my way to the elevator, but the sound of Cash's voice halts me in my tracks. His sexy tenor is coming from beyond the ajar door.

When did he get back? He isn't due home for a few more days. A flutter of excitement goes off in my belly, and I raise my hand to knock. That's when another voice freezes me before my fist reaches the door. A woman's voice. No, not just any woman, but his wife's.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize how odd it is that I know her voice that well. I've grown familiar with all things Cash, including Monica Montgomery.

I should walk away. Should mind my own damn business. I already know I won't. Peeking through the space between the door and the frame, I see Cash standing with his arms crossed, facing his wife.

And me.

It's too late to duck and evade. His gaze catches mine, and realization jolts through me because that's not Cash. I'm stunned as usual that I can tell by a single glance the difference between him and his brother.

I don't know what I just stumbled upon, since I didn't catch what they were saying. Before Kaden can call me out on eavesdropping, I hurry toward the elevator and press the down button. The floor is empty. The day late.

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And that fucking elevator decides now is the time to climb all thirty-eight floors before reaching me. Flicking my gaze toward the conference room, I find Kaden watching me. The door is wide open now, and I spy Monica standing behind him, eyes downcast. The strong, commanding woman I equate with Cash's wife is absent. Folding herself in her arms, she gnaws on her lower lip.

The ding of the lift saves me, and I rush inside and jab the button for the atrium level. My heart thumps hard against my chest the whole way down, refusing to calm until I'm out the doors of Mont Center and on my way to the restaurant.

I can't help but look over my shoulder at least once every block as I stride down the sidewalk. Part of me is certain Kaden will come after me and demand to know why I was listening to what was obviously a private conversation. Even though I didn't catch a word of it, the tension in the air was palpable.

And odd.

Still processing what just happened in the dregs of my mind, I find Lesley waiting at our favorite table. Sure enough, she's tapping her black-painted nails on the wood surface.

"He's working you too much," she says, grumbling.

I slide into the seat across from her. "He's out of town this week, so things are especially busy." Picking up the menu, I eye her over the top. "Is something wrong? You seem cranky."

“Just band stuff. Tensions are fucking high right now. All Zan and Garen seem to do lately is argue.” She brushes her bangs out of her eyes. “Actually, forget arguing. They’re playing tug-of-war like two toddlers in diapers.”

“Aren’t they best friends?”

“They’ll go back to being best buds after the gig, I’m sure. There’s just too much pressure right now to get our sound out there.”

My cell dings, and I fish it from my purse as Les peruses her menu, even though she always orders the French dip.

Cash: I miss you like hell. What are you up to?

I bite back a sad smile. He hasn’t texted me once since he left. Any correspondence we’ve had has been related to business. I’m not sure how to feel about his text.

Me: I’m having dinner with Les.

Cash: Your friend in the band?

Me: Yeah.

Cash: Can I text you later?

Frowning, I hover my thumbs over the screen, remembering the last time we exchanged texts. The last time we spoke over the phone, when I came with his voice ringing through my ears.

Me: I don’t think that’s a good idea. We can’t keep doing this.

A full minute passes, but he doesn't text back. I despise myself for the flood of disappointment rushing through me. Putting an end to this—whateverthis—is for the best. I lift my head and find Lesley watching me.

“You been holding out on me?” Her question lifts her dark brows.

My cell dings again, and I'm dying to glance down and read his message, but I don't—not with Les giving me the eye the way she is.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean who's the guy?”

The urge is too strong, and I lower my head and take in his words.

Cash: I know we shouldn't be doing this.

And it's as simple as that. He knows it, and I know it, yet here we are, continuously playing with fire. We might as well douse ourselves with lighter fluid at this rate.

“All right, Jules. Spill.”

Shit. She's not going to let this drop. As I slip my cell into my purse, I consider confiding in her. It's not that I don't trust her. She'll listen without judgment, and she won't tell a soul. The problem is I'm ashamed of myself for being so weak. For jumping back onto the same dangerous ride I just got off of in Oklahoma.

The waitress stops at our table to take our orders, and I don't know whether to thank her, or curse her timing. I order shrimp scampi, and Les goes for her usual.

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“So, are you gonna make me play the guessing game?” Les asks after the waitress leaves with our menus and dinner orders.

“I’m not seeing anyone.” That much is true. The sexual tension between Cash and me is all-consuming, but we’ve never even kissed.

“Is it the hottie who owns the club?” she says, completely ignoring my denial.

I swallow hard, almost squirming at how close she is to the truth.

“Itishim. I knew it.”

I’m already shaking my head, the truth sticking in my throat. Another swallow dislodges it, because she’s my best friend, and I need to tell someone. “It’s my boss.”

And just like that, the playfulness melts from her face. “Isn’t he married?”

It takes me five long seconds to answer. “Yes.”

“Jesus, Jules.” Her tone might be harsh, but sympathy underlies her expression. Because that’s who Les is. The most non-judgmental and caring person I know.

“I met him on the plane here. We had a...connection. But I didn’t know he was married.”

“You know I love you,” she says, leaning forward, “and I know you’re still hurting after what happened with Chris, but rebounding with your boss is the absolute worst

thing you can do. There are so many other rebound-guys out there. Hell, I know Garen would help you take your mind off Chris, if you wanted him to. He's a manwhore, sure, but he's the most caring guy I've—"

"Les, it's not rebound."

In order to rebound, you still have to want your ex. The harsh truth is I barely think about Chris at all anymore.

"Then what is it? I mean, you're not in love with the guy, right?"

I can't answer. Because I can't speak. Even worse, I can't mask the truth washing over my face, turning my cheeks a deep shade of pink. A few rapid blinks of my eyes stave off the threat of shameful tears.

"Holy shit, Jules. You're in love with him?"

"I've never felt this way before," I say, shuddering out a breath. "Not even with Chris."

"Does he feel the same?"

"I don't know. I think so." Lowering my attention to the napkin I'm shredding in my fingers, I add, "There are issues in his marriage that I can't go into."

"Did you sleep with him?"

I shake my head. "We haven't done anything."

Yet. The word echoes through my mind.

“Jules, I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but you’re my best friend and I care about you too much to not give it to you straight. You need to get out of this situation pronto.”

“He’s my boss, Les. Neither one of us expected this.”

“Then find a new job. Walking away now might hurt like hell, but imagine how much worse it’ll hurt when shit hits the fan.”

She’s right. And it’s nothing I haven’t already told myself a hundred times.

“I’m not sure I can walk away.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but you need to. Just rip it off like a bandaid.” She reaches across the table and grabs my hand. “Because married men don’t leave their wives.”

And that right there is the biggest truth of all. The last thing I want is to become a cliché; the mistress sleeping with her boss, forever waiting for him to leave his wife.

21. In the Shadows - Cash

We can't keep doing this.

I've ran that statement through my head too many times to count, but my heart refuses to accept it, otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting in a dim corner of Kaden's club stalking Jules as she hangs out with her friends. A dark-haired guy with tattoos sleeving his arms is sitting next to her, and I want to throttle him every time he lays a hand on her shoulder.

It doesn't matter that he's closer to her age.

And probably free to be with her.

I still want to kill him.

As I take another drink of my whiskey, someone steps between me and my view of Jules, casting a shadow on my already shitty mood. I look up and find my brother eyeing the drink in my hands.

"You're back early," he says.

"Wrapped things up quicker than planned."

He hops onto the other barstool at my small table for two. "You look like shit."

"Gee, thanks."

"Something bugging you?"

I cock a brow. “Why would anything be bugging me?”

“Dude, you’re sitting here looking ragged as hell and drinking.”

“Monica and I haven’t been getting along lately.” It’s true enough, even if it’s a massive understatement. The real reason I look like hell is sitting across the club laughing at something Tattoo Guy said to her.

Kaden turns his attention on the object of my obsession, and it’s too late to avert my gaze. Besides, he knows me better than anyone on this planet, and I’m sure he’s sniffed out the truth by now. I’ve always had a hard time hiding things from him.

“You got something going on with your assistant?”

“No.”

“Then why do you look ready to murder the lead singer of my band?”

I level him with a serious, let-it-drop stare. “Nothing’s going on with her.”

“Not because you don’t want it to,” he says, tapping his fingers on the tabletop.

I shoot him a scowl. The last thing I need right now is a lecture from my brother, especially since he’s not likely to say anything I haven’t already told myself. “Doesn’t matter what I want.” I hold up my left hand, displaying my wedding band. “This makes it a moot point.”

“You mean the shackle Dad pressured you into putting on that finger?”

“Don’t start with me, Kade. I married her because I loved her.”

The past tense in that statement hangs between us, and I throw back the rest of my drink.

“Talk to me, little brother. What’s going on?”

“How about another drink?” I say, setting the empty tumbler down with a thump.

He flags down a barmaid and orders us both another round. While we wait, the silence between us is strained, especially considering he went out with Jules.

It was only one time.

I’m a stranger to logic and reason tonight, so it’s best to not even go there. Instead of stewing over Jules with my brother, I take in the scene. The dance floor in front of the stage is packed with moving bodies, even though the night is early, and the band isn’t due to start playing for another hour.

“You’ve done well here,” I tell Kaden.

“Too bad Dad can’t see it.”

“Fuck Dad,” I say. “Don’t let his bullshit bring you down.”

Kaden raises a brow. “You are in a bad mood.”

The arrival of our whiskey saves me from answering. Kaden empties half of his before giving me a questioning look, and I realize he isn’t going to let this slide.

“How bad do you have it for her?”

Jules is bending over the bar, giving me a perfect view of her jean-clad ass, and I can only imagine how sexy her tits look in that white halter top she’s wearing. I’m getting hard just thinking about running my hands over her bare shoulders.

“Pretty damn bad,” I finally admit, “and that makes me a shitty husband.” I won’t even go into how shitty of a wife Monica has turned out to be. Regardless of her behavior, there is no fucking excuse for what I feel for Jules.

“Has anything happened with her?”

“No.”

Not yet.

But if I dig deep enough, I know it’s inevitable. A person can only stare in the face of temptation for so long before giving in.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’re human, just like the rest of us.”

“Don’t try to justify this, Kade. There’s no excuse for cheating.”

“You aren’t cheating. There’s a world of difference between wanting and doing. Trust me, you’ve got nothing to feel guilty about.”

I want to argue with him, but one of the barmaids interrupts us and tells Kaden he’s needed somewhere. Rising, he finishes off the amber liquid in his glass then sets it on the table.

“Duty calls. Try to have some fun, okay?”

A derisive laugh escapes me. The only fun I want to engage in involves Jules and my hard-as-fuck cock finding home between her legs.

Kaden disappears into the Friday night flock, and I empty my fourth drink of the night. No matter how much I try, I can’t tear my gaze from Jules. Her friends leave their perches at the bar, and I grit my teeth as Tattoo Guy grabs her shoulder again.

I’ve never felt so possessive over a woman. So insane with jealousy. The intensity of this desire coursing through me is stronger than my rage the night I first saw that photo of Monica.

I’m seriously losing my shit.

Jules wanders away from the bar, making her way to the edge of the dance floor, and I’m out of my seat and following her before I can talk myself out of it. I don’t think about the fact that I’m off-kilter and armed with whiskey. Extra vulnerable to the whims of stupidity.

There isn't a thing in existence that has the power to keep me from touching her.

22. When We Fall - Jules

The energy in Club Shadow is off-the-charts excited. The place is packed, and Les and the guys are about to burst from adrenaline mixed with nerves.

I should be having a blast, but all I can think about is how much I miss Cash. Lesley's talk the other day did nothing to dampen this obsession I have with him. If anything, his absence is only making me want him more.

"Last one, then we gotta get backstage." Garen and Zan toss back another shot, and Lesley downs the rest of her mixed drink. As Garen slides off the barstool, he squeezes my shoulder. "Try to have some fun tonight, gorgeous."

Guess my half-listening skills aren't as good as I'd hoped. I shoot him a smile. "Go break a leg...or something?"

"Or something," he says with a loud laugh.

"Wish us luck." Les winks as they pass by, and I watch them disappear through a door.

I move away from the bar and make my way closer to the stage for a better view. It'll be a while before the band comes on to play, but people all around me are dancing to the DJ music as we wait.

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The song doesn't reach the end before I sense him standing behind me. I know he's there, because a delicious chill is shivering down my spine. I go perfectly still as his arm snakes around me. A warm palm flattens against my stomach, and the tips of his fingers inch beneath the waistband of my jeans. Everything south of that tempting hand flares to life, setting off a deep ache I know only he can fix.

Pulling me against his body, he leans down and whispers into my ear. "Watching him touch you is killing me."

"Knowing you're married is killing me."

He curses under his breath. A hint of his woodsy cologne, along with the sweet aroma of whiskey fills my nostrils.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Maybe a little." He whirls me around until we're face-to-face, and my pulse flutters in my throat as he tightens his arms around me. "Come upstairs with me."

His proximity riots through me, the heat of his body sizzling all the way to my fucking toes. We fall into a lazy sway, dancing but not quite, and for a crazy second, I consider following him to the VIP area in the loft. As far as I can tell, it's empty unless a stray couple is hiding in the shadows in the very back. I doubt it though. The club is vibrating with restless energy as everyone crowds the first floor in anticipation of the concert.

"Look at me, Jules."

His words jolt me to awareness, and I realize I'm staring at his chest. I curl my hands into fists at my sides, too tempted to run my palms down that broad expanse hiding underneath cotton. I bet it's the softest material on the planet, but I won't find out because I'm not going there.

Nope.

Not. Gonna. Do. It.

Because I have zero control right now, and we're standing in the middle of a busy club with God-knows-who watching. And if I do touch him...I might not stop.

"Jules," he murmurs. "Bring those gorgeous eyes up here."

I lift my chin and dive headfirst into the fire of his gaze. His eyes are smoldering, liquid steel. "Cash...please..."

"Please what?"

"Don't make me want to give in. You're married." My voice cracks on that ugly word.

"My marriage is a sham."

"Your marriage is your business." I grip his arms, intending to push him away. But somewhere along the way, my brain gets its wires crossed, and I end up curling my fingers around his biceps. God, he's built—solid man through and through.

"I disagree," he says, dipping his head until our mouths linger a hairsbreadth from each other. "Everything about me is very much your business."

“W-why?”

“Because I can’t feel this way about you without it being your business.”

I eye the people around us on the dance floor. Les and the guys are backstage getting ready for their set, and Kaden is nowhere in sight. But if someone spots us like this, and it gets out—or worse, gets back to his wife—I could lose my job.

Again.

I could lose him...which doesn’t make any sense, because he’s not mine to begin with.

“We’re not exactly alone here,” I say.

“Jules, I really don’t give a shit. Please,” he says, raising his fingers to my cheek, “come upstairs.”

“And do what?”

“Talk.”

“We are talking.” My tone indicates resistance, but the softness of my voice spells doom. Defeat. He must have picked up on it too, because the next thing I know, he’s leading me toward the stairs with his large hand wrapped around my smaller one.

And I’m following.

Putting up no resistance whatsoever.

Because apparently one fuck-up this year isn't enough.

The bouncer lets us pass without a second glance, and after we reach the top, Cash grabs my hips and walks me into the shadows. He is domineering yet tender as he pushes me against the far wall. I'm caught between the hand he's bracing himself with and the hand he's wrapping around my waist. There's possession in that touch.

He leans in, and I'm helpless to move away. Not because he's got me trapped, but I'm so glued to this spot that a fire couldn't persuade me to leave the circle of his heat.

"It's your business, Jules. I'm making it your business." He grips my waist a little tighter. "And I want you to know that I haven't been with Monica in months. We sleep in separate bedrooms, for Christ's sake."

"Oh," I manage to squeak out, my heart pounding with violent longing. And relief.

"I can't get you out of my head," he says. "I know it's wrong. I'm breaking every moral code I've ever lived by, not to mention several ethical points as your boss." His brows furrow. "And probably some laws, too."

"Cash, this can't..."

"Happen?" he finishes.

I nod, unable to do anything else because if I open my mouth to speak, the wrong words might slip out.

“But it is.” He brings his fingers to my lips. “Happening, that is.” The soft pad of his thumb trails along the seam of my mouth, applying just enough pressure to coax me into parting my lips. I accept the gentle quest of his thumb on my tongue and swallow a moan. His taste is intoxicating—a bouquet of pure Cash with a dash of salt. My lids flutter shut, and I can’t hold back a moan any longer.

“Fucking hell, Jules.” Slowly, he withdraws his thumb, leaving a damp path of desire on my bottom lip. My lungs hallow out, and there’s nothing but breathless huffs escaping my mouth. I’m throbbing between my thighs, panties drenched.

He curses again. “We’ll probably regret this in the end, but I’m having a hard time giving a shit about that right now.”

“Do you regret meeting me?” My voice sounds faraway, as if I’m speaking from the other end of a long tunnel. Hell, I’m drunk from the spell of him, standing with my eyes closed in a lust-filled trance. And I’m terrified of what he might say because I’ve grown dependent on him wanting me as much as I want him.

“I have many regrets, but that’s not one of them,” he says, grasping me by the nape. “My biggest regret is not kissing you on that goddamn plane.”

His mouth is on mine in the next instant. We come together in mutual madness, gone to reality as our tongues slide together. His kiss stalls the air in my lungs, steals the strength from my limbs. There’s no buildup, no getting to know the softness of his lips or the taste of him. It’s like zero-to-sixty in two seconds flat.

My knees buckle before I can stop them.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers, tightening his hold on me.

“Don’t let me fall.”

Too late.

“If you fall,” he says, breath shuddering against my mouth, “I’m going down with you.”

I clutch his shirt, and the material is as soft as I imagined. He’s warm and hard against my knuckles as our tongues battle like this is the last taste we’ll get of each other.

And maybe it is. Maybe it’s the first and last. It’s fucking everything, but even as we’re grasping and clutching, moaning in tandem in this frantic mating of mouths, I’m sure we’re both fighting one glaring fact.

This can’t happen.

I tear my lips away with a small cry, instantly missing the warmth of his kiss. Resting his cheek on the crown of my head, he breathes as hard as me. The rapid rise and fall of his chest pushes against my aching nipples. Shit, everything is aching, from my well-kissed lips to the space between my thighs. But my heart hurts most of all.

The silence between us is heavy and heartbreaking, this forbidden sample of what we can’t have destroying him as much as it’s destroying me.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “I can’t do this to you. I’ll be damned if you become a secret in my closet.”

He’s right. I’m not cut out for being a shameful secret. The two weeks I spent

wanting to come clean with Chris made me sick. Beyond sick. I barely ate, couldn't sleep. And as much as I hate Monica for the times I've witnessed her leveling him with her frigid gaze, she doesn't deserve what we're doing behind her back. No one deserves this.

And yet the idea of never touching Cash again is searing and soul-shattering. It's downright debilitating. How can I walk away from this man and never touch him again? Never taste him? Never be allowed to love him?

"Why are you still with her?" There's palpable fear in that question.

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He doesn't answer right away, and that only fills my gut with dread.

"It's complicated, Jules."

"What does that even mean?" I try to slip out from between him and the wall, but he won't let me. "Either you love her, or you don't. It's simple."

"I wish it were that simple."

"Then what the fuck are we doing here?" I wince at the frustration in my tone.

Brushing a lock of hair from my face, he holds my gaze. "Don't you think I've thought about leaving her?"

"I don't know what to think. All I know is this hurts so fucking much."

"I know it does," he says with a hard swallow. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

My heart breaks at his words. I lower my gaze, unable to look at him any longer. "Do you love her?"

"Not like I should."

"But you married her."

"I thought I loved her, Jules. And maybe I did in the beginning, but somewhere along the way, she changed. I don't know who the hell Monica is now, because she's not

the woman I fell in love with.”

“Then leave her.” I’ve sunk to a whole new low, devoid of pride or principles.

“I wish it were that easy.” He grasps the back of my neck again, his fingers sliding into my hair, our lips inches apart. “You have no idea how much I wish things were different. Because God, I want you, and no matter how hard I try, I just can’t quit.”

“But we have to.” Despite my words, I ache to press my mouth against his again. “As long as you’re married, we can’t do this.”

Closing his eyes, he drops his forehead against mine, and his defeated sigh billows across my lips. “Just give us five more minutes.”

“Five more minutes?” My voice has softened to a breathless rasp, and like Cash, I shutter my eyes. Because staring at each other is too painful. So is standing like this, foreheads pressed together as our bodies meld into one.

“Kiss me, Jules. I want the memory of your lips with me when I fall asleep tonight. If I could bottle up the taste of you, I would.”

I clutch him by the hair, fingers sinking into soft, thick strands, and pull his mouth down on mine. He cradles my cheeks, tender at first, then with desperation as he plunders my mouth. Nicks away at my will.

Weakens my limbs with the scrape of his teeth down my throat.

Five minutes will never be enough. A lifetime with him won’t ease the intense longing taking over my soul.

“Let me come home with you tonight.” He’s holding me so close and tight that every

hard inch of him is pressed against me, including his cock. “I missed you so much this week.”

“I missed you too.” My eyes sting, threatening mutiny, but the last thing I want to do is cry in front of him. Or fall into bed with a married man.

Again.

“I can’t do this,” I say, voice breaking as I bust free of his arms. I’m practically sprinting toward escape, but as I reach the top of the stairs and risk a glance over my shoulder, I find him propping his forehead against the wall, his hands forming fists on either side of his head. I’d do anything to take away his anguish.

To see him happy.

And it cracks my heart in two because if he ever finds happiness again, it can’t be with me.

23. After the Depravity - Jules

Voices blend together in a cacophony of celebration. The band’s house is overflowing with people and music. A cloud of smoke drifts in the air, as does the scent of beer and mixed drinks.

I’m plopped in the corner of the living room in a beanbag chair, doing what I promised I’d never do again.

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“Girl, you are wasted.”

“Am not,” I mutter. But even in this heady, I-don’t-give-a-fuck stupor, I’m aware of my weak denial.

Garen flops onto the beanbag chair with me and tosses an arm over my shoulders.

“Yousoare.” His breath flits across my cheek, and I catch a hint of whiskey. It reminds me of Cash tonight.

Slightly intoxicated. Walls down. Desire running rampant.

He has no fucking idea how hard it was for me to walk away.

“Who has no idea, gorgeous?”

Did I say that out loud? Shit. This is exactly why I shouldn’t drink. I say and do stuff I don’t mean to.

“I’m not sleeping with you,” I slur.

“I don’t fuck drunk chicks.”

“Don’t let anyone else fuck me either.”

“We don’t hang around with sleazes, so no worry there, babe.”

“Just checking.” The room seems too dim. I’m so tired. So fucking heartbroken. And limp from the booze. I lean my head on Garen’s shoulder. “It’s happened before.”

“What has?”

“Someone fucked me. I don’t even remember it.”

“That’s fucked up, Jules.”

“I know. Shouldn’t’ve done it.”

“No, I mean it’s fucked up he did that to you. That ain’t right.”

“Lots of things aren’t right.” I curl into his side, eyes closed, and he tightens his arm around me. “I’m in love with someone I can’t have.”

“That sucks. Been there myself.” He shifts, and I hear liquid sloshing, and him taking a long swig of his chosen poison.

“This is why I don’t drink. Can’t keep my big mouth shut.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

“You’re a nice guy, Garen. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Not very often.”

“Why’s that?”

“I break too many hearts.”

“Maybe you should stop.”

“Or maybe you should get your player hands off my bestie,” Les says. I drag my eyes open and find her standing in front of us, arms crossed.

“Hey, bestie,” I say with a drunken smile.

“Good God, you’ve been drinking. Like seriously fucking drinking, Jules.” She pulls me up by the arm.

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“So maybe I have,” I say, stumbling after her as she leads me away from the crowded living room. We enter the hall, and I lean against the wall for a moment, waiting for my surroundings to stop twirling around me.

Around and around we go.

That’s what Cash and I have been doing—dancing in a continuous circle of agony.

Lesley props me up under her arm. “Do you need to barf?”

“Uh-ummm.”

“Is that a no?”

“Hmm.”

“What the fuck were you drinking?”

“I had a...I think a few of those fruity drinks Zan was making. And some shots...I think...”

“If you can’t remember, then you’ve had too much.” A door squeaks open, and Lesley flips on the light. Through the haze of my twirly reality, I recognize her bedroom, which seems off to me.

Probably because my shit is no longer in it.

“What’s going on, Jules? This isn’t you.”

“You are so wrong,” I say, pointing a finger at her as I flop onto her bed. “I’ve got a bad habit, Les.”

With a sigh, she settles onto the mattress next to my hunched over form. “I wouldn’t go that far. You don’t drink very often.”

“That’s not what I mean. I have a bad habit of screwing around with married men.”

“Tell me you didn’t.”

“I kissed him.” I blink a few times until the outline of her form isn’t so blurry. “Or he kissed me. What the fuck does it matter who kissed who? We’re both so far gone.” I flop over and hug her pillow.

“You’re gonna get hurt,” she says, rubbing my shoulder.

“It’s too fucking late. I love him.”

“He’s married, Jules. Say he does leave his wife? I say once a cheater, always a cheater. He’ll turn around and do the same to you.”

“Things aren’t that black and white.” I glare my pent-up frustration in her direction. “And by that logic, you might as well say the same about me.”

“That’s not what I meant. I know you well enough to know that you’re not like that. You made a mistake, simple as that. One you’ll hopefully learn from.”

“So it’s okay for me to cheat, but not him? Double standard much, Les?” I’m drunk, cranky, and hurting, but I can’t seem to care about my shitty behavior right now.

“You’re right,” she says. “I don’t know him, or the circumstances. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“You’re a good friend. The best friend I’ve ever had.” I cuddle her pillow a little tighter, my lids growing heavy. “I’ll apologize tomorrow for being a bitch. Just let me sleep it off, ‘kay?”

The bed shifts, and her footsteps fade as she leaves the bedroom. She shuts off the light before closing the door, but the streetlamp outside the window offers enough illumination to chase away the pitch dark. Sleeping it off isn’t going to come as easily as I’d hoped. I fish my cell from my pocket, thankful I didn’t lose it during my string of drinks and drowning sorrows. Shuffling through my notifications, I frown.

A missed call from Chris. Big surprise there, since he’s been calling and texting for a couple of weeks now.

He misses me. He wants me to come home. He’s sorry. He forgives me. Blah, blah, blah.

I pull up my contacts, and my thumb hovers over Cash’s name.

Don’t do it, Jules.

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Closing my eyes, I relive the moment his lips touched mine for the first time. The way his fingers twisted in my hair. The way he pulled me close—so close that I felt every hard plane of his body against me.

His abs under my palms, his mouth on my throat, his hard cock nudging me through his jeans. Holy hell, do I love that man in jeans. There is nothing sexier than Cash Montgomery in jeans and a T-shirt.

For a long while I stare at my cell, trying to reconcile what I should do with what I want to do. What I want is him, and I'll take him any way I can get him, even if it's only through a text message during a weak moment I can't help but steal.

Me: Are you alone?

He answers almost immediately.

Cash: Yes. Are you?

Me: Alone and drunk.

Cash. Jesus. Where are you?

Me: At my friend's house.

Cash: Is the guy with the tattoos there?

Me: He lives here.

Cash: The thought of him touching you is making me insane. Please tell me you're not doing anything stupid.

Me: Stupid, like finding someone who can actually be with me?

Minutes pass, and I bite my lip as I wait for him to answer. I'm a nervous wreck, wondering what he's thinking.

Me: Please talk to me.

Cash: I'm here, Jules. I just don't know what to say.

Me: Just tell me the truth, no matter how much it might hurt.

Cash: The truth is I don't want you with anyone else. But that's not fair to you, so if you're into this guy, and he's treating you right, then I'll deal with it.

Me: What if I want to be yours?

God, I have no filter right now.

Cash: We both know that's not possible.

Tears sting my eyes, and there's no chance of holding them back now—not with the crushing weight of his words on my chest, making it hard to breathe. Blinking the sorrow down my cheeks, I reply to his text, and a teardrop lands on the screen.

Me: Because you love her?

Cash: No, because divorcing her involves more than just the two of us.

Wiping my eyes, I glare at his message.

Me: I don't understand. That makes no fucking sense, Cash.

Cash: I told you it's complicated.

Me: Then fucking uncomplicate it.

Cash: I'm not sure I can.

Because I'm just a girl he's hot for, and nothing more. All this time I thought he felt the same way, but if he isn't willing to fight for us, then I must have been wrong. The realization winds around my throat, squeezing a sob free.

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Me: You shouldn't have kissed me.

Cash: I know, Jules. And I'm sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am that I put you in this position. I never wanted to hurt you.

Me: It's too fucking late for that.

I power off my cell and let my despair bathe Lesley's pillow. Our texts haunt me for what seems like hours, making sleep an elusive bitch. He's not just the man I'm in love with—he's also my boss. The man I'll have to face at work on Monday morning. Somehow, I have to make this right. At the very least, we need to go back to the way things were, back when we kept an appropriate amount of distance between us.

The kind of distance that doesn't involve spending time outside of work. The kind that doesn't involve kissing or late-night phone calls that end with me crying out his name as I come.

Fingering my silent phone, I consider texting him again to tell him I'm sorry, too. That I don't blame him, despite how much he's hurt me. Because we're both to blame for this mess, and for both our sakes, we have to find a way out of it, through it, around it.

Clearly, texting isn't going to help—if anything, it's only gotten us into more trouble. But I can't imagine having this conversation at work either. Hoping to set things right with him tomorrow at the market, face to face, I eventually fall asleep.

But the following morning, he never shows.

24. Lose Control - Cash

I'm turning into a bitter man. I hate everything.

The sight of Monica. The sight of Jules. Fuck, the sight of myself in the mirror. I've made such a fucking mess of my life. Jules has barely said two words outside of what is necessary to do her job, and I can tell how torn up she is over us too.

All week, I've been preoccupied with the single most important question she asked.

Why don't I just leave my wife.

Sounds simple. At this point, with the way our marriage has deteriorated into nothing—no, less than nothing—drawing up divorce papers should be a no-brainer. By the time Saturday rolls around, I'm giving it serious thought. In fact, I've even written a pro and con list. The con portion is a bit longer.

There's the publicity nightmare a divorce will cause the company.

The fallout with our families.

And the fact that I'll be divorced at thirty.

Not to mention the inevitable tug-of-war in the courtroom, because no way will Monica allow me to walk away without taking a chunk of my soul first. Not unless the private investigator I hired finds evidence of her affair to use as a counter-attack.

The pro part of this list is short and simple, and perhaps the most important of all.

I'm in love with Jules.

The day matches my mood—cloudy with the threat of a storm. The sun wants to peek through the cover, but more clouds keep rolling in. As I approach Pike Place, I let out a shaky breath. Today is the day I'm going to put everything out there, all the fucked-up cards laid out bare on the table. If she loves me, which I think she does, then I need to know for sure. She's already got my heart, and I need to know I have hers as well before I rip apart my world.

Two hours later, after a lot of thinking and loitering in every corner of the market, it's clear Jules isn't going to show up today. As I step onto the sidewalk, rain falls in a steady shower, chilly drops hitting my warm skin. I head in the direction of her apartment, consequences be damned. And yes, I do know where she lives. I know she likes her tea with cream and enough sugar to bring on a cavity. I know she's subtle in style, favoring blacks and whites and grays with splashes of color that draw attention. She dresses modestly but manages to radiate the sexiest vibes ever.

I'm positive she has no idea how she attracts the eyes of men.

Mine haven't strayed from her since I met her.

Soaked by the time I reach her building, I climb the stairs two at a time. Not because of the rain dousing me from head to toe, but I'm that desperate to see her. I rap on her door with too much fervor, my emotions rushing through my veins. Footsteps sound seconds before she pulls the door open. Jesus, she looks like she just fell out of bed. Her blond locks riot around her face in sexy disarray, and I can't decide if I want to tangle my fingers in them, or tug on them.

"You weren't at the market." The words come out harsher than I mean them to, with the knife's edge of accusation.

Never one to back down, let alone take my shit, Jules launches my frustration right back at me in the fire of her gaze. "You weren't there last week, so I guess we're

even.”

“Are we keeping score now?” Unable to help myself, I take a step forward until she opens the door wider. “Let me in, Jules.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

Letting out a sigh, I eye the vestibule for bystanders, but no one’s out here right now. It’s just Jules and me and this unstoppable attraction between us. Unbearable and festering—it’s only growing stronger everyday.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I say, brushing my fingers across her cheek. “You’ve barely looked at me all week, and it’s killing me.” Her skin is incredibly soft, making me wonder what it would be like to touch the rest of her. “If you don’t want to work for me, I understand. I’ll transfer you to any department you want.”

“You’re firing me?” Her voice quivers, but her tone is all fire and brimstone, as if what I said hurt and pissed her off in one bullseye.

“Of course I’m not firing you. I’m giving you the option to walk away now, while you still have the chance.”

“And if I don’t?”

My thumb has a mind of its own, because I sure as hell didn’t give it permission to brush over the corner of her mouth. She closes her eyes, lips parting as a sigh escapes. And her perky tits, Jesus, they’re rising and falling fast in the tank top she’s wearing. Her nipples form two tempting points, just begging to be fondled in their braless state.

And I can’t fucking take it anymore. Grabbing her by the nape, I bring our bodies together, and there’s no mistaking the hard length of my cock as it strains toward her

through my gym shorts. “I think you know what happens next.”

“We should be stronger than this, Cash.” The desire she tries so hard to mask dances across her face. “Say we do this...what happens tomorrow?”

Shit. Now her eyes are filling with tears. I’ll be a goner if she cries.

“We’ll figure it out together.”

“What if that’s not enough?”

“We can keep going on like this, but eventually we’ll stumble, because every day you walk into my office is another day I come close to fucking you on my desk.” I lower my head, my mouth lingering inches from hers. “And I think you’d let me. I think you’re losing the battle as much as I am, so if you want to stop this—”

“Cash,” she interrupts with a jittery sigh as she grabs hold of my arm. At first, I think she’s going to push me away, but she doesn’t. Her tiny fingers wrap around my bicep, and my dick twitches, causing my thoughts to scatter.

“Let me in. Please, Jules.” Into her home, into her body, into her heart and soul. I’d sell mine to own hers. To love her.

Because I already do, and it’s raging through my blood, invincible. Right or wrong, this woman has had me by the heart from the moment I first locked eyes with her.

A furrow plays between her brows, indicating the war waging inside her mind. We stand like this for what seems like forever before she gives a small tug on my bicep. And that tiny concession on her part is all it takes to bring me into her apartment. I have her in my arms before the door shuts all the way, one hand tangled in her hair as our mouths crash together. We don’t make it far. Backing her up against the wall, I

dart my tongue into her eager mouth, and the taste of her annihilates me. I'm famished for her, drowning in the ocean that is Jules.

She grips the front of my rain-soaked shirt, knuckles pressing against the irregular beat of my heart, and moans against my lips. The voice in my head that's steered me in the right direction all my life begs me to stop this before we take it too far.

I drag my lips from hers. "Tell me to go. Please."

"I can't." Her voice cracks, and it fissures my last-ditch effort to not let this happen.

It's going to happen.

It's been happening all along.

I grab her ass and hoist her into my arms. She wraps her legs around me, fingers threading through my hair as she tugs my mouth back to hers.

And I'm convinced I'll die if I don't get inside her.

"Where's your bedroom?" I say, nibbling on her lower lip.

"That way." A tilt of her head sends me toward the point of no return, to a room with a bed and the promise of Jules underneath me with no barriers. We stumble in, and the doorknob slams against the wall. Warm rays of the sun sneak in through her gauzy curtains, splashing soft light onto her bed. I lay her down right in its path, her golden locks splaying over the white bedspread.

"You are so fucking gorgeous."

"You make me feel gorgeous."

I yank my shirt over my head and drop it on the floor before reaching for the hem of her top. “You have no idea how tempting you are.”

“I think I might.” She pushes shaking fingers through my hair, and I slide the material up her belly, thumbs grazing a path along her skin. A scent reminiscent of vanilla and honey fills my senses, and for several seconds, I breathe her in, watching the heaving motion of her chest.

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“We can’t come back from this, Jules.”

“I know.”

This moment is a crossroad, and I already know I’m going to take the wrong turn. But fucking hell, nothing else has ever felt so right. As I push up her tank top and expose her perky tits, the brown depths of her eyes pull me under. I drown in the endless sea of trust I find there. No one’s ever looked at me like that.

Like I’m the sole owner of something too precious to put into words.

The feeling is powerful and precarious all in one, and my fingers tremble as I stand back to remove the rest of my clothing. Jules parts her lips at the sight of my cock jutting out toward her. Leaning down, I work the tank top over her head then tug the waistband of her shorts down her smooth thighs, dropping kisses on every inch I uncover before pulling them free of her ankles.

“You’re perfect.” I’m overwhelmed by the sight of her laid out before me. The triangle of her pink panties draws me in, and I nudge my nose against the core of her sex. Breathe in the essence of this girl I can’t get enough of.

There’s something about pink panties that screams Jules.

She’s too soft for the boldness of red. Too vibrant for black or white. Pink is sexy and sweet, hinting at the innocence that is Jules. Innocent, until I discover the wet spot that blows that illusion to an explosive end. I can’t hold back a low growl as I bite through her panties.

“Cash...” My name trails off on a sigh. A whimper. She pushes her pelvis against my mouth, and fuck, her pussy is begging for my tongue. I ache to push past the barrier of fabric and bury it in her core.

Hunger to taste and own.

“Holy shit.” Her body shudders beneath me, fingers tightening in my hair.

I pull at her panties with my teeth and rip them off in my haste to get to her. She’s so damn beautiful, and I can’t wait to slide my palms over every inch of her skin.

“You consume me.” I crawl up her body and nestle my cock at the wet juncture of her thighs, and our chests smash together, feverish skin on feverish skin. Twining our fingers, I trap her hands on either side of her head. A tremor spears through me. Through us both. “I want to go slow with you, but I don’t know if I can.”

“I don’t care,” she says, her fingers flexing around mine. “I want you, fast or slow.”

I lower my forehead to hers, and we exchange a thousand breaths in that moment. A thousand truths. We’ve shared office space late at night, stolen a searing hot kiss in a darkened loft, sat together on a plane.

None of it was as intoxicating as being alone with her like this, with our naked bodies on the precipice of becoming one in the privacy of her bedroom. It’s enough to unhinge me.

I thrust into her, fast and hard in my violent need. She locks her gaze on me, and I hold her captive in the cage of my stare. We both give in to sweet fucking surrender, moaning and groaning with every plunge, sharing the heat of quickening breaths. Getting fucking high off the adrenaline rush.

“You feel amazing. So damn tight.” Getting inside her is like coming home. Like finding perfection in an imperfect world. And there’s no going slow now—not with my cock buried to the hilt. I drive us both to oblivion, holding tight to her hands against the squeaking mattress.

She squeezes her eyes shut as countless whimpers escape her. But she can’t escape me. There’s no going back. We’re joined, moving as one, sharing the same heartbeat. Sliding together in sweat and the covenant of consummation. With every thrust of my cock, I’m staking my claim as our mouths collide in mutual ecstasy.

And for the fucking life of me, I can’t figure out why we fought this for so long.

I want to live inside this girl forever, lost to the allure of her kiss. The seduction of her body. Pulled into the abyss by the grip of her hands.

Suddenly, she breaks our lip-lock. “Cash, I’ve never...” A long moan steals the rest of her words.

“Never what? Tell me.”

“I’ve never come during sex.”

My breath hitches. The idea of taking a first from her—of receiving such a gift—is mind-blowing. “You’re gonna come for me if it’s the last thing I do.”

I withdraw only to dive in once more, and she meets every thrust, her body writhing under my strength. Dipping a hand between us, I bury my fingers between her legs and rub steady circles on her clit.

She clings to my shoulder with her free hand, and her spine arches as I push her closer to the point of no return. I kiss my way down the elegant column of her neck

and suck a nipple into my mouth. She hisses in a breath, and when I flick my gaze to her face, the sight of her trapped in sweet agony almost sends me over the edge.

Holding back has never been so hard.

Gritting my teeth, I slow my pace and focus on the subtle cues of her body. The way she's biting her lip. The deep flush of her skin. The way she's gripping my hand and digging her nails into my shoulder. She's so close, and I'll be damned if I let her fight it.

"Don't hold back, Jules. I've wanted to hear you come since the day I met you."

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Her eyes fly open, and what flows between us is too intense to ignore. Too potent to cast aside as lust. We aren't just coming together in the physical sense. She's crawled inside my soul and made herself a part of me.

Made me a part of her.

As she writhes and bucks underneath me, I watch the first brick of her wall crumble. An orgasm busts through her barriers, and she shatters in a series of breathless cries.

And it's the sweetest, most addicting sound I've ever heard.

25. Owned - Jules

Tears burn my eyes. Two blinks send them splashing onto my cheeks. Mortified, I hold my breath and try to hide this utterly female moment from him. He's still got hold of one of my hands, but the other is tangled in my hair as he rests his head on my chest. We're covered in sweat, breathing hard, and the result of our fervent tumble into bed is coating the inside of my thighs.

And my belly, because he pulled out as he came in a tide of torment, my name a plea for mercy on his lips.

We're a mess, but I don't give a shit. I'd lie here with him forever, if only I could control this surge of emotion brought on from having my first orgasm during sex. Thirty seconds doesn't pass before he notices the stillness of my chest, no longer rising and falling beneath him. He lifts his head, and the deep storm in his eyes grabs me by the soul.

God, this man. I feel too much for him, and it's scaring the shit out of me.

He untangles his fingers from my hair and brushes the tears from my cheeks. Then he kisses me, slow and deep until I'm moaning into his mouth.

"It's okay," he says, breaking our kiss. His breath stutters across my skin as he leaves a trail of open-mouthed kisses down the center of my neck, all the way to my collarbone. "I'm not going anywhere, Jules."

He didn't need to ask about the tears. Somehow, he already knew. It's enough to open the floodgates all the way. Turning us onto our sides, he gathers me in his arms, one palm at the small of my back, and the other holding my head.

And he lets me cry it out.

All the guilt and shame.

All the love in my soul for this man who isn't free to be mine.

Everything I'm feeling courses down my face, trembles in my limbs, and flares to life again between my thighs. I cling to him as if he'll disappear.

He tucks my leg between his and dips his head, coaxing me into another kiss.

Jesus, he knows how to use his tongue. Earlier, he reduced me to an incoherent puddle of lust when he teased me through my panties, and I can't help but wonder what it would feel like to have his mouth on me with no barriers.

Tugging on my hair, he tilts my head back and scrapes his teeth down my throat. "I already want you again. Once isn't enough."

He's rock hard against my thigh, just as ready as I am to go again. I don't think we'll ever stop wanting each other.

"Take a shower with me?" he asks.

I nod, and he slips from bed before pulling me to my feet. The door to my bathroom stands open, and he leads me in that direction. As soon as we step onto the cool tile, he brings his mouth down on mine and walks me backward into the shower stall. Never severing our kiss, he pushes me against the wall then flips on the spray.

His cock presses into my belly, and I'm curious how it would feel in my hand. Reaching between us, I wrap my fingers around his shaft and caress the velvety smooth tip with my thumb.

"Jesus," he says, voice strangled as he braces himself against the wall. "Don't ever stop touching me."

His vulnerability empowers me, gives me an addictive taste of confidence. I lower to my knees and trail my free hand down his abs while I stroke his cock. Eye to eye with his erection, I lick my lips as his need for me collects at the tip. I don't care that I'm still wearing his cum, that taking him in my mouth is poking at one of my biggest insecurities. I just fucking need to taste him.

I lift my chin and meet his metallic eyes. "Will you show me how you like it?"

He grabs the back of my head, and water sprays over us, sending tear-like drops cascading down my face. My pulse flutters in my throat as we stare at each other. Several moments pass before he thrusts his hips forward and pushes the soft head of his cock against my lips. As I open for him, I splay a hand on his stomach.

With a groan, he slides in, and his shaft is warm and smooth and thick, and my lips

stretch wide around him. Stroking his base with my fingers, I flatten my tongue and let him take the lead. Let his continuous moans guide me.

He shoves deeper, his hand at the back of my head keeping me in place, and even though he's moaning how good it feels, my old fears roar through me.

Am I scraping him with my teeth? That was one of Chris' biggest complaints, and he wasn't as big as Cash. My limbs seize up, and I close my eyes as all of my insecurities stampede through my mind.

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He fists a hand in my hair. “Open your eyes, Jules.”

The command in his voice draws my lids up, and I’m met with the image of a man on the verge of coming undone. Chest rising and falling fast, he pistons in and out of my mouth with increasing speed. The whole time, he traps me in his grasp, immobilizing me.

Rendering me helpless to do anything but let him take his pleasure.

To let him fuck my mouth.

I feel used and adored all at once. Powerful and vulnerable and more sexual than I’ve ever felt in my life.

“Jules,” he says as a shudder travels through him. “Touch yourself.”

I dip my hand between my thighs. He’s taken control of my mouth, leaving me free to focus on rubbing myself to climax. Stroking my clit with my middle finger, I keep pace to his thrusts, and every inch of my skin flushes. I moan in abandon, my impending orgasm vibrating off my lips and around his shaft.

“Don’t come.”

Questioning him doesn’t occur to me. I halt my fingers before the tension building inside me has a chance to gush free.

“The next time you come,” he chokes out, shoving the tip of his cock between my

tonsils until I'm gagging, "it's gonna be on my tongue." He comes in a torrent of grunts and groans, and there's nothing polite about the way he's holding me to him while he empties down my throat.

It's raw and dirty and sexy-as-fuck.

He didn't just show me how he likes it.

Didn't just take the lead.

He fucking owned me.

26. Alpha - Cash

The memory of Jules on her knees with those luscious lips wrapped around my cock will haunt me for the rest of my life. So will the desperation in her eyes. That glimmer of need is still festering in her brown depths, because I told her not to come.

And she listened, which completely blows my mind. Her trust in me is humbling. It's awe-inspiring. I can't wait to take my time with her, to coax her toward that cresting wave before dropping her into the abyss of sexual purgatory.

Because nothing gets me hotter than the thought of keeping Jules on edge and watching her fall into madness with the need to come.

We end up back in her bed with the sunlight spilling over our naked bodies. Her blond locks tickle my face as I spoon her. I can't keep my gaze from straying to the sunflower bouquet on her nightstand. The poor thing is past the throwing-out stage, but she kept it anyway.

Palming her breast, I kiss my way along the curve of her shoulder, and her nipple

pebbles against my hand. Goosebumps arise on her skin.

And my cock is already throbbing for more.

“Did I suck at it?”

“Jesus, Jules. You sucked the fuck out of it.” I draw the delicate lobe of her ear between my teeth. “And I mean that in a good way.”

A nervous sigh stutters from her lips, and even though we’re talking about something that’s a huge deal to her, she’s still flushed from arousal. “I don’t want to be a disappointment.”

“That’s not even possible. Everything about you has me wrapped, including your mouth. You could suck me forever and it wouldn’t be long enough.” Parting her thighs, I draw her leg back and drape it over mine, opening her for the touch of my hand. And for the longest time, I drive her wild by gently rubbing her clit.

I’m high off the pleading sounds she makes in the back of her throat, the way her legs quake as I dip two fingers into her drenched pussy. But every time she approaches that inevitable summit, I snatch her back before she can dive off the edge.

“Please,” she whimpers.

My uneven breath blasts her neck. “Begging turns me on so much, Jules.”

“You want me to beg? I’ll fucking beg.”

“I want you to beg.” I swirl a finger at her opening before sliding it in again.

“Please, Cash,” she gasps.

“You want my tongue here?”

“God yes.”

“Do you want to come again?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Shifting on the mattress, I push her onto her back and fit my knees at the juncture of her thighs.

“Is that a yes?”

A moan is the only answer I get.

I slip down her body and dip my head between her splayed knees. “I can’t wait to taste you,” I say, blowing a drift of air onto her pussy. I slide my thumb through her wet center then lightly tease her clit.

“You’re torturing me, Cash.”

My dick jumps at the way she says my name—with a jittery sigh that jumpstarts the blood-flow to my cock. “Torturing you intrigues me.”

She’s heaving breaths, her body so tightly strung she can’t stop trembling. And I

haven't even put my mouth on her yet. I crawl off the bed and yank her to the end of the mattress by the ankles. I lower to my haunches, and her knees quake as I haul them over my shoulders.

"I'm gonna lick you until you're out of your mind." I raise my head and pin her with my gaze. Grabbing her hands, I push them to the mattress. "But if you move, I'll stop."

Fuck, she's a sight.

Shallow breaths escaping parted lips.

Sweat beading on her temples.

The tint of her skin flushed pink from arousal and the heat of the day. And her eyes. Damn, those chocolate orbs cast me under their spell from the instant she turned them on me.

"Tell me you want my tongue on your pussy."

"You have such a dirty mouth," she says, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth.

"You have no idea. I want to hear you say it, Jules. Beg me to lick you."

"I've waited so fucking long to be with you like this. Please, Cash."

We both waited—not only waited but fought against it tooth and nail—and that's why I want this moment to last forever. I can't imagine leaving this bed, but deep down, I know all that's certain is now. This blip in time when I have Jules exactly where I want her.

And I want her insane with wanting me. Hungry for the heat of my mouth and the plunder of my fingers.

“I could eat you out all day.” I blow another hot breath between her thighs, making her spine arch. But she doesn’t move her hands at all. The fact that’s she’s so responsive and ready to obey makes my cock throb with the power she’s giving me.

I bring my mouth down on her, my tongue burrowing its way home until I find the spot. And the first time the heady taste of her fills my mouth is the moment I know I’ll never be able to walk away from her.

Because I’ll always need to come back for more.

More of her smile.

More of her fiery spirit that ensures she never hesitates to tell me how it is.

More of this right here—the core of her sex and my tongue lapping her up as if I’m dying of thirst. Licking her clit in light back-and-forth strokes, I thrust a finger inside her and crook it. From between her spread legs, I meet her gaze, and the way her eyes are glazed over as she pants, her hands curling into fists at her sides where I told her to keep them, busts my heart wide open.

She’s so close to shattering already, yet her willpower to do as I asked is holding her captive.

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And I fucking love it.

I add another finger, extracting a cry from her. “Please!”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

She studies me, her brows furrowed in curiosity, and damn, she’s sexy when she bites her lip like that. I have no shame as I pull my fingers from her pussy and use her body’s arousal to lubricate her ass. I gently push a finger into her puckered hole.

She gasps and moans at the same time, but instead of tensing upon my intrusion, she relaxes enough to accept my probing digit. Her reaction storms through me, all the way to my toes. As she arches her neck, I devour the sight of her pretty nipples pointing toward the ceiling, just begging to be licked and bitten. I lodge my finger in her ass all the way to my knuckle.

“You’re so beautiful, Jules.”

“Oh God, Cash. Please.”

“Please what?”

“Touch me.”

I wiggle the finger I have shoved in her back door. “I am touching you.”

“More.” She’s breathless when she says it. Demands it. I love that she knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to ask for it. I slip my thumb into her pussy.

Jules is exquisite perfection with her knees splayed, golden locks tousled around her flushed cheeks as I cup her by the ass and pussy. I lower my head between her thighs and open my mouth over her again.

She’s fucking mine.

27. Slip of the Tongue - Jules

Jesus fucking Christ. He’s filling me with his fingers. I tighten my thighs around his shoulders as a flood of warmth gushes toward his expert tongue. Instead of keeping his pace, he slows his intimate kiss, lightens the strokes of his tongue. I want to growl in frustration because I’m almost there.

My nails are digging into my palms. With sheer willpower, I keep them at my sides. I’ll do anything he asks at this point. For weeks now, I’ve been unable to stop the eventual tumble down this rocky mountain. Saying no to Cash is impossible.

A breeze comes in through the window, making the curtains billow above the bed. The sounds of life outside our private bubble drift to my ears from beyond that window. Footsteps and chirping birds. Quiet conversations in the alley mingling with the drone of traffic from the freeway. There’s something especially erotic about spreading my thighs for Cash, unabashed in total nakedness as his tongue and fingers push me to madness in the middle of the day.

God, do I want to touch him.

I want to come again even more.

The fact that he brings that out in me is astonishing, but when I think of how strongly I've reacted to him from the beginning, I wonder why I'm so surprised. Deep down, I've known all along that sex with him would be mind-blowing.

Life-changing.

The chemistry between us is too powerful to be denied, and right or wrong, we've gravitated toward each other from the beginning.

He moans against my core, and the vibrations from his mouth make me arch into him. I know I'm whimpering, despite trying to hold it back. He's driving me fucking insane.

"You're so close, Jules." Kissing my inner thigh, he slides his finger out of the one place no one's ever been before pushing in once more.

Cash is a contradiction in bed—a seductive mixture of commanding and tender, deviant and traditional. I sensed the hidden layers underneath his CEO persona. He wears those suits like armor, cloaks himself in stringent responsibility that shelters the passion raging inside him. I can't help but wonder if his wife made him retreat into himself. Did she make him bury all of that fiery passion? Or is it a part of him that only comes out for me? I want to believe it's the latter.

Even more, I want to forget he has a wife. I shove that elephant into the dusty warehouse of my mind and lose myself to the sensation of his lips closing around my clit, gently sucking until I'm bowing over the bed again.

"Please," I say, moaning as I thread my fingers through his hair.

He pulls back, and his stormy gaze pins me to the mattress. "I told you not to move your hands."

“Don’t stop.” Reluctantly, I return them to the bed.

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I want him so badly I'm about to burst with it. The more I fall into the vacuum of loving him, the more I realize there isn't a line I won't cross to be with him. Not anymore. Not after fighting to keep my distance and watching it all crumble the instant he touched me.

There are no lines left between us.

No boundaries.

No rights or wrongs.

No fucking shame.

Just him and me and this bed, and his fingers and mouth and the heat in his eyes sending a wrecking ball through the last of my resistance.

"I like watching you squirm," he says, slowly withdrawing his fingers. "Do you have any idea how many times I thought about this? Hell, Jules. I jerked off to the fantasy of you in the bathroom the day I hired you."

If I had a response, it scatters because his mouth is feasting between my thighs again. Between his tongue and fingers, it's fucking sensation overload. I ball my hands to keep from moving them, but I've never wanted to grab someone's head and hold them to me the way I do now.

It just isn't enough. As much as his tongue is making me come unglued, I'm throbbing for his cock. My breasts ache for the hardness of his chest. I might go crazy

if I don't have him on top of me.

"I'm about to fall the fuck off the edge, Cash. I need you inside me."

I want to open myself to him and let him live inside my heart. Deep down, I know he won't break it. Despite the ring that's still on his finger. Despite the complications in his life. I know he'll protect my heart as fiercely as I'll protect his.

The smile he gives me arrows straight to my soul. "Who can resist you when you talk like that?"

Grabbing my hips, he slams into me before I take my next breath. He drops his forehead against mine with a groan. But instead of closing his eyes, he pierces me with his thunderous stare, pulling his lower lip between his teeth. Pulling me deeper into the vortex of him.

"I love you." The declaration is out of my mouth before I even thought of saying the words. Before I was ready to tell him. My cheeks flush hot as hell, and I veer my head away.

He tugs my face back to him until we're gaze to gaze. "I'm so in love with you. Don't doubt that for a second." The fact that he says it in a raspy melody of need while our bodies are joined is somehow...everything.

My eyes fill with tears, on the verge of overflowing, just like my heart is, but I can't find any fucks to give. All I find is the safety of our connection, the sizzle of his skin on mine as he buries himself in me.

"Jesus, Jules," he groans, nipping at my lips. "I can't get enough of you." Arms shaking under the weight of everything crashing over us, he slows his thrusts, teasing me with the head of his cock.

“I need you.” My words tumble out in a continuous plea for more, and I arch my hips to bring him deeper.

“I’m right here,” he says, plunging home. “Everything I am is inside you.”

Holy hell.

His mouth eats up my soft cries as I writhe underneath him, powerless to stop. We come in a tidal wave of emotion, forehead to forehead.

Body to body.

Heart to heart.

He holds me as the fever calms and our heartbeats slow to a normal cadence. We don’t bother showering again, because when I look into his eyes, I know he’s going to take me until he can take me no more.

Fuck me until he’s had his fill.

Love me then leave me.

After a while, he sits at the edge of the bed and grabs his cell from the pocket of his discarded shorts. But his attention is on me instead of his phone. I prop myself up on elbow, unashamed of my nudity.

“Are you gonna leave?”

“I don’t want to leave you, Jules.”

“Then don’t.”

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“I need you to know something,” he says as he turns his phone to silent. “I’m going to tell Monica I want a divorce.”

That was the last thing I expected him to say, and though it fills me with hope, part of me is skeptical. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Nothing matters to me as much as you do.” He’s watching me as if he’s ready to devour me all over again. He sets his phone next to my wilting sunflower bouquet, and my gaze flickers to the gold band on his finger.

Wordlessly, he takes off his wedding ring and sets it on the nightstand.

28. Yellow Tape - Cash

My stolen weekend with Jules goes by too fast. Next thing I know it’s Sunday evening, and I’m having the hardest fucking time leaving her apartment. Wrapped in a sheet, Jules clutches the ends to her chest as I draw her in for what seems like our hundredth kiss. We’re standing in her doorway, and I’ve been trying to leave her place—leave her—for the past ten minutes. I’m sure we’re drawing attention, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“I don’t want to go,” I mumble against her lips.

She pulls me back inside, and the sheet falls to the floor as the door closes. We’re once again inside the privacy of her apartment, and just like yesterday morning, I have her up against the wall with my mouth fused to hers. For the past two days, we’ve lived on sex, takeout, more sex, and more takeout.

I flick my thumbs over her nipples as I kiss a warm path down her throat. “You’re gonna have to tell me to leave, Jules.”

“I’d only be lying. I don’t want you to go.”

“The longer we put this off, the harder it’ll be.”

Letting out a defeated sigh, her shoulders slump. “Will you come back and spend the night?”

“I’ll try. I don’t know how this conversation is going to go with Monica. But I’ll try. I want to be with you more than anything.”

After she wraps the sheet around her deliciously naked body, I open the door and step outside. Maybe this time, I’ll actually make it beyond her welcome mat.

Twirling a lock of her hair, I lean down and kiss her cheek because kissing her anywhere else will only lead to me pushing her back to that wall and fucking her against it. “I’ll make this right, I promise.”

“I trust you.”

She’s trusting me with so much.

Not to be a cliché douchebag who says he’s going to divorce his wife but doesn’t. Jules is trusting me not to break her heart, and I’m going to cherish that trust more than anything.

“I’d better go.”

“You’d better,” she says, nibbling her lower lip, “before this sheet ends up on the

floor and I drop to my knees.” She lowers her gaze to the growing bulge behind my shorts.

“Jesus, Jules. For sucking at sucking cock, you do it pretty damn well.” I grab her by the back of the neck and slam my mouth onto hers. As her tongue pushes against mine, all I can think about is sinking into the wet glove of her mouth again. The memory of watching her lips slide up and down my cock has me rock hard. I break away before I lose total control.

“No more goodbyes,” I say, leaning my forehead against hers. “No more kissing or talk of sucking me off. I’m going now.” Before I lose my nerve, I tear myself away and put a few feet of space between us. “I’ll text you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Neither of us move.

“Go inside, Jules. I can’t leave until you do.”

She’s still nibbling on that sexy-as-fuck lower lip. And her eyes—good God I need to get out of here before I never make it home.

And going home is important, despite the dread in my gut, because Jules and I have no future until I hash things out with my wife.

“Why do I feel like this is the end?” she asks, her gaze veering from me.

I shove down the urge to close the short distance between us. “Jules, look at me.” She does, and damn how I want to reach for her. “Nothing on earth could keep me away from you.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“I love you, Cash.” She draws in a shaky breath before shutting the door.

I let out a breath. Yesterday when she said it, I had my cock buried in her. The moment was intense, the kind when emotions run high and people say and do things they might not mean.

But she meant it. I saw it splashed all over her face before she closed that door.

I leave her complex on a rush of happiness and adrenaline, and it isn't until I'm passing by Pike Place that my erection settles the hell down. Even closed for the day and empty of people, the market will always remind me of her. I think about that bouquet on her nightstand and how I want to bring her a new one to replace it.

Except maybe I'll give her tulips next time. Maybe I'll give her flowers every week for the rest of her life.

I can't do that until I face my wife.

I'm almost home before I remember to turn my phone back on, and I can only imagine all the missed calls and texts I have from Monica. Despite everything, I feel like shit for dropping off the face of the earth for over twenty-four hours. We might not be close anymore, or even talking to each other most days, but I know she's worried. Even with the deterioration of our marriage, she always insists on knowing when I'll be home.

I've got several missed calls from her and even more texts, all of them demanding to know where I am. There are other missed calls and voicemail messages too, but they're likely related to work. For once in my life, I'm leaving work alone until the following morning. It's not going anywhere. Monica, on the other hand, is waiting to lay into me.

Turning onto my street, I lift my gaze from her frantic messages, all of which stopped today for some reason, and that's when I notice the emergency vehicles outside my building.

Spanning the distance seems to take several long minutes, but in reality, it's only seconds. People are pushing me back, keeping me from entering through the revolving doors.

Throwing questions in my face. Trying to get my attention.

I barely hear anything beyond the thrashing of my heart echoing in my ears. See anything beyond the panicked haze blurring my vision.

"What happened?" I'm finally able to focus on a face. "My wife's up there."

"Which floor, sir?"

"Penthouse."

He goes still, and the dread in my gut hardens to stone. Maybe I knew it all along and didn't want to face it. Monica hasn't been acting like herself for months, and that's especially true these past few weeks. I open my mouth to speak, but the words catch in my throat. Swallowing hard, I squeeze them past the fear and guilt winding around my neck.

"My wife is Monica Montgomery. Is she okay?"

Those words seem to be my ticket inside. The cop herds me into the lobby and grabs the attention of a man in a suit. There are suits and uniforms everywhere.

“Detective Riley. I found the husband.”

He faces me, and I don’t like the harsh chill in his blue eyes. He looks at me as if he’s judging me. “Are you Cash Montgomery?”

“Is my wife okay?” There’s no mistaking the tremor in my voice. Sweat drips down my temples as I wait for him to reply, the seconds ticking by in dreadful beats.

“Mr. Montgomery, your wife is missing.”