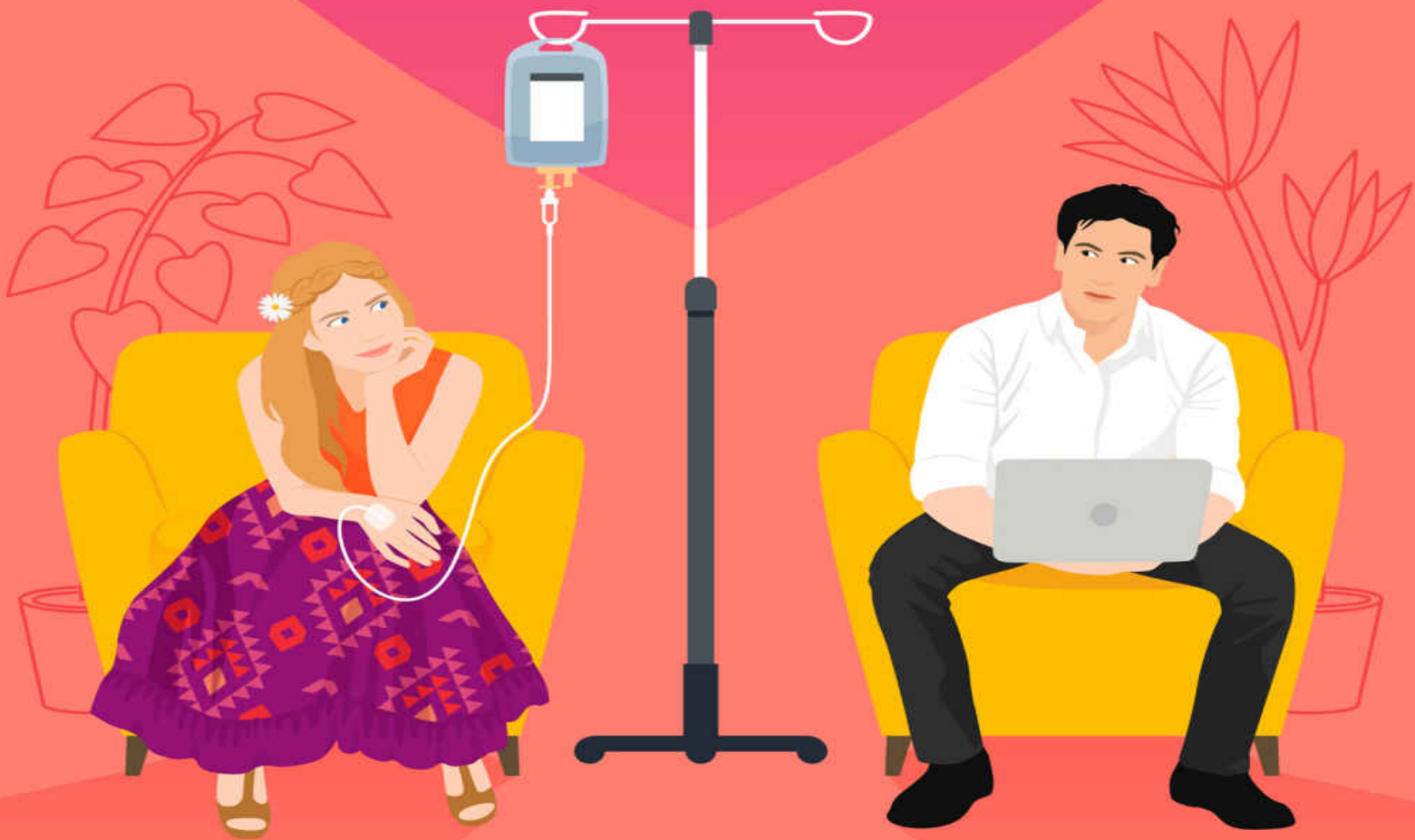


LAURA BRADBURY

# Unlikely MATCH



A transplant romance

LAURA BRADBURY



*Unlikely*  
**MATCH**

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*If life has lobbed a health-related shit sandwich at your head, this one is for you.*

*I see you. I feel you. I am you.*

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*Unlikely*  
**MATCH**



Liver Transplants:

You take someone who's dying;

And then you put their body through total insanity;

And then they're not dying anymore.

It's life emerging from death. The closest thing to a miracle that I know.

The Anesthesiologist

@fuzzymittens

11:56 4/15/22 Twitter web app

## NOTES TO READER

- *This book contains sensitive topics such as medical trauma, PTSD, and hospital scenes on the page. It also refers to parental abandonment and the foster care system mostly off the page. Please be gentle with your precious self.*
- *This book takes place in Canada, which is why there is no mention of private health insurance and that whole side of things.*

**BEFORE**

## CHAPTER ONE

That wasn't me in the mirror.

I splashed water on my face and looked up again. *Nope*. Not me. How had my pale Irish complexion and softly rounded face transformed into what looked like an olive-shaded mask with the sharp bone structure of a runway model?

I needed to finish up and dive into the meet and greet happening on the other side of the bathroom door at Hubtech. The party was partly for my company, after all. I didn't just need to be present—I needed to be *on*.

Last check. I pulled down one of my bottom eyelids and looked in different directions to check the color of my eyeballs. Were they yellow enough to warrant indoor sunglasses? I really didn't want to resort to that, especially when making first impressions.

*Passable. If only I could get rid of this nausea and the sensation of ice slowly freezing my body from the inside out. One foot in front of the other, Jules. Just keep going and pretend you're normal.* I could do that—I had become a pro at it over the past five years.

A gravelly male voice boomed behind the bathroom door. Why did men in the tech start-up world always talk so loudly, as if the world was in urgent need of their opinions on everything from obscure craft beer to the metaverse? I listened closer.

"Just look at them." The voice on the other side of the door was ripe with annoyance. "I can't believe we have to share our space with them."

*He must be talking about GoodGuides*, I thought. We were all women at my start-up, except for my best friend, Alan, COO and co-founder. A ball of anger grew under my sternum. *Tech bro culture strikes again*. I was hoping things would be different at Hubtech, but apparently not.

Another voice chimed in. "To be fair, Tom, it isn't *our* space. It's Hubtech's space, and our rent here is being subsidized for an entire

year. You can't get all territorial about it."

Tom merely growled, a sound that sent a hot flash of anger through me and goose bumps rippling up my arms.

It had to be Tom Davenport, the CEO of the other start-up sharing our subsidized office space at Hubtech for the next year. I'd had high hopes he would be good to work with, or at least respectful.

"What brought on this mood?" The second voice sounded more reasonable.

"Mark my words, they're going to be a distraction," Tom said.

I swore under my breath. Another tech bro. How original.

"Stop complaining. It's free office space for a year. Do you realize how many other start-ups wanted this opportunity?"

"I know, but these GoodGuides people... They're *women*."

Tom's voice was laced with a dismissiveness that made the blood pound in my ears. Didn't I have enough challenges in my life without a chauvinist CEO in my new workspace? After three years of working in the start-up world, I knew most men in tech were no more mature than a bunch of eight-year-old boys hanging out in a treehouse with a "No Girls Allowed" sign nailed to the door. It limited access to women in ways that were as unacceptable as they were disgusting.

I heard an incredulous gulp of laughter. "What's come over you, Tom? Please tell me I'm not working for a man who hates women. I *will* quit."

"Would you?" Tom sounded genuinely curious.

"Yes."

"I don't hate women, Peter. I enjoy rational, intelligent female company as much as anyone else, but this group...most of them look like hippies. How serious can they be about their work if they dress like that?"

The Peter person snorted. "They don't dress like hippies. Just because they're way more stylish than our crew of nerds doesn't mean they're not smart or driven. In fact, we should encourage our employees to be more like them."

Tom—at least I assumed it was Tom—sighed deeply. "Trust me, their presence is going to make it hard to keep our employees on

task. We both know how crucial this year is for Silobase.”

Right. Silobase. That was the name of the other company sharing the space. Well, it was high time men started taking responsibility for themselves. If they were distracted by us just existing, that was their problem, not ours. The ball of rage under my sternum gathered speed like a hurricane, pushing back my chills and nausea.

“Also, their business idea?” Tom added. “Not very tech at all, is it?”

The nerve. GoodGuides was an amazing business idea. If I didn’t have this stupid illness holding me back, Alan and I would have already made it a worldwide name.

Maybe it wasn’t my dream career, but nobody needed to know that. It was helping Alan get back on his feet, and it had been the perfect escape from working in my family’s business. I liked my work—I just didn’t love it.

Since my diagnosis with a rare orphan disease of the bile ducts and liver with the tongue-twisting name of primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC for short), I lived every day knowing that all my plans and dreams could be snatched away in a heartbeat. PSC had no treatment and no cure. The only way to prevent it from killing me was a liver transplant.

If nothing in my life right now was guaranteed to last, I wasn’t interested in putting my whole heart into anything—a job, a relationship, or even buying the gorgeous sundress I’d found on end-of-summer sale at my favorite vintage store.

If I could get a transplant, I might have a shot at being able to create a life with a guaranteed future. Until then, building GoodGuides with my best friend was the perfect alternative.

Still, that didn’t mean I was going to put up with judgmental misogynists for the next year. I burst out of the bathroom right into the hard back of a man who I registered, before anything else, was unpardonably tall.

He turned around and looked down at me with dark, impatient eyes. “Can I help you?” he said in that testy voice.

*Tom. My new nemesis.*

His face was the definition of stern, with straight black eyebrows and a nose that was wide at its bridge like a Roman emperor's. It looked like it might have been broken in the past; I completely empathized with the person who'd punched him. My fingers were already itching to do the same.

I deeply regretted my lack of inches yet again. My mother must have been on some new diet pills when she was pregnant with me, because I always felt like a five-foot-ten person trapped in a five-foot-three body. Now I was a healthy person stuck in a sick person's body as well—that was plenty to feel upset about without adding Tom to the mix.

"I doubt it," I scoffed. "I'm Jules, the co-founder and CEO of GoodGuides. I overheard you talking about my company and my employees."

The man beside Tom—Peter, no doubt—blanched, but Tom's face remained unrepentant.

"I need to know something." I crossed my arms in front of me.

"What's that?" He stared down his imposing nose at me. His skin had that honeyed glow of Hispanic heritage, or maybe Greek? Why couldn't he be hideous? Life really wasn't fair.

"What happened in your life that made you such a misogynistic asshole?"

Peter rubbed his hands together. Slightly shorter than Tom (but still way taller than me, like most people), he was a gorgeous black man with a good-humored tilt to his lips. "This is going to be good."

Tom's eyes flashed, and a sizzle went through me like a lightning bolt, making me stand taller and straighter. He inspected me, starting from my feet—clad in a pair of high-heeled clogs—and moving up to my cool bohemian dress in my favorite shade of green, chosen because it didn't itch as much as most of my clothes did now, finally landing on my French-braided hairdo. He didn't open his mouth.

When our eyes met, that electricity ran through me again, somehow cutting through the worry and overwhelm that had become my constant companions. He jerked me out of Sickland back to the land of the living.

“Well?” I prompted. “Say those things to my face instead of gossiping about my company behind closed doors.”

“You were the one behind a closed door,” Tom pointed out with the smallest quirk of his lips. “Eavesdropping, I might add.”

For the first time in so long I actually felt toasty warm thanks to the indignation boiling inside me. It was the strangest thing. In that precise moment, I felt like *me* again. The old me, from before I got sick.

Peter tugged his sleeve. “Tom...don’t.”

The part of me that finally felt alive again made me want to tell Tom not to listen.

“Who are you to judge my company?” I demanded. “I doubt you know anything about it.”

“It doesn’t seem too complicated.” He tilted his head. “You match up local travel guides with tourists. That’s basically what a travel agency does, isn’t it?”

It certainly was not. I mean, in one way I suppose you could say that, but what Tom was missing, and what most venture capitalists (because they were 97 percent male, of course) also missed, was that it was so much *more* than that. “It’s as much a tech company as yours,” I said.

“Then where’s the tech? What are you offering that any person can’t find with their cell phone when they’re traveling? I realize my frustration must seem like a personal insult, but it’s not. I’m sure your company is fine within its own sphere, but I was hoping another true tech company would share the space with us.”

I opened my mouth to defend GoodGuides but a familiar wave of frustration made my bones go heavy. Tom’s response was the same as that of most men I’d met in the start-up community. It was why women-led tech start-ups had received only 2.3 percent of venture capital funding in the past year. They were incapable of seeing anything beyond their exclusively male perspective. It was such a constantly uphill battle that I couldn’t, just *could not*, waste one more second of my life explaining it to people who would never understand.



I made a sound of disgust. “My time and energy are far too valuable to waste defending myself to you. You bore me already, with your generic male perspective.”

“Generic male perspective?” Tom snorted. “What does that mean?”

“Men don’t feel the need for our service because they are rarely the ones organizing travel. The women in their life take care of that, and pretty much everything else, because men are, when it comes right down to it, allowed to be narcissists in our society.”

“Wha—?” Tom attempted. He blinked. I had flustered him. *Excellent.*

Satisfaction prickled up the back of my neck. All the medical bullshit I’d gone through since being diagnosed meant that I was no longer intimidated by anyone, no matter how overbearing. I didn’t remain diplomatic anymore in the face of stupidity and insults, the way I’d been brought up to do.

After tangoing with massive liver biopsy needles, dealing with ego-puffed ER doctors, and grappling with a possibly terminal diagnosis, nothing scared me anymore. Well, with the glaring exception of my own possible demise.

“What is it your company does again?” I demanded.

Tom just stared at me, his dark eyes intent and gleaming.

Peter cleared his throat. “We silo off companies’ corporate databases so they’re protected from attackers.”

“What’s it called again?” I asked Peter.

“Silobase.”

I faked a snore. “Scintillating. Good luck keeping your potential investors awake long enough to hear your pitches. You might consider investing in cattle prods.”

Another thing I’d discovered in myself since getting sick was the sharp tongue of a viper. Where had it been most of my life? Still, as the words flew out of my mouth, I knew I was all talk. Venture-capital investors drooled at the idea of anything as boring and stripped of humanity as Tom’s company.

Tom knew it too. I could tell from the sparkle of triumph in his eyes. “We’ll see, won’t we?” he said in a quiet voice. “I wonder who

will triumph at the end of the twelve months?”

“Game on.” I put my hands on my hips, but my defiance was all smoke and mirrors—I had virtually nothing to back it up. I could shuffle off this mortal coil within the next twelve months for all I knew. Even if I didn’t, I had roadblocks ahead of me that Tom couldn’t even imagine.

He couldn’t *ever* know about them. I’d known the man only five minutes, but I knew beyond a doubt that I much preferred his antagonism over his pity.

Someone called Tom from the other side of the room. He held up a finger and shook his head.

Meanwhile, I stuck out my hand to Peter. “Pleasure to meet you. You seem nice.”

Peter shook it and tilted his chin toward Tom. “He’s not usually like this.”

Before I could answer, Alan appeared beside me. Had he seen something in my expression that sent the alert? He was almost psychic that way. What I said about men didn’t apply to Alan, who was hands-down my favorite person in the world. *My* person.

Tom turned back to us.

“Hello there,” Alan said, sticking out his hand to Peter. *Good choice, Alan.* “Alan Higginbotham the Third. COO of GoodGuides. Pleased to meet you.”

Peter shook his hand, then looked to Tom, whose brown eyes shifted quickly to me with a weird aura of triumph in them. Sure, Alan had a pretentious name, but Tom didn’t know the first thing about him. Alan and I had always been protective of each other. That really was why we’d started GoodGuides.

He stretched out his hand to Alan. “Tom Davenport. CEO of Silobase. Pleasure to meet you.”

I nudged Alan. “It won’t be a pleasure. You can trust me on that.”

Alan flicked a glance my way. I was, generally speaking, not in the habit of insulting people I’d just met or, come to think of it, insulting people at all unless they gave me good reason. Tom, however, filled me with a kinetic energy that had me spoiling for a fight.

“I’m the COO of Silobase, Alan,” Peter interjected. “Just for the record, I’d far rather we all got along than fight. We’ll be working side by side after all, and I was hoping we can learn from each other.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” said Alan. He leaned toward me and whispered in my ear. “What have I stepped in here? Also, you have a Band-Aid on your arm from the lab.”

I looked down at the unsightly piece of white tape covering a cotton ball they’d slapped on my arm after my bloodwork first thing that morning. I shouldn’t have picked a short-sleeved dress on a lab day.

Alan, bless him, immediately began peppering Peter and Tom with questions about Silobase while I peeled it off as discreetly as possible. The tape was backed with some sort of superglue that could hold together the International Space Station. I rolled it up and shoved it in my pocket. I *only* bought clothes with pockets.

“You must visit so many countries with your business.” Peter smiled at Alan and me, a desperate plea in his eyes. He was clearly the designated peacekeeper of Silobase.

“We do.” Alan nodded, flashing one of those warm, charming smiles of his. “We’re very lucky. Jules and I have always shared a passion for travel. We backpacked around Asia together for a year after high school. That was the genesis of GoodGuides.”

Tom fixed me with those eyes again. “Yes, from your tan, you look like you’ve been *working* somewhere tropical.” The ironic inflexion he put on “working” made electricity race up my spine. I relished that he was so utterly wrong and completely ignorant of the hole he was digging for himself.

“I was, as a matter of fact.” If he was determined to assume the absolute worst of me, why not lean into this alternative life of mine he’d concocted in his imagination? It was a definite improvement on my reality of lab tests and doctor visits and the ER waiting room. “I recruited new photographers for our company all across Europe, mainly over sangria.”

Alan cast an alarmed look my way. He knew better than anyone I’d been nowhere that summer, unless you counted the hospital. Alan and I jokingly called it “Club Med.”

I tried to maintain a stoic front about the torture of working in a company that was centered around travel I could no longer do. My health was too precarious, and since my diagnosis I'd joined the ranks of the uninsurable. GoodGuides was a daily exercise in look but don't touch. I was trying to be a bigger person about it, but honestly, I was starting to think I just didn't possess the martyr gene. Some mornings I wept in the shower, thinking how this disease had robbed me of so much.

Alan cleared his throat. "We recruit online too."

"But I'm sure Jules would never want to miss out on *socializing*," Tom said, now turning "socializing" into a dirty word.

"No," I said. "I wouldn't. My company is a lot of hard work, but it's designed for fun, which is why we're going to succeed."

He lifted his left eyebrow. "We'll see."

"Yes," I said. "We will."

## CHAPTER TWO

After a quick general meeting with our employees, time spent setting up desks in the common area, and pinning photos of our customers and their GoodGuides in Thailand and Greece and Bhutan on the wall, Alan finally cornered me on one of the gorgeous curved yellow couches in the atrium of Hubtech. I was right in the middle of emailing a potential local guide in Milan.

Hubtech took up the entire upper floor of an enormous old warehouse space from the early 1900s. It had been spectacularly renovated with a quirky mix of modern touches and the original features like brick walls and huge oak beams. There were different sections that all flowed into one another—video conferencing cubicles, hot desks, several lounge areas with couches and tables, and glassed in offices that ran along the exterior walls.

In the heart was the soaring atrium space where I sat. I didn't know who had designed it, but it was a jewel. Two half-moon couches flanked a leafy tree that thrived under the skylights at least thirty feet above our heads.

Since becoming sick, I paid more attention to how different spaces made me feel. I was always seeking out ones like my loft that made me feel safe and cozy. Hubtech was a perfect antidote to the hospital with its putrid green paint, cold chairs, and beeping equipment, where I spent far too much of my time.

A year's worth of free office space for GoodGuides? Peter was right; so many other start-ups would be gagging for this opportunity.

Alan threw his large body beside me and cast me one of his *looks*. Reproachful. Questioning. Confused. I'd been getting a lot of those from him lately.

"What the hell was that?" he asked in a deceptively mild tone. He had a takeout coffee cup in each hand. Another great thing about Hubtech was Neighbours, the funky coffee shop and deli downstairs.

Of course the coffee was sublime—this was the Pacific Northwest, and if there was one thing we took seriously, it was our coffee.

“Is one of those for me?” I pointed at the cups.

“Yes, although I’m not sure you deserve it. I get Tom was being a typical tech bro, but you let him bait you, Jules.”

I sighed. He wasn’t wrong. “I know. My serpent tongue came out to play.”

“Sure did. I didn’t know whether to give you a round of applause or slap some duct tape over your mouth.”

“The first one please.”

“I love that you stand up for yourself Jujube, and you stand up for me too, but we have to share office space with these people for a year. You usually aren’t so easily riled by these ubiquitous tech bros.”

I’d been expecting a wave of remorse after my behavior with Tom, but it hadn’t come. “You should have heard him, Alan. He was so dismissive of GoodGuides and spouting out all this sexist garbage about our team being too *distracting*.”

Alan grimaced. “Ew. Seriously?”

“Yup. I was in the bathroom, and I heard it all through the door. What can I say? It got my back up.”

Eyebrow arched, Alan passed me a coffee. “Is that so? I could barely tell.”

I shrugged. “I know we have to work near him, but it felt good to get mad, Alan. True, righteous anger, you know? I’ve been feeling so sick and blah lately, but I’ve gotten a ton of work done since fighting with Tom.”

Alan’s forehead puckered.

I sighed. “Please don’t give me your concerned-parent look.”

“I’m not!”

“I know that look. It was the same one you gave me when I got together with Douchy Dave when we were sixteen.”

Alan snorted. “He had three other girlfriends at the time. I was right.”

“Maybe,” I grumbled.

“You know when it comes down to it, I’ll always support you, but I’m worried that an ongoing feud between you and Tom could get toxic for everyone. I’m concerned about the atmosphere for all our team members. I hate that you’re feeling so sick, but surely in the long run fighting with Tom will hurt rather than help you?”

I thought about this as I took a sip of coffee—scalding and bitter against my tongue. Perfect. My lovely hepatologist recommended I drink as much caffeinated black coffee as I could hold. It was excellent for the bile ducts and liver, apparently. That was the one prescription I was delighted to follow.

“I did some reconnaissance work,” Alan continued. “I’m sure Tom was seriously unpleasant, yes, but his employees seem to think he’s smart and fair.”

I sniffed in disbelief.

Alan frowned at me. “You know I completely believe you and have your back, but you were just so angry. You were vibrating with it.”

I smiled to myself as the echo of that zing I’d felt reverberated up my spine, making me sit straighter. “This is going to sound weird—”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, Jujube, it’s us. It’s a given that it’s weird.”

“I think fighting with Tom was good for me.”

He tilted his head. “More details required.”

I shrugged. “I don’t understand it myself. It just made me feel... alive.” It wasn’t an adequate word for how Tom had brought out the fight in me—the fight I desperately needed and that, before meeting him, I felt slipping away—but it was the only way I knew how to explain it.

He glanced at me doubtfully. “And that’s helpful?”

“Weirdly, yes. I think it could be funneled to benefit the company—and me. It’s the fuel I need, especially now.”

Alan took a deep breath, his plaid flannel button-down stretching against the buttons. He far preferred sipping a Barolo in a great Italian restaurant to hiking through an old-growth forest, but his personal style—plaid shirts, jeans turned up at the cuff, and spotless Timberlands—definitely had a misleading mountain-man vibe. Then

again, I dressed bohemian and carefree, when my life was anything but. Alan and I had coined the term *aspirational dressing* for ourselves.

“I get all that,” he said. “But do you think it’s a good time to start issuing challenges to Silobase? We don’t know what this year is going to bring.”

He was right. That part of my behavior had been stupid. The truth of this brought me back down to earth with a thud. Still, what else could I do in this waiting game but continue to live my life to the best of my ability? I didn’t want to stay at home like some people did, getting depressed and hopeless as they waited for the phone call that could change their life...or signal its end.

“I have to keep moving forward,” I said, thinking of the challenge in Tom’s eyes. “I’m like a great white shark. I’ll die if I stop swimming.” At the same time, maybe just giving in to being sick and being in this horrible limbo was the more rational choice. I was emotionally all over the place, and I hated it. The five years since being diagnosed had been the world’s worst mind game, and I still had no idea how to play.

Alan’s eyes got all shiny. “I wish so much I could do more, Jules. I would do anything, give anything, to make you better.”

I reached over and squeezed his knee. “I know you would, but don’t you dare start crying. Not here.”

He sniffed. “Cry? Me?”

Sorrow was always there in Alan’s eyes now when they met mine. I knew it was the flip side of his love, but being an object of pity and compassion was my version of hell on earth.

“This thing with Tom...” I tried to verbalize those flashes of energy Tom had set off in me. “I think it might help me. I don’t understand how, or why, but there it is.” I needed to cling to that spark he sent through me.

Alan slung his arm around me. “OK then. If it helps you, let’s kick his ass.”

“He *cannot* know about me being sick.”

Alan frowned. “But if he did, maybe he’d—”



“No!” The idea of Tom backing down and being nice to me because he felt sorry for me hollowed out my stomach with loss. I was a force to be reckoned with under this ill-fitting costume of sickness, more than I’d ever been in my life. The problem was nobody saw it. Tom gave me the gift of seeing a worthy adversary in me. Right now, that felt like a lifeline.

“If that’s what you want, you got it.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder and closed my eyes. I would always be safe with Alan. I’d known that since the moment we met at seven years old. “Thanks.”

“So we’re kicking his ass?” Alan clarified after a while.

“Yup,” I said. “Hard.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but it was quite a fine ass.”

“Traitor,” I mumbled.

“Well, excuse me for not being blind. Are you telling me you didn’t notice?”

I had, much to my annoyance. I’d bumped into it when I’d surged out of the bathroom. “No,” I lied. “He was far too objectionable for me to admire anything about him.”

“You should take a look next time,” Alan advised. “It’s worth compromising your principles for, trust me.”

“Shut up.” I laughed, despite myself.

“Never. Love you, Jujube.”

“Love you too, Alan.”



The next day I was still setting up my desk in the office I shared with Alan.

Our office space was separate but didn’t feel separate, thanks to the ingenious design brain behind Hubtech.

The main area shared by Silobase and GoodGuides stretched across the whole back end of the massive Hubtech space. It was a glass-walled, open concept office—Silobase on one side and GoodGuides on the other. The whole thing was anchored by the

massive, original brick wall at the back which softened the modern lines of sleek glass.

In the front corner of each side was a cube of glass inset in the bigger glass and brick rectangle—these were the CEO offices, but the space was big enough for Alan and me to put both our desks with room to spare. Even the door to our cube was glass, so it felt separate but not. As we moved in, we left our door wide open so people could flow in and out.

Mac and Annie were helping Alan and me get set up, and we were all enjoying a comfortable chat, encompassing work and everything else.

“So how have things been going lately for you, Jules?” Mac, with her tender heart, couldn’t keep the empathy out of her big green eyes. She was a proud lesbian with the best marketing esthetic I’d ever come across and was our head of branding. Before we moved into Hubtech, Alan and I had taken her and Annie out for lunch and told them about my health situation.

I wished I could wipe the looks of pity and sadness in their eyes from my memory, but I couldn’t; now it lingered every time we interacted.

“Pretty stable,” I said. “Not much to report.”

“That’s good, right?” Annie chimed in. The worry was there in her blue eyes too. She was a bubbly blonde sorority-girl type who I had, much to my eternal shame, quickly pigeonholed as a client concierge in her first job interview. She’d then proceeded to knock my socks off with the most brilliant data management, development, and coding strategies I’d ever seen. Annie was our tech leader and a daily reminder that I should never put any woman in a box. Women possessed multitudes that no box could ever contain.

“Yeah. No news is good news,” I said.

I knew they did everything they could to act normal around me, but now they had the truth, nothing could undo that knowledge. From the moment I told them, it irrevocably changed how they saw me.

I was no longer a straight-shooting boho badass, but someone to feel sorry for. I hated it. That changed look in their eyes made me

feel like I wasn't myself anymore. As my health failed, that feeling only got worse.

"Have you talked to any of the Silobase guys yet?" I asked.

"I bumped into their COO, Peter, in the kitchen area yesterday." Annie blushed. "I spilled coffee on his shoes, and he was really nice about it."

"He does seem great," Alan said from one side of his desk, where he was setting up his computer screen. "I like him."

"I asked, and they don't even have anyone in-house for branding," Mac said. "From the look of things over there, I can't say I'm surprised."

"Yeah, they don't exactly give off creative-hothouse vibes," I said.

"I look over to their side of the room, and I swear it's a sea of greige with their outfits," Mac said. "I think it kicked off my seasonal affective disorder two months earlier than usual."

We were still laughing when Tom walked in, wearing the exact same thing he'd worn the day before: tailored black pants and a crisp white dress shirt, rolled up to just below his elbows. I would *not* look at his forearms.

"Getting settled in?" he asked, stiff and formal compared to the rest of us.

"Yes." I crossed my arms again. What about him made me do that? Also, why was he here? He didn't strike me as one for social visits.

"Tessa asked me to drop this off for you. Even though our rent is subsidized by Hubtech, as CEOs we still need to sign this lease agreement."

He handed me a few papers, frowning. He didn't relish being the messenger. I loved that Tessa, Hubtech's director, asked him to do this in the way that women had been asked to do such tasks throughout history.

"Thanks," I said and took it from him.

"She said if you don't mind signing it now, I can take it back to her." His mouth was set in such a grim line, it was almost comical.

"You'll have to wait a few seconds while I read it over."

“Fine,” he said. An uncomfortable silence dropped over the room while I sat at my desk and began to read, twiddling a pen in my free hand. Tom lingered by the edge of my desk, his face more flushed than usual.

From the corner of my eyes I saw him picking up my citrine crystal from my desk. I chose it because it was said to inspire creativity and ambition as well as detoxify the blood—something I sorely needed with my sick liver.

“Don’t touch that,” I said. “You’ll get your negative energies all over it.”

He snorted. “You can’t possibly believe crystals have magical properties.”

While I loved the look of crystals, I still hadn’t decided if they truly had powers beyond beauty. Still, beauty counted, didn’t it? “What if I do?”

Mac crossed her arms over the vintage trucker shirt I’d found for her when I was thrifting one day. It even had her name embroidered on the front. “My house is *full* of crystals,” she said, “because they are legit powerful. Only people of limited intelligence believe reality uniquely consists of things they can see and touch.”

“Mac’s right,” Annie said. “Besides, I’ve seen some solid data for myself.”

That stumped Tom. Had he actually thought my people wouldn’t back me up?

He put down the crystal and picked up my glitter globe with the Parthenon inside. “I like this,” he said in a much nicer tone. “I used to enjoy reading about Greek myths when I was a boy. Did you get this there?”

I shook my head. “It’s on my travel wish list, but I haven’t made it yet.”

I’d wanted to go to Greece since Alan and I had watched *Mama Mia* a few years before, but my chances of going were receding by the day. My glitter globe, which one of our Greek GoodGuides had sent me, was a constant reminder of the life and possibilities I was trying to fight for by getting a transplant.

“I hope you do,” Tom said in a kind voice.

I stared up at him, mystified.

“Do you really?” The sincerity in his tone had completely caught me off guard. His mouth softened, and his eyes didn’t look so much like two hard chunks of obsidian anymore.

He rolled his eyes. “Despite what you may think, I’m not a complete monster.”

I looked down and quickly signed the document. “I’ll take your word for it,” I said, passing it back to him.

“Thank you.” He marched out, but whether he was talking about my signature or my words I couldn’t tell. We all watched him go.

“I have to say it—he’s got one hell of a butt,” Mac said.

“Ha!” Alan sent me a triumphant look. “See?”

“I thought you only liked lady butts?” Annie said.

“Visually, I’m an equal-opportunity butt person.”

“A butt-sexual,” I quipped.

“Exactly!” Mac said, and we all roared with laughter, forgetting about Tom, his posterior, and his stupid forearms, which were among the best I’d ever seen.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Why wasn’t my prescription sent?” I demanded.

I wedged my cell phone between my shoulder and ear as I transferred bottles of champagne from the box Alan had brought in into the communal fridge in the gorgeous kitchen at Hubtech the next morning.

A long marble-topped island separated the kitchen from the main open area where people could lounge and chat or rent desks for the day.

“When I say I’m going to send something, I do it,” I interrupted the receptionist’s excuses.

I’d never sat down and calculated the time I’d wasted tracking down prescriptions, requisitions, and referrals and basically riding the ass of almost every doctor and receptionist involved in my medical care. The number of hours would be despairingly huge.

Why was it acceptable for so many people in medicine to just not follow through on their commitments? I would never do that to our GoodGuides clients; neither would anyone on our team.

That was the thing, though, wasn’t it? As soon as I was issued my passport to Sickland with my PSC diagnosis, I was made to feel like a beggar rather than a customer. There were so many wrong things wrong with that, I didn’t even know where to begin.

“Look, I understand you’re under a lot of stress right now, Ms. Kelly,” the transplant receptionist snapped. “But these things happen.”

The fridge was directly across the open area from the massive glass doors that led into GoodGuides’s and Silobase’s shared office space, so I had a front row seat for watching Tom stride through them. From the tense lines of his body, he did not look happy. A thrill shivered up my spine. His eyes were focused on me, and even from this distance I could tell they were disapproving. Excellent. He might be exactly what the doctor ordered.

“That’s not good enough,” I said to the receptionist. I needed to end this call before Tom reached me. “Almost every time, the prescriptions aren’t faxed into my pharmacy. I have better things to do than chase them down all day long. I know you have a lot of work, but I really need this medication.”

A killer itch bloomed on the sole of my left foot, and I futilely tried to rub it against the other. “Suicidal itching,” as the medical community so descriptively termed it, was one of the most torturous symptoms of my rare autoimmune biliary liver disease. “Just send it. I’m trying to stay alive, and it’d be great if you could help with that.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

On a muttered curse, I hung up and slipped my phone in my jeans pocket just as Tom reached me. He perused me from head to toe again. It was insolent, but I liked the fact he was clearly still sizing me up as an opponent. In his eyes, at least, I was still a contender.

If he found fault with my clothes, that was his lack of taste. One of the last few things in my life that made me still feel like *me* was my wardrobe of carefully thrifted and curated items. I considered them—my embroidered linen tunics, sequined kimonos, and worn leather boots—as a living art collection more than anything else.

Today, for example, I was wearing a pair of perfectly worn jeans, vintage Frye boots, and one of my favorite velvet tunics in the most beautiful shade of periwinkle. I’d paired that with a chunky crystal-and-silver bracelet and a pair of dangly filigree silver earrings.

I met Tom’s eyes, drawn in by the storm brewing in them. All that futile anger I’d been feeling about the constant medical runaround honed into one concentrated point—this man in front of me.

“Good morning, Tom,” I said with false cordiality. “Do I pass your inspection today?”

His upper lip had an unusual dip and curve to it, but now it pressed against his lower one in a thin seam. “What is that?” He jerked his head down at the half-empty box at my feet as if it contained cockroaches rather than champagne.

I opened the fridge again and continued laying the last few bottles on their side to keep them nice and cool. I didn’t answer his

question right away, just for the sheer pleasure of watching his light brown skin become tinged with red. *I did that.* I unloaded the last bottle, then closed the fridge with my boot and leaned against it. “That was champagne.”

Tom scowled. “What for?”

“Champagne Friday.”

His lip curled. “What is that?”

“It’s when I, as CEO of GoodGuides”—I touched my chest with my hand and couldn’t help but notice his gaze lower to linger there for a few beats—“do something fun for my employees to reward them for all their hard work.”

“You serve them champagne every Friday?” His drawn brows were proof the concept simply didn’t compute.

I tilted my head. “It’s something called positive reinforcement. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

I loved lobbing insults to someone who was strong enough to take it. Alan and I used to adore doing that, but since I got sick, he didn’t go there anymore.

“I’ve heard of it, but I didn’t think it stretched as far as getting your employees drunk.”

“Even if you and your team aren’t mature enough to know how to enjoy alcohol in a social setting, rest assured my employees do,” I said, cool as a cucumber.

“What if somebody doesn’t drink?”

He thought he had me there, but I hadn’t drunk a drop of alcohol since my diagnosis. Of course I catered to the non-drinkers too. “Many people don’t, which is why I always make a delicious non-alcoholic option.”

His head jerked back slightly. He hadn’t been expecting that. He crossed his arms, making his ironed white dress shirt pull across his biceps interestingly.

*No, Jules.*

Like his posterior, I could not be noticing that. I could notice, though, that he was wearing the exact same black pants and white shirt combo as the day before. Was he doing the Steve Jobs work uniform thing?



“Why do you assume being obliged to socialize after hours is fun for your employees?” he asked in a deceptively soft voice. “My team would far rather go home early or get paid more.”

“Shocker.” A sizzle crackled through my veins. I’d forgotten the thrill of a good comeback.

He leaned toward me, and I got a whiff of some expensive-smelling cologne that made me light-headed for a second. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You haven’t exactly cultivated a lively work culture at Silobase.”

He shrugged. “Why would I? It’s called *work*. That’s what we’re here to do. I also happen to value my employees’ private lives.”

“So do I. Not that it’s any of your business how I run my company, but you’ll see for yourself that Champagne Friday takes place at four o’clock.”

I was hoping he would look thwarted, but instead his eyes widened in horror. “You serve them champagne during office hours?”

There was no winning with this guy. But since he’d walked up to me, I hadn’t thought of my itchiness or my missing prescription once. Maybe I didn’t want to win exactly. I wanted to string this along for as long as I could. “Yes.”

“Surely that has to be against some labor law.”

“You really are a barrel of laughs, aren’t you? Look, you can either spend your time researching the law, or you can come and socialize a bit with the rest of us. Up to you.”

Those biceps pressed against his white cotton shirt again as his muscles flexed in annoyance. “Even if it’s not criminal, it’s bad business. No, I’m not a ‘barrel of laughs.’ Unlike you, I don’t aspire to be. I’m a CEO, and I pride myself on working hard and smart. I expect the same of my team. Don’t you want your employees to get any work done?”

I laughed. “There are a hundred different ways to get work done. It’s arrogant to assume you’ve found the only one.”

“I don’t assume that,” he snapped back.

“Then why are you criticizing our approach when you know nothing about it?” The friction between us felt like being plugged into a charger. I wondered for a brief moment how it felt for him.

He raked his hand through his hair. It was a bit ridiculous really, thick and wavy and cresting off his brow like he was some sort of cartoon prince. “Look.” He frowned. “Silobase is at a critical juncture. I can’t have my employees distracted right now.”

“Well then, full disclosure—I made sure Alan brought extra flutes for your crew, and he’s invited the entire Silobase team.”

He drew himself up even taller. I could see from the unleashed power in his body, his lowered brow, and the fury in his eyes how he could seem formidable to his employees. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

Instead of backing down, I laughed. “Don’t act as though you’re being herded off to the guillotine. Honestly, men can be such drama queens.”

He pursed his lips. “I’ve been wondering something. If you’re such a man-hater, why is your COO male? I saw you two cuddling on the couch earlier. You two seem...close.”

Why had he been watching us? While I enjoyed jousting with him, the last thing I needed was him spying on me. I had far too many secrets I didn’t want him to know. “I’m not a man-hater,” I corrected him. “I’m just a tech-bro-culture-in-the-start-up-world hater.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Obviously. As for Alan, he’s my dearest friend.”

“Nothing more?”

Now I crossed my arms, mirroring his stance, and arched my left eyebrow. A crease appeared on his forehead, and his lips twitched as though he regretted the question that had escaped from his mouth. “How is that any of your business?” I asked.

He fixed me with those deep-set eyes of his. “If we’re all working in the same office, it helps to know the lay of the land.”

I wasn’t buying it, but if I answered for Alan, it would save him having to straighten out misunderstandings himself, something he had to do with his ridiculous family too much anyway. “I wouldn’t tell you this if Alan wasn’t completely open about it himself, but he’s gay. The man who eventually ends up with him will be the luckiest person on earth.”

Tom blinked. “You’re very loyal.”

“Yes, I am. Was there anything else?” I pushed myself away from the fridge, assuming Tom would take a step back to give me room, but he didn’t. Instead, he stood there, like an immobile statue, looking down at me. If only I was a foot or two taller.

We faced off until he sighed, catching me off guard. “Do you realize what a bad position you’re putting me in? I don’t want my employees to get used to drinking champagne every Friday—”

“Then order them not to join in. Whatever.”

“How does that make me look?” He tapped his chest with his hand, and it bounced off, as though his muscles were poured concrete.

“Like a killjoy?” I ventured.

“Exactly. Just because you run your company like a summer camp doesn’t mean the rest of us do.”

“Excuse me? Summer camp? Misogynistic and belittling, much?”

He blinked and blew air out of his nose. “You know that’s not what I meant. How is my team supposed to work when right next to us your team is swilling champagne and making a racket?”

“Do you *really* expect to get quality work out of your team during the last hour on a Friday afternoon, after they’ve worked hard all week?”

He shrugged those wide shoulders. “Why not? I do it. I work most weekends as well.”

He said this as though it was a point of pride. It was in start-up culture, but as much as I loved my company, I had a different perspective now. No amount of work and success could beat illness and death, despite the collective delusion that it could.

I shook my head. “All work and no play makes Tom a very, very sad person.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. Satisfaction flared in my chest. Life was trying to walk roughshod over me, just like Tom. Fighting with Tom made me feel like I wasn’t going to let either of them get away with it.

He opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut, turned on his heel, and stalked back into the open office.

*Victory.* It felt far better than it should, but the thing was, I hadn't had many of those lately.



That afternoon at four o'clock, Alan started setting up the flutes and champagne on the vast island in the kitchen. "I thought people could grab their flute here and then head over to mingle in the atrium. I've already cleared it with Tessa," he explained.

"Perfect," I said. "And the popcorn?"

"I'm going to put it in individual bowls, and people can just pick it up with their champagne."

"Nice."

Once Alan's set-up was underway, Tom's team started to crane their heads to look through the glass office walls. I could see the naked hope on their faces as they looked at Alan and then back at Tom, who was working at his desk with a scowl on his face.

At three o'clock on the dot, Alan and I waved our crew into the open kitchen and began popping corks and filling flutes. My team got giddy and loud, as they did every Friday.

This week they'd more than earned it. They'd recruited and vetted fourteen more local guides in cities such as Lisbon, Beijing, and Addis Ababa. We'd also made serious progress on brainstorming a better infrastructure for the client database so we could handle the increase in traffic we forecast in the future.

As always, we'd put out a few fires with guides who'd bailed or missed signals with our clients. That was part of the job too. Hell yeah, my team deserved to celebrate and be celebrated.

I was certain that, given the way Tom drove his team, his employees had achieved just as much. They deserved a break too, but Tom still hadn't looked up from his computer screen. I felt a pang of disappointment I couldn't quite figure out.

After all my employees had filed out, claiming their champagne flutes from Alan and toasting one another, I headed over to Tom's glass cube office within our shared space. His door, unlike Alan's

and mine, was closed. The longing looks of Tom's employees followed me as I opened the door and entered the inner sanctum of his space.

I leaned against the side of his immaculate, midcentury teak desk. My flowy velvet tunic was like the answer to one of those IQ questions: "Here is a spotless desk, an angrily working man, and a soft velvet tunic—which thing does not belong?"

"It's up to you," I began without preamble. "But there's plenty of champagne for your team." His room smelled vaguely of that cologne of his—of bonfires and aged leather.

I glanced up to see that all the Silobase employees had stopped working and were staring at us.

Tom fixed me with a fierce glare. His employees weren't even bothering to hide their imploring looks anymore. If it was up to me, I would invite them, but it wasn't my place to do so. There were some lines I wouldn't cross, and this was one of them. Even if I didn't like or agree with him, Silobase was Tom's company. If he wanted to be a despot boss, that was his prerogative.

"You've given me no choice, have you?" Tom growled. "Who could work with this sort of racket anyway?"

Perhaps he had a tiny little valid point. The decibel level of my team's chatter outside the office was loud, even inside Tom's glass box.

"Alan is going to herd people over to the atrium, so it won't be as noisy. We'll try to find a different area of Hubtech to set up the champagne and popcorn next week," I said. "Maybe this week, though, you could just consider this welcome drinks for the new space for both our companies?"

"That GoodGuides pays for? If I agree, I insist on paying you back for half."

I waved my hand. "You wouldn't have done this if we weren't here. Don't worry about it."

"No. I make a point of not being beholden to anybody."

"Ah," I said. "I'm starting to understand the whole Silobase origin story."

"What are you talking about?"

“Siloing yourself off from others. Siloing databases off from other databases... Trust me, it tracks.” Man, he could never handle being on the transplant waiting list like me. It was all about being beholden to another person in the most visceral way possible—I literally needed someone’s liver to stay alive.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “That’s not it at all. There was a gap in the market for our services. I did my research.”

“I’m sure you did.” I smiled. I couldn’t imagine Tom doing anything remotely spontaneous. If it wasn’t for the heat in his eyes, I would worry he was a robot. “I’m heading out now. Join us if you like. We’d be delighted to have you.”

Filled with the triumphant thrill of having taken the high road, I left our office, walked around Hubtech, and invited everyone to join us—the rent-by-the-day desk workers, the podcasters, the solo entrepreneurs...everyone—not just the people who worked in the GoodGuides and Silobase office space. I’d never liked anyone feeling left out.

Once I did that, I grabbed my mocktail ingredients from the cupboard where I’d stored them and began mixing up a large jug of virgin mojitos for those who didn’t want champagne or, like me, couldn’t drink alcohol for other reasons. We deserved a tasty, celebratory drink too. I’d been on the receiving end of far too many nasty Shirley Temples in the past several years not to put in an effort.

I chose one of the six virgin mojitos and took a sip. *Delicious.*

I handed out mock cocktails to anyone who wanted them, then went back to mix some more.

Tom must have finally given his team the green light, because the Silobase crew crashed all at once into the party like a herd of overenthusiastic penguins.

Alan waved to me with a grin. He looked like he was chatting with a few of our employees, as well as one of Tom’s guys and a few other people I didn’t recognize.

A special mojito in each hand, I was just about to continue passing them out when Tom materialized in front of me.

“Do you always get your way?” He glowered down his nose.

If he only knew just how the most important thing of my life—my health—was going the exact opposite of “my way.”

“No,” I said. “Nobody does.”

“I’m starting to wonder.”

“Virgin mojito?” I offered.

He reached for it, and our fingers touched. White-hot energy coursed up my arm and down my back. For a brief second, I wondered if I wasn’t lit up like a Christmas tree. Why did his hostility feel so delicious?

I looked away to gather my wits and scanned the atrium space. His team were all grinning ear to ear and chatting animatedly with my team and other people using the Hubtech space.

“Looks to me like my team weren’t the only ones who needed to blow off steam,” I observed.

He frowned. “*This* is how you like blowing off steam?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Getting to know new people. Chatting. Laughing. What’s so terrible about that?”

“I prefer to socialize on my own time.”

Tom struck me as many things, but a social butterfly wasn’t one of them. “Do you socialize a lot?”

His olive skin took on a rusty undertone. I thought back to how his hand had bounced off his chest when he tapped it. “Let me guess, you socialize at the gym?”

“No,” he said, but the corner of his mouth quivered interestingly. “I use my gym time to listen to tech podcasts.”

I took a sip of mojito. “What a riveting life you lead.”

He tapped his fingertips on the back of one of the yellow couches. “Better than a life of dissipation.”

“If that’s a barb for me, you’re missing your target.”

He let out a little puff of exasperation. “I barely see you eat, you’re permanently tanned like you live in a sunbed or on the beaches of Hawaii, you wear dark sunglasses indoors more than necessary, and you throw champagne parties once a week. Oh, and your COO has ‘the Third’ after his name—what am I supposed to think?”

Anger—real anger this time, not our little fencing matches—stirred in my chest. It was so easy for people to assume things about me when, really, they had no idea. “Maybe you could think there isn’t only one way to have a start-up?” I demanded. “Or just one way to be a founder? The way guys approach it isn’t the only way, or even the best way.”

“I never said it was.”

I pointed at him. “But that’s what you’re implying, isn’t it? Any start-ups that appeal to primarily female customers are poo-pooed as ‘soft,’ just the same way as rom-com movies, romance novels, and the whole category of books known as ‘women’s fiction.’ Why aren’t James Patterson and David Baldacci books classified as ‘men’s fiction’? They just get to be ‘fiction,’ don’t they?”

It was such a double standard, and men were so *blind* to it. It always made me want to fight, but especially when it came out of Tom’s mouth.

Tom didn’t answer, but the expression in his black eyes changed into something contemplative and doubtful.

“Cheers,” I said bitterly and clinked his glass with mine. “I’m off to socialize.”

“But—”

“I recommend you do the same,” I said over my shoulder.



## CHAPTER FOUR

The doorbell rang.

“Use your key!” I shouted from the couch.

Thank god it was a Sunday, because it'd been a bad day. One of those days when my body demanded to be in a horizontal position only.

I'd been leafing through a stack of photos from the glorious year Alan and I spent backpacking around Asia, trying to find some hope to cling to. I had to find a way to convince my jaded heart that life could go back to something innocent and carefree if I could just get a transplant.

Clattering noises floated over to me as Alan used his key to let himself into my loft. Alan couldn't do stealth. He'd always been obsessed with James Bond movies, but he would make the world's most inept spy.

He rushed into the open kitchen and living space. “Holy mother of hell,” he yowled. “This pizza is hot.” He dropped a steaming box on the kitchen counter and inspected his hands with an agonized expression.

“Gonna live?” I asked without sitting up.

He turned and caught sight of me, covered in blankets and with a glass of water, a thermometer, some bottles of medication, and a romance novel on the reclaimed wood coffee table in front of me.

“You really take the fun out of feeling sorry for myself these days,” he complained.

I threw a dramatic arm over my forehead and put on my best dying heroine voice. “We all have our burdens to carry.”

He chuckled as he came to perch by my feet on the edge of my ridiculously plush sectional. I always chose sitting—or lying, these days—in the corner of the couch, so I faced the kitchen and the spectacular floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the city lights and the boats and floatplanes coming and going in the harbor.

If I couldn't be out there enjoying the city on the weekend, at least I could look down on those who were from my luxurious pink velvet couch. It was more stimulating than staring at the exposed brick living room wall, in any case.

He pinched my big toe. "One of those days, eh?"

"Yeah." I nodded, blinking back tears that had sprung up from nowhere. I would not cry in front of him. As much as I loved and trusted Alan like a brother, I had a rule—I only cried alone, preferably in the shower.

"How bad is it?"

I sighed, caught up in a constant internal debate about how much I should tell him. He was the only person besides my medical team and to a lesser degree Mac and Annie I confided in, but I still let him see only the tip of the iceberg of my suffering.

I got the impression sometimes that my family—who knew my circumstances but avoided talking about my illness at all costs—believed I was faking being sick. They had it backward. Every second of every day I was faking being well. I hid the nausea I felt during every waking hour, the aches that racked my bones and joints, the itching that made me claw at my shins, scratching and gouging my skin. Alan knew a lot, but the details were too much of a burden, even for him.

"It was a pretty shitty day," I admitted. "Some days are just like that, and some days are better. I've tried to figure out if there's any rhyme or reason to it, but as far as I can tell it's just like me getting this stupid disease—"

"Total crapshoot," Alan finished. It wasn't the first time he'd heard me say it. I'd always been the type of person who wanted to control everything, but life had thrust me into a situation where I controlled nothing. I hadn't come to terms with that. At this point, I didn't think I ever would.

He squeezed my foot through the blanket. "I'm sorry, Jujube. You know if I could take it away..."

I flexed my toes in response. "Just knowing you're always here for me helps."

Around the time I was diagnosed, I'd had a flock of friends. Unlike Tom, I used to be the very definition of a social butterfly. In the first shock after my diagnosis, I'd told everybody. One by one, all of those friends retreated from my life. Eventually Alan was the only one left standing. I'd found out the hard way there was nothing like medical problems as a litmus test for friendship.

I lifted the stack of photos. "So does looking through these pictures."

He yelped and picked up the one on the top of the pile—of us volunteering at an elephant sanctuary outside Chiang Mai. I was feeding an elephant some long grass, and Alan was earnestly talking to the lovely Thai vet who treated them.

I was diagnosed six months after that trip. Our memories, and these photos, remained precious in my heart as the last blast of that carefree time when I didn't know I was living with a super rare terminal disease slowly percolating in my body. I thanked my lucky stars for every day of that blissful ignorance.

Our best days on the trip were when a friend of a friend of a friend put us in touch with a local who showed us around their favorite restaurants and shops and spots. The one rule was nothing on the traditional tourist track was allowed. Three years ago, when Alan's ex-boyfriend Ghastly Gary had left him bankrupt, and when I realized I needed to escape the family business, we started GoodGuides based on those amazing travel days.

Alan sighed. "I had such a crush on that vet. He was divine."

I snorted. "It's not like you did a stellar job of hiding it."

Alan looked up. "How dare you? I did too. After all, the man had a wife and five children. I'm no home wrecker."

"I was just joking," I soothed, stroking his arm.

"You know, I think we should do a big trip like this for every important birthday. We turned twenty in Asia, you in Bangkok and me in Bali. Where should we go for our thirtieth birthdays?"

"Can't promise I'm going to be around for that," I quipped, trying to make light of this limbo that had become my reality.

He looked up from the photos, stricken. "Don't talk like that, Jules. Of course you will." Alan's eyes went all shiny, and I wanted to

snatch back my words. I hadn't meant to say it that bluntly, but rather as a bit of dark humor to drive out the fear. From the wobble of Alan's chin, it had clearly backfired.

"It helps, you know, just being able to talk to you about it."

He shook his head. "If only I could donate..."

I slowly sat up, ignoring the protest on the right side of my body when I did. Even if I felt wretched, I would not lie on my couch when I had visitors like some sort of Regency romance heroine in a decline.

"I know you would," I said. "But there's no getting around the fact that we're not the same blood type. Besides, my team doesn't feel I'm sick enough yet to warrant a transplant."

"How sick do you have to get?" he exploded. "What sort of disease is this that you have to wait five years between a diagnosis and getting a transplant when there's no treatment, no cure... All that leaves you to do is—"

"Get sicker and sicker and try not to die during the wait. Yeah. It's bonkers."

He grimaced. "If it's this crazy-making for me, I realize there's no way I can imagine how it feels for you. You're so—"

I punched his shoulder, kinda playfully but also a bit harder than necessary. "Don't you dare call me brave. If you do, I really will feel like some sort of dying character in a TV soap opera."

He rolled his eyes. "All right. You're a complete wimp. There. Happy? When's your next appointment with Dr. Abebe?"

"Next week."

He bit his lip then, and I could feel his next question coming. "Don't you think maybe we should let the GoodGuides team in on what's going on?"

I shook my head, a visceral response more than anything logical or reasonable. "Mac and Annie feel like enough for now."

"But they haven't freaked out or made you feel bad, have they? Isn't that a good sign for the others?"

"They're great about it," I said. "The best, but there's still a different look in their eyes when they talk to me. I know it has to happen eventually, but just..." I twisted my soft fluffy blanket between

my fingers. I clung on to any bodily comforts I could find these days. “Can we delay it a little longer?”

“But—”

“I hate the idea of my employees looking at me the way people look at sick people.”

Alan opened his mouth, but I lifted my finger to let him know I wasn’t finished. “Don’t say it doesn’t change things, because it *does*. The other thing is I’m worried it will destabilize the company at such a pivotal time. We’re aiming for so much growth this quarter. If employees find out I’m sick, it’ll become the elephant in the room. They’ll start thinking their jobs might be in jeopardy, especially if they do an internet search on my disease. They’ll become distracted and might even fly the nest to look for more secure jobs elsewhere. Honestly, I wouldn’t blame them.”

Alan frowned at his hands.

“You know I’m right,” I said gently.

“But Jules, they’re going to find out eventually. There’s no way around that.”

“I know, but I want that to be when the next funding round is secured. Then we’ll be in a position to weather the storm.” Alan knew “the storm” meant me getting a transplant, or...not.

“We also need to get you on better financial footing,” I added.

When Ghastly Gary left Alan, he’d gone on a spending and traveling spree with Alan’s credit cards that put my bestie in a massive hole of debt we were still trying to dig him out of. The betrayal had destroyed Alan in every possible way, but with GoodGuides he was building himself up, little by little.

I felt like I was running a race in more ways than one with my transplant. I needed one as soon as possible to save my life, but at the same time I wanted to get Alan financially solvent before I headed into such a dicey surgery. My body was reminding me louder and louder that time was running out on both fronts.

“You shouldn’t be worrying about me with all you’ve got to deal with,” Alan chided.

“Of course I should. You’re my best friend. Do you think I enjoy seeing you live in that horrible shoebox with your rat children?”

The apartment Alan rented wasn't just cheap. It was an actual hovel on a street rife with drug dealers. I'd urged him to move into my loft so many times, but he was adamant about his independence. Part of me understood that. It was, after all, the only thing he had left after Ghastly Gary had finished with him.

In my own way, I was the same. Striking out with Alan and GoodGuides was one of the only empowering options when I'd been stripped of my health and possibly my future.

"My apartment is fine," he mumbled.

"Beg to differ."

He sighed. "I'm too hungry to argue any more about this tonight. I'm going to get our pizza before it gets cold. I got pepperoni." Because Alan was the best, he'd remembered pepperoni pizza was one of the only foods I could eat these days.

Before getting sick I ordered my pizza topped with the weirdest combinations possible—anchovy, pineapple, and mushroom was one of my faves. Now I could barely stomach anything. Bile rose in my throat, but I knew I had to at least try to choke some down to keep my strength up.

"Sure," I said. "One slice."

He went to get the pizza and handed me a plate before settling down on the couch beside me. The sun was setting, and the sky had turned flamboyant colors of orange and crimson that were reflected in the water. I thanked the universe for this view every day.

I took a bite. My stomach lurched in protest. How could pizza, my favorite food, not taste good anymore?

I longed to feel that rumble of hunger in my stomach again, to salivate when I caught a sniff of delicious food. I hadn't felt either of those things for the past year at least. Having no appetite stripped so much of the pleasure from life. I was quickly discovering that when liver disease got near the end it picked up speed like a freight train without brakes.

Alan was stuffing his face beside me, occasionally licking tomato sauce from his fingers. He nodded at the pink-and-lilac cover of my latest romance novel.

"How is that book?" he asked.

“It’s *amazing*. It’s witty and swoony and feels like bright sunshine when I’m reading it.”

He smiled at my enthusiasm. “That’s good.”

I knew Alan was a devoted reader of sci-fi, gritty murder mysteries, and thrillers to the exclusion of much else besides a few business books.

“More than good. For several minutes at a time when I’m reading it, I forget about this liver nightmare. I swear to god, I don’t think I’d survive without romance books.”

“Yeah, I imagine depressing shit isn’t what you’re in the mood for.”

“Nope. I need funny. Bright. Clever.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that you know all your books will end happily?”

I stared at him.

“I mean, doesn’t it take away from the reading experience if you know what’s going to happen?” he tried again.

“Are you kidding? That’s the best part. I can relax and enjoy knowing a happy ending is guaranteed.” Especially now, I didn’t add, when my own happy ending felt like a long shot.

He untied his Timberlands and put his socked feet on the coffee table. “I’m reading a good Ian Rankin novel myself.”

“Uh. Dark, moody streets of Edinburgh? Corpses? I usually love his books too, but I just can’t do dark right now.”

He started in on another slice of pizza out. “So definitely no telling anyone else at GoodGuides for now?”

“No, but you, me, Mac, and Annie can start making contingency plans tomorrow for my future transplant vacay. Promise.”

I had been dreading this, and the decisions around how much to tell Alan, let alone Mac and Annie. Most of the other people I met online with PSC got extremely sick before their transplants. Some didn’t get their transplants in time or died from one of the many issues that could crop up on the steeplechase there. I was fast discovering the hard way that a body really did need a healthy liver to survive.

No one was handing out guarantees I would get a transplant before it was too late, or that I would make it through the procedure even if an organ became available in time.

“All I’m saying is let’s not tell anyone *yet*. I’m too tired tonight, but let’s book a private breakout room at Hubtech for first thing in the morning and we can get started, okay?”

He sighed deeply. “Of course, Jujube.”

A familiar pang of guilt coursed through me. “I hate that you have to shoulder the weight of being my best friend.”

“Are you kidding me?” Alan did a pretend face-slapping motion in the air. “Snap out of it, Jules. I’m your person. That’s never going to change.”

It was true. We’d been each other’s people for a long time. Alan and I had both been brought up in the upper crust of Victoria’s society, and only managed to get through the parties, Christmas balls, and Easter brunches that peppered our childhood because we had each other.

I was the odd one out because I wasn’t as skinny or blue-eyed as the rest of my family, not to mention the fact that I wasn’t gifted at maintaining the shiny exterior they were so obsessed with projecting at all times. I was too much of an overthinker and too much of a questioner.

Alan says he always knew he was gay, but he didn’t dare come out until he was sixteen. Even then, his family made it a nightmare for him.

I thanked my lucky stars we’d always had each other—the two outcasts on the sidelines, making cutting asides about everyone else.

“I still can’t believe none of your family has come forward to be tested as a match,” he said. “Do they even *know* people can donate part of their liver and it regrows—not to mention saves your life?”

I put my half-eaten slice of pizza on the plate in front of me. All of a sudden, nausea slammed through me. Hardly a coincidence that it happened when we broached the topic of my family.

“They know,” I said quietly. “I told them all about the process over a year ago, and that I had to start looking for a living donor and get



listed for a deceased donation.”

“And *none* of them showed any willingness, not even a little bit?”

They hadn’t. They’d professed their undying love for me, but being sick had made me realize how actions spoke much louder than words. There was a stark difference between the people who showed up and those who didn’t. Alan did. My family didn’t.

“It’s a pretty big ask,” I admitted.

“But they’re your family.” He cracked his knuckles. “I know I’m not helping by harping on that, but I just find it so unbelievable. I mean, maybe your parents are too old, but one of your siblings surely has the same blood type as you.”

“Chances are, yes.”

“How can they just let you—”

“It hurts, okay?” I said. “It’s knowledge about them I never wanted and can’t undo. Still, I have to recognize it’s a pretty big ask for anyone—even my family—to donate half of one of their major organs. It’s a major surgery.”

Alan scoffed. “I would do it in a heartbeat.”

I reached over and lay my hand on top of his. “I know you would, but they’re not like you. They never have been. That’s one of the million reasons I’m so lucky to have you.”

He nodded, frowning. “I’m so angry with them, and Tom too, despite his good butt. I want to be there when he finds out what’s really going on so I can see the expression on his face.”

“Don’t tell him,” I warned.

“Of course not!” Alan said. “What do you take me for?”

“Sorry. Knee-jerk reaction.” I sat up like I’d received an electric shock and ate the rest of my pizza. I even asked Alan to get me a second slice. Even thinking about my conflict with Tom had the magic effect of zapping me back to life, even when I felt half-dead.

“What are we watching tonight?” Alan asked, nodding toward the TV.

“*The Proposal*,” I said. “Ryan Reynolds and Sandra Bullock.”

He groaned and dropped his head back on the couch. “Another rom-com? Not *again*.”

“Yes...again. Trust me, this one is seriously the best. I could watch it a thousand times.” I had watched it almost a hundred times, at least.

“Whyyyyyy?” he howled. “There’s this new Icelandic murder mystery on Netflix—”

“Alan, you know the state of things in my life right now. Do you seriously think I’m in the mood for blue camera filters and a bunch of dead people in snow drifts?”

“Fine,” he sighed. “But just for the record, you’re bonkers.”

“Would you have me any other way?”

He grinned and put his feet back on the coffee table. “Of course not. Let’s get our rom-com on.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Alan and I had sequestered ourselves in one of Hubtech's private meeting rooms with Mac and Annie to start on the contingency planning for my absence. Our glass cube within a cube office was far too visible. I didn't want any of our other employees, or Tom, seeing the inevitable distress on our faces.

I knew I needed to push through this for Alan's sake, but every cell in my body itched to escape this meeting. I was capable of confronting conversations about my transplant and possible death matter-of-factly, like I was discussing the merits of a revenue versus growth start-up model, but the fear and disbelief that churned within me while I did it were anything but matter-of-fact.

"We'll need you to get me up to speed on the European guide recruitment, okay?" Annie said. "I need to build a platform for that."

"How do you feel about that project?" Alan asked.

Annie's perfectly pink lipsticked mouth pulled down at the corners, and I could almost see the wheels spinning in that formidable brain of hers. "The thing is, as you know, I'm first and foremost a coder for things like integrated websites with background automation pathways. Database architecture is a completely different beast. I need a bit of time to teach myself how to do it properly."

"I hate to suggest this," Mac said, leaning back in her chair and twirling one of the many cartilage piercings high up on her ear, "but we are sharing an office space with a bunch of people who do nothing but eat and breathe databases all day long."

None of us said anything for a long while.

"This vibe is hella weird," Mac finally spoke. "Did I miss a memo? Is Silobase our enemy?"

I sighed. "No. I have no problem with Silobase or its employees. It's the CEO, Tom. He's not an enemy, exactly. More of a..." I searched in vain for the right word.

“Adversary,” Alan supplied. That wasn’t quite it. Tom was also an annoyance yet strangely necessary for me at the moment, but “adversary” would have to do.

“Yeah. Adversary,” I said. “For lack of a better word.”

Mac and Annie exchanged a baffled look. I usually wasn’t wishy-washy about anything.

“Look, just leave that with Alan and me. We’ll discuss how best to approach it in light of me eventually having to be away for a bit,” I said.

“And we need to create a Dropbox link to share the HR updates on our full roster of guides.” Alan deftly changed the subject.

I nodded and bent my head to write “HR updates/guides” in my notebook to give myself a chance to push down the knot of emotions currently trying to fight their way up from my chest in a primal scream.

It felt so deranged to be talking calmly and rationally about a transplant. Would I get one? Would I die before? Would I die during? Would I die afterward, or would I survive? All these were possibilities, and the uncertainty made the air around me feel denser, pressing against me until I felt paper thin.

*Please, please, let there be an earthquake, a tsunami, a fire drill—anything to get me out of this room long enough to fill my lungs with air again.* Tom’s face flashed in my mind. I needed to skirmish with him to snap myself out of this and feel like me again.

“Jules, are you feeling sick?”

I felt Alan’s hand on my forearm and jumped in my seat. “What?”

“You went somewhere there,” he said. “We can do this later if you want.”

I met his bright blue eyes and saw the crease of worry between them. Making contingency plans for my declining health would never be easy. I had to power through. I owed him that.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Sorry, just haven’t had enough caffeine this morning I guess.” I felt nauseous and chilled to the bone too, of course, but then I always felt sick, so what was the point of focusing on that? “Let’s do this.”

“Okay,” he said, uncertain, but somehow we managed to cover our projected HR needs and the new system we intended to put in place for recruiting and interviewing.

The whole time, my head swam and I felt like I was going to collapse with terror when faced with the series of unappealing options that comprised my future.

We had launched into what documents we needed to pull together for our next investment round—a big one—when there was a knock on the door.

I looked up from my notebook. There was a square glass window inset in the door, and Tom’s face filled it. He stared only at me. Hope leaped in my chest. I’d never been so happy to see someone I didn’t like.

“What does he want?” Alan muttered.

“No idea,” I said.

Mac looked at Tom’s face through the window, then back at me. “I’m kind of getting the adversary thing now.”

“Why is he glowering at you, Jules?” Annie asked.

“That could just be his face,” I said. “If not, I think it’s because I’m far too much fun for his liking.” Was he here for something that would require me to get out of the meeting and spend some time in his galvanizing presence? I sent up a silent prayer to the stars.

Alan sighed heavily, got up, and opened the door.

“Tom,” he said pleasantly. Alan had such better manners than me. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I need your CEO,” Tom said, pinning me with his eyes like a butterfly on a specimen board. A flash of fury and a quiver of anticipation ran up my spine.

Mac and Annie leaned back in their ergonomic chairs, clearly ready to enjoy the show.

“Well? Are you coming?”

I arched an eyebrow calculated to see just how hot that fire in his eyes would go. “Why would I?” I said. “You haven’t even told me what for.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed, as though I was the most exhausting person he’d ever had the misfortune of coming across.

The knowledge I was getting under his skin tingled through me.

“It’s Tessa,” he said. “She’s convocated both of us for a meeting.”

Tessa? She was the director of Hubtech and one of the people in tech I most admired. For Tessa, I would go.

“When is this meeting?” I asked.

Tom checked his watch, one of those space-age-looking chrome things that probably contained enough data and equipment for a flight to Mars. “Five minutes ago.”

I pushed myself up from my chair and walked over to Tom. “Let’s go.” I looked back. “Sorry about the interruption, everyone. We’ll pick this up later.”

“Come find me after,” Alan said, a mystified expression on his face.

“Of course.”

Tom turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. I followed, relief and curiosity pushing my chills and nausea to the background.

He slowed his pace and dropped beside me. “What were you meeting about?” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

I stared up at him. “Confidential.”

He let out an angry little huff. “I was just trying to make conversation.”

Friendly chitchat wasn’t what I needed from Tom. “Well, it isn’t any of your business,” I said. “And why do you want to start civil conversation? I thought we’d established that we don’t exactly get along.”

He stopped in his tracks, looking down at me. His eyes were as intent as ever, but there was something new there. Was that genuine surprise, maybe even regret?

“We don’t?” he asked.

Had he hit his head recently? “Well...no,” I said, suddenly unsure of my footing in that moment.

He cleared his throat, visibly collecting himself. “I appreciate you bringing me up to speed, then. Don’t forget that as far as Tessa is concerned, we’re supposed to be coworking well together. If we let on that we didn’t start on the right foot—”

I snorted. “Not starting off on the right foot? Is that what you call insulting me and my business model?”

He waved his hand. “If we let on that we can’t work well together, one or both of us could lose this subsidized office space.”

I hadn’t considered that, but he was right. The office space was an incredible deal and a key point at such a crucial time in our company’s growth. Losing it would slow us down so much it wasn’t something I even wanted to think about. It was not an option.

Besides, my team had accomplished an incredible amount of work since moving into Hubtech. The entire Hubtech space and maybe even the synergy of working in the same air as the industrious Silobase team was proving to be a game-changer for GoodGuides. Even though I was getting sicker, being around Tom was making *me* get so much more work done too.

I must have grimaced, because Tom demanded, “Why did your mouth just go like that?”

“Just working up the ability to be pleasant with you,” I fibbed. “It’s not easy. I’m sure it’s not for you either.”

He tilted his head. “You don’t know that.”

“Uh. I think I do.”

“Are you done with your mind-reading?” he demanded. “She’ll be waiting for us, and Tessa doesn’t strike me as a person one leaves waiting.”

He was right about that. “Yes. Let’s do this.”

Even though acting like Tom and I were happy coworkers would be a stretch, it was still a thousand times preferable to being locked in that office with Alan, Mac, and Annie, facing down the question mark that was my future.



Tessa’s office was prime real estate in the converted Hubtech warehouse. The floor-to-ceiling window behind her desk looked over the harbor where a tugboat was chugging along, dragging a log boom behind it.

No overstatement here—Tessa was an icon in the tech industry. Female. Black. Wildly successful. She'd sold her commercial communications platform for a few hundred million dollars and was now an angel investor for other start-ups. She had created Hubtech and subsidized space for companies like GoodGuides and Silobase to give worthy start-ups a leg up.

It dawned on me that Tessa had chosen Tom, or at least Silobase, as worthy of help. I valued her opinion, so I wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

She waved us to sit in the comfy armchairs on the opposite side of her desk.

"So," Tessa said, getting right down to business, looking gorgeous in a bright green pantsuit, her hair beautifully braided and piled on top of her head. "I've brought you two together to get an update on how your coworking situation is coming along."

Tom and I exchanged a glance. Could we do this? This being-friendly thing felt fake. Fighting with him, on the other hand, felt effortless.

Then Tom's face did something I'd never seen before. Something I hadn't even imagined was possible. His mouth curved into a smile, and his eyes became bracketed by—*what fresh hell is this?*—attractive crinkles.

*Goddammit.* Where had he been hiding those? They softened everything about him and made his flinty eyes liquid. My heart flipped.

"Wonderfully," he said, his voice deep and smooth as silk.

I was so shocked I didn't smile right away. Tom cleared his throat, casting an expectant look.

Right. I had to play along. This was like improv. I forced my mouth into a grin and met Tom's eyes again. They sparkled with suppressed laughter.

Tessa's gaze moved back and forth between us. "What's going on?"

"Shared joke," Tom covered for me. "We didn't get along when we first met. We'd both come off terrible days, but now we're making up for lost time. We have a lot in common."



I repressed a snort of laughter. We could not be more different. Had Tom really been having a bad day that first time we met, or was that just another part of this play-acting?

“You do?” Tessa demanded. “Uh, that’s surprising.”

“Really?” I crossed one leg over the other and glimpsed Tom’s gaze fall to the long leather boots I wore under my dress. “Why is that? We’re both CEOs of start-ups, after all.”

Tessa steepled her hands in front of her. “The reason I chose the two of you is specifically because you are such an unlikely match. Completely different types of tech companies, completely different work cultures, completely different CEOs.” Tessa splayed out her perfectly manicured hands. Her nails were painted the same green as her jumpsuit.

That explained so much. If only Tessa knew how successful she’d been. From the very start, Tom and I mixed like oil and water.

“You sound disappointed we get along,” I pointed out. Tom gave me a little nod of approval that warmed me inside. It was strange to be on the same side as him.

“No, not at all,” she said. “I’m delighted. I think you two can learn so much from each other.”

“I think Tessa is correct, don’t you, Jules?” Tom said in a caressing voice I’d never heard come out of him before. He was enjoying this. He could not know about the goose bumps that had just rippled up my legs.

“Of course, Tom,” I said in a voice even more purring and seductive. His eyes flew open for a split second and flashed with something as incendiary as molten lava.

I looked away, shaken.

Tess looked back and forth between us with a shrewd expression. “Excellent,” she continued briskly. “Start-ups that are similar, or even parallel, can’t learn that much from each other.”

“I suppose not.” Tom laced his fingers together over his knee and leaned forward in his chair.

“Whereas with you two, there were specific reasons why I wanted you together in that space.”

“Can you expand on that?” I asked.

Tom nodded in agreement.

“Tom, I was hoping you could learn from the customer-driven, lively and diverse company culture, and interaction style of Jules’s business,” Tessa said. “And to make you see that both your team and your marketing efforts need to recognize the earth is not entirely populated by men.”

Tom looked down at his lap, and the bicep closest to me flexed. *Vindication*. “Point taken,” he said.

“Jules, I was hoping you’d be able to learn from the hard tech side of Tom’s business and equip yourselves to better perform in that arena. Tech is the reality of GoodGuides if you truly want to become the Airbnb of local guides for travelers. The back end of your business has to be cutting edge and beyond reproach to make your customer interface experience as on-brand and smooth as possible.”

Tom looked at me, his thumb thoughtfully tapping his chin, his eyes sparkling with triumph.

“Yes,” I said, working hard to swallow that, even though I knew she was right. “That actually sounds very clever—”

“That isn’t the only reason I summoned you here.”

Tom and I shared a questioning glance that convinced me he was just as much in the dark as me.

“I also happen to have an exciting proposition for you,” Tessa said. “Well, for one of you, at least.”

Tom and I leaned forward in our chairs.

“I was contacted by an angel investor who prefers to remain anonymous.”

We both nodded, barely breathing now. Money equaled growth. The more money, the more growth, and angel investors could be game-changers. Alan could pay off his debt in one swoop and get a nice place to live, and I could go into transplant knowing that—

“They are prepared to offer one of your companies a several-million-dollar investment to help you on your way. I will set a date for your pitches just before Christmas. That gives you almost four months to prepare.”

Several million? That wasn’t just growth; such a windfall would propel one of our companies into the stratosphere in an instant. But

why just one of us instead of splitting it two ways?

“Why only one winner?” Tom asked. Great. Now he was some sort of mind reader too.

“The angel doesn’t want to dilute the transformative effects of their investment by splitting it between two companies.”

Something about that didn’t sit right with me. “Tessa,” I said. “If your initial motivation for putting us together in this space was collaboration and cross-learning, doesn’t adding this extreme competition factor directly conflict with your vision?”

Tom nodded, and I couldn’t detect any mockery or play-acting anymore. So he didn’t like the winner-takes-all scenario either? That surprised me.

“That was a mouthful.” Tess laughed. “It’s also perfectly true. Adding that level of competition right now works at cross-purposes, but I reasoned that it’s such a pivotal opportunity for one of you that I couldn’t turn it down on your behalf. Of course, if you both agree you don’t want it—”

“No!” We both shook our heads. We were on the same page here. I guess that made Tom and me competitors, with a pot of millions stoking our division. Well, so be it. These stakes would fan that angry spark inside me and keep me going.

I had changed so fundamentally since getting sick. I used to avoid competition like the plague, whether it be track meets in elementary school or competing with a friend for the same guy. I always opted to back out—not wanting anything to do with the drama. Now, though, I was willing to do whatever it took to keep fighting. If that meant leaning into this antagonism with Tom, so be it.

“I think I can safely say we both want it.” Tom shifted a glance my way.

I gave him a small nod. I needed this. Alan needed this. I was twenty-six. I couldn’t stop fighting yet.

“May the best person win,” Tess said in dismissal. “And don’t think you’ve fooled me for one second. If you could refrain from killing each other, that’d be ideal.”



Tom's body sagged when we rounded the corner after leaving Tessa's office. "This is not going to end well."

"Maybe not for you," I quipped.

He stopped once we were out of audio range of Tessa's office. "You're going with that? You want to continue bickering?"

"Seeing as I seem to annoy you by merely existing, do I have another choice?"

He raked a hand through his hair. Theoretically that should make it look worse, but vexingly it didn't. It just exaggerated the swoop and made it seem even more freshly GQ model-ish. "Look, what I said in there about having had a horrible day when we first met is true. I apologize for being a—what did you call me?"

"An asshat."

"Ah, yes. How could I have forgotten? The truth is you and your company caught me off guard at a really bad time, but I'm ready to end this antagonism if you are."

Didn't he know an apology was the last thing I needed from him? "The fact is we're in direct competition now for a game-changing amount of money. There's no way around that."

"Look," he said after a deep inhale. "You don't need this like I do."

I couldn't believe my ears, especially after his apology. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

He crossed his arms in front of him again. He loved this stern pose—did he lie in bed like that? I wondered briefly where he lived. I had a hard time picturing him sleeping. If he did—which was far from a sure thing—I pictured Tom laid up like a vampire, in a dark drawer like they have in those cheap hotels in Tokyo, his arms across his chest. A bat cave had to be involved somehow.

"I've just noticed you don't stay late at night like I do, and you don't work weekends either. You must know that's very unusual for a start-up CEO," he said, his tone defensive.

I couldn't tell him I needed to go home early to lie on my couch so I wouldn't pass out on the floor at Hubtech. I couldn't explain I'd been feeling light-headed the past few days, which was never a good sign. "Have you ever heard of work-life balance or the concept of working from home?" I demanded instead. "They're actual things, you know."

He threw out his hands, frustrated. "I came from nothing, Jules. Less than nothing. I get the impression you had some solid financial backing behind you to begin with."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Tom's accusations stung all the more because they weren't entirely untrue. My parents had never invested a cent in GoodGuides, but I did start off with \$100,000 in my bank account, a swanky loft that I'd been gifted for my eighteenth birthday, and a fancy Mini Cooper I'd sold to put the money into the company.

He sighed. "Let's stop playing. It means I've got your number—privileged kid with tons of connections who was given money by her parents to mess around in the tech pond. It's no commentary on your talent or your brains or anything else, but I've seen it before."

"You have no right to judge me," I said, seething with the rage that I'd been bottling up since our first interaction. "You know nothing."

He shoved his hands not his pockets and nodded slowly. "I may know more than you think."

Ice ran through my veins. He didn't know about my PSC, did he? *Please, no.* I had to get away from him.

"Nothing," I repeated and turned on my heel to find Alan.

## CHAPTER SIX

A week later as I was coming up from Neighbours with my third black coffee of the day, I caught sight of the most undesirable scene imaginable. Something so bad, I couldn't have even contemplated it as a possibility.

But it was all too real.

My stomach dropped to my ankles, and I clutched my takeaway cup tighter. Through the glass of our shared office, I could see Tom talking with my sister Dominique.

What was she telling him? In my family, talking about my health was avoided as much as humanly possible, but Dominique had always been a rogue missile. She had an impressive track record of saying the wrong thing at precisely the wrong moment.

I rushed through the door, reminding myself she was just like the other members of my immediate family. To them, my illness was a weakness—a blemish on the perfectly ivory skin of the Kelly family reputation. As far as they were concerned, it had to be hidden from the public like a shameful family secret, as though I liked to collect toenail clippings in my spare time.

Tom turned to me slowly, his white teeth gleaming under the natural light that flooded our office even on the grayest days.

"Your sister came to visit your new office!" he declared. "Isn't that nice?"

I could think of many choice words for my sister's visit, but *nice* was definitely not one of them.

"Dominique!" I said, grabbing her arm and tugging her away from Tom. "What a surprise. Have you been waiting here long?"

"I just got here." Rooted to the spot, she fluttered her lengthened and dyed eyelashes at Tom.

"You were nowhere to be found." Tom arched a brow. "Again."

With my hand still wrapped around the coffee cup, I lifted my middle finger so only he could see.

He bit back a smile, a gleeful sparkle in his eyes.

Dominique peered at my face, her perfectly tweezed brows pulled together in confusion.

God, to have alabaster skin again like she still had. Instead, my failing liver made my complexion look like one of those crocodile-skinned retirees in Florida, living in a gated community called La Boca de Soledad or something like that. I might as well take up shuffleboard. I used to curse my pale Irish skin—never again if I was lucky enough to get a new liver.

I tugged again, and finally she let me drag her into GoodGuides territory. I marched her directly into my and Alan's office.

Tom's eyes followed us, hot on my skin.

When I shut the door behind me, I let her go.

"Ow!" She rubbed her arm. "That hurt, Juliette."

"Jules," I reminded her for the hundredth time. "That's what everyone has always called me except for you and François and Mom and Dad."

"Mother gave the three of us beautiful French names." She pouted. "It's disrespectful not to use them. I would never want anyone to call me 'Dom.'" She shuddered.

I put my hands on my hips. "Dominique, we don't have a drop of French blood. We're *Irish*."

She shook her head. "You'll never understand elegance."

"I sure hope not if it's just another word for pretension."

She flipped her smooth and shiny blond hair. "In any case, you're not looking very Irish anymore. You look like you've been living in a beach shack in Hawaii."

That sounded like absolute paradise to me, whereas for the rest of my family, I knew it would be hell on earth.

I sighed. "I've explained to you this, Dominique. It's jaundice."

She pursed her lips and gave me the real Kelly inspection—the one Mom used to give us every morning before we left for the day. We were never allowed to have a hair out of place or a sock slouching down around our ankles. Even our weekend jeans had creases ironed into them by the maid. There was more than a

nugget of truth to what Tom had intuited about my privileged upbringing.

“You’ve lost more weight,” she said, still scanning me up and down. “Look at your collarbones! I’m so jealous.”

Weight was falling off me, and it was scary. I’d always been on the curvy side, which incurred my mother’s constant disapproval. I’d always thought it might be nice to be downright skinny like I was now, but it was terrifying.

For one thing, the constant nausea had robbed me of enjoying food. Eating had always been one of the greatest pleasures in my life. Also, rapid weight loss like I’d been experiencing was an unmistakable sign that my disease was gaining momentum and my body was no longer absorbing nutrients.

Every pound I lost stressed me out exponentially, but the grand irony of it all was the fact that I’d never received so many compliments on my appearance. Doctors saw me as sick, but other people, especially my image-conscious family, were envious of my “tanned” liveness. Female body image in our society was screwed up beyond belief.

“Losing weight is not a good sign for me, Dominique,” I reminded her.

She snorted. “How can losing weight *not* be a good thing?”

Subtlety never worked with my family. A brick wall required a sledgehammer. “I’m losing weight because I’m dying. A transplant is my only hope.”

I always hated the spurt of hope in my heart at moments like this. Maybe Dominique or our brother, François, would pull through after all and offer to be tested to donate. I knew I had to respect their decisions not to, but... How could their refusal to even consider it *not* affect me?

“You know I’m out of the question,” she said, squashing down my hope before it even caught fire. “Because of my shellfish allergy.”

“That has nothing to do...” I began before running out of steam. Why was I torturing myself like this again? They had said no. End of story. Coercing anyone into donation was ethically wrong. I had to be a bigger person than go down that road.



“Besides, Mom and Dad have forbidden François and me to even consider it.”

I wished I was beyond feeling the dagger of rejection from my family slide into my heart, but apparently not. “Why?” I demanded. “You and François are both legal adults now.”

Dominique looked at me with sympathy. “Yes, but as Mother and Father pointed out, François and I are young and so talented and have our whole lives ahead of us. Besides, the family business needs us.”

I blew out a gust of air and stared down at my suede flats, trying to get my anger under control. The fucking family business—our high-end family department store—had always been more important than our individual lives or happiness. The store was the most important family member by a long shot. I should have known it would come back to that. It always came back to that.

“It’s a huge surgery,” Dominique said.

She had a point there. “Yeah,” I admitted. It was. There was no getting around that. Doubt rained down on me. How could I consider asking such a thing of her, or of anyone? It felt impossible.

“Don’t you see? Mom and Dad can’t lose *two* children.”

“What?”

“You could die during the surgery.” Another point for Dominique. That stark reality had been spelled out to me on numerous occasions. “And then, if one of us donated, we would risk dying as well. Imagine our poor parents then!”

Exhaustion filled every cell, and I leaned against the edge of my desk. Nothing could drain the fight out of me faster than dealing with my family. “Right,” I murmured.

“I’m so sad about it, you know.” She pulled a pouty moue. “All my friends are helping me with my grief around not being able to donate. I’ve even had to book appointments with my massage therapist once a week instead of once every two weeks.”

I had no words left inside me. I shouldn’t be surprised that my parents would sideline the sick child who failed to live up to the family name and put all the hopes and dreams on the healthy,

compliant ones. In my parents' world, I was certain it made complete sense.

Pressure was building behind my eyes, but I refused to cry over my family. No more. I had to change the topic for my self-preservation.

"What did you and Tom talk about?" I asked.

She gave an indignant little shrug. "I was amazed to discover he didn't know you were a Kelly, as in the *department store* Kellys. Why didn't you tell him? How can you possibly be ashamed of where you came from?"

*You have no idea how easily.*

Tom was going to have a field day with this new information. For three generations, my family had owned and managed the most expensive, hoity-toity department store in the city called, not coincidentally, Kellys. It screamed luxury and exclusivity, and it played into every assumption Tom had made about me. I ran my fingers through my hair and hated that when I drew my hand away, some hair came with it. Great. Thinning hair. This end-stage liver disease was just getting more glamorous by the day.

"I prefer to be more incognito here," I said. "You wouldn't understand."

"No, I wouldn't," she said. "But I do want to understand you, Juliette. Actually, the reason I came here is because I have been talking with François, and we were thinking it might be good to schedule some therapy as a family."

That sounded like the seventh circle of hell. "What? Why?" I spluttered.

"Like I said, I'm dealing with a lot of stress and guilt around you being sick, and so is François, so we were thinking the three of us could talk it through with a therapist I found—she's very good apparently. I heard she charges New York prices!" Her peaches-and-cream face lit up at this.

*Unbelievable.* Should I be surprised my siblings had found a way to make my illness all about them? *No.*

"Sorry, Dominique," I said. "That's not going to work for me."

"But it's your responsibility." She pouted, looking thwarted.

“It’s not my responsibility to make you all feel better about my illness, but I don’t think you will ever understand that. I have to get to work.”

“But, Juliette! I think it will be really healing for all of us.”

That wasn’t even worth a response. “Can you find your way out?”

“Of course, but first tell me about Tom.”

How long was she going to drag this out for? “Why?”

“He’s cute. No, cute isn’t the right word. He looks dangerous. In a good way.”

“He wears the same thing to work every day,” I said.

Dominique scrunched up her face. I knew my sister well. “Really? Ew.”

“Really. Bye, Dominique.”

“Well, bye.” She frowned. “I’ll say hello to François and Mom and Dad for you. You really need to come for Sunday dinner more often.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I said, something Alan and I were in the habit of saying when we needed more time to find and excuse to get out of a request.

“You do that,” she huffed.

I waved her off with a throbbing mix of relief and sadness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

As far as miserable obligations went—medical appointments, biopsies, and visits from family members—I preferred to pack everything into the same twenty-four hours rather than drag out the despair.

As luck would have it, my appointment with transplant hepatologist Dr. Abebe was that very afternoon. I loved the guy. I truly did. It was just he was unfailingly honest about where things stood, and the way I'd been feeling, I was fairly certain things didn't stand anywhere good.

His waiting room was in the hospital. Even though he tried to cheer it up with African artwork and bright orange paint, that familiar scent of antiseptic in my nostrils made my heart feel as though it was beating out of my chest. Medical trauma was a real thing, and it was just as physical as it was mental.

How did I get here, sitting in a hospital waiting room instead of the GoodGuides office overseeing the onboarding of new guides? How did I go from being the picture of health to someone who was dying and on the transplant list? My brain still couldn't compute it.

At the same time, I knew from spending so much time in hospitals and medical offices that they were full of healthy people whose bodies suddenly turned on them. Not even the marathon-running, manifesting, organic-eating vegans were immune. All it took was a single cell going rogue or a funky hand of genetic cards being triggered.

They all shared the same shell-shocked expression I was sure I wore most of the time. Our eyes broadcast the same question: *Is this really happening?*

I knew just how lucky I was to have Dr. Abebe coordinating my care. He was unlike any doctor I'd ever come across. He treated me like an adult with a brain and was up-front and honest with me. It was harsh at times, but necessary.

After what felt like a century but in reality was probably only minutes, he popped his head out of his office door.

“Jules!” he said. “Come on in. I was just taking a moment to review your latest bloodwork and scans.” His office had more brightly colored artwork, but there was no camouflaging the examination table or the fibroscan machine—used for measuring liver density—pushed in the corner.

I shut the door behind me and flopped into one of his office chairs. I took a deep gulp of air, gathering my courage around me. “How do they look?”

He sat down and grimaced. While it was truly a gift to have a specialist who treated me like an actual person instead of just a medical case, the bad news had been relentless lately.

“That good, huh?” I asked with a bitter laugh.

“They’re pretty terrible,” he admitted, his eyes meeting mine. “Sorry, Jules.”

“Terrible enough to get a transplant?” I’d officially been on the transplant list for a year but was still nowhere near the top.

He shook his head. “No. And I’m not going to dance around it—I’m worried. Like I’ve told you before, with PSC and other biliary liver diseases, you can be deathly ill with sepsis and cholangitis like you are now but still not have a high enough MELD to qualify for a deceased organ.”

Like all the other people on the liver transplant list, my life was decided by a number called a MELD score, which ranged from one to fortyish. It was calculated from the results of four different blood tests and estimated my chances of surviving their disease during the next three months. The higher the number, the higher I would be on the transplant list to receive a liver from a deceased donor if one became available.

I needed to move up the list. By a lot. The MELD was far from a level playing field, and people with my liver disease were, quite frankly, screwed. “What is my latest MELD?”

“Still fifteen.” He grimaced. “But your alkaline phosphate and bilirubin have skyrocketed.”

“Shit.”

“My thoughts exactly. It doesn’t come anywhere close to reflecting how sick you are. I’m going to be blunt with you here—”

“Aren’t you always?”

“I am because I know you can handle it—and also you prefer it. I also know it’s difficult to hear.”

I braced myself. “Go ahead. I can take it.”

“I know you can, but I’m sorry you have to. Here it is—I’m getting increasingly worried that given you’re getting sicker, but your MELD isn’t rising proportionately, you’re going to...” It wasn’t like him to let his words trail off.

“Out with it.”

“You’re going to die before you get a transplant.”

I tried to calm my wildly pounding heart by squeezing my sweaty palms together.

“But...”

His interjection snagged my thoughts before I could spiral down too far. “But what?”

“Don’t forget you still have the option of a living donor transplant.”

I sighed. I knew this, but my family wasn’t interested, and Alan and Mac and Annie were all the wrong blood type. “But I would definitely have to be the one to find a potential donor and have them apply to the transplant center, right?”

“Yes. Your family haven’t come around?”

Bitter disappointment rose in my throat. I gave a tight little shake of my head. “That’s just not going to happen.”

He swiveled back and forth in his chair and chewed on the end of his pen. “Friends?”

“My best friend, Alan, would do it in a heartbeat, but he’s the wrong blood type.”

He frowned. “Right. Your blood type. That’s another problem I’ve mentioned, right?”

I grimaced. “Yes.” An O-negative blood type meant I was a universal donor, which meant it was harder to find a match from a deceased donor. Anyone of any other blood type in more need would get a liver ahead of me.

The cards were stacked against me in every way. I'd already known that in an abstract sense, but something in Dr. Abebe's tone made it seem real. My hands were shaking, so I held down one with the other.

"We'll keep you on the list, of course," he said. "But you need to know your chances of getting a liver from a deceased donor are growing slimmer by the day. You need to tell more people you need a liver. Spread it around to everyone."

Who else could I ask? "Do you mean I should start immediately?"

He sent me a wry look. "I mean you should have started yesterday."

"Right." So it couldn't wait any longer. "I need to sit down and think of who to ask, but to be honest, right now I'm drawing a blank."

"What about friends from high school or university?"

I stared at my fingers, which I'd tightly knotted in front of me. "I used to have tons of friends, but when I was diagnosed, they all vanished. They could barely handle going for a coffee or a walk once they knew about my diagnosis, so asking them for a chunk of one of their organs is a long shot."

Dr. Abebe made an angry little noise. "It's not the first time I've heard this story about my patients' 'friends.'" He made air quotes. "In my job I really see the absolute best and absolute worst of humanity."

"I'll bet."

His forehead pleated with wrinkles. "You got the shit end of the stick, Jules. I'm sorry."

"I know."

"Enough of this morosity!" He clapped his hands together. "I want to see you healthy and living your life again. Even though nobody can make you any promises, I will do everything in my power to get you there. However, I need you to be aggressive about finding a donor."

I nodded vigorously. "Should I get a message painted on my car?"

"I wouldn't rule it out."

"What are your thoughts on billboards?"

He chuckled. “How about making a bunch of calls first?”

I groaned. “Fine.”

“Your latest bloodwork suggests your cholangitis has been rearing its head again. How are you feeling?”

“Like a steaming bag of poop.”

He scribbled something in his notes. “That’s evocative.”

I half sighed, half laughed. “It’s true, though. I’m feeling so bad all the time that it’s getting hard to parse out what’s sepsis and what’s just the way I am now.”

“Hm.” He wrote down something else. “Guess what you just won in this liver disease game?”

“A new liver?”

He chuckled. “Not yet. We’ll have to work for that. In the meantime, you’ve got yourself a seven-day outpatient antibiotic treatment at the hospital every morning, starting tomorrow. We’ll do labs on day six to see if it needs to be continued.”

I groaned. “How am I supposed to get any work done? GoodGuides recently moved into new offices—”

He held up his hand. “Jules, I know your company has been a lifeline for you. I have patients who actually seem to enjoy being sick—the focus on them, the drama of it, the wallowing in victimhood, but you’re not one of those people.”

The mere idea filled me with revulsion. “Ugh. No.”

“Still, we’ve reached the point where fighting for your life has to be your primary focus. This chapter won’t last forever.”

Tom was going to have a field day with me being away from the office even more. Anyway, let him be judgmental and just plain wrong. What did I care? “Understood,” I said.

“When on earth do you rest? Patients at your stage are sleeping most of the day at this point.”

My body wanted to sleep all the time, but I loathed the sensation of missing out on life. I refused to give into my exhaustion until I almost collapsed. “I do cat naps here and there, and I sleep pretty much all of Saturday and Sunday. As soon as I get in the door at the end of a workday, I try to gag some food down and then sleep.”

“Appetite not great, I take it?”



I faked a retch. “Food. Barf.”

“That’s to be expected. Sooner rather than later, you’re going to need to take a leave of absence from work.”

Bad news, bad news, and more bad news. Sometimes finding a silver lining felt impossible. I sighed. “Any good news?”

“The good news is as it stands right now, you’re a perfect candidate for a living donor transplant. We just need the donor. But things are going downhill with your health. Fast. Once you get too sick you will not be a viable candidate anymore. You’re running out of time.”

I nodded, familiar panic filling the space between my ribs. “Anything else?”

“Remember you’re stubborn, young, and tenacious.”

“Thank you for that. Truly.” I gnawed my lip, contemplating the unenviable task ahead of me.

“What are you thinking?”

“That it’s not the easiest thing to walk into a dinner party and ask if anyone wants to have half their liver chopped out.”

He grimaced. “Agreed. Pretty Grim Reaper-ish.”

“Exactly. People start to issue fewer invitations.”

He laughed. “You’re very innovative. I have full confidence in you. I want to be in that OR when they take that sick old liver out of you, put the new one in, and release the clamp. I want to see blood flow in and turn your new liver a beautiful healthy pink. That exact moment...it’s one of the main reasons I do what I do.”

I chewed my lip. The thought galvanized and terrified me at the same time. “Kinda gross, kinda cool,” I said, finally.

“Miraculous,” he said. “Trust me.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning I showed up at OPAT, a far-too-well-known-to-me acronym for the Outpatient Antibiotic Treatment Center at the hospital.

A few nurses grimaced in my direction. Nurses had become my heroes in life, but I doubted I was one in theirs. My reputation clearly preceded me—I was what was known as a “hard start.”

My veins were tiny and way below the surface of my arm, so trying to get an IV line inserted was like mining for frigging diamonds. Sometimes I felt like reminding them, *You think this isn't fun for you? Let me assure you it's even less fun for me.*

As usual, the busy hubbub of patients being admitted and discharged and IV orders being set up surrounded me as I went to the check-in desk. The whiff of saline and alcohol swabs made certain that even if I closed my eyes, I'd know exactly where I was.

I didn't need to give the nurse my name. “Jules,” she said in a leaden tone. “You're back. I've got your IV order here.”

*Geez. Calm your enthusiasm.*

She found me a recliner in a room with a guy who, I learned, had a lifelong staph infection in his leg from a spider bite twenty years earlier in Madagascar, and a poor young girl who had tonsillitis so bad she needed a cocktail of antibiotics and steroids just to be able to get air through them. OPAT wasn't the most joyful place, but it was never boring.

The first nurse came in with bags of antibiotics and a grim face. “Hello again, Jules. How are the veins this morning?”

“Sadly, no bigger than last time, or closer to the surface.” All these battles—big and small—I had to fight were feeling more and more relentless. How much further could my dogged tenacity take me? The rope between me and my willingness to continue was starting to fray, thread by thread. I didn't know how many threads I had left or when they were going to snap.

Except when I was around Tom—then, for some mysterious reason I couldn't fully comprehend, that rope inside me holding everything together felt unbreakable.

"Oh no," the nurse sighed, taking my arm and poking around it with her fingers. "Did you drink a lot of water this morning?"

"Yup, except my kidneys are struggling because of the liver failure, so I'm pretty much always dehydrated no matter how much water I drink."

She clicked her tongue. "Fabulous. Just what I want to hear. I guess all there is left to do is pray to the IV gods."

"Already done," I said. "Did you draw the short straw to be assigned to me?"

She grimaced. "I lost at paper, rock, scissors."

"Figured it was something like that. What did you choose?"

"Rock."

"Never choose rock, because someone always chooses paper, but hardly anyone chooses scissors."

She rolled over a stool covered with the same green vinyl upholstery as the chairs. She rubbed her hands together. "I'll remember that for next time. You might not believe it, but I have a reputation for being one of the best nurses here at IV starts. You seriously screwed up my batting average when you were here last time. Wasn't that only—"

"Six weeks ago."

"Right. Transplant any closer on the horizon?"

I couldn't bear going into the whole twisted, unjust MELD thing again. All I wanted to do was close my eyes and block everything out, visually at least—the vinyl recliners, the needle nearing my arm, the tight plastic band cutting into the skin on my upper arm. "Maybe."

"I hope so," she said, squeezing my hand before she tore open the IV kit. "We're all rooting for you, you know."

"Because you don't want to see me and my tiny veins around here anymore?"

"No!" she said, the needle hovering above my inner arm. "Well, yes," she added slyly. "But that's not the main reason."

We were still laughing when I felt the needle plunge into me. I didn't flinch anymore. In situations like these, I had trained myself to become a rag doll and to not react to anything. I just let them get on with it. I could tell without looking she hadn't hit a good vein. Her muttered curse confirmed it.

"Here we go again." I sighed.

"Don't jinx me!"

She tried two more times. No luck. Another nurse came and tried as well, then another. Nine pokes. I would have been happy to let them carry on if they were getting somewhere, but they clearly weren't.

"I vote we page the IV team," I said.

The nurses clustered together, staring at me in consternation. "They'll never let us live it down."

The first nurse shook her head. "It's terrible for our reputation."

I looked at my arm, which didn't feel like part of my body anymore. I think somewhere between the pokes I'd completely dissociated from it. It was covered in cotton balls and medical tape. "I'm sorry to negatively impact your batting average, but I'm thinking of my poor arm here."

"I guess you're right," she grudgingly agreed. "Hang on. I'll page them."

They shuffled out, dejected, and I lay my head back on the chair and closed my eyes. Times like this I wanted to go crazy—start screaming primally to let out some of the terror and frustration and anger that felt like more than my rib cage could contain. I wanted to knock everything down, tear my hair out, pound my chest with my fists.

I wanted Tom. He was the only remaining channel for me to let out little bursts of anger, like the valve to a pressure cooker. Without that, it was just a matter of time before I exploded.

*You don't need this like I do.* I couldn't believe he'd said that about the mysterious angel investment.

*Oh, but I do, Tom.* Not only did I need the money for Alan, but also I needed to feel as though I could win at something when this disease was beating me every second of every day.

I must have dozed off. Dr. Abebe had been right about the encroaching sleepiness that came with my stage of PSC. A gentle shake woke me. I opened my eyes to see a face bobbing in front of me with kind green eyes and crazy, white Albert Einstein hair going every which way.

“Hi,” I said groggily.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Stewart, from the IV team.” He looked at my arm. “You poor thing,” he said. “Look what they did to your arm.”

I don’t know why—maybe because there was something so kind in Stewart’s face and I so badly needed some kindness right then—but tears gathered in my eyes and started to roll down my cheeks.

He pulled over a stool. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.” He didn’t tell me not to cry. “I’m going to get this IV started so we can get this done and you can get out of here. Looks like you’ve been through enough for one day, and it’s only nine o’clock.”

I just let the tears flow. The spider bite guy had gone, and the throat girl had huge headphones on and was watching something on her phone.

“You can tell me if you want,” Stewart said. “I’m a good listener.”

So I did. I spilled out my entire story. Stewart wordlessly listened as he smoothly and painlessly started an IV in my wrist. He kept nodding, his eyes not shocked, just full of compassion and understanding. Somehow he had the gift of remaining completely present for me and holding my pain with no judgment. How did he do that? He didn’t even know me.

When I was done, I drew in a shuddering breath.

He squeezed my hand. At some point he must have started holding it. I didn’t want him to let go. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry you have to go through this.”

Mortification swept over me. “I’m sorry.” My voice broke. I had not been brought up to burden others with my problems. How could I have poured out all my pent-up grief and fear to a complete stranger?

“You will not apologize, is that clear?”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t convinced.

“What I want you to know is I get it. Your feelings don’t scare me one bit. I was where you were five years ago.”

“You had PSC?” That would be a bizarre coincidence. Only seven people in a million had it.

He smiled then, a lovely smile. “No. I had a massive heart attack and needed a quadruple bypass. Things were so messed up in there they warned me that my chances of surviving the surgery weren’t good.”

“How did you—?” What was the right word, exactly? Survive? Persist? Not lose yourself for good?

“You just keep putting one foot in front of the other. It’s as impossible and as simple as that. Are you familiar with the quote from Samuel Beckett, ‘I can’t go on. I go on’?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t, but it described the paradox of my daily existence in a way I hadn’t been able to explain to myself.

“That was my mantra throughout my surgery and recovery. It’s normal that it feels unfathomable, but you can do this, Jules. I believe in you, even if it feels impossible. *Especially* if it feels impossible. That doesn’t mean you won’t get there.”

“Thank you.” My voice caught. How had Stewart known the perfect thing to say? “It got better for you?”

Stewart nodded. “I couldn’t even imagine it when I was at my sickest, but a few weeks after my surgery I woke up one morning, and the first thought in my head was, ‘I *can* go on.’ You’ll get there too.”

“Will I?” There it was—that lurking uncertainty I struggled with more than everything else combined.

“Yes. You’re fighting so hard right now that what I’m going to say next won’t make much sense. One day, though, you’ll be where I am now—healthy and recovered—and someone will be in crisis like you are now. You will listen to them with complete understanding and empathy. I know it.”

“I hope so.” I wanted to give so much back if I could just make it through.

“My advice is to let this illness change you, Jules. I know you’re in survival mode right now, just like I was, but let it transform how you

look at the world.”

I nodded. “I’ll try.”

He smiled, and it made me feel like I could keep going. Pure stubbornness rose up in me and stomped on the uncertainty and fear. I felt understood instead of pitied. “Next time you’re in here and need an IV, just get the OPAT nurses to page me immediately. You’re dealing with enough. You shouldn’t have to deal with—” He nodded at my bandaged arm. “That.”

“With pleasure.”

“I’ll let them know you’re ready for them to get your line started, okay?”

I nodded. “Thank you, Stewart, I can’t even tell you—”

He shook his wild hair. “No need to thank me. Just pay it forward.”

## CHAPTER NINE

After my three-hour OPAT appointment, I made my way up the stairs to the atrium entry. I exhaled with relief at the sight of the yellow couches at Hubtech.

I stood there for a moment, just letting myself soak in the clack of keyboards, the hum of conversations, the spatter of raindrops on the skylights above, and the faint smell of coffee.

Stewart's kindness had cracked me open somehow, so I wasn't entirely certain I was mentally equipped to come to work. Still, after the morning in the hospital, I wanted more than anything to rejoin the flow of life. I glanced around. Where was Tom?

I spotted him at the far end of one of the couches, mostly hidden by the tree in the center. His laptop was on his lap, and he was gazing back at me.

I went burning hot, then cold. I wanted a hundred contrary things at once. I craved the fuel of Tom's antagonism, but was that wise with all this vulnerability making waves inside me?

I wanted to get closer to the crackling energy of his crisp white shirt and hard muscles and swoopy hair and understand how he had gotten here from "nothing," as he'd told me.

I started walking toward him, drawn like a magnet despite having reached zero resolution about how to act.

His throat convulsed as he swallowed. "Hello, Juliette."

I stopped, struck by the uncertainty in his eyes. Was he nervous? *Wait.* He'd called me Juliette, not Jules. Was he trying to antagonize me? Which was it?

I needed to play it cool, even though I felt anything but. "Have you been waiting for me?"

I sat down beside him, relishing how he blinked. Had I inadvertently guessed right? *Had* he been waiting for me?

"No," he spluttered. "I mean, not exactly."

I just responded with an appraising look.



“Where were you?” he asked, but it didn’t get my ire up as it usually did. That had to be the aftereffect of Stewart’s calming presence.

“I had a few things to take care of,” I said.

That interesting muscle jumped in his jaw. “It was educational speaking with your sister yesterday.”

He was trying to bait me, but something else was behind it this time. For once I didn’t feel like acting in the way he expected. Instead, I groaned and slumped back on the couch beside him. If he thought I was going to leap to the defense of my sister, he was woefully mistaken. I was definitely in the wrong mood for that.

“What are you doing?” He stared at me as I went all loose and boneless beside him. He tugged on the collar around his neck with his index finger.

“To be honest, I’m not really up to defending my family today—or any day, come to think of it.”

His face softened, changing entirely. “I’m sorry,” he said with a sincerity that robbed me of my breath for a few seconds. “I was just fooling around. I didn’t realize—”

“It’s fine.” I waved my hand. “How could you? We barely know each other.”

He exhaled and relaxed his broad back against the couch like me.

I expected it to feel flat sitting relatively peacefully beside Tom on the couch, but it didn’t. It felt like sitting in front of a roaring fire under a soft blanket, sipping a good cup of hot coffee. My stomach fluttered with surprise.

“I have no excuse for my sister.” I twisted one of my French braids around a finger. Tom watched the motion, his eyes intent. “Do you have any siblings you’re embarrassed of, or did you just emerge from a pupa, fully formed as an adult?”

He smiled again. I realized I would go to the same lengths to make him smile as I would to make those sparks of annoyance burn in his eyes. “No,” he said. “No sibling. No pupa either, unfortunately. Skipping my youth would have been a godsend.”

“Lucky. My sister is pretty much representative of my family. Total nightmare.”

He nodded with an understanding I hadn’t been expecting. “She struck me as very different from you. Let me guess—you’re the odd one out?” he asked with a quirk to his lips, except it wasn’t mocking this time. It was almost...affectionate.

“Yup. I’m an island within my family. A silo, if you will.”

His eyes gleamed. “Silo. Clever.”

“I’m proud of it.”

“You should be.”

“How do your parents feel about this whole start-up thing?” I asked.

He opened his mouth, then shut it. “My parents aren’t around.”

Thanks to Stewart’s energy lodged in my heart, a wave of compassion for Tom swept over me. “I’m so sorry. They’ve passed away?”

He seemed to consider this a moment, as though there wasn’t a simple yes or no answer. “Yes. Dead,” he said, his voice stripped of emotion. Strange.

“Nobody should have to go through that.”

He waved his hand, as if that slight gesture could dismiss the pain and grief. “Anyway. Your sister informed me you are one of the Kellys, as in Kelly’s department store.”

Why would he bring our conversation to that sore point? Were we no longer doing sympathy? Disappointment thudded in my chest. *So be it.* “Correct.”

“I was right about the privileged upbringing, wasn’t I? I mean, your best friend and COO has ‘the Third’ after his name.”

Tom was leaning into our antagonism as a shield. I was sure it had something to do with his absent parents. “Alan uses it ironically, but yeah, it’s a dead giveaway.”

“Let me guess. You two are childhood friends?”

He had me there. “You’re very perceptive today, Thomas.”

“Don’t call me that.”

I was amused by the way he shifted his shoulders under his shirt, as though trying to dislodge something uncomfortable. “My name is

Tom, not Thomas.”

“Fine. Terrifying Tom? Tyrannosaurus Tom? I like that one. It suits you.”

He rolled his eyes. “How does Tyrannosaurus Tom possibly suit me?”

“There are similarities, with all your roaring and teeth gnashing and king of the start-up jungle energy.”

He growled low in his throat. Every hair on my body stood on end.

“See? Like that.”

“What should I call you, then?” he mused, rubbing his chin like one of those James Bond villains Alan adored.

“Trust me, Juliette is bad enough.”

“You truly hate it?”

I shrugged. “I just don’t feel like a Juliette. I never have.”

“Then what?”

“Do I really need a nickname?”

“If you’re going to call me Tyrannosaurus Tom, yes.” He taped his cheekbone with his finger. It was long and nicely tapered, the nail clean and cut short. No nonsense. I liked the fact he didn’t look like the type of guy who does manscaping and manicures. “You’re very up and sunny most of the time. I didn’t know what to make of it at first.”

“And now?”

He shrugged. Man, his shoulders were nice. “I’m adjusting.”

“You can’t possibly fathom my relief.”

“Maybe I should call you Sparky? You seem to perk up any room you’re in.”

“Hard pass. You, on the other hand, seem to treat work as though it’s a matter of life or death.”

He thought about this for a second. “It is.”

I snorted. “Trust me, it’s not. A matter of life or death is a completely different beast.”

“How would you know?”

I blinked, caught in a trap of my making. “I don’t. I just know work is just that—work. It’s not *life*.”

“Maybe it is for me.”

I rolled my eyes. He had no idea. None at all.

“That wasn’t a very sparky look,” he said with mock reproach.

I reached over and punched his leg. My fist glanced off his iron-hard thigh muscle. I suppressed the urge to wrap my hands around his leg just to feel how hard it was. “Ow,” I complained.

“I know we’re in direct competition, but there’s no need to resort to violence.” He said it jokingly, but it reminded me—how could I have forgotten?—that we *were* in direct competition for the angel investment. That was an immutable reality.

“What’s that on your arm?” Tom asked. “Are you hurt?” His sincere solicitude gave me pause. Where had that come from?

I glanced down to see my wide sleeve had crept up when I’d punched his leg.

The nurse had left the IV catheter in my wrist so we didn’t have to go through the whole starting-the-IV drama over the next few days. It was wrapped with gauze. I’d worn long sleeves to cover it, but I hadn’t expected the IV site to be so low down. I yanked my sleeve lower.

“It’s nothing,” I muttered, my blood running cold. It didn’t matter that things had shifted a bit between us—he could not find out. The prospect of pity in his eyes made my insides shrivel.

“It is.” He frowned. “I should have noticed.”

“I burned my wrist last night making dinner,” I lied. “It’s fine.”

A crease appeared between his eyebrows. I’d been on the receiving end of false solicitude too many times not to see the real thing when it was in front of me. “How did you dress it? You know, burns can be tricky to heal—”

I put my hand on his forearm to get him to stop fretting. A flash of heat snapped up my arm, as though his skin was burning me for real. His sleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows, as usual. As his muscles shifted slightly under my palm, I stared down at my hand on his arm, half expecting to see it burst into flames.

His skin was toasty warm, and the perfect amount of dark hair felt springy against my palm. His wrist bones were prominent, and his

body contained so much unleashed strength and just sheer maleness... I snatched my hand away.

"Jules..." His voice sounded as though it had been dragged through gravel.

What was this craziness? I needed to snap out of it. "I have a nurse who lives on my floor," I lied some more. "He took care of it."

"Oh." Tom searched my face intently.

I had to get out of there before he insisted on looking at my arm again. "I should go." I hopped up off the couch. "I need to find Alan."

"Right," he said, as if his mind was somewhere else. "Sure. Bye for now, Sparky."

I had begun to walk away, but that made me stop in my tracks. "I really don't like Sparky. It's a name for a dog."

Tom thought for a moment. "Sparks?"

I let out a beleaguered sigh. "Only friends give each other nicknames."

"You started it, Sparks."

I didn't have an answer to that. He was right.

## CHAPTER TEN

Six days into my IV antibiotics at the hospital, I sat in a hard plastic chair in the lab for bloodwork, as per Dr. Abebe's instructions.

My hopes weren't high that things had improved all that much. These IVs used to make me feel significantly better, but now they didn't seem to put a dent in how sick I was feeling.

It was already ten o'clock. I tapped my vintage leather boot on a chair leg in frustration. The medical portion of my day was eating up so much time lately, and from what Dr. Abebe said, it was only going to get worse.

How could I make use of my time? I checked my phone. *Nothing*. I checked again. My email appeared to be working, but I hadn't received a single email from a prospective liver donor, not even a no.

I'd spent the weekend emailing and calling people from my past—names I remembered from as far back as elementary school. I let them know I was in desperate need of a liver donor, but even as I did it, I was acutely conscious of what a massive, impossible thing it was to ask.

Donating to me entailed an eight-hour surgery. Weeks of recovery. Someone putting themselves at risk of complication when they were already perfectly healthy. Why would they do that when we hadn't been in touch for years?

Nevertheless, I communicated all the information they needed—blood type, linked articles about live donation that detailed the surgery, and so much more. I'd spent hours crafting the perfect tone and stuffed my pride down as I hit send.

Despite all that, I was no further ahead. I swore at my phone. I hated everything about what I was asking of people.

"Jules."

I looked up. What was Tom doing at the lab? Two completely separate spheres of my life collided, and my anxiety flapped its

wings like a trapped bird in my chest. He towered over me, his skin unusually pale.

All the lab techs here knew I was listed for transplant and why. If there was a frequent flyer program at the lab, I'd have qualified ten times over. Would they let that information slip in front of Tom?

I cleared my throat. "What are you doing here?"

His mouth opened and shut like a fish. His lips drained of color.

"Tom?" I looked around the room, trying to figure out what was wrong with him. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Routine blood test for extended medical insurance," he said robotically.

"Oh," I said. "Right." That didn't explain why he was looking and acting so off.

He sat down heavily in the empty plastic chair beside me. He clenched his hands so tightly his forearms flexed with the effort. *Could I have mixed feelings about the man but adore the forearms?* There was a question for the ages.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked me suddenly.

I shrugged. "Ah, low iron." I did have low iron because of the sick liver. It was the proverbial tip of the iceberg, but it sounded innocuous enough.

He nodded, listing over slightly in his chair.

"Hey, what's up?" I snapped my fingers in front of his face. "You don't look good."

He shrugged. "Embarrassing,"

Tiny beads of sweat were popping out on his forehead.

I thought of Stewart and how good it had felt when he'd taken my hand in his and given me something to anchor myself to. Maybe this was one of those situations he described, where I could pay it forward. I didn't have to wait until I was healthy for that, did I? Despite my mixed feelings about Tom, all I could see beside me was someone who was scared. That, I could relate to.

I reached over and took his hand in mine.

"What are you doing?" His skin was chilled, but despite his surprise, he squeezed my hand reflexively.

“I’m holding your hand. You look like you need someone to do that right now.”

“But—” His breath came out in short, staccato bursts.

My hand fit in his somehow, our palms coming together like puzzle pieces. “Don’t freak out,” I said. “I’m doing this as one human to another human who is clearly in distress. I can’t see someone who needs help and not give it to them.”

“Thank you,” he breathed. A tinge of color seeped back into his skin.

“You can tell me what you’re scared of if you think it might help,” I said. “I won’t give you a hard time. Promise.”

“For everything or just for this?” His voice was still shaky, but he was trying for a bit of humor. Progress.

“Just for this,” I clarified.

He let out a sound somewhere between a nervous laugh and a groan. The hairs on the nape of my neck prickled.

“Right. Okay then. I have a bit of a thing about needles.”

I nodded, determined to remain like Stewart—open and compassionate.

Even if I had a thing about needles, it would be my tough luck. I had to get them all the time, and now I was even injecting vitamin K shots into my stomach every morning to keep my blood clotting. I didn’t have the luxury of a needle phobia.

Tom’s fear wasn’t the easiest thing for me to relate to, but that surge of sympathy came anyway. I wasn’t scared of needles, but I knew what it was to feel alone and vulnerable in a medical situation. “I think many people do.” I tightened my grip on his hand. “You’re far from alone.”

“Are you scared of them too?” he asked, his voice hopeful.

I almost burst out in laughter. Hardly. My lips pressed together, and I shook my head. “No, I have to get a lot of blood tests.”

“For your iron?”

“Yes,” I lied. “For my iron.”

He bit his lip. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Not be scared?”



“Even if I’m not frightened of needles in particular, I’m scared of other things.” If he only knew. I was scared of a transplant, of dying, of being seen as weak and vulnerable, of losing who I was to this illness, of not being able to find a liver donor in time...

He winced. “It’s just so stupid,” he said.

“There’s no need to feel embarrassed for being human.”

Tom flashed me a tiny smile, and it cracked more of the hard shellac around my heart.

“It’s just the idea of something metal in my arm...in my vein.” He blanched again.

“You know how they always say being brave is being scared of something and doing it anyway? Without the fear, you can’t have the brave.”

“You’re being so understanding and kind,” he said. “But I’m still terrified.”

He squeezed my hand again. I squeezed it back, like Morse code between the two of us.

“Do you want me to go into the room with you?” I asked. “I can distract you, and I know the procedure pretty well.” Maybe like Stewart said, my suffering created an inability not to help someone going through a similar thing.

“You would do that for me?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“Why?”

The lab tech called my name from behind the desk. I let go of Tom’s hand. He’d held on so tightly, my rings had made red indents on the neighboring fingers. Still, my hand felt cold and empty now. “I’ll get mine done, then I’ll come back out and go in with you.”

His dark eyes were held a mixture of mortification and full-throttle terror. “Thank you.”

I nodded and went in for my turn. I murmured to the person taking blood about the IV from OPAT already in my right arm and gave her my left. It took a few pokes, as usual, and the left was always worse, but she finally managed to access a tiny vein in the back of my hand. Those always hurt the worst.

She bandaged me up and I headed back into the waiting area, making sure to pull my sleeve well over my IV site, just the lady at the desk called, “Thunder Días?”

Tom stood up. Wait. *Thunder Días?* I looked between him and the lab tech who was beckoning him into room two. She was biting back a smile because, honestly... *Thunder?*

I was just about to ask him if that was his actual name, but he staggered as he got out of his chair and looked at me beseechingly. “Jules?” he pleaded—a straight up SOS.

“I’m here.” *Thunder?*

He was weaving all over the place. An unfamiliar warmth pooled in my stomach as his hand clenched mine.

The tech—a nice woman I recognized as a “good poke”—sat Tom down in the seat between the two counters. They were piled high with test tubes with different color ends and a yellow biohazard disposal container for used needles. Yeah, for someone phobic of needles, this setting didn’t exactly help.

Tom’s body seemed completely out of scale with the space, but I focused in on his face. His normal honey glow was a sickly green now, and those beads of sweat on his forehead had started to drip. He was pathetic and kind of adorable rolled up into one.

He looked up at me. “Jules,” he mouthed. It was a futile plea for me to make it all go away, I knew. Unfortunately, no one could do that. All I could do was stay there with him.

“Hi,” I said to the tech. “I’m Tom’s friend. He’s not a fan of needles.”

“Hi. Your name is Jules, right? I recognize you.”

“That’s me,” I said.

“He’s your friend? I have his legal name written down here as Thunder. Is there a mistake?”

Tom shook his head. “No mistake.” I’d never heard his voice so strained.

“Scared of needles with a name like Thunder?” The tech’s lips twitched.

“Thunder?” I couldn’t help but repeat, my eyebrows shooting almost up to my hairline.

“Never mind that.” He frowned. “Can I hold on to your hand again?”

I’d let go of his hand to let him get seated, but now I moved to the side where I knew the lab tech wouldn’t be. I leaned to help him roll up his sleeve another inch or two so his inner arm was exposed. His skin was warm and silky beneath my fingers. I swallowed hard and slid my palm against his, holding on tight.

He looked at where our hands connected with an expression as fascinated as it was helpless. In vulnerable moments, kindness could mean everything. This was one of those moments. Just because Tom and I didn’t see eye to eye didn’t mean I couldn’t offer that to him, as a fellow human being. Also, this was an excellent vantage point for his perfect forearms...

The lab tech was getting a sterile swab and elastic and test tube stickers organized on the other side of the counter. Tom started to turn his head toward her.

I put my free hand on his shoulder. “Look at me,” I instructed. “Don’t worry about anything else. You can squeeze my hand as hard as you need to. And I’ll squeeze yours too.”

“But your pretty rings.”

I loved my rings, especially the big citrine one I always wore on my middle finger. They wouldn’t exactly feel wonderful crushed in Tom’s iron grip, but little did he know I’d survived far worse than that. Still, I never would have thought he’d describe them as pretty. “Hippie” and “weird,” yes. Pretty, no.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured him.

“You sure?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m tough.”

He was silent for a minute or so, but I could tell from his grip and that muscle jumping in his jaw that his panic was ramping up. “I’m worried I might throw up on you,” he said out of the blue.

“I’m not squeamish.”

The lab tech, who had seen my requisitions and knew exactly what I was going through, snorted. I gave her a wide-eyed “don’t say anything” head shake and nodded at her to get started. She ripped the needle out of its sterile package. It clattered on the counter.

Tom looked toward the sound.

I grabbed his chin, freshly shaved but bristly already, and turned his head to look at me. “Not over there, remember? Here. Look at me.”

“I’m always looking at you,” he muttered almost angrily. Did he mean just here, at the lab, or—? Something flipped low in my belly.

“Keep doing it, then,” I whispered, pushing down the churning, conflicting emotions inside me.

The lab tech tied a rubber band around his upper arm. His biceps were wide and impressive under his crisp—well, not so crisp anymore—white dress shirt. The needle was next.

He made a little panicked yelp that was so surprising I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Don’t worry, Thunder,” the lab tech said in a hearty voice, using his real name with relish. My god, the techs would have a field day with this story in the break room later. “I know what I’m doing.”

He moved to turn his head again. I made a circle on his palm with my thumb, which made him jerk his gaze back to me. Despite his panic, there was so much heat there. A part of me I’d shoved aside for the past few years in the name of survival announced itself. There was no mistaking the fire prickling through me. I was lusting after Tom. This had to stop.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “Your real name is *Thunder Días*?”

He blinked. “Don’t tell anyone. Please.”

“I won’t,” I said. “But in exchange I’ll need to know the backstory.”

He flicked his gaze to where the lab tech held the needle poised to insert. I grabbed his chin again. “Look at me. Why Thunder? And why Tom? I have so many questions.”

That muscle in his jaw jumped one, two, three times. “The woman who had me was a hippie, I guess.”

“The woman who had you?” I asked. “You were adopted?” I normally wouldn’t pry like this, but he wasn’t looking at the needle. This line of questioning was my best chance at distracting him.

He shook his head. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

I understood, but I could see out of the corner of my eye the needle was about to go into Tom's arm, so... "How about your biological dad?"

The teeny, tiny needle went in, and Tom shuddered as though he'd been run straight through with a broad sword.

"Squeeze my hand as hard as you can," I ordered.

He did, and I was sure my fingers were splintering like old chicken bones as the lab tech filled three vials with his blood. "I didn't know my father either," he said in a burst.

The lab tech withdrew the needle. The worst was over, so it didn't feel right probing any further about his parents.

"How many people know about Thunder?" I asked instead.

He shook his head. "Not many. No one at work. Except you now, I guess."

The lab tech flashed me a smile and mouthed "thanks" as she pressed a cotton ball against Tom's arm.

"You know what?" I asked.

"What?"

"It's over." I grinned.

"Really?" He spun his head to look at the tech and sucked in a breath. "Thank you so much," he said to the woman, then turned to me. "And thank you, Jules. I... Well, you had no reason to help me like this."

I waved it away. "It's fine. Let's get to the office."

We walked out of the lab into pouring rain. It was just a short walk to Hubtech, but Tom stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk between one of my favorite thrift stores, which specialized in kaftans, and an extremely hip tattoo parlor.

He ran his hand through his now damp hair and gazed at me with a troubled expression. "What can I do to make this up to you? I've given you no reason to be so kind to me."

"I didn't do it to get anything in return."

"Why did you do it, then?" His words had no aggression, just genuine curiosity.

"Because even if we don't get along, you're a fellow human being. What the point of all this"—I waved my arms to encompass

the whole streetscape—the turquoise VW van parked beside us, the leaden clouds, the rain creating overlapping circles in the puddles at our feet, and the seaplane swooping above to make a landing in the harbor—“if it’s not to help each other?”

He frowned. “Really? You believe it’s as simple as that?”

“Really.”

He considered this for a few moments, that crease appearing again between his brows. “What about ambition and success?”

I shrugged, wrapping my jacket around me. The damp late September weather wasn’t helping my inability to stay warm. “They’re fine, I suppose, but kind of beside the point.”

Tom rubbed the heel of his palm against his chest. “I used to know somebody who believed that too.”

“Maybe they were right.”

He tapped his toe against the sidewalk, hands deep in his pockets now. “Seriously, Jules, name something you need done for you. It’ll make me feel better.”

*Give me half your liver?* No. I would never ask Tom—not in a million years. That would require him looking at me like a sick person instead of looking at me the way he was now. I sighed. “Sometime maybe you can explain the Thunder thing.”

“Why?”

“Insatiable curiosity.”

He chuckled. “Like I said, the past is not something I think about much. I’ve learned to set my sights on the future instead.”

“Look, if you don’t want to talk about it, I respect that.”

He groaned. “The high road! Now I guess I *have* to tell you.”

I laughed. “You don’t. Really.”

“How about we meet for lunch tomorrow?” he said. “I’ll tell you the whole sorry tale if you promise you won’t call me Thunder at work.”

I sucked in the wet West Coast air between my teeth. “That’s a big ask, Thunder. It’s so much better than Tyrannosaurus Tom.”

He cast me a skeptical look. “Is it, though?”

“Oh yes.”

As we started walking again, I started wondering. *Lunch. It wasn't a date, was it? No.* It was just Tom trying to feel like we were even again. I shook my head at my foolishness.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We’re almost up to thirty cities,” Alan told me. “Can you believe it?”

“I know,” I said as I surveyed the collection of Beanie Babies on the transplant social worker’s desk with distaste. They should have been an instant tip-off on my first visit. “Amazing.” Alan and I should be having this conversation at Hubtech. I checked my watch. Actually, I should be having lunch with Tom at this very second.

This interview was last minute. The transplant coordinator had phoned early to tell me she’d booked another interview with the transplant social worker today—a necessity to keep me active on the transplant list.

“Hey, is that a new shirt?” I asked Alan, searching for anything not work- or transplant-related.

He looked down at the blue-and-green plaid. “Yeah.”

“It’s nice.”

“I like it.” He examined the sleeves. “Tragically it hasn’t magically transformed me into the kind of guy who portages canoes on the weekend.”

“False advertising.”

“Definitely.”

When cancelling my lunch with Tom, I’d made up a lie about a family emergency. The crestfallen look on his face had caught me off guard. I’d meant what I’d said about rescheduling soon.

Alan drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair, upholstered in tatty brown fabric. “We’re going to need someone to come in and help with our database,” he said. “Annie warned me her progress will probably be too slow for our growth.”

“Yeah.” The poor Beanie Baby giraffe’s neck appeared broken as it rested against a tiny unicorn. “I wish we could kidnap one of Tom’s database guys for a month.”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about that,” Alan admitted. “What do you think about asking Tom for permission to have one of his



employees help us?” He tried to keep his tone light, but we both knew the implications were huge. “Do you think he’d mind?”

Even ten days ago I would have dismissed this possibility out of hand, but now it didn’t seem completely beyond the realm of possibility. Tessa wanted Silobase and GoodGuides to collaborate, after all.

“Maybe,” I conceded.

Alan’s fingers stopped drumming on his chair. “Wait...seriously?”

I shrugged. “Seriously.”

“Do I sense a thawing on the Tom front?”

“No... I just... It could really help GoodGuides,” I said, flustered.

“Hmmm.” Alan twiddled his fingers, eyeing me craftily.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Looking like Hugo Drax in *Moonraker*.”

“I’m flattered. He’s one of the best Bond villains ever.” Alan was doing his best evil chuckle when the door flew open.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” the social worker gasped as she fell into her chair, acting as though she’d just saved the world from a meteor.

“It’s fine,” I said.

I was sure there were some amazing social workers performing miracles in the world, but based on my experience, Amy was not one of them. Our first mandatory meeting when I was listed for transplant had been mercifully brief, but she’d tried to draw out every bad thing about my for maximum drama. She was a vampire of tragedy—I could spot them a mile off now.

Her touchy-feely “I understand completely” attitude made me feel more nauseous than usual, like when I was ten and insisted on ordering and finishing an enormous sickly sweet Slurpee at 7-Eleven.

“Are you Jules’s husband?” She looked at Alan with a woebegone expression.

Alan gave a nervous little gulp of laughter. “No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Neither.” I cut to the chase. From what I knew of Amy, this guessing game could go on for a long time. “Alan is my best friend. He’s my support person.” My vision went suddenly blurry. “Always has been.”

“Oh, a friend?” She shuffled her papers a bit more. “How...nice.” She said it in a way that made it sound anything but. *I’d rather have a true friend than a bad romantic partner, Amy.*

“All right, Alan.” She turned her too wet, too wide eyes to him. “It must be so difficult for you to see your friend suffer and change before your very eyes.”

*Here we go again.*

Alan cast me a questioning glance. “Um. Not nearly as hard as it has been for Jules.”

*God, I loved him.*

“Yes, but the entourage often underestimates the impact of the illness and potential death of a person close to them on their mental health.”

I rolled my eyes. She was the absolute worst. I wondered again what motivated her and other fellow tragedy vampires. Was it an inherent love of drama? A feeling their own lives weren’t emotionally rich enough? Or just morbid curiosity, like those people who chase ambulances and stand and watch the unfolding of a traffic accident? It felt invasive and gross.

“I don’t think I underestimate that,” Alan said, his voice turning stony.

She nodded. “Most people don’t. The question is, Alan, do you think you can handle it?”

“I’m here,” Alan said. “I believe that answers your question.”

“Don’t be so quick to assume. Many people show up, you see, out of guilt, or pressure, or a sense of obligation, but that is quite a different thing to following through.” For full effect, she spoke in a sepulchral tone.

“Alan always follows through,” I said, an edge to my voice. Every fiber in my being wanted to tell her off, of course, but she had the power of deeming me mentally unstable or unfit for transplant. If I

wanted to stay approved and listed, I would have to endure the torture of her bullshit.

“Are you in therapy?” she asked him.

He looked panicked. I should have warned him this could turn into a bit of an interrogation. “Um, yes,” he said. “Who isn’t?”

“Excellent, excellent,” she murmured. “You’ll also have access to many support groups here at the hospital. Jules, have you been going to the pretransplant one as I suggested?”

I absolutely had not. I knew that sort of thing was super helpful for some people, but I didn’t want my whole life to revolve around the business of being sick until I had no other choice.

“I was going to,” I said. “But I’ve been busy working.”

She clicked her tongue. “You must take advantage of the resources available to you, Jules.”

*Really? Must I?*

She turned back to Alan. “What do you do for a job?”

“Jules and I work together in a tech start-up. She’s the CEO, I’m the COO.”

She frowned. “You work in the same company? Who will manage the company if Jules gets a transplant and you’re both absent?”

I reluctantly had to give Amy a point.

Alan shifted a look at me, one that clearly broadcast *I told you so*.

I nodded to let him know I understood the message. Yeah, we were going to have to deal with this. With the way I was feeling and my latest test results, sooner rather than later.

I’d finished my projected series of IV infusions, but this time around, they hadn’t had any effect. My blood results were still terrible, and I could barely stand up during the day.

“Our top two people know,” Alan explained. “They are poised to take over management while we’re absent.” It wasn’t enough of a plan. I knew it. Alan knew it. And unfortunately, it looked as though even Amy knew it.

“I would like to see something concrete,” Amy said. Really, our business arrangements were none of her business, but Alan and I nodded obediently.

“You do realize, both of you, that even if Jules is lucky enough to receive a transplant, she may be plagued with complications—some mild, some severe, for an indeterminate time afterward?”

“Like what?” Alan asked, and I inwardly cringed. I’d heard this list before but hadn’t really spelled it out to him in detail. He wasn’t as hardened to the brutality of my situation as I was. Was it wrong of me not to want to cause him any undue worry or pain?

“Infection, organ rejection, and blood clots, to name a few,” Amy recited with relish. “Some of our patients don’t make it through the transplant at all. Some recipients make it through the transplant then succumb to complications. Some make it through but then have to live with lifelong complications.”

Alan was clinging to his chair like he was on an airplane flying through extreme turbulence. He turned to me with a stricken look. I reached over and grasped his hand in the same way I’d done with Tom’s. Alan’s hand felt like a warm blanket, whereas Tom’s was like being plugged into an electrical socket.

“But some get the transplant and are healthy, right?” Alan asked.

“Yes,” Amy grudgingly admitted. “But you must realize that getting a transplant for PSC is like exchanging one medical condition for another. It’s a lifelong commitment and a lifelong risk.”

*A ray of sunshine, this one.*

“I’m aware of all that,” I said.

“You are?” Alan couldn’t disguise his shock.

I nodded.

He swallowed hard. “I would do anything for Jules.” The words were for Amy, but he was facing me. “I would donate my liver in a heartbeat if I was the right blood type.”

“I know, sweetie.”

“How is your search for donors progressing, Jules?” Amy asked with that unerring instinct for pressing on places that hurt. She rifled through the paperwork on her desk again. “Dr. Abebe has written here that he’s advised you to get more aggressive in looking for potential donors?”

I nodded. “Yes, I contacted a bunch of high school and university friends, but so far, nothing.” I kept my voice matter-of-fact,

determined not to give Amy the sadness she fed on.

“You did?” Alan asked me. “You didn’t say anything.”

I bit my lip. “There hasn’t been much to tell.”

“Oh, Jules.” Alan’s eyes had gone shiny.

I wondered how Tom would react if he found out about my illness. Would he be far too fascinated, like Amy? Or would he ghost me, like my old girlfriends? Or would he be more like Alan and support me? For a crazy moment I wanted to find out, but I quashed that curiosity. The first two options weren’t worth risking for the slight chance of the third.

Amy rested her chin on her hands, rapt. “You’re going to have to try harder,” she said. “It’s in your hands, Jules.”

If Amy had one gift, it was for stating the obvious. How I would love for everything *not* to be in my hands for once. Every morning I struggled to get out of bed, crushed by the weight of it all. Besides, what else could I do besides what I’d already done?

“How about our staff?” Alan asked me. “Or Silobase’s staff?”

Mac and Annie were not compatible blood types, but—

Amy shook her head. “No,” she said. “That would never be acceptable to our transplant ethics committee.”

“There’s a transplant ethics committee?” Alan asked, astounded. Maybe I had protected him too much from the reality of the transplant steeplechase.

“Of course. Policies vary from transplant center to transplant center,” Amy said. “But here, employees are absolutely disallowed from donating because of the power imbalance between management and employees.”

“What about an employee who worked for another company, one we share office space with?” Alan tried.

Amy shook her head. “That would fall too close to the gray area. They would be rejected after wasting everybody’s time. Jules has no time to waste.” She sent me that stricken look again. After speaking like a somewhat sensible person for a second, the vampire was back.

“Damn,” Alan said.

“You have to be more creative,” Amy urged. “You know, the sooner you can get a transplant, the better your chances of recovery. I know you’re the sort to try and carry on, but you are very sick.”

“I live in this body,” I snapped. “I don’t need reminding of it.”

“Sometimes I think you do,” Amy insisted. “You’re in denial.”

It was grossly unjust that I couldn’t just punch her. I *wasn’t* in denial. I knew exactly what my chances were, but I knew myself. Languishing in bed would kill me even faster than my sick liver.

“I see here you haven’t filled out the medical directives yet,” she continued. “We need it to complete your file, and it’s useful to have your caretaker in on the decisions. Should we do it now?”

I shrugged. “Yes.” I wanted to get it sorted and escape as fast as possible.

She slid a piece of paper from my file.

“All right. These questions might be emotionally painful to answer, but they are necessary.” Again with that wide-eyed, grieving look. *Hey*, I wanted to shout. *I’m not dead yet!*

“If the medical team is unable to take you off a ventilator without you dying either pre- or post-transplant, how long would you like to be kept alive by artificial means?”

Alan’s mouth dropped open.

Uh oh. I’d forgotten about *these* questions.

“What are my options?” I asked, pretending we were discussing cheesecake options instead of my demise. I was getting scarily good at dissociating, but honestly, what else was I supposed to do? Face my mortality with this blood-sucking woman in the room? No. I would save that for when I was alone in the shower, and my tears of terror could mix in with the shower water.

“There are check boxes,” Amy said. “One week, one month, three months, six months, one year.”

“Check boxes?” Alan’s voice was strangled. “*You have to check one of these boxes?* Jules, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“Shhh,” I said. “I’m used to this.”

“Nobody should be used to this,” he whispered, dropping his head in his hands.

“One month,” I told Amy.

She nodded. “Who are you giving medical authority?”

“Alan.”

“You will most likely need several blood transfusions during and after your transplant. Will you sign this to accept those?”

She pushed a piece of paper across her desk. I signed.

“Is your will up to date? It needs to be.”

“Yes.”

“Have you written letters or notes to your loved ones, with your”—*oh my god, she was drawing this out in the most hellish fashion. I hated her*—“final words?”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said.

Alan peeked at me through his fingers, horrified. I should have seen this coming. Yes, he knew the bones of what was going on, but I was fast realizing I should have prepared him better for the nitty-gritty logistics of illness and possible death.

“Are you all right, Mr. Higginbotham?” Amy homed in on his anguish, of course.

His breath caught, and a sob escaped.

A smug look crept over Amy’s face. My hand itched to slap it off her.

“I knew,” Alan said. “But I just didn’t realize. You are asking Jules to prepare for a new life and death at the same time. How can anyone do that and stay sane?”

I reached over and patted his arm. “That’s the reality of a transplant. I’ve accepted it. Somebody told me it’s like that Beckett quote—‘I can’t go on. I go on.’ That’s what I do—go on. I realized a while ago the only way out of this is through it.”

I turned to Amy. “Is that it? Have we taken care of all outstanding items?”

“We haven’t discussed how you feel.”

“I have an excellent therapist,” I said. “So does Alan. Besides, we have an important meeting we’re already late for.”

“Oh.” She sighed, but I was fairly certain she didn’t have a legitimate reason to keep us any longer. “All right, then. I’ll be here for you. Always.”

“Yes,” I said. *As if.* I would never, ever take her up on that.

I hustled a shell-shocked Alan out of the office, then the transplant clinic, then the hospital, and shoved him into my beat-up Honda. Luckily it was a fifteen- or twenty-minute drive to Hubtech, depending on traffic. I was hoping it would be enough time for Alan to collect himself.

When we got on the road, Alan took one look at me and burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” he finally gasped through the deluge. “I don’t know why I’m crying in front of you. It’s all wrong. I shouldn’t be the one crying. You need someone strong. I’ll be strong for you. I swear.”

“I know you will. It was a shock. I should have prepared you better.”

His tears subsided after a few minutes. “You absorb these hits constantly, don’t you?”

That was one of the many reasons I loved Alan. He really saw me. There was a ball in my throat that prevented me from speaking, so I just nodded.

“I think I realized in there how hard it must be to keep it together every day—to keep going.”

I couldn’t look at him. Otherwise I’d be just as much of a mess when we arrived at the office. I tried to blink away the tears collecting in my eyes. “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Most days lately it feels impossible.”

“I finally understand why you don’t want more people at the office to know. I’m sorry I didn’t before. It would change everything. It would make putting one foot in front of the other that much harder for you, wouldn’t it?”

I nodded again. That was it exactly. If everyone knew, I didn’t know if I would be strong enough to keep acting like I was okay in the face of their pity.

That was the thing with being so sick: I lost little parts of myself every day. The ability to go out and have a few drinks with friends. The energy to have hobbies. The ability to travel. A clear-thinking mind to do my job. An appetite for food. The way my face and body looked. What made me *me* was disintegrating before my eyes, and



the only three things that kept my grip on who I was were work, Alan, and bizarrely, Tom.

“I think we need some music,” I said. Luckily our “Cringey-in-a-Good-Way-Pump-Up Tunes” playlist was lined up on my Bluetooth. I scrolled to find Chumbawamba’s “Tubthumping,” which had somehow become our liver fight anthem.

Like the song said, I could get up again—as long as I had those three things.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I collapsed on my velvet sectional in lilac silk pajamas. They were the only kind that didn't make my itching ten times worse, and they covered up all the scratch marks on my arms and legs.

My body sank into the plush cushions with relief. The meeting with Amy and Alan had done me in. It was only five thirty, but exhaustion made my bones and joints feel like the weight of an elephant.

I should've been eating and checking my email to see if I'd had any responses from my latest batch of donor prospection emails. My will would be simple to do. I'd decided long ago everything I owned—mainly this loft—was going to Alan with instructions to donate any spare cash to PSC research.

Instead of getting up, I flicked on the TV to decide which rom-com I wanted to rewatch. I chose *Ten Things I Hate About You*, a classic I could never tire of watching, and curled up under a soft white blanket.

I must have drifted off to sleep, because the sound of the doorbell ringing jerked me from a black pit of unconsciousness.

"Alan?" I called out. There was no one else I could think it would be. My family members weren't in the habit of dropping by.

I heard a throat being cleared on the other side of the door. "It's me, Tom."

A bolt of energy made me spring from the couch. Tom? What was he doing here? The clock on my kitchen wall read 6:30. I was falling asleep earlier and earlier.

"Hiiii!" I yelled in a weirdly high-pitched voice. "Just hang on a second." I ran to the kitchen counter, where I kept an impressive line-up of green medication bottles. I swiped them into the nearest drawer. I stared down at my purple pajamas and lack of bra or underwear. Not much I could do about that.

“Um. I’m in my pajamas!” I called out. He was going to think I was some kind of weirdo, being ready for bed before seven o’clock. I was some kind of weirdo now.

“I didn’t think... I’ll just go and—” Before he could finish, I slid the dead bolt back and opened the door.

Tom’s eyes were unsure. He held a brown paper bag that emanated the heavenly scent of fried onions. Wait, food that smelled good to me? *Miraculous*.

He shifted his shoulders and took a step back, clutching the bag so tightly his knuckles were turning white. He was in his work uniform—dark, well-tailored pants, white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and black jacket held over his shoulder.

My gaze tore from his forearms to his face. He still looked unsure. “Sorry. This is a terrible time. I’m such an idiot. I’ll just go.”

I was confused, but I knew one thing at that moment—I didn’t want him to go. “Don’t go,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“But—”

“Really.”

His expression cleared a bit. “I was just thinking we missed our lunch today. I heard you say to one of your employees how much you love pierogi, and I know this Ukrainian place close to my apartment. I’m realizing now it was a lot to presume. Look, I’ll just—”

“Don’t you dare leave with those pierogi,” I warned.

He blew out a huff of air. “I just don’t know how this is supposed to work.”

“How is *what* supposed to work?”

He grimaced. “You know, the whole socializing thing. Friendship and all that. I don’t have any friends outside work.”

“Do you have friends inside work?” I asked. I had meant it to be funny. After all, no one at Silobase could accuse him of being a warm and fuzzy boss.

His head dropped. “I’ll leave you the pierogi, but I’m going.”

I’d hurt him. I hadn’t meant that—not at all. There was so much to compute. He remembered a little tidbit like my love for pierogi? He didn’t have friends and didn’t know how friendship worked? I couldn’t leave things like this.

“Don’t go. I was trying to be funny, but it backfired. I haven’t had dinner yet, and I’d really like if you’d come inside and we can eat those delicious-smelling things before they get cold.”

He cast me a tentative look that softened his stern face in the same way as his elusive smile. “Are you just saying that to be polite?”

“Tom, if there’s one thing I’m not when it comes to you, it’s polite. Come in.”

“True.” He smiled then, a smile that knocked me backward with its sweetness. Confusion bubbled up in me. I didn’t hate him anymore. What was I supposed to do with all this new information?

I’d thought it was the anger Tom provoked in me that gave me that electric jolt of life. But here, standing in the doorway near him, the air between us snapped with energy. It allowed me to shove aside the meeting with Amy today, my fruitless search for a donor, and Alan’s distress. Tom was the only person who had that magic ability. Now that I could no longer blame it on my outrage, all that was left was...Tom.

I ushered him into the kitchen with a jerky wave, too unnerved to think any deeper about this sudden shift while he was around.

He took a hesitant step inside my loft, then another. He craned his neck to take in the high ceilings and great expanses of brick and oak beams in the converted heritage space. He placed the pierogi on the counter and gestured toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the harbor.

“Do you mind?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Of course not. Have a good look.”

He walked over and crossed his arms, peering out. “This is amazing,” he said finally. “What a view.”

I came and stood beside him. The Parliament Buildings sparkled in the dark, outlined with thousands of tiny white lights. Many boats moored in the harbor had their masts lit up, and my gaze followed the pilot light of a tugboat chugging under the bridge.

Tom turned to me after a good, long look. I braced myself, expecting some jibe about how my gorgeous loft proved he was right about me embarking on start-up life with a marked advantage.

I couldn't deny it. My father had bought all of us apartments as investments on our twenty-first birthdays. It was a grossly spoiled thing to have, but since I was diagnosed, this haven above the city had become my safe place.

"Your place is phenomenal," he said. Much to my surprise, I didn't detect any veiled criticism in his tone. "It reminds me of Hubtech in the way it's renovated as modern but kept so many of the original features."

"That's no coincidence. This building and Hubtech were developed by the same company, and they're both reconverted warehouse spaces from the turn of the century. When I walked into Hubtech the first time, it felt like a second home." *Except for the grouchy neighbor.* My restraint in not saying that out loud was impressive.

"I'd love to have a place like this one day," Tom said, his gaze faraway and dreamy.

"If you keep working as hard as you do, that's going to happen sooner than later. You'll probably end up in something far more grandiose."

He shook his head. "I don't need anything more grandiose. I'd love something like this place. Anyway, I pride myself on working hard, so thank you for the compliment."

"Shocked?"

His lips twitched. "Not really. More shocked by your silk pajamas, if I'm completely honest."

I gasped in mock outrage. "And I was making such an effort to play nice! It's not like I waltzed into Hubtech wearing them, although that might be a fun idea. Pajama day!" I wasn't really serious. I just enjoyed winding him up.

"Don't even think about it, Sparks. You and GoodGuides are plenty distracting enough without adding pajamas into the mix."

"Come on, our employees would love it. We could do a contest for—"

"The pierogi are getting cold," he reminded me.

In the kitchen area, Tom insisted on me telling him where my plates were and wouldn't let me help him plate the pierogi. He

moved with the same precision with which he seemed to approach everything.

Working on the marble-topped kitchen island, he placed six soft-as-a-cloud, cheese-scented pierogi on each plate, beside an esthetic dollop of sour cream and a mound of fried onions.

“Do you have any pepper I could grind over top?” he asked, his face intent with concentration.

I passed him the huge wooden pepper grinder I’d bought at Dehillerin in Paris.

“Wow.” He eyed it. “All right, then.” He ground three grinds of fresh black pepper over each artfully arranged plate, then his shoulders dropped. “I forgot the chives to snip over top.”

Did Tom’s perfectionism ever take a day off? “I think we’ll survive. You know, you come across as surprisingly domestic.”

“If you saw my apartment, you would revise that opinion. I’m just obsessed with doing things the correct way.”

“Ah. Yes. I have noticed that.”

I peered down at my plate. As much as I felt invigorated by Tom’s unexpected presence, there was no way I could eat all six pierogi. Maybe two, if I was lucky. Still, my plate looked too beautiful to mess with.

He passed me cutlery and picked up his. “Where do you usually eat?”

I jerked my chin toward the pink velvet sectional. “I know it’s not the ‘correct’ way, but I tend to eat on the couch.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“It looks really...comfortable.”

Was he balking at this outward sign of frivolousness? “You were going to say something about it being pink and velvet, weren’t you?”

“Nope,” He shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Liar.”

He chuckled deep in his throat. Why did that sound make every tiny hair on my body stand to attention, and why was I willing to do almost anything to hear it again?

“It’s a good thing you like the look of it,” I said. “Because we’re going over there right now.”

“Are we?” Instead of sounding critical, his voice took on the delighted tone of a seven-year-old who’d been told he could have dessert before dinner, just this once.

“We are.”

He followed me. I took my usual spot in the corner of the sectional. He sat down gingerly, as though he wasn’t quite sure how to approach such a decadent, self-indulgent piece of furniture.

After a fair bit of fidgeting, he finally closed his eyes and let himself sink into the feather cushions. He groaned, and it lit a flame of lust in me I thought had been extinguished by my illness.

“This is so comfortable.” He sighed.

“Yup,” I managed, but my voice was strained. I was just being crazy. My life was far too uncertain, and I was far too sick, to entertain anything with Tom beyond eating pierogi on my couch.

If I got a transplant, things would be different. I would be carefree again, and things would snap back into focus in my life. I could do the things that mattered—work, relationships, travel—all the things I couldn’t embark on now with my guarded heart.

Tom cast a glimpse at the screen where I’d paused it when he knocked at the door. It was right on that scene where Heath Ledger serenades Julia Stiles. Iconic. “Were you watching a movie?” he asked.

“I’ve seen it a hundred times before. It’s one of my comfort movies.”

He took a huge bite of pierogi, chewed, and swallowed. I liked how he attacked his food—not fussy and careful like I’d expected, but with enthusiasm and relish. “What’s a comfort movie?”

“You don’t know?”

“No idea.”

“It’s a movie you love and watch over and over again because it always feels like spending time with a close friend. You know, comfy and happy and effortless.”

“But if you’ve already seen it, you know what happens.” Those forehead wrinkles were back.

I took a bite before answering. An impossibly soft, silky texture caressed my tongue, then a full-flavored cheese filling exploded in my mouth. Tom was right about one thing—these were hands-down the best pierogi I'd ever tasted. My stomach felt touchy, but it was accepting them happily for the moment.

"But that's the best part," I explained. "It's all about looking forward to your favorite parts but eliminating the stress of the unknown. It's safe."

He looked perplexed.

"So you don't have a comfort movie?"

"No."

"A book, then? I have lots of comfort reads too."

"Nope."

I lifted a shoulder. "Well, then, Thunder, I don't know what to say."

He nodded toward the screen. "What's *this* comfort movie?"

"An iconic rom-com from the nineties." I took a forkful of friend onions and chewed. The flavors all mixed together in the most scrumptious way. "These pierogi are the best I've ever tasted. Thank you."

"Aren't they good?" He lips curved into that sweet, excited smile again, and my heart did a weird thump. "I was walking home after work one day and smelled them from the sidewalk. They make them every night at the Ukrainian Cultural Center. It's one block from my apartment, so I'm one of their best customers now." His eyes broke away from mine and inspected his plate. "When I heard you mention pierogi at work, I knew what I had to do."

I would never have imagined in a million years one of the thoughts going through his head during our hours at Hubtech was buying me food.

"Hit play." He gestured the TV. "I'm curious what this rom-com thing is all about."

My hand froze in the air as I reached to pick up the remote. "I won't have you dissing or disrespecting one of my favorite movies."

He sighed. "If I don't like it, I'll just stay quiet, okay?"

"It's not just fluff. This one is based on *Taming of the Shrew*. It's extremely clever."



“Shakespeare?” His eyes widened.

“The very same, so no mocking.”

He made a cross on his chest with his right hand. I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away from the glorious maleness of his hard, beautifully-put-together musculature. “I swear.”

“If you break your promise, I'll tell everyone your real name is Thunder.”

He sent me a look of mock betrayal. “That's low, Sparks. It's beneath you.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But I'd do it.”

“Hit play,” he said again. “I'm going to get more pierogi. There are tons more in the box. Can I get you some?”

Despite their deliciousness, I'd managed to eat only two and a half, which in itself was a triumphant feat. “I'm good. Thanks.”

When he returned with his plate heaped high again, I hit play. Soon the movie swept us away.



I must have fallen asleep again, because I woke up to a sudden silence in the room and Tom's eyes looking suspiciously shiny.

“You're awake,” he said, turning his head so I couldn't see him wipe the moisture away. I always cried at the end. Could it be possible that Tom had too?

“What did you think?” My voice sounded a little dozy.

“That was a rom-com?” he asked, turning back.

“Not only that,” I said. “A classic example of the genre.” I sat up from where I'd schlumped down in the corner. “Sorry I fell asleep. It's been a long day.”

He nodded at my cover. “I pulled up the cover a bit so you stayed warm.”

The thought of this little act of care robbed me of my breath.

“I really loved the movie,” he admitted.

“Really?”

“I wouldn't say that if it wasn't true.”

“I believe you. You don’t exactly specialize in false flattery.”

The corners of his mouth quirked. “I suppose I don’t. Anyway, I really enjoyed myself, and I apologize again for crashing your evening.”

“Anytime,” I said, shocked to find I truly meant it. “By the way, have you recovered from the needle?”

He flushed red behind his usual gold glow. “I’m still mortified you saw me like that.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “If anything, it was kind of endearing.”

“I think you used the wrong word for ‘pathetic.’”

I chuckled. “Where do you think the phobia came from?”

“I’m not exactly sure. My childhood was chaotic. I’ve blocked out big chunks of it.”

That compassion Stewart had exemplified surged in me again. Not pity, but awareness of what Tom must have gone through if it was bad enough to block out. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“That reminds me—I promised to tell you about the origin of Thunder, didn’t I?”

He had, but I felt as though a carpet of eggshells had appeared beneath my feet. I sensed I was treading on highly personal and sensitive ground, and I didn’t want him to feel obligated to tell me. I waved my hand. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

He bit the inside of his lip as his fathomless eyes roved over my face. “I never would have believed this a few weeks ago,” he said. “But now, with you, I don’t mind so much.”

“Go ahead,” I said softly.

He took a shuddering breath. “I don’t know much about my biological parents. Based on my first name, I’ve always pictured them as hippies. They handed me over to child services as soon as I was born—I don’t know why. Lately I’ve been trying to find answers, but I keep running into dead ends. The morning we first met, I’d received a phone call that yet another lead was dead in the water.”

My skin prickled with the fact Tom was trusting me with this information. Our first meeting reshuffled in my mind. “You *did* have a real reason to be in a bad mood that day.”

He looked at his feet, not at me. “There’s still no excuse for the way I acted. I was angry for reasons that had nothing to do with you or GoodGuides, and I acted like a complete—what did you call me again?”

“An asshat,” I said, the memory causing my face to burn. He imagined his birth parents as hippies, so that explained Tom’s distaste over my style and crystals. It was short-sighted, of course, but logical.

“You were right. I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

“I was a foster kid until the court legally emancipated from the system at sixteen,” he continued. “I lived in a lot of different homes, all of them varying degrees of bad. Well, except one.”

“Tell me about that one.” I was intrigued by the note of rueful affection in Tom’s voice.

“When I was eleven, I was placed with an older man for about a year. His name was Brian Meeks. His wife had passed away, and he wanted to help make life better for someone, so he applied to be a foster parent.”

Tom wrung his hands together. I wanted to take his hand like I’d done in the lab, but I wasn’t sure if that was allowed here.

“He was good to you?”

Tom nodded, as much to himself as to me. “He was the best. I was awful when I arrived. Skipping school, getting into trouble all the time, talking back, even stealing things. Everyone had given up on me, so I guess I’d just given up on myself.” Tom winced at the memory.

“But this Brian kept trying anyway?”

“He insisted I was worthy of love, even when I was at my worst. We played basketball together, and he explained jazz music to me, and I hung out with him and his friends when they played chess in the park. He made all my favorite foods, and he was a really good cook. I just... I was happy there for the first time in my life.”

“What happened?” I asked, my heart throbbing with sorrow that he hadn’t been able to stay with this wonderful-sounding man.

That muscle jumped in Tom's jaw—the muscle I now understood meant he was keeping himself on a tight leash. “The foster care agency had a change in policy,” he said. “They decided foster kids were better off in a family settling. Brian was a widow. He and his wife were never able to have children. One day a lady came by, told me to pack up my things, and drove me to a house with four other foster boys. I remember Brian following us out to the sidewalk, shouting that he wanted to adopt me, that they didn't know what was best for me, until a police officer the care worker had brought along threatened to arrest him.”

I'd been holding my breath without realizing it. I released it in one long stream. “That's horrendous. I'm so sorry.” My words felt so completely inadequate. “Did you ever see him again?”

Tom shook his head, still gazing at his lap. “No. I've been trying to track him down—that was the phone call I got just before we met. Another dead end.”

“I had no idea. What was the family they moved you to like?”

He blinked. “Horrible. They were doing it just for the money, and they took on way more kids than they could handle or house. Those other kids made my life a living hell.” He pointed to the thick bridge of his nose. “That's where I got this. I got the crap beat out of me on a daily basis.”

“That's terrible.”

“I think my needle phobia might have something to do with the fact that I'm not comfortable with situations that are not in my control, which was the case with every foster home besides Brian's.”

It made complete sense. “How did you cope? Mentally, I mean.”

He gave a tiny, sad shrug of his formidable shoulders. “I trained myself to never look back. If I'm rejected or have to leave a place, I've become a master at blocking it out. Now I look only to the future and move forward.”

It was as understandable as it was heartbreaking. “Except for Brian,” I said.

“Except for him.”

“I get that.”

“Don’t pity me,” he said after a long time. His warning glare that reminded me of what mine must look like to Alan and Mac and Annie.

If he only knew the battles I faced as well. The words to tell him about my situation were on the tip of my tongue, but something stopped me. Was it self-preservation? Or more likely, that I didn’t want him, of all people, seeing me differently? Whatever it was, I didn’t go there.

“Why would I pity you?” I said finally. “Look how far you’ve managed to get on your own. You’re no object of pity, I can tell you that.”

He reached out to me then. I froze, my heart galloping in my chest. That sensation of being intensely, brutally alive flashed through every cell in my body.

His eyes caught mine. He kept his hand suspended in the air for a few beats, then dropped it. My heart plummeted to my feet.

“I should go,” he said, getting up from the couch.

I checked my watch. Ten o’clock. I needed to get to bed too. “I guess it’s getting late, and tomorrow is work. “Thanks again for the pierogi,” I said. “They were out of this world.”

“Thank you for introducing me to rom-coms.” He walked to the kitchen stool where he’d left his jacket and slipped it on. “If that was any example, I’ve been missing out.”

“You have been.”

I noticed now he must have washed, dried, and put away our dishes while I was sleeping. There was nothing left to clean up.

“I’ll let myself out.” He began walking through the kitchen, buttoning up his jacket. I stayed nailed to the corner of the couch, unable to tear my eyes off him.

“Good night, Jules.” He gave me an awkward wave when he reached the door. “By the way, the leftover pierogi are in the fridge.”

“Sweet dreams,” I said. “Thanks for dropping by and, well, everything.”

With a funny, sheepish little nod, he disappeared out my door.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I have some preliminary ideas for the visual theme for our flip deck.” Mac was leaning on Alan’s desk.

I was grateful for the break. My brain had been doing cartwheels every night for the past week since Tom’s impromptu visit.

The document I had been writing—or rather trying to write—listing the various components we needed to gather to pull together for our investor presentation in nine weeks’ time was swimming in front of my eyes. I wanted to crawl into a deep, dark place and sleep for a thousand years.

“Great,” I told Mac. “I’d love to see it.”

Mac tilted her shaved head. “Come over to my desk. I’ve already rolled you up a chair. It’s all ready to go on my computer.”

The hum of the shared open space where Mac’s and Annie’s desks were was invigorating—it was the sound of all sorts of brains working at once. When we got settled at her desk, and Mac was unlocking her computer screen, her fingers flying over the keyboard caught my attention. “Hey, are those new tattoos?” I pointed to the symbols that adorned the fingers on her left hand.

“They are. I got them at the Sea of Ink tattoo parlor down the street. They’re awesome there.”

The line work was sharp and exquisite. “They’re gorgeous. What are they?”

“Tarot symbols from a reading I just had and really liked. Tattooing fingers *hurts*, though. I don’t know if I would have done it if I’d known.”

“I hate getting needles in the back of my hand. It hurts so fricking much.”

“Oh.” Horror filled her eyes. “I hadn’t thought about that. Here I am complaining about something completely voluntary, when you—”

I stopped her with a shake of my head. “There’s no need to feel bad. Pain isn’t a competition,” I said. “They look extremely cool. I bet

you're glad now."

She gave her fingers a little wiggle. "Yeah."

I clapped my hands together. "Show me your brilliant ideas."

"Ideas, yes, but brilliant? I'm don't know about that."

"Of course they are," I said staunchly. "They came out of your head, after all."

"Sometimes your confidence in me is terrifying."

"It's warranted."

She waved away my compliments as her screen jumped to life. "Okay. What I'm going to go through are three intro template designs. Please keep in mind these are only preliminary. I didn't want to waste time developing them further until I have a clearer idea what direction you and Alan want to go in."

"Stop stalling," I said. "I'm dying of anticipation here."

She laughed, clicked her screen, and walked me through three graphically stunning concepts for our investor presentation flipboard. They were all somehow perfectly on brand yet stretched the creative vision Alan and I originally came up with, making it look more cutting edge, more innovative, more brilliant. Mac's work took my breath away, and it wasn't the first time.

"Mac, these are unbelievable," I said. "You knocked it out of the park." Alan walked in the door of the main office area, and I wolf-whistled to beckon him over.

Tom stood beside Peter's desk, having some sort of intense conversation involving a lot of intense looks. His head snapped up at my whistle, and he saw me with my fingers in my mouth. I braced for that old look of disapproval, but it never came. Instead, he smiled in amusement. When my face flooded with heat, he winked.

I put a palm to my forehead. Was I developing a fever, or was that affectionate look from Tom making me feel as though the two of us had shared a joke? I had to get a grip on myself.

Before I could decide, Alan reached us. "A wolf-whistle, Jules?" He clucked. "Your mother would expire on the spot." He had a point.

Alan's reaction to the presentation was almost identical to mine. "This is brilliant work, Mac," Alan said. "Er, Jules, can I drag you away for a second?"

“Sure.” I had no idea what Alan was up to, but the troubled look in his blue eyes made me know it was serious. Alan pulled me into the atrium.

“What is it?” I said when we had sat on the yellow couches. “Is this about Annie’s need for help with the database?”

“We definitely need to discuss that,” he said. “But this is more urgent.” Dark, heavy circles ringed his eyes. I hadn’t seen those since the days of Ghastly Gary, the apocalyptic ex-boyfriend.

Uh oh.

“It’s Ghastly Gary.” His words came out in a throbbing hiss.

Bingo.

“Oh god, what’s he done now?”

“He is trying to slither back into my life. He showed up on my doorstep yesterday, begging me to take him back.”

My eyes sharpened on Alan. “You didn’t, right?”

“Who do you take me for?”

I collapsed against the couch and slapped a hand over my heart. “Thank god.” The thing was Ghastly Gary was Ken-doll good-looking—waxed and buffed within an inch of his life. He was not at all my kind of handsome, but I knew he’d been Alan’s kryptonite at one time. “Sorry,” I said. “Old habit.”

Alan twisted his hands together in his lap. “I tried to kick him out of my apartment, but do you remember how weirdly strong he is? It took me at least five minutes to shove him out and lock the door.”

“What the hell does he want? Is he coming back to rob you of everything you’ve built since he left your life in ruins?”

“Pretty much,” Alan said. “Except he doesn’t see it that way. He swears he’s a changed man and wants to get back together and make it all up to me.”

“I just barfed in my mouth.”

“Same.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about. I have no idea how he found my new apartment. You know I’ve changed all my social media and made it all private.”



I did indeed. I'd done it with him in the aftermath of what Alan and I often referred to as "the Extinction-Level Event Known as Gary."

"How did he find me?" Alan wondered out loud. "Was it someone here at Hubtech?"

We looked wildly around us, as though there were spies hiding behind every potted plant and the coffee bar.

Just before moving into Hubtech we had made our contact information and addresses available to the Silobase and GoodGuides teams. It was on the GoodGuides and Hubtech websites as well. Transparency was something Tessa encouraged.

"He'll have found out you work here," I concluded. "Any moron could do that." As much as I hated to admit it, Ghastly Gary was not exactly a moron. He was a cheat and a thief, but he had a certain shrewd intelligence that could not be denied.

"Should I get a restraining order?" Alan asked, tugging the sleeves of his newest plaid shirt.

"Maybe."

"What will happen if he shows up here? I couldn't sleep last night." The panic rose in Alan's voice. "What will people think of me? Will Tessa kick us out? Should I warn our employees and the Silobase guys to watch for him, or is that grossly unprofessional?"

Alan's distress rolled off him in waves. It didn't make much sense, but my instincts were whispering to me that maybe Tom could help. "I think we should let Tom in on this."

Alan looked as though I'd just suggested eating our coffee mugs for lunch. "Did an alien come and kidnap you during the night and replace you with a clone?"

I thought back to the affection in Tom's eyes. "Maybe," I admitted.

Alan pinched my thigh, and I yelped. "You are terrifying me," he said. "Answer this question, or I'm going to start to think the real Jules has been replaced by an alien clone. Why was our trip to the spring carnival cut short when we were ten?"

"You threw up on the Zipper," I answered. "All over me and the people in the cage below us. I never was able to wash the smell out of my One Direction T-shirt. Perhaps this is a good time to tell you that Tom dropped by my place with pierogi a few nights ago."

Alan's mouth dropped open. "Miss Juliette Kelly. You *are* a dark horse."

"I'm not, sadly." But even I had to admit to myself maybe it could have been the beginning of something if I was healthy and had a future I could depend on. The truth was, health-wise I'd been stumbling through my days since Tom's visit. "Honestly, can you imagine Tom with this?" I waved a hand up and down the hot mess of my sick, yellow-tinted body.

Alan shrugged. "Is there ever a right time for love? From what I can tell, it happens when we're busy with other crises."

I chuckled. "Yeah, I guess actively dying fits that criteria."

Alan's mouth went funny for a moment, but then he forced it steady again. "You're going to make it, Jules. Besides, when you think about it, aren't we all actively dying? You may be on an accelerated path for the moment, but a transplant can fix that even if there are complications."

When Alan put it like that, I could almost believe it.

"Any luck with the donor search?"

I shook my head. Like Tom, I was running into dead end after dead end and was fast exhausting the possibilities. "We got off track—back to Ghastly Gary. Do you want to tell Tom? We can do it together if you prefer."

Alan bit his lip and nodded. His color had started to come back. That was a good sign.

"How about I grab him now?" I asked. "The quicker we prepare for Ghastly Gary's possible appearance, the better you'll feel."

I found Tom still standing beside Peter's desk, his knuckles on its edge. When I was still a few feet away, he looked up, and our eyes caught. His face softened, and the zing of thinking I'd done that shook me to my core.

I beckoned him over. He said something to Peter, then met me by the door to the shared office space. "You wanted me, right?" he asked, then gnawed his lip.

"Yes. Alan has something he needs to talk to you about. Come with me."

“Should I be nervous?” Tom asked as we walked to the atrium. He cast me a sideways look that made something hard at my core feel like it was melting.

“Nah.”

Alan stood up as we neared the couches and gestured for Tom to sit down, sandwiched between me and Alan. I settled in beside him, the warmth of his skin heating me like a ray of summer sun. My skin pricked under my dress in every spot where our legs touched. *No, Jules. Impossible.* Still, I could bask in the warmth, couldn't I?

“I have a bit of a problem,” Alan began. “Jules thought perhaps you might be able to help.”

Tom's eyes connected with mine. “She did?”

“She did,” Alan confirmed.

“Those must have been magic pierogi,” Tom murmured to himself, but I knew it was meant for me as well.

Alan filled Tom in on Ghastly Gary, how he'd ruined Alan's life before and how he'd reappeared. He shared his worries that Gary might show up at Hubtech. “Jules agrees maybe I should get a restraining order, but I think that could take some time.”

“I can help you with that,” Tom said with a glower that was quite frankly mesmerizing and—I had to be honest with myself—crazy hot. His fingers were clasped in fists in his lap. I had a sneaking suspicion after he'd had his nose broken, he'd learned how to use those fists in the subsequent foster homes.

“How?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“One of the boys I grew up with is a cop now.” He shot me a loaded glance, and I nodded slightly to let him know I hadn't told Alan—or anyone—anything about his childhood—if I could even call it that. “I can help you get a restraining order fast.”

“That would be great.” Alan rubbed his forehead. “Even though I doubt Ghastly Gary is the type to be dissuaded by such a thing.”

“If he isn't,” Tom said, his eyes like flint. “I'll dissuade him.”

He said this with such menace that Alan's eyes went round. He mouthed, “Holy shit,” and I nodded in return.

“This is all very unprofessional and embarrassing.” Alan cracked his knuckles. “But thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” Tom said. “I’ve got your back.”

Alan looked at him and then me. “Jules was right about you.”

“I’ll be bringing you more pierogi this week.” I swear to god the room tilted vertiginously when Tom winked at me. Did I just *swoon*?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I took my laptop to the Hubtech library the following day to try and recruit some energy for a few minutes. Despite downing three large black coffees, I couldn't keep my eyes open after lunch.

This little room was barely used, but I loved it. Tiny and tucked under the sloping wooden beams of the eaves, it was anchored at one end by a small gas fireplace. Heavily cushioned bench seats ran along both sides, upholstered in a dark teal blue. Locally made vanilla and tobacco candles scattered here and there scented the place. The bookshelves that lined the walls were mostly about tech start-ups and coding.

I needed to bring in some of my romance novels to give people a break. I loved the company Alan and I had created and adored Hubtech. It was crucial to work independently from my family's company too. Still, one of Tom's long-ago observations about me—that I didn't have a one-track mind about GoodGuides the same way he did about Silobase—was true. To me, this job was a great way to pass the time until my real life could restart after a transplant—if I got a transplant and if it went well. That was a lot of *ifs*.

I flopped on one of the cushioned benches and put my laptop down on the coffee table in front of me. Sitting up felt far too taxing. Like a felled tree, I slowly toppled sideways.

With a sigh, I kicked off my vintage clogs and curled up. I tugged a faux sheepskin blanket over me. My eyelids closed. I couldn't fall asleep, not here. I was just going to rest my eyes. Just five minutes.

I woke to a big hand on my shoulder. I blinked, feeling groggy and disoriented, like I was swimming up from the bottom of the ocean. Tom's eyes were studying me over that uncompromising nose, full of worry.

"Are you sick?" he asked.

Fear made me snap to reality. I sat up.

He was kneeling on the carpeted floor in front of me. “I shouldn’t have woken you. I was looking for you to discuss something and peeked in here. When I saw you, I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

His burst of words came out with the same awkwardness he’d had when he stood at my door with the pierogi. Everything inside me felt softer and gentler. He was adorable. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” I managed.

“You’re not sick?”

It was hard not to laugh. *If he only knew.* Instead, I shook my head.

“I’ve never been in here before.” He looked around the room.

“It’s always empty. But it might be my favorite room in Hubtech.”

He sat beside me on the cushions. I could feel the shape of the air between us—every curve, every notch where we were just inches from touching. I had gone from noticing to appreciating to full-out craving him.

“Why were you looking for me?” I asked to distract myself.

“I’ve been thinking about this Gary situation,” he said, that fascinating little muscle jumping in his jaw. “I wanted to talk to you quickly to get a better understanding without embarrassing Alan. He seemed distressed enough already.”

“Ghastly Gary,” I corrected him. “Trust me, he’s earned the prefix.”

“That’s why I wanted to spare Alan questions about it. I realize how difficult it must have been for him to share it with me in the first place. How bad is this guy, and how...um...*firmly* should I deal with him?”

I tried to ignore the flames that licked up my spine when I thought about Tom acting *firmly*, especially with that implacable look in his eyes. I cleared my throat. “As *firmly* as needed.”

“Good.” Tom punched one fist in his other palm. I stared, riveted. “If he shows up, I’ll get rid of him fast. You can count on me for that.” His tone contained more than enough tightly leashed menace for me to believe him.

“What if you’re not here?” I said.

Tom's lips quirked. "Besides the gym and my new side hustle as a pierogi delivery man, I'm *a/ways* here, Jules."

I laughed. "Good point."

Silence enveloped both of us. The cotton wicks of the candles crackled, and the air thickened. Our eyes locked, and my heart pounded in my chest as I tried to interpret the question in his gaze. I had to say something—anything.

"Did you learn how to fight in the foster homes?" I asked, breaking the spell.

He shook his head as if to clear it. "Yes. Also, I've been practicing Muay Thai for the past six years."

"Muay Thai." I remembered there was a club at university for that. "Is that the kicking one?"

"It also involves punching, but only if there is no other way to limit aggression in a situation," he said. "I used to get beat up a lot, so I made a point of learning to defend myself."

Pragmatic, as always. Still, I was having a hard time imagining a Tom who wasn't as physically imposing as he was now.

He must have read my expression, because he smiled. "I didn't hit my growth spurt until the very end of high school."

"It's just difficult to imagine. Having a name like Thunder couldn't have been easy if you were small."

"It wasn't."

"When did you change it to Tom?"

He sighed. "As you saw at the lab, I haven't gotten around to legally changing it yet, but I started going by Tom when I was eighteen, just after graduating from high school. I mean, can you imagine me trying to make a reputation for myself in the tech world with a name like 'Thunder'?"

"People would definitely remember you."

"I want them to remember me for reasons other than a hippie name."

As far as I was concerned, he'd succeeded.

He placed his hands on his knees. "Anyway, that answers my question about Ghastly Gary. Thank you."

“No, thank you,” I said. “I truly appreciate you being so supportive, and I know Alan does too.”

“And a bit surprised, maybe?”

I chuckled. “Maybe.” I checked my watch. I’d been sleeping for an hour and a half. Yikes. “Thanks again for waking me up.”

“Actually, seeing as I’m here, there was something else.” His voice was hesitant enough for my heart to skip a beat. What was he going to say?

His pupils dilated and seemed to swallow his dark brown irises. Sweat broke out on the back of my neck. I needed to turn off the gas fireplace. Surely he wasn’t going to make a move on me. *Please no*. I couldn’t do that. Not now. Not when my life was a mess and I had no future in front of me.

“It’s about the investor pitch,” he said finally.

I was *such* an idiot. Tom wasn’t thinking romance. That’s what I got for watching too many rom-coms. Life wasn’t like that—especially my life.

I shook my head to rid it of all my silly, and probably one-sided, daydreams. This was work. Tom and I were direct competitors for investment money. I could not forget that. “What about it?”

“Tessa caught me earlier this morning and told me she was going to call us in for another meeting tomorrow. She wants to see proof of the collaboration she suggested.”

I huffed. “She’s asking the impossible—pitting our companies against one another for a life-changing pot of money and then expecting us to collaborate.”

“That’s true, but I suspect Tessa has the success she does by asking the impossible.”

Things may have shifted between me and Tom, but there was still an invisible line drawn between work life—particularly this angel investment—and life outside work. I could not let the pierogi, the lab, Tom’s past, his baptism into the wonderful world of rom-coms, and even protecting Alan from Ghastly Gary get muddled up with the future of GoodGuides. “What should we tell her?”

“I have an idea.” Tom fiddled with the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt.



I restrained myself from looking down at his arms, because if I did, I'd definitely get all moony and stupid again. "What?"

"Maybe we should give her what she wants. We should discuss some collaboration between our companies to help us prepare for this angel pitch. It would surprise her."

"No kidding." Why on earth would we help each other if we were in direct competition? But I stopped myself. I was curious to see what was percolating in that head of his. "What do you have in mind?"

He took a deep breath. "Because Silobase is a business-to-business company, we've never really had to focus on anything outward-facing until now."

"You mean branding, right?"

He gave a sharp nod. Work Tom was back. "Tessa said Silobase needs to step up our branding, and it will be especially important for our investor pitch."

"She's not wrong." Largely because of Mac's brilliance, branding was an area where GoodGuides could beat out almost any other company. Still... "But why would we help you win the money? We need it too, you know."

Tom gnawed on the inside of his cheek, and my stomach sank. We weren't going back down that road of Tom saying he needed it more, were we? Was this one of those scenarios where men expected women to be giving, giving, giving, while they took, took, took?

*Not this woman.* "I don't see why we would be motivated to help. I hope you don't think we're suckers at GoodGuides. That could severely test our newly forged pierogi alliance."

"I'm maybe not the best at reading people," he said. "But I'm not a complete idiot. In exchange, we would help you with building a bigger, far more capable database. This would be a two-way street."

"Wait. How did you know we needed help with that?"

He shrugged. "I'm more perceptive than you give me credit for. Also, Annie and Peter have been spending time together."

How had I been blind to that? I didn't think Tom's idea was going to work, but I couldn't dismiss it out of hand. "I'll need to discuss it

with Alan.”

“Obviously,” Tom said. “But consider this. Whoever this investor is—and we won’t know until we do our pitches—they are probably going to prefer one of our business models over the other, simply because Silobase is B2B and GoodGuides is B2C. I researched it. The data shows Investors tend to have very specific wheelhouses when it comes to that.”

Tom had researched it. I would be naive to think he wouldn’t enter this competition in that cutthroat way he approached his work.

“Also,” he added, “it will appease Tessa to know we’re collaborating.”

He’d thought this through. “Point taken.”

He stood up and smoothed his black pants. “Just think about it.”

I stood up as well. My bones ached, and I longed for a long, hot bath. I was sick of feeling like a hundred-year-old granny living in Siberia. “I will.”

He turned to leave, but after sliding his hands in his pockets, he turned back to me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

The concern was sweet, but he was treading too close to my secret. “I’m fine. Thanks for asking, but I don’t want you to worry about me.”

“I wasn’t worrying!” he protested, then frowned. “On second thought, maybe I was. That’s what friends do though, isn’t it?”

“It’s not a requirement.” Were we friends? If so, it was the most confusing friendship I’d ever had.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“We can’t refuse Tom’s offer to collaborate,” Alan told me the next day when I brought it up.

“But—”

We were walking up the stairs from Neighbours, takeaway coffee cups in hand.

“Look, Jujube,” he said, tugging on his flannel shirt. “I think Tom was right about winning this investor pitch being largely out of our hands due to the investor’s preferences. Those are impossible to know ahead of time. If we can get Silobase’s help in building a database good enough to handle future expansion, just think how better positioned we’ll be going forward, regardless of what happens with this investor round. I mean, sure it would be amazing to win, but we’re going to continue on regardless. Right?”

I couldn’t suppress a spurt of pride. I clutched his arm as we passed the yellow couches. “I hope you realize how good you are at this,” I said. “You impress me every day.”

He stopped and grabbed me in one of his delicious bear hugs. “Thank you,” he whispered in my ear. “Some days I feel like a fraud. It scares me how much I love my work now.” I sniffed the familiar pine scent of his laundry detergent.

“You’re amazing,” I whispered, rubbing his back. “You always were, through everything. You just forgot for a while. Your reasoning for the collaboration is sound, by the way. You’re acting more and more like a CEO every day, Alan.”

His face went from excited to horrified in a flash. “*You’re* the CEO, Jules, and you’re not going anywhere.”

“Well—”

He held up a palm. “Stop. You’re freaking me out. Don’t you dare talk like you’re dying.”

The idea that maybe being CEO of GoodGuides was not my dream was clearly not a possibility he considered. “Fine.”

He exhaled. "That's better. Let's talk over the details with Peter and Tom."

I grinned, looking forward to the expression on Tom's face when he heard. "After you, sir."

Alan didn't move. "Uh oh." His eyes were fixed on the staircase we'd just ascended. "Incoming Kelly."

I whipped around and groaned as I saw my mother, perfectly attired in a pale blue tweed Chanel suit with matching handbag and freshly blown out hair, clicking her way toward me on her patent leather heels. "Shit," I mumbled.

Alan grabbed my hand. "I'll stay."

I shook my head. "I can handle her. You talk to Tom and Peter and figure out the logistics. No reason both of us should suffer."

"But you'll need moral support."

"Escape while there's still time!" I hissed.

After a split second of hesitation, Alan beat a hasty retreat, relief palpable on his face. My mother had been icy toward him ever since he came out as gay and she was forced to stop marrying us off in her Machiavellian mind.

"Juliette!" she said, calling over to me.

"Hello, Mother." I rocked back on my heels, waiting for her to reach me like I would a stealth missile. "How nice that you came to see me at work." I didn't mean it, of course. I had learned long ago it was never wise to say what I meant with my family.

"I didn't come to see *this* place." She surveyed the beautiful atrium with a look of disdain contorting her beautifully made-up features. "I came to see my long-lost daughter."

"I'm hardly lost. You know exactly where to find me."

She surveyed my crown of French braids, vintage Mexican embroidered tunic, perfectly worn Levi's, and Frye boots. "Still dressing like you've recently escaped from the 1970s, I see."

"And you're still dressing like you're attending fashion week in Paris. You realize, don't you, that among my generation most people in the Pacific Northwest live in fleece and Birkenstocks?"

She shuddered. "The Kellys have never followed the masses. We lead by example."

My whole family were perfect examples of big fish in a small bowl. They flourished here because they were known. Anywhere bigger or more sophisticated left them flapping around, gasping for oxygen.

“*Noblesse oblige*, my dear,” my mother added, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. That was one of her favorite sayings. She’d brought us up believing we had to set the example for the poor plebeians (as she saw them) below us in Victorian society. It was so pretentious and self-satisfied it made me gag.

“Mom, you started to do our genealogy and then stopped when you discovered that our ancestors were dirt-poor potato farmers in Ireland. We are not, nor have we ever been, noblesse of any kind.”

She frowned. I always made her angry, just by existing and not going along with the family’s collective delusion that the Kellys were somehow special. “You finally look skinny,” she said, her eyes narrowing with interest.

Not this again. Dieting had always been my mother’s full-time job. I’d never known her to look any other way than she did now—as thin as a whippet—but she was constantly trying different diets, or restricting her food, or subjecting herself to punishing workout regimens. Even with all this, I’d never known anyone to be more constantly unhappy with their body than her.

“It’s not a good thing. It’s because I’m so sick my body cannot absorb any nutrition, and I have no appetite. It’s a very, very bad thing.”

She gave a tiny shrug. “Let’s agree to disagree on that.”

*Give me strength.*

“You’re very tanned too. It suits you.”

I stared at the ceiling to keep myself from blowing up at her in the middle of my workplace. “It’s jaundice. It’s because my liver is failing from PSC.” I’d explained this to her I don’t know how many times, but concepts she didn’t like slid off her brain like Teflon.

“Well, I’ve never seen you looking this chic. Look at those *cheekbones*, darling. It’s too bad you can’t bottle it and offer it for sale for the rest of us.”

“Bottle up what?” Frustration erupted inside me. “Are you seriously saying I should figure out a way to charge the masses for the privileged experience of end-stage liver disease? I look this way because I’m *dying*, Mom.”

She gave another shrug.

Before I could retort, I heard a rough cry behind me. Alan’s voice.

I whirled around. He was standing with Tom and Peter but pointing to the stairs with a stricken look on his face. A look I hadn’t seen since... I spun back around.

Ghastly Gary was at the top of the stairs, a cloying look on his chiseled features. I had to hand it to him: his repentant-boyfriend act was on point.

“Oh!” my mother exclaimed. “It’s Gary! Are he and Alan back together?”

“Definitely not,” I snapped.

I darted forward to ward off Gary at the pass, but Tom beat me to it. He stormed toward Gary with such a menacing look on his already intimidating features that I stopped in my tracks. He was magnificent.

I could picture him perfectly as a medieval warrior in one of my favorite historical romances. My breath was coming in uneven, staccato bursts. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

Tom reached Gary and spoke to him in a growl. I couldn’t make out the words from where I stood, only the low vibrations. They rumbled through me, lighting up every one of my cells.

Gary shook his head and tried to push past Tom. Hah! Fat chance. Ghastly Gary was a muscle-bound gym rat, but Tom was naturally wider and taller. Tom bent his head and delivered what looked to me like a final ultimatum. I was fully expecting Gary to turn tail and run.

Gary shook his head, then poked a finger square in the middle of Tom’s broad chest. Oh, that’s right! I’d momentarily forgotten Gary was a sociopath. I held my breath, and the tension in the room felt like being inside a freshly shaken magnum of champagne about to be uncorked.

Then I saw it. Tom’s fist flew forward, as powerful and unexpected as a lightning strike, and caught Ghastly Gary’s jaw.

Gary's eyes rolled back in his head. Tom caught him before he fell like a sack of potatoes to the ground.

I swallowed hard. Holy crap. Tom was *so hot*.

Peter walked over and conferred with Tom. With the seamless efficiency Silobase had built its reputation on, Peter grabbed Gary's inert form by the legs, and Tom grabbed his shoulders. They disappeared down the stairs with Gary's unconscious body.

I was left standing there with my jaw hanging open and parts of me I'd completely forgotten about roaring back to life.

"Who is that?" my mother demanded in reverent tones, watching the space where Tom's back had disappeared down the stairs.

I'd been so absorbed I'd forgotten she was standing beside me. "That's Tom," I said, my voice strained. "He's the CEO of Silobase. We share office space."

"He's handsome." Her eyes were bright and calculating.

I nodded, still entranced.

She rubbed her palms on the front of her skirt. "I must be off, but the reason I dropped by was because I insist you come to family dinner this Sunday."

Usually I found a way to get out of Sunday family dinners, but I was still too distracted to come up with an excuse. "Sure," I murmured off-handedly.

"I must be off." She sped off in the direction Tom and Peter had taken Gary.

"Yeah...bye," I said, still in a daze.

Alan appeared beside me, looking as hot and bothered as I felt. He exhaled for a long time. "That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

All I could do was nod.

He nudged me. "You might want to close your mouth, Jules."

I snapped it shut and wiped off the bit of drool that had gathered in the corner. "Um, thanks. Are you okay?"

"Surprisingly, yes. That was amazing. I hate to break this to you, but your frenemy, the pierogi delivery man, is kind of a demigod."

I blinked, replaying the scene in a loop in my mind just to feel that leap of my heart on repeat. "I guess so," I said with wonderment.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Why did I agree to this?*

I walked up to my parents' front porch that Sunday night. The Kelly McMansion I'd grown up in was adorned with columns like the White House. When my father built this house, he'd spared no cost in making it as pretentious as humanly possible.

I was late, of course, mainly because I'd been sitting in front of my laptop, trolling social media. Emailing potential donors had given me no leads so far, so I'd started to send out messages via other platforms. I'd even gone so far as to price out billboards on the highway. I was getting that desperate.

There was still a tiny flicker of hope in me that someone in my family might offer to help. I tried to quash it so as not to be disappointed all over again, but so far the idea refused to be completely extinguished.

The day before I'd been even more weak and short of breath than usual. How long could it last like this?

I rang the doorbell. It played "Danny Boy," of course, because my father could never let anyone forget our Irish heritage, even though he suffered permanent amnesia about the humble-potato-farming reality of it. My sister answered the door.

"Juliette!" she shrieked. "I almost didn't believe it when *Maman* said you were coming. Where were you? You're late! Your guest is already here."

"Have you inhaled too much nail polish, Dominique?" I asked, walking into the two-story-high front hall. All white, of course, including a crystal chandelier the size of a small boat and a tiled marble floor.

She hooted in that owlish way she did when there was an eligible man around. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. I hadn't invited anybody. What guest was she talking about?



“Stop!” She giggled. “I should ask you the same thing. I can’t believe you kept a man like that waiting for you.”

Was this another one of my mother’s horrible matchmaking attempts? Those had tapered off as I’d got sicker. Then again, she’d been so thrilled to see my newly revealed cheekbones.

Dominique steered me into the sitting room, where my family liked to have drinks before the sacred Sunday dinner. That tradition had started a few years earlier when they’d become obsessed with *Downton Abbey*. I was assailed by the overpowering scent of rose potpourri.

My eyes scanned over the usual suspects but snagged on the man ensconced in one of the massive armchairs near the roaring fireplace, looking bewildered. *Tom*.

I stared at him. Had I died already and slipped into an alternative universe?

He looked back at me with a pleading, questioning look in his eyes.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, not accusing but confused.

“I... Uh...”

My mother fluttered in from the dining room, where she had surely been putting the final touches on the table. “I invited him! Isn’t that fun?”

Panic seized my windpipe. Did my family realize Tom didn’t know I was sick? Why on earth did my mother invite him? And when? I tried to breathe, but my lungs took in only a small breath of air. My heart pounded. The thought of Tom getting weird or uncomfortable around me was suffocating. I needed him to keep myself going—I needed him just the way he was now.

“Jules.” Tom fixed me with his dark eyes. “I want to make one thing clear. Your mother told me you’d asked her to invite me.”

My mother tittered again. “Well, sometimes a matchmaking *maman* has to tell little fibs, you know—”

“I’m so sorry, Tom,” I pressed my hand against my chest. “I had no idea.”

“Maybe I should leave.” He began to get up from his chair, but my mother pushed him down firmly. “No. That would be rude,” she said, her voice icy.

Tom stared at me, looking hunted. Understandably.

I held up a finger. “Just wait here a sec. I’ll be back.”

I grabbed my mother’s scrawny arm, dragged her into the dining room, and shut the heavy oak door behind us. “What were you thinking?” I demanded.

“I was just trying to give you a leg up. Tom seems is very eligible, you know. You can’t let *that* pass you by.”

I shook my head. There was no time to address the ridiculousness of it now. “Mom, Tom doesn’t know I’m sick. Nobody at work does except Alan and our top two employees. He *can’t* know.”

She gave me a look of reproach. “I’m well aware of that, Juliette. Do you seriously think I would bring it up in front of him? Never! That would be disastrous to your chances.”

“My chances?” I buried my face in my hands. “If I don’t get a transplant, I’m going to die. I need a liver donor right now, not a boyfriend.”

She pursed her lips. “It seems to me there’s never a right time for you.”

I couldn’t. I just couldn’t talk reason to her anymore. We spoke completely different languages, and it had been that way as far back as I could remember. My mother lived on an entirely different planet, one that was lightyears away from my reality.

“Tom can stay,” I said. “But no matchmaking during dinner, or I will get up and leave and take Tom with me.”

“Juliette! That would be unspeakably rude.”

“You know that won’t stop me.”

She frowned. She knew it. I hadn’t played by her rules since I’d gotten sick.

“Does everyone else know to keep their mouth shut?” I demanded.

She nodded so hard I thought her head might topple off her spindly neck. “Of course. I gave them all firm instructions before Tom

arrived.”

My siblings were terrified of my mother, so if she instructed them to keep their mouths shut, they would.

“Let’s get this over with.” I headed for the door.

“I’m trying to do something nice for you,” she hissed. “And this is the thanks I get.”

I opened my mouth but, overcome with a wave of exhaustion and the futility of trying to talk with my mother, soon shut it again. I waved listlessly toward the shut door and the sitting room beyond.

She nodded briskly. “Stand up straight, Juliette,” she said. Back we went, into the family fray. Poor Tom. He had no idea what he was in for.



We were seated by the maid my mother had hired for the evening along with the caterers—she never cooked, and besides grandiose dinners like this one, my family seemed to subsist on cereal, Pop-Tarts, scrambled eggs, and takeout.

Tom was sending me SOS looks. Unfortunately there was only so much I could do from the opposite side of the massive oak table.

“So, Tom.” My mother clasped her hands together. “Who are your people?”

He looked bewildered. “My people? You mean my employees at Silobase?”

He’d already been fully questioned by my father about the business model and revenue prospects of Silobase. I was pretty sure the questions were more probing than any angel investor would ask, so maybe this was giving Tom invaluable practice. Now there was a desperate attempt to find a silver lining.

“No,” my mother answered, showing a patience for him she never showed me or my siblings. “I mean your family. Davenport? I believe there are some Davenports at our club.” But his real name wasn’t Davenport. It was Días.

Tom’s mouth tightened in consternation.

“You don’t need to answer that,” I said to him, then turned to my mother. “That’s a very personal question to ask someone you just met, Mother. It’s vulgar.”

I thought the magic word ‘vulgar’ would give her pause, but I should have known my mother was made of sterner stuff.

“Nonsense, Juliette.” She waved a hand imperiously. “Tom, you should know that with us Kellys, family is *everything*.”

That was rich, seeing as they almost never visited me in the hospital and changed the topic of conversation every time I talked about my health. “Not for all of us Kellys,” I muttered, and I saw a flash of crinkles around Tom’s eyes.

“So, tell us about yours,” my mother pressed on.

“It’s a painful subject,” Tom said. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Why is it painful?” Dominique rested her chin in her hands, as if she was settling down to her favorite Netflix show.

“What’s so hard to understand about Tom not wanting to talk about it?” I demanded.

Dominique jerked back. “Geez. Sorry for existing.”

My mother clapped her hands in front of her to change the conversation, but the maid must have thought it was meant for her, because she came barreling through the door from the kitchen and cleared away our barely touched bowls of soup.

She quickly replaced them with plates of some sort of vegetable lasagna that would have looked appetizing if my stomach wasn’t doing somersaults.

“So, Tom.” Undaunted, my mother inaugurated a new topic of conversation before he’d taken a bite. “What do you think of Alan?”

“He’s a lovely guy,” Tom said. “Very good at his job and well liked by everybody.”

“Yes,” my mother agreed but with obvious reserve. She put her hand to her mouth. “Did you know he’s gay?” she said under her breath.

“Yes.”

“It’s not exactly a state secret,” I said.

“It’s just such a *shame*.” She picked up her fork.

I had already opened my mouth to defend Alan, but Tom beat me to it.

“Why?” he asked.

Tom had inadvertently—or was it on purpose?—found the perfect way to deal with my mother’s nonsense. Asking her to explain herself was brilliant.

“It’s just a shame he is dating someone like Gary.” She twirled her fork in the air. “And not, you know, Juliette here.”

I covered my face with my hands and groaned.

“They have always gotten along so well,” she continued. “It’s just such a *waste*.”

I threw my head back against the chair. “Mom! It’s been years. Alan prefers men. If you haven’t gotten over it yet, that’s entirely your problem.”

“I wasn’t saying it’s his fault, I was just saying it’s been one of my life’s greatest disappointments. Not as tragic as it’s been for his parents, though. Do you know, Tom, Alan is their only child? Can you *imagine*?”

“Shut up, Mom.”

“I would think any parents would be thrilled to have a kind, hardworking, generous man as their son, regardless of their child’s sexuality,” Tom said.

My eyes flew to him in surprise. Nicely done.

“Of course.” My mother folded and refolded her linen napkin. “I didn’t mean it that way, of course.”

My gaze connected with Tom’s. *She totally meant it that way.*

“In any case,” my father said, blustering through, as always. “What do you think of the GoodGuides business concept, Tom? I must confess, Juliette’s mother and I haven’t quite wrapped our minds around it yet.”

“It’s perfect for Instagram,” Dominique said.

I was conscious of a tug of gratitude for my sister that I didn’t quite know what to do with. She was right—GoodGuides was a company made for social media.

“François?” my mother asked my brother, whose nose had been pressed up against his phone the entire meal. I could never

understand why my parents were so strict about manners but let my brother do that without comment. My mother often excused him by saying, “He’s a boy. That’s how he communicates with his friends.”

“What?” My brother lifted his head. Halleluiah. A miracle.

“What do you think of Juliette’s business?” my mother asked in the saccharine voice she always used for him.

“It’s cool,” he said with absolutely zero enthusiasm. “But she’d be better off working at the store.”

We were all expected to work at Kellys. My parents had brought us up to consider anything else grossly inferior.

My father chuckled. “I can’t argue with that wisdom, son. Although I have a feeling Juliette will come back to us eventually, once she gets this independence thing out of her system.” Once I get this *illness* thing out of my system was the subtext.

My mother nodded.

“I won’t,” I warned for the umpteenth time.

“I think Jules will be successful at whatever she wants to do,” Tom said. “She’s not only smart, but she has people skills and marketing savvy that don’t come to me naturally at all and that I can only hope to acquire one of these days. She has that ability to draw people to her. It’s a rare magic.”

I blinked. Given how we first met, I could never have imagined Tom would defend me to my parents. Did he really think all those things, or was he just as annoyed by my parents as I was? I shouldn’t care, but I did.

My mother had the strangest expression on her face. Half thwarted by his words, but half hopeful he had defended me and that maybe her heavy-handed matchmaking was working, despite beating on the dead horse of Alan as a possible match.

“Tom,” she said. “We are having a fun event at the Gold Club next week. Maybe—”

I slapped my palms on the tabletop and stood up. “Well, that’s my limit, folks. We’ll be off. Thank you for the lovely half a bowl of soup and heartwarming interrogations. Much appreciated. Tom?” I cocked my head in question.

He was already getting up from the table with alacrity. “Yes. I’ll drive you home.”

“I brought my car.”

“I’ll follow you to make sure you get there safely.”

I quirked my lips. “Clever.”

“Thank you for the lov—er, the evening,” Tom said to my family. It was all I could do not to burst out laughing. “Where is my coat?”

“I know where it is,” I said. “Follow me.”

We hurried out of the dining room, through the sitting room, and to the front hall cupboard, where I grabbed Tom’s and my coats before getting us both out the door and down the front steps.

“I don’t think there are enough apologies in the world for exposing you to my family,”

I said as we got near our cars at the bottom of the driveway.

He grinned, relief relaxing every imperious feature in his face. “It wasn’t all bad.”

“How do you figure?”

“It makes me feel much better about being an orphan. My only regret is I didn’t get to try that lasagna. I’m starving.”

“What? The three spoonfuls of soup we ate before it was whipped away didn’t fill you up?”

“Sadly not.”

“How about I treat you to some pierogi?” I said. “It’s the least I can do.”

“You’re also dying to have them again, aren’t you?”

I held up my palms. “Got me.” The thing was, I didn’t crave only the pierogi. I craved more of Tom as well.

“Ha! I knew it. The Ukrainian Cultural Center is open tonight. Do you want to follow me?”

“Yes, Thunder. I do.”

“Just a warning. The decor and everything—it’s pretty simple there.”

“After an evening with the Kellys, simple sounds like a dream.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I parked behind Tom and got out of my car. This neighborhood used to be blue collar, but the developers had found it, and it was quickly being gentrified, as evidenced by the big shiny condo building rising in front of us.

Tom rubbed the back of his neck. "I have to run up to my apartment and grab my bank cards." He looked down at his work outfit, uncertain. "I might get changed too."

"If you want a shower after that dinner, I'd completely understand," I said. "It does tend to leave one with an icky residue."

He laughed with that soft light in his eyes that set tingles crackling through my blood.

"Can I come up?" I asked. "I'm dying of curiosity to see your lair."

His thought for a moment. "My place is nothing special," he said, stumbling over his words.

"It really *is* a secret bat cave, isn't it? I knew it."

He shook his head and chuckled. "Sorry. Please come up. It's just... I don't have a lot of guests. Any guests, in fact. I don't know how it's supposed to work, exactly."

"There's no formula," I said, touched again by his nervousness.

With a self-conscious shrug of his shoulders, he beckoned me into the lobby. It was as big and shiny as the outside, featuring three large abstract paintings in inoffensive earth tones. This place had been developed to appeal to the "urban professional"—all flash and profit and no quirkiness. I would bet the marketing materials had rhapsodized about a "metropolitan lifestyle" and "sleek finishings."

Tom flashed me a nervous smile in the cavernous elevator, then stared at the panel of buttons for the ride up to the seventh floor. *Hmm.*

The mirrored doors slid open noiselessly, and he led me down a sleek gray hallway with chrome light fixtures that could easily be confused with medieval torture devices. This place matched with



who I thought Tom was when I first met him—a generic tech bro—but it didn't mesh at all with who I was discovering him to be beneath that.

Tom pulled a key card from his jacket pocket and held it in front of the door. It beeped just like in a hotel. *Seamless technology for the urban bachelor.* I could just hear the marketing copy. Tom hadn't said a word, and he kept shrugging his shoulders under his black jacket.

He pushed the door open and ushered me in. "It's nothing like your place," he said, his tone apologetic. "I bought one of the show suites, and I haven't done anything with it. Besides work and the gym, I don't have much time."

He flicked on the lights.

*Ugh.* It was exactly like he'd warned me—a show suite. Aggressively gray with hard corners and an overabundance of shiny metal surfaces. There was a black minimalist sofa thing in the corner that looked about as comfortable as sitting on pavement.

"Um, make yourself at home, I guess," Tom said with a vague wave at the forbidding room.

I didn't think that was at all within the realm of possibility.

"I'll be quick," he added.

He disappeared behind a black door. I looked around, trying to find anything, even the smallest thing, that looked like it was bought by Tom. I couldn't imagine him—or any non-masochist—choosing the metal bowl on the coffee table with terrifying jagged edges or the drab gray cushion on the couch that looked as uninviting as the couch itself.

Finally, my gaze fell on a tiny shelf below the massive TV mounted on the wall across from the couch. *Books.* Bingo. They were always the key to a person's inner self.

I wandered closer and perused the titles. *How to Manifest Success. Manifesting your Best Life. Positive Think your Way to Multi-Millions. Engineering Financial Freedom. Keys to Start-Up Mastery...* What the hell?

Tom's bedroom door opened. My breath caught as he approached. Soft, faded jeans hung low on his hips and hugged his powerful thighs. He'd paired them with a laundry-fresh white shirt, as

though the jeans were the only concession to nighttime. I swallowed hard. Tom's small apartment shrank ten times in size.

My eyes travelled up. The jeans, combined with Tom's breadth and height, sharp cheekbones, liquid eyes, and that thick black hair... If circumstances were different, I could fall for him.

My bile ducts cramped like someone plunged a knife into my torso, calling me back to order. I couldn't fall for anyone, not until I'd gotten a transplant and a future.

"Are you okay?" Tom took a step toward me, the oxygen squeezing out of the room as he got closer. My fingers itched to reach down and feel if those jeans were as soft as they looked. I longed to take his white shirt in my fists and pull him to me, to reach up and taste those eccentrically sculpted lips. Would that turn up the fire in his eyes?

*Diversion. Diversion. I need a diversion.*

"Just surprised by your books," I said. "I wasn't expecting self-help stuff."

He broke our gaze and winced. "I was emancipated when I was sixteen, remember? There was nobody around to teach me stuff, so I had to teach myself."

Was Tom's driven exterior an act he thought he needed to play in order to be successful? I waved toward the books. "You don't really believe in that manifesting crap, do you?"

He shrugged. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Life doesn't work like that. That whole idea of manifesting perpetuates a cruel lie that it does."

"How so?"

"If you take manifesting to its logical conclusion, it means you can basically control your own life."

His right shoulder twitched. "That's the whole point."

"So if your life is a mess because of external factors, it's somehow your fault?"

He blinked. "I don't know about that."

"But that's the logic of it, if you think it through. By implying you can manifest the positive in your life, it follows you should also be able to manifest yourself out of the bad."

“I suppose.”

“So then how does that apply to an eight-year-old in the hospital with an incurable brain tumor, or a man who has lost his husband in a car accident, or starving people in war-torn countries around the world...” *Or a child thrown to the mercy of the foster system. Or a young woman who develops a rare disease and needs a life-saving liver transplant.*

“Jules, I—”

But this was personal. I couldn't count the number of people who'd told me since I'd been diagnosed that I just needed to manifest health or vibrate at a higher frequency, as if my disease was a switch I could flick off if I would just try hard enough.

The reality was far more brutal. With disease, or accidents, or being orphaned, there was simply no off-ramp. Nobody could just decide to stop life from throwing shit sandwiches at their head.

“The whole concept of manifesting is completely lacking in humanity when you probe a little deeper,” I said, my voice catching. “The notion we can control life is a fallacy, not to mention cruel. It's a backhanded way of shaming and blaming people who are truly suffering. It *sickens* me.”

Tom stared at me, dazed. “I never thought of it like that before.”

“More people should,” I said stoutly. “It would make for a much more compassionate world. Are you ready to go?”

My heart was pounding in my chest, and the cold gray walls of Tom's apartment were closing in around me.

“Yes,” Tom answered eagerly, probably dying to get such a firebrand out of his personal space. “Let's go.”



The Ukrainian Cultural Center was indeed just a block away from Tom's apartment and a complete contrast to his sterile show suite in every way.

We were seated at a folding card table in a back room full of elderly Ukrainian people. Most of them were playing cards, and the

whole place smelled like borscht. It was comfy and worn and perfect. Neither of us said much. I didn't regret my rant, but I'd definitely made things awkward.

Our pierogi and fried onions and sour cream were served on paper plates. The only beverages on offer were coffee or water.

Tom passed me a paper napkin from the pile between us. "This place is pretty humble," he said apologetically. "I hope that's okay."

"I like humble," I said, eager to get things back on more stable footing between us. "I hope you don't think I'm like the rest of my family. Or, you know, completely unhinged, what with my shouting in your apartment."

Tom arched a brow. "You were my first guest. You set the precedent, so I'll be expecting that behavior from every visitor from now on."

I kicked him under the table, and we both laughed.

The pierogi were delicious and piping hot. I didn't have an appetite exactly, but for the moment they tasted good.

"I was starving," Tom said.

"Tough workout this morning?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, with an hour of Muay Thai on top of that."

"You drive yourself hard." I thought back to those books. None of them were about life outside work. I was getting a better understanding why Tom had once said work felt like a life-or-death matter for him.

Maybe it was all he had. "Anyway, about that dinner—sorry again."

He shook his head. "Please. No more apologies. I almost can't believe you're related to them. There's not even much of a family resemblance. You're a much more Mediterranean-looking than the rest of them, and you have those beautiful brown eyes."

*Wait. No, Jules. You can't go there.*

I swallowed hard. "The brown eyes were a massive disappointment for my parents. According to them, all Kellys should have blue eyes. I must be some throwback to when the Spanish conquistadors invaded Ireland or something." Of course, the

Mediterranean skin tone was not natural, but if Tom mistook my jaundice for an olive complexion, I wasn't going to rock that boat.

He snapped his fingers. "That's right! I always forget about them."

"Anyway," I said, changing the topic. "Do you read anything besides self-help books?"

He winced. "Not since I left school. I've had to educate myself—not just about work but about life."

I got through three piergoi and considered that a roaring success. "I have to ask you a question, but you don't have to answer."

Tom's stopped his fork halfway to his mouth and flared his eyes. "What?" His hand was trembling.

"The black suits you wear to the office every day. Do you have a closet full of them?"

He put his fork down and took a deep breath. Oh no. Had I inadvertently stepped on sensitive ground?

"Yes," he said. "I have five suits and ten shirts. All identical."

I hooted with delight. "You really *are* like Batman."

He grinned, that strange tension gone now. "I'm color blind." He shrugged. "But it's easy for me to tell the difference between black and white."

"Color blind? I had no idea."

"It's not too much of an issue when you work in tech," he said. "Except, you know, branding."

"Right."

When Tom finally sat back after two more servings of pierogi, he eyed my plate. "Now I feel terrible, Sparks," he said. "That's all you're eating?"

"I make a practice of always eating before I go to my parents' house for dinner," I lied. "That's not the first time I've had to make a break for it."

He nodded. "Well, you'll have to excuse me. I'm a glutton."

"You've got a big body to fuel." I hadn't meant for it to sound flirty, but it did. The *things* I could do with that body if I was healthy.

His golden skin took on that rusty tone it did when he blushed.

"Sorry. That came out like I'm some sort of horny cougar on the prowl."

Tom blinked. "S'okay."

He insisted on paying on our way out. The woman operating the cash box knew his name, and a few others gave us a wave as we left.

We ambled back to my car. Pierogi required slow, easy movement after eating. Tom matched my wandering pace.

How had he stirred up all sorts of feelings in me that I'd thought I'd abandoned when my health started to really tank? It was getting harder and harder to be near him and know that, just like the travel focus of GoodGuides, he was yet another thing in my life I could admire from afar but not experience for myself.

I loathed being stuck in this disorienting, terrifying limbo with every particle of my being.

We finally reached my car. I leaned back against it for support as we said our goodbyes. Exhaustion made my limbs feel like they were filled with wet concrete.

I dug my hand into the pocket of my velvet coat to search for my car keys. It was nearing the end of October, and the clouds were spitting a frigid rain. "I guess we should call it a night."

He stood in front of me, his eyes fixed on mine. "Weirdly enough, I ended up having a great evening."

"You did?"

He took a step closer. What would it feel like to have those powerful arms wrapped around me, to have my ear pressed against his solid torso? I was sure he'd be able to rest his chin on the top of my head. I could almost feel the sharp weight of it now and how good his chest would smell pressed up against my nose.

"I did." He came closer still. Was he going to open the car door I leaned against?

Heat rippled off him. Even though the night was windy and wet, his back and shoulders blocked the weather. For the first time since I could remember, I felt protected.

Energy surged through my body in the way it only did when he was close. Was this all in my head? If I wasn't sick, I would definitely lean forward within kissing range to find out.

Time slowed. There was a honk in the distance, and raindrops pattered on the sidewalk. Tires hissed through the puddles. Tom leaned closer, so close there was almost no space left between us. I froze, paralyzed by the glittering desire for something I couldn't have.

His lips touched mine. Tender at first, hesitant, but then all that life that had been slowly draining out of my body roared from him into me. I needed it like I needed the next beat of my galloping heart. I pulled his huge body against mine, needing to wrap myself up in his heat, his strength, his lips. For someone who said they didn't have good people skills, Tom sure knew how to kiss.

I felt him harden against my hip. It was every bit as impressive as the rest of him and made me feel keenly, achingly alive. I wanted all of him. I wanted all of this. If only—

I broke away, breathing hard. I whipped open my car door and thrust it between us like a shield. *Jules, you are dying.* Tom made me forget that. To take this any further would be yet another source of frustration and pain, as well as brutally unfair to Tom, who had already lost so much in his life.

"What was that?" I demanded, my chest heaving.

His eyes were the darkest I'd ever seen them.

"I wasn't planning on doing that," he said, taking a shaky step back. "I'm sorry. I just can't stop thinking about you, and—"

I waved my hand to get him to stop talking. "Wait! You can't stop thinking about *me*?"

He nodded. "Yes." That crease between his eyebrows appeared. "I can't quite figure out when that happened."

"Not that long ago we were enemies."

"That was fun too." His mouth quirked in that way I was quickly growing addicted to. "But the more I got to know you, the more I liked you, and I realized the enemy thing was just part of that."

"I don't get it."

He frowned down at his shoes, unsure again. "Neither do I. I hadn't planned to kiss you right then, but I've been wanting to ever since I confronted you about loading the Hubtech fridge with champagne."

*Since then?* My head was spinning. "Really?"

He bit his lip and nodded. "I'm sorry. I did that all wrong."

He hadn't. The kiss had been pretty much perfect, but we couldn't. Not now. Not for so many reasons, all of which I didn't want to tell him. "This can't happen," I whispered.

His face fell. "I judged this badly, didn't I?"

He hadn't, but it was my way out. Maybe my only way.

"Yes," I said, the words scratching and clawing at my throat to remain unsaid. "I just don't think of you like that."

"But that..." He shook his head. "That kiss. It felt..." His tongue touched his curved upper lip, and it took every ounce of willpower to stop myself from kissing him again.

"We work together," I said. "Our companies are going to be collaborating now. We're in direct competition with each other. We both want to stay in Hubtech until at least the end of the year. We *have* to keep this uncomplicated." As far as excuses went, it was a pretty good one, but really, that wasn't it at all.

Tom's lips pressed together, and his eyes gleamed like chunks of obsidian under the streetlights. "My apologies for misreading this," he said stiffly.

"It was a mistake, that's all. We can just pretend this didn't happen."

He raked a shaky hand through his hair. "Right."

I couldn't look at the hurt in his face for one more second. "Good night, Tom." I climbed in my car.

He turned away, hunched against the rain.

I slammed the car door, shutting out Tom and the world. I wept the entire way home for the life I couldn't have.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I was not going to shine at this meeting with Tessa.

It had been ten days since the kiss, and I'd barely slept. I tossed and turned at night, replaying the hunger of Tom's lips against mine. I itched. I felt like I was on the verge of throwing up all the time. My eyes had taken on a lemon tinge. Exhaustion that no amount of black coffee could cure plagued me every second of every waking hour, and the steady, dull pain in my liver never let me forget I was going downhill.

I got up from my desk, pressure building behind my eyes at what my life had become.

Worse yet, as much as I continued to reach out to everyone I could think of to find a donor, I got back only polite refusals or, most of the time, no response at all.

I regretted so many things. I shouldn't have let myself become such a social pariah since being diagnosed, but my mind wasn't clear enough to decide whether that was my fault or the fault of my former friends. Nothing made sense anymore. Even more frightening, my fear was fast outpacing my hope.

I made my way to Tessa's office, dreading seeing Tom. I saw him every day, of course, but that too had become a kind of torture. Since the kiss, we hadn't gone back to normal as I'd hoped. The moment his lips had touched mine and, against all common sense, I'd kissed him back with every ounce of suppressed longing in me, everything changed.

Tom acted like the kiss that had shaken me to my core had never happened, and he did it so well it was yet another thing that was slowly killing me.

He remained civil without being overfamiliar. He called me Jules instead of Sparks. He would meet my eyes only if talking to me directly, and even then, he'd talk to me only about work. His face gave nothing away—shields up and firmly locked in place.

I shouldn't feel so surprised. He'd warned me how it was with him. The moment I'd rejected him, I became part of his past. Forgotten.

Tom was standing by Tessa's office door. If only I were healthy, this would all be so different. Tom and I could kiss like two normal people, and judging by the electricity of that kiss, we would have slept together. We might even be on our way to becoming a couple if I wasn't for my stupid disease. It would be perfect. I would be happy, and I would make him happy too.

Life had never felt more cruel than this instant as Tom's eyes scanned over me like I was a piece of furniture.

"Hello," he said, his voice completely neutral.

"Hi," I mumbled. God, I was so furious with life.

Tessa whipped open the door. "Come in, come in," she beckoned us. When we got settled, she sat behind her desk and peered at me.

"Are you okay, Jules?" she asked.

"I'm fine." What else could I answer?

"Okay," she said, not sounding at all convinced. "This is just a check-in. The investor pitch round with our angel is less than two months away. How's it going?"

"Good," Tom said, and I nodded with enthusiasm I definitely didn't feel. "Great, actually."

He was right. On paper, things were going well. The collaboration between Silobase and GoodGuides was going better than anyone expected. Alan had taken the reins on it and was working directly with Peter to coordinate logistics. He was doing a fantastic job. I was more and more checked out. It really should have been Alan in this meeting instead of me, as lately he'd been the one taking the lead at GoodGuides in everything but name.

Mac was doing amazing work for Silobase. She was incapable of anything else. Annie was working with Peter and two other Silobase guys, and they could not contain their glee over how much progress GoodGuides was making on our shiny new database.

Annie also had the glow of new love. She and Peter were trying to act professional, but I couldn't help but see they brushed together more than was necessary. Their eyes caught and lingered. How I

wanted that, and what a bitter pill to swallow that if it wasn't for my sick liver, I might have it.

"Tom's right." I nodded. "It's going even better than expected." I didn't have it in me to compete with Tom or impress Tessa.

"Do you have any details?" Tessa asked.

I shrugged. "No." I was feeling so wretched and furious and weird that I didn't feel up to adding anything else.

Tom cast me a questioning look, then straightened his shoulders.

"So far I would say, and I believe Jules would agree, the collaboration you'd hoped for between our companies is surpassing your expectations."

I merely nodded.

Tom continued. "Mac is doing a beautiful job helping with the Silobase pitch deck, and Peter is helping GoodGuides with database architecture and implementation."

I nodded again. Tom was nailing it, and I just couldn't muster up the energy to care.

"You seem elsewhere today, Jules," Tessa said, not unkindly.

"Sorry." How I would love to still be a match for Tom—healthy and optimistic, able to fall headlong into a relationship without second thoughts. "I'm fine."

Tom gave me the side eye again.

"I'll have to accept your word on that," Tessa said with a frown. "Tell me how this is all working in the context of the fact you two are competing against each other."

The realization sank in that, in my present state, I was no longer a contender. I was pathetic. Frustration at this loss made my breath catch.

Tom, meanwhile, smiled at Tessa. "I don't consider Jules or GoodGuides as serious competition."

My fury at the injustice of it all erupted in a burst of ferocity. "What?" I shouted.

We weren't serious competition? Of all the belittling things for Tom to say. Tom could not have made it clearer that it had all meant nothing to him—not the pierogi, not the rom-com, not the nicknames,

not holding his hand during his bloodwork, and especially not the kiss.

If I'd felt like I'd been robbed before this meeting, it was nothing compared to the way Tom's attempt to obliterate our shared memories made me feel now. I stood up. My legs shook.

"How *dare* you?" My words were as ferocious as I felt.

Tom looked at me, his dark eyes huge. Tessa said, "Jules. Wait —"

But I was already on my way out the door. "I can't!" I yelled over my shoulder. Maybe it was dramatic, but truer words were never spoken. My fuel tank was empty. I had nothing left.

I walked straight out of Tessa's office and down the stairs, got in my car, and went home to hide from the world in the corner of my pink couch.



I must have fallen into an exhausted sleep, still in my work clothes, because a knock on the door woke me up. I turned my head to look out my window. It was dark. Granted, that did happen at around four o'clock in the afternoon in early November at this latitude.

*Alan.* The news of my abrupt departure had no doubt spread like wildfire around Hubtech after I'd stormed out. I got up, my entire body aching, and shuffled over to the door. He must have forgotten his key yet again.

I opened it and froze in shock. The object of my fury was standing there in my doorway.

All the things my illness was denying me were embodied in Tom's unique nose and the intriguing swoop and dips of his upper lip. Same with the rich, burnished scent of his cologne and those forearms—it made me burn with resentment that he was constantly thrust in front of me when he'd already left me behind.

"Jules. I need to explain." A swallow vibrated down the length of his throat.

Part of me wanted the satisfaction of not letting him in, but another part of me needed him physically there so I could push my outrage and humiliation out of my body and back onto him, where it belonged.

I turned and stalked wordlessly to the kitchen, bracing myself against the side of the island.

He gingerly closed the door behind him and perched on a stool on the other side. He folded his hands in front of him on the marble surface.

“How dare you show your face here after that!” My voice came out low and throbbing. My outrage at Tom and my outrage at life were tangled like a knot of silver chains.

“Let me explain—”

“You really are just as cold-hearted as I thought when I first met you,” I snapped. “You can just revert to being that tech bro so easily, treating me and my company as if we’re not even worthy of being considered contenders.”

“What?” He shook his head, bewildered. “Jules, wait—”

“All because I rejected you? Well, it hurt me too, for your information, but I haven’t lowered myself to the level of denigrating you or Silobase.”

“Oh my god, Jules. No!”

The most infuriating thing was even after all that, I still longed to continue our kiss. I wanted to claim something of this disappearing existence as mine. I deserved it, and I was being denied it, and it was not fair.

I stalked around the island until I stood right in front of him, my breath heaving with indignation. I placed my palm on his chest. Even through his white shirt he was so warm, and I was so cold I couldn’t bear to take my hand away.

“I’ve never hated anyone as much as I hate you in this moment,” I seethed. “I hate this stupid massive chest.” The steady thrum of his heartbeat pounded beneath my fingers. How I wanted to steal some of his vitality.

“What else?” he said, that flame I’d so missed igniting in his dark irises.

“I hate your stupid forearms.” I wrapped my free hand around one and felt those hard muscles shift and slide under my palm.

“And?” His breath caught.

“I hate the stupid white dress shirts you wear every day.” I reached up and grabbed the collar and pulled, hard. The first two buttons popped off, pinged on the wood floor. They revealed an expanse of taut, golden chest with just the perfect amount of coarse dark hair.

“What else?” His eyes closed, and he sucked in air between his teeth. His legs fell open on the stool, and I roughly wedged myself between them, opening them farther, not caring how he felt about my abrupt movements.

He smelled delicious. This close, his skin radiated vanilla and cedar and something spicy. Maybe even borscht.

“Your hair!” I clenched my teeth.

He opened his eyes, our faces only inches apart. “What about my hair?”

“It’s too perfect. It’s like a fairy-tale prince of something stupid like that. I just want to mess it up.”

“How?” His eyes were aflame now, riveted on my face.

“Like this.” I dug my hands in his hair. The strands were thick and silky between my fingers, just like I’d imagined. I clawed at it to muss it the best I could.

I dropped my hands. My chest was rising and falling like I’d run a marathon. My gaze dropped to his lap, where the outline of his erection was clearly visible in his black pants. I was wet, I realized suddenly. More than that, I felt hungry and insatiable and *alive*.

“Better?” He raised a brow.

“No,” I hissed. I put my hands back in his hair and yanked his head so close that our mouths were only an inch or two apart. “I hate these lips. They kissed me, and I haven’t been able to sleep since. I feel you sucked the life right out of me. I want it back.”

He settled his hands on either side of my waist. They were wide and strong, with a little tremble of uncertainty that made him even hotter. He pulled me tighter against him, so we were breathing the same air.

“Gladly,” he said in a strained voice. “I kissed you because I dream about you every night. I can’t work because I fantasize all day every day of how it would be if you and I had twenty-four hours together, or even twelve, in a big bed or even on one of your pink velvet couches. The things I want to do with you—”

His lips were on mine, and that energy zapping between us was now coursing through every part of me, lighting me up like a Christmas tree.

He was giving it all back. Energy and lust soared through me. My fatigue—gone. My nausea—gone. Tom took up so much space there wasn’t room for anything else. All I felt was hunger for more of his kisses, more of his body on me. His cock in me, making dirty, vigorous love to me.

He lifted me up as if it was nothing. *I can’t let this happen.* At the same time, this could be my last chance. When I looked at it like that, I couldn’t *not* let this happen.

Tom carried me to the bedroom and finally broke our kiss to lay me down on the bed as if I were made of china. He crawled over me like a predatory animal and pressed me against the mattress and pillows with more hard, hungry kisses. *More. I want more.*

“Jules?” He said my name as a gasped question.

“Yes,” I answered. I wanted him. I wanted this. I wanted life.

I couldn’t get enough of the heat of his body over mine. My hands roved over the muscles of his back—power and beauty that made me want to cry in appreciation.

*More.* I wanted more of him touching me. I wanted everything. Desperation pooled in my groin, and my breasts felt heavy with need. “We’re wearing too many clothes,” I murmured with a laugh.

I reached down to feel his erection, and he arched up and groaned. When he looked back down, I caught sight of his eyes. They were molten fire, and I wanted to feel it burn me everywhere.

“Sparks, you’re going to be the death of me,” he whispered.

“Here’s hoping,” I murmured and pulled him on top of me. For the first time since I could remember, I wasn’t cold.

He bunched my long-sleeved linen dress in his fist and pulled it up and off me. My need obliterated any self-consciousness.

“So beautiful,” he murmured and kissed down my breasts. His lips on me... “Ah,” I hissed between my teeth.

He didn’t comment on how I was “tanned” everywhere. Either he was too preoccupied to consider the matter, or he figured I went to the fictional tanning bed naked.

I unzipped his pants and stripped him down to his boxer briefs—black, of course. With shaking hands, we managed to get his dress shirt off too. Those beautiful forearms strained as he propped himself over me and then lowered himself slowly, covering me with his body like a weighted blanket. His hips ground into mine so hard it would almost hurt if it didn’t feel like a bolt of lightning between my legs.

“Do you have a condom?” I gasped.

He went dead still. “I didn’t bring one with me.”

This couldn’t be happening.

“Hang on,” he said, and my heart soared again. “Maybe I have one in my wallet?”

Propping himself on one hand and letting me see those powerful arms flexing and relaxing, he grappled to find his pants, fished his wallet out of the back pocket, and flipped it open. A condom fell out on my stomach.

“Thank *god*.”

He groaned, then cast me an apologetic look. “If you’re going to give me a performance review after this, let it be known I agree I could have done that a lot more gracefully.”

I laughed freely, and after a few seconds he joined in as he slid back over me again. “Now, where were we?” he asked. He pressed his erection against me, and I threw my head back, wild with wanting him inside me. Within moments, I tugged down his tight black boxer briefs as far as my hands could take them.

“You sure about this?” He kicked them off his ankles.

“Yes,” I rasped, my body burning for him. “Hurry.”

He grinned, his face looming over mine. “I can do that.”

He rolled on the condom, and I hooked my leg over his hip.

“Please,” I whimpered. It had been so long, and I needed this so badly. In that moment I realized that from our very first meeting, this is where we’d been heading. It felt as inevitable as it did urgent.



He slid into me, slowly at first. So hot and hard and shocking. It had been a long time. I dug my fingers into the muscles of his haunches and pulled him sharply so he filled me up completely and all at once.

*This.* He was huge and thick, and I'd forgotten my body could feel this soaring abandon. It was glorious. I threw my head back. "Yes." I sighed.

He pumped once, tentative. "You're okay?"

*Okay?* My breath caught at how miraculous it felt to have this man pulsing inside me. To have *Tom* inside me. His single thrust felt like it was filling me with life again. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. In my deepest, most secret heart, I wanted more life, more of this, more of him, more everything.

"More," I pleaded, my lips against his collarbone.

I arched my hips, and he thrust again, still with that loving care but faster, harder. I met him thrust for thrust, so it became a new conversation between us—one of recognizing each other and marveling over this strange new thing we were together.

His eyes became wild as he lost control, just like my body beneath him. He let loose a strangled groan that just made me grip him tighter, telling him I was right there with him.

My heart sang. He needed this just as much as I did. We spiraled and spiraled up to somewhere that felt like heaven to me.

"Jules." It was a desperate plea. I tightened my legs around him in answer.

"So good," I murmured into the shell of his ear, arching my neck against the pillow. "Why is this so good?"

My words made Tom lose any vestige of restraint, and he drove into me, pushing me higher and higher until I saw stars.

"Jules, I—" he cried.

I snapped, the fire of Tom inside me consuming everything. Who I was becoming, who I was. Every bit of ego was obliterated in exploding with Tom in that moment.

He lowered himself gently onto my chest, still propping himself up on his forearms to keep his weight from crushing me. It took us both

many minutes before we were breathing anywhere close to normal again.

He tightened his arms around me. "I knew it," he mumbled, sounding smug. I looked up at his face, and it was so soft, so happy and gentle now where before it had been so fierce. "I knew it would be different with you."

"You did?" I stretched against his ridiculous expanse of body. Even now I wanted every bit of him. More and again. More and again.

"Yes," he whispered in my ear, his hot breath unleashing a silvery shiver up my spine. "It's so good because it's us."

Damn him, he was right.

"Thunder," I whispered, just for the pleasure of saying his real name.

"Sparks," he whispered back, his hand caressing my hip. "My Sparks."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

We spooned under my soft, fluffy duvet. I kept burying deeper and deeper into Tom's chest and the rest of his delicious self to warm myself up. His steady breathing told me he'd fallen asleep, but even unconscious he held me tight against him.

I emerged fitfully out of sleep, amazed that even with Tom's body wrapped around mine the blood in my veins felt like ice. A shiver wracked through me. What was going on with my body? My head felt even more fuzzy than usual.

Tom let out a little grunt and shifted against me.

My teeth clacked together, and I knew. *Not here. Not with Tom asleep in bed behind me.*

*Sepsis.* It needed immediate treatment. My liver infection had reared its head at the worst conceivable moment.

How was I going to get to the hospital without Tom finding out I was sick? I couldn't bear the thought of him going from desiring me last night to pitying me today. What happened between us was shining and perfect and unsullied. I needed it to stay that way.

My strategic brain went into gear. I had two priorities. I had to get Tom out of the loft, and I had to get myself to the hospital as quickly as possible. Sepsis could kill me in a matter of hours or damage my organs to the point I was no longer a viable candidate for transplant. Even though moving felt like agony, I managed to find my phone on the bedside table.

I texted Alan. *Tom in my bed but I need to go to the hospital NOW. Sepsis. He doesn't know.*

Clutching my phone, I craned my neck to look at Tom. I held my jaw tight through another teeth-clattering bout of rigors. That's what the shaking was called, and it was a reliable sign I needed to get to the hospital as soon as humanly possible.

Tom's lips were curved into a peaceful smile, and he looked completely unguarded. I wanted more time with him like this. I

wanted more time for everything.

My phone vibrated. *Tom? !#\$%! On my way.*

Tom moved behind me again, then stilled and drew me against him. "I can't remember the last time I slept so deeply," he murmured.

I mumbled in agreement, trying to lock my jaw together so he didn't notice the shakes. His body went from languorous to frozen in a second, and he reached around and palmed my forehead. I wanted it to stay there forever. It felt so lovely and cool.

He sat up in bed. "Jules! You're burning up."

"Am I?" I mumbled, tight in a fetal position. Anything else just felt too cold. "I must have caught the flu or something," I lied. My head was filled with cotton, and the bed tilted vertiginously. "You should go so you don't catch it."

"No!" He got out of bed and kneeled on the floor next to me. I didn't even have it in me to admire the spectacular lines of his shoulder muscles.

"You'll catch it." Each word took so much effort. "You have to go."

He frowned. "If it's contagious, I think it's a fair bet I caught it last night. Besides, I never get sick."

I used to be like that too, although it felt like another lifetime. My teeth chattered again; I didn't catch it in time. The sound reverberated off the walls.

"You poor thing," he said, smoothing the hair off my forehead. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"Alan's coming to pick me up," I said. "I just texted him."

"I'll take you."

"He's already on his way."

"I want to," he insisted.

"Could you grab me some clothes?" It was a diversion, but also I was so desperately freezing that the trek between the bed and the closet seemed like the trekking to the North Pole in a bikini.

"Of course!" He hopped up. I mustered an admiring glance at his tight buttocks and breathed a sigh of relief. I wasn't on my deathbed yet.

"What should I get?" His voice was laced with panic. Those self-help books surely hadn't addressed this situation.

“Just grab anything,” I said through my chattering teeth. “Underwear. Bra. Leggings, a top.” It didn’t matter—I’d be in a hospital gown soon enough.

He came back to the bed with the weirdest combination of clothes—a purple top and green leggings? I was going to be dressed like Barney. Still, they were clothes, and that was what I needed.

I must have looked at them a second too long, because Tom winced. “Color blind,” he reminded me.

“Right.” I nodded.

“Do you want me to get something else?”

“No. This is great. Thanks.”

I tried to get up but rigors wracked my legs. My bones had been replaced with Jell-O.

“I’ll help.”

“It’s fine,” I protested, but wordlessly he took the underwear he’d chosen, a lacy yellow pair, and pulled them on. I was as limp as a rag doll. He began to dress me gently, determinedly. Normally I would never allow this to happen, but I felt too weak to care.

“I’m so sorry about this—”

“Don’t you dare.” The fierceness in his eyes was back.

A key rattled in my front door.

“Jules,” Alan called out. “I’m here. Let’s go.”

Tom dove for his pants on the opposite of the bed but didn’t get there in time. I didn’t miss the long admiring glance Alan cast over Tom’s beautifully defined body sprawled across my duvet. Tom was still completely naked.

“This would be an awkward, hilarious situation on a normal day,” Alan said. “But I need to get Jules to the hospital, so I’m just going to pretend you have clothes on, Tom.”

Tom nodded, businesslike despite his nudity. “I’d appreciate that.”

“I parked my car right in front of the building,” he said, walking toward us. “I can finish dressing her. Why don’t you find your clothes?”

Tom gave him a curt nod of agreement and left me to Alan’s care. He gathered his clothes quickly and hurried to the ensuite bathroom to put them on.

Alan tugged on my top. “Isn’t there a kids’ TV show character who dresses in these colors?” Alan asked.

“Barney,” I said. “Tom is color-blind.”

“Ah. Now it all makes sense.”

“It must be a flu,” Tom called through the bathroom door. “She was fine last night.”

Alan and I exchanged a knowing glance.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s it,” Alan agreed, but I could see the concern in his eyes as he scanned the shaking, teeth-chattering, color-clashing mess before him. I was sure I looked as terrible as I felt.

“Come on.” Alan put his arm around me and tried to hoist me from the edge of the bed where I sat.

“I can walk,” I said, acutely aware Tom was going to be traumatized enough already by this head-spinning turn of events. I wanted to stand and walk out by myself, at least. Those last shreds of dignity weren’t very substantial, but they were all I had.

It took every ounce of sheer will I possessed, but I somehow managed to get to my feet. My legs liquified, and all I wanted to do was drop to a fetal position on the floor, but I shuffled one foot forward to the bedroom door, then another, then another. Tom came out of the bathroom. Just a little farther. I could do this. *I’m not dead yet.*

The room lurched to one side, then the other, as though I was on a boat in the middle of a storm. Darkness collected at the corners of my vision. I shook my head to clear it. *Just one more step.* I’d never fainted in my life. I sure as hell wasn’t going to start now. Loud buzzing, like a swarm of bees, filled my head. What was this fresh hell my body was lobbing at me?

Before I could find out, everything went black.



I came to in an ambulance.

My first sight was Alan’s face, pulled with worry, floating in and out of my line of vision. He was talking with a paramedic who was

taking my blood pressure.

“Primary sclerosing cholangitis,” Alan was saying as a second paramedic wrote frantic notes. “Listed for transplant. You probably haven’t seen a patient with it before—the disease is extremely rare—an orphan disease.”

“I’m familiar with it,” the first paramedic taping my IV site answered. Even through the cotton balls in my brain, I registered surprise at that.

“That’s unusual.” Alan sounded relieved but a bit thrown. “Anyway, she has a recalcitrant infection in her bile ducts and liver. Septic cholangitis. She recently finished a ten-day course of OPAT antibiotics just a while ago. Her transplant hepatologist is Dr. Abebe. I’m her emergency contact.”

I wanted to tell Alan how much I appreciated him. He’d remembered everything.

The morning was coming back to me in snippets. I’d fainted in front of Tom. There was no hiding this from him now. He knew, and that would probably change everything.

“Boyfriend?” the paramedic taking notes asked.

“No. Best friend.”

The siren’s wail filled the air. I was urgent enough for the sirens.

How had I gotten here, on a stretcher, feeling the closest I ever had to death? That was the thing people who had their medical virginity didn’t understand. Life and health were both more fragile and unpredictable than our human brains could compute. No amount of juicing or probiotics or marathon running changed that.

“Alan?” I tried to say, but my voice came out in a gossamer thread. It didn’t sound like me. It sounded like the voice of a sick person.

“Jules.” Alan grabbed my hand. “You’re awake.”

“I fainted?” Somehow this mere fact, more than anything else, made me question everything I’d previously thought about myself.

“You did. Luckily Tom caught you on the way down, otherwise you’d have a concussion on top of the sepsis.” He waved over the mess of my body, stuck with heart monitors and the blood pressure cuff around my arm.

“I don’t faint,” I said.

The paramedic who was familiar with PSC looked down on me. Miraculously, I had enough brain cells left to vaguely register he was extremely handsome with caramel skin and high cheekbones. “I’ve learned in this job there’s a first time for everything,” he said. He flashed a lovely, sympathetic smile that reminded me of Stewart.

I blinked.

“We’ve got you.” He patted my shoulder. “PSC is a brute, but you’re in good hands. Your friend Alan here is wonderful.”

He turned his smile on Alan, whose mouth dropped open in the face of such kindness.

“I know.” I tried to squeeze Alan’s hand but had no strength.

I wanted to ask more questions, but before that, I needed to know something, and my head had started swimming again. “Tom? He knows?”

The paramedic sat back to read the monitors I was connected to. Alan leaned forward. “He didn’t hear much, but he insisted on meeting us at the hospital. He was so stricken, Jules. He surprised me back there. He was upset but effective in a crisis. I think he deserves to know.”

“Alan...” Those black edges in my vision began to close in again. I wanted to ask if he could keep Tom away from me in the hospital. After having sex, I didn’t want Tom to see me attached to lines everywhere with a crowd of doctors and nurses huddled. “We had sex.”

Amusement lit up Alan’s blue eyes. “No shit, Jules.”

The bees were back buzzing in my ears.

I was gone again, just like that.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

The next time I swam up from the depths, I was being rolled into the ER. One thing about arriving via ambulance was it got me into the express lane of care.

Two nurses were conferring with the paramedics, and the handsome one was talking to them in a hushed voice while occasionally touching his hand to my arm in a reassuring way. Some people just had that innate ability to comfort, like Alan and Stewart. This man, whoever he was, had it too.

My vision flickered in and out. Stained ceiling panels. I was being rolled somewhere. Why were hospital ceilings so ugly? Didn't they realize how many patients got this view?

They rolled me into a spot and pulled the curtains around me. They quickly transferred me to an ER bed, and three nurses and a doctor set to work, taking my temperature, getting my clothes off, and shoving a hospital gown over me. Alan stayed, but Tom was nowhere to be seen.

"My name is Shanti," said a no-nonsense-looking nurse by my head. "I've just paged the lab to take some blood cultures. They'll be here soon."

"Call the IV team," I managed to get out. "I'm a hard start. Ask for Stewart."

Shanti picked up the arm closest to her and squinted at it. "Indeed. Your veins do not look cooperative. I'll page him right now."

"And Dr. Abebe," I said. "He's my transplant hepatologist."

"Alan already has them doing that."

After a few minutes being hooked up to new lines and testing and peppering me with questions, I started shaking harder than before. It became difficult to get words out without biting my tongue between my chattering teeth. They needed to get an IV in me.

Shanti frowned as she checked the machines reading my blood pressure and heart rate and temperature and other vitals. "Now

there's an impressive temp," she said wryly.

The clacking sound of metal shaking got louder and louder. "What is that noise?" I managed to ask. "An earthquake?"

Shanti shook her head. "No, honey, it's rigors shaking your metal stretcher."

I'd never had them this bad before. I closed my eyes, wanting more than anything to slip into unconsciousness.

"Jules, what is this all about?" a familiar voice asked beside my head.

My eyes flew open. "Stewart." Tears welled. He patted my hand. There were his kind eyes and his wild Einstein hair. Kindness meant literally everything in that moment.

"We need an IV line. Pronto," Shanti told him.

"You got it," he said. "No secrets between Jules's veins and me."

He let go to prepare his equipment and returned to tie a rubber band in the middle of my arm.

When he leaned down to poke me, I whispered, "I slept with someone last night." Why was I confessing to him? I had no idea but for some reason felt the compulsion to share.

"Good for you." He patted my shoulder. "I can't think of a better way to spend the night before checking into the hospital."

I chuckled, but then a wave of sadness swept over me. "Maybe it was the last time."

He shook his head, working on my arm. "You're going to make it through this."

"Will I?" I honestly didn't feel like it. I heard the click of him setting the IV line. He got it threaded in record time.

"You will," he said, not a trace of doubt in his voice. "You may be close to your rock bottom right now. You have to go through this place in order to rise. And you will rise. I know it."

"Thank you," I whispered, feeling miraculously comforted amid all the pain and fear. Stewart taped the IV securely to my arm.

Shanti came over to admire Stewart's handiwork. "Seeing as you're here, do you mind taking the blood culture samples?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

Shanti handed him two glass bottles, and he got to work as Shanti hooked me to the IV bag she had already started on the pole.

“All right,” Shanti said. “Antibiotics started. Double flow.”

The curtain opened a bit. Tom peeked in.

*Oh no.* This was exactly how I didn’t want him to see me, hooked up to an IV, with Stewart hovering around me trying to find good veins for blood cultures. EKG stickers connected to wires were all over my chest, and my feet stuck out from my hospital gown. A nurse was reading my vitals, and the lab person was hovering around waiting to take the bottles from Stewart for testing.

“Jules.” Tom somehow found a gap in the bustle around me and grabbed my hand.

“Don’t you dare mess up my IV line,” Shanti barked at him. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Tom,” he said. “Tom Davenport.”

Stewart narrowed his eyes at him, then widened them in question as he shifted his gaze to me. I nodded slightly, a bit proud of my conquest as well as absolutely horrified to have our scorching lovemaking finish like this.

Tom’s hair was mussed, and yesterday’s wrinkled black pants and white dress shirt looked a little wrinkled.

Stewart gave me a “bravo” wink.

Tom looked healthy and gorgeous, but his eyes were black with worry.

“I don’t care what your name is,” Shanti told him. “I meant who are you in relation to our patient here?”

“Her name is Jules,” he said stonily.

“I know that,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “But right now Jules needs our help, and I’m going to make sure she gets it. Now, Jules.” She looked down at me. “Do you want him to stay?”

His hand felt good around mine. Tom had seen me now. That balloon had been popped. I gave a quick nod.

“All right, Tom Davenport,” Shanti said with asperity. “You may stay, but I will kick you out in a heartbeat if you get in the way. Jules is very sick.”

Tom looked at the Shanti with stricken eyes. “Because we had sex last night?”

Shanti’s mouth popped open, incredulous.

Everyone in the cubicle froze for a few seconds.

Stewart let out a crack of laughter, then bit his lip with what looked like tremendous effort to suppress his mirth.

Finally Shanti hooted. “Oh bless! I forgot how ridiculous men are. Thanks for reminding me why I’m married to a woman.”

Tom looked bewildered.

“Calm yourself,” Shanti told him. “This has nothing to do with you or your mighty penis.”

His honey skin flushed a deep red. I felt sorry for him, and also sorry I wasn’t feeling as good as I needed to be to fully appreciate the sublime comedy of this moment.

Alan reappeared. “Wow, getting squishy in here! Okay, the paperwork is done. Do you want me to fill him in on the details?” He indicated Tom, who still looked troubled.

Maybe it was the fever or the shakes, but I was too tired to keep secrets anymore. I just wanted to close my eyes. “Go ahead,” I mumbled.

“Not in here please,” Shanti said as Stewart motioned at the pager he wore on his waist. “Gotta go,” he said. “I’ll check in later.”

Alan nodded and tugged Tom out. Shanti whisked the curtain shut behind them.

She patted my ankle and chuckled. “Men, am I right?”

I nodded, my head starting to spin again.

Shanti brushed the sticky hair off my forehead. “Don’t worry, honey,” she said, gentle now. “You can close your eyes and rest. We’re going to take care of you.”

This time I didn’t fight the dark.



I woke up in a private room. The sun was low in the sky, and my IV pole had four bags running. Heart monitor stickers were still on my

chest and connected to a bunch of wires that ran to a place behind my head. The scent of antiseptic meant I couldn't possibly be anywhere besides the hospital.

Tom was sitting in one of the hospital-green vinyl chairs beside my stretcher, his chin resting in his hands. His eyes had dark circles. They were trained on one thing and one thing only—me.

He jerked his head when he realized my eyes were open. He took a massive gulp of air and let it out in a slow, steady stream. "Thank god, Jules." He pressed his palm against his chest. "You're awake."

I nodded, but my heart was in my throat. Tom surely knew everything now. How could he not, and how could he see me the same way after finding out?

Within the next few minutes, I was going to discover how Tom was around sickness. Did he prefer to pretend it wasn't really happening, like my family? Would he vanish into the ether, like most of my friends had, unable or unwilling to handle the heaviness I couldn't help bringing with me? Please let him not be the worst thing—a vampire of tragedy, like icky Amy, the transplant social worker.

I checked in with my body. My head pounded and it felt like every bone in my body was being crushed, but the shakes were gone. I didn't feel quite as close to dying as I had. I glanced up at the IV pole. Hopefully that was a sign the antibiotics and other things flowing into me—probably potassium and saline—were making inroads on the sepsis.

Tom laid his hand on top of mine. He was a furnace as usual.

After a few minutes like this, he leaned forward to brush a strand of hair off my forehead. I knew I looked like hell, but his fingers against my face felt welcome, and my eyelids fluttered closed for a moment to savor his touch.

When I opened them, I tilted my head toward the IV pole. "Do you know what they're giving me?"

"Ertapenem, saline, potassium, and Pip-Tazo, another type of antibiotic."

I was shocked he'd remembered all that accurately. Actually, knowing Tom, I shouldn't be.

“Of course,” I croaked. This wasn’t my first tango with either of those powerful antibiotics. “Where’s Alan?”

“I told him I’d stay here so he could go to the office and do a few things, head home, and get showered and changed and have a bite to eat. We’re going to swap off. He insisted on doing the night shift.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to do that. I’m used to hospitals. I’m used to being here by myself.”

He winced. “I hate that you are. So much, Sparks.”

I blinked. I’d never thought about it that way. “I do too.”

“I’m so sorry—for everything,” he said, his voice gravelly. “I made comments about you partying and drinking and your *tan* when we first met—why didn’t you punch me?”

“You would not believe how close I came.”

“I deserved it, ten times over. You should be awarded a gold medal for your restraint.”

The moment had come to address the elephant in the room. Besides, I was sick of it sitting on my chest like an anvil. “I guess you know everything.”

His eyes sharpened in on mine. I couldn’t help but search them for revulsion or pity. I didn’t find either—in their place was understanding. “Alan filled me in. I understand why you kept it a secret.”

Alarm bells went off. Did he think, like my family, that being sick was something shameful to be hidden? “Why?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I figured it’s a similar reason to why I hide the fact I grew up as a foster child, not to mention my legal name, and the fact my biological parents couldn’t be bothered to keep me. People judge fast, don’t they? Once they decide you are one thing, it’s almost impossible to change their minds, yet nobody can be defined by just one thing. Not ever.”

Relief flowed through me. “Exactly.”

He blinked. “I imagine you don’t want people to pity you any more than I want them to pity me.”

“That’s it!” It felt miraculous to talk to someone who inherently understood. “Those pity looks,” I groaned. “Aren’t they the worst?”

“They *are*.” He pantomimed a few exaggerated sad faces that had me smiling. Who knew Tom could be funny? “I got so many of them,” he said, growing more serious. “And they always made me feel like a stranger to myself—like pity blinded people to who I was inside.”

He got it. Somehow he explained my loathing of pity better than I ever had to myself. I knew I should feel weird about the fact Tom and I had flipped from torrid sex to this, but I didn’t. I didn’t regret it either. “So you don’t pity me?”

He smiled down with such naked affection my heart cracked open. Now I really didn’t want to leave this world if it had this look of Tom’s in it. The lowering sunlight in the room behind him gave his black hair a glowing halo of auburn.

“How could I?” He shook his head. “I knew you were strong, but...you’ve been dealing with this all along? You are one hundred times stronger than I thought you were, and stronger than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re going to get through this.”

He spoke with the same low, determined conviction as Stewart. How did he know that was exactly what I needed to hear?

“Alan explained the transplant,” he continued. “And about the MELD system and finding a deceased donor. I’d never heard the term MELD before today—or knew livers grow back.”

“Most people don’t,” I said. “Why would you? It’s pretty incredible, though, right?”

“And convenient.”

I sighed. “It would be if I could find a living donor, but trust me, I’ve looked, and I’ve struck out badly.” That reality came back like a building collapsing on me. “It’s a brutal system.”

He grimaced. “I just learned about it, and I already hate it.”

“Yeah.”

“I met Dr. Abebe when you were asleep.”

“Unconscious,” I corrected him.

“Potayto, potahto. Anyway, he explained how it works.”

I nodded, that familiar shadow of hopelessness coming back.

He let go of my hand, jumped up from the ugly green chair, and began pacing across the room in front of my window. I’d *slept* with

him. The reverberation of that connection echoed through me even now.

“I can’t believe there is such a shortage of donor organs and that the system has so many inefficiencies,” he said, his words soaked in the same frustration that had devoured me from the inside since my diagnosis.

“You have no idea. The CEO in me can’t stand it.”

“Alan told me you need a certain blood type? Which one?”

“O negative or O positive.”

He whipped to face me. He didn’t say anything. I didn’t say anything. The air was heavy with waiting, but for what? I had no clue.

He studied me until Alan burst through the door, snapping the elastic band stretched between Tom and me.

“I’m back!” Alan rushed to my stretcher and gripped my hand. “My Jujube!” His chin quivered as he gave me a careful hug and a smacking kiss on the forehead. He looked at Tom. “Thank you for staying with her.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Tom said. “I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll leave you two alone for now.” He slipped his black suit jacket over his wrinkled white shirt. “Sleep as well as you can, Sparks.”

“Sparks?” Alan hissed at me out of the side of his mouth.

With an endearingly awkward wave, Tom left.

Alan opened his eyes wide and pointed to where Tom had just disappeared. “Just so we’re clear, I’m going to need the full story on *that* whole situation.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next day Tom didn't come as he'd promised. I hated that I was waiting for him to show up.

The doctors kept busy with a bunch of unpleasant things. An endoscopy to check out the inflamed veins in my throat from the portal hypertension. An MRI of my bile ducts and liver. A Doppler ultrasound. More bloodwork. So much bloodwork it was a miracle I had any blood left in my body.

When I was wheeled back into my room after the final test, Alan was sitting there, scrolling through his phone.

"Jujube!" His face fell when he got a good look at me. "You've had a hell of a day, huh?"

"Tom didn't come," I said in a stony voice to hide the pain behind it.

Alan had a guilty, uncertain expression on his face I knew meant he was debating whether he should give me bad news. "What is it, Alan?" I demanded.

"Nothing!" he said. "Nothing you need to worry about now."

"Alan," I said, warningly.

He sighed and passed my phone from the hospital side table. "Tom texted you."

My chest tightened. From the strain on Alan's features, it couldn't be good, whatever Tom's message was. Maybe his words had been perfect the day before, but words were easy. The real proof of how a person dealt with sickness was their actions.

I read it. *Going to be a busy week. Will pop in as soon as I can.*

My heart shriveled up. *A busy week? He'd pop in?*

"What about what he said yesterday about you two swapping off?"

Alan ducked his head. "He sent me almost the identical text."

Oh god. I'd been wrong. So wrong. Everything I'd been scared about Tom finding out was happening, and the hurt filled every cell of

my body. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to lift my arm enough to throw my cell phone on the hospital bed. It hurt to turn my eyes to Alan.

“Well, shit,” I said.

“I’m sorry.” Alan climbed into bed beside me, ever so careful not to tangle the IV. I nestled into his shoulder. I loved him, but even his pine smell and the softness of his plaid shirt didn’t lighten the heaviness of my disappointment.



The next morning I texted Alan to tell him not to bother coming until at least four because they’d be taking me in and out of another round of tests all day.

I had too much time to think. My mind flip-flopped between finding excuses for Tom, then getting angry at myself for doing so.

He worked long hours and had already given up an entire day for me. He might be feeling overwhelming guilt that he didn’t want to or couldn’t donate to me. I wished I hadn’t talked about that aspect of my transplant so frankly. I should be used to people acting awkwardly around me by now, but somehow with Tom it reflected an image of myself I couldn’t bear to face. My breath came in painful hitches.

If he just came and talked to me, he’d find out he didn’t need to feel awkward about it.

He had his own battles to fight with his childhood, and he was in the middle of trying to rise above all that. I suspected winning or losing this investment round would determine his self-worth. It was misguided, of course, but, given his past, achingly human.

Still, after the roller-coaster we’d ridden together with our relationship so far, I deserved more than being ghosted.

By three thirty, my fever started to rise again, and I could do little more than shut my eyes against the thoughts.

It was the worst possible time to have visitors besides Alan, so of course with their unerring ability to make a bad situation worse, my parents knocked on the door.

“Coo-coo!” my mother called in her hostess voice.

My eyes flew open in horror. A two-part mask with a spit shield dangled from my mother’s manicured fingers, while my father—always apoplectic about getting sick—was wearing his but upside-down so the shield stuck out over his chin and neck, like some kind of space-age plastic beard.

Was I hallucinating from the fever?

They had visited me in the hospital only once before, and that had been for only five minutes. They were simply too busy, they said, to stay by my bedside doing nothing.

Now they hovered in the doorway, staring at me with shock and—it broke my heart to see—a bit of revulsion.

I was the first one in the family who had ever been seriously ill, and they made it abundantly clear that everything about my disease and the hospital made them deeply uncomfortable. Worse, there was always the insidious implication it was somehow my fault. Kellys didn’t get sick, so it had to be another way I was trying to rebel against the family mold and make their lives more difficult.

“Juliette,” my mom whispered in a sepulchral hush after what felt like a long time.

“You can come closer, you know,” I said. “Like I’ve told you many times, PSC is not contagious.”

They shared a skeptical glance and gingerly approached the bed as if it were a pit of rattlesnakes.

I moved my legs, trying and failing to find a position where they didn’t ache so much. I hated how fevers did that.

“You look terrible!” My mother’s eyes filled with horror. “Your hair is a rat’s nest!”

This hurt far more than it would have if Tom hadn’t disappeared. It hit me then. Tom was acting exactly like my parents, and in a secret spot in my heart I’d hoped he was different. This, plus my mounting temperature, felt like it was crushing me to dust.

“The nurse is going to help me into the shower later on,” I said. *Damn you, Tom. Damn you for making me expect so much better of you.*

“I doubt they have any decent toiletries here,” my mother scoffed.

“Did you think you’d stumbled into a Blow Bar instead of a hospital?”

My mother rolled her eyes. “I swear, Juliette. You’re impossible when you’re like this.”

*Unbelievable.* I was literally lying here, dying, and she still believed I was doing this just to be difficult.

“Listen to your mother,” my father intoned. He nodded his head, and the off-kilter mask, at me, then sat stiffly in the green chair. He folded his hands in front of him as though he was chairing one of Kellys Department Store’s weekly staff meetings at the big boardroom table. “But seriously, I’m sorry to see you like this.”

It was ridiculous, but the back of my throat ached with the guilt of falling short of their expectations yet again.

My father looked at me expectantly. Was he waiting for me to apologize for inconveniencing them, or give them some sort of explanation for how I found myself in this situation? Silence was the only feasible response. Besides, I was so tired.

“That hospital gown.” My mother looked at my blue gown, her face contorted with disgust. The nurse had changed it that morning, but it was already stained by a few drops of blood from starting a new IV line and some coffee I’d spilled thanks to my still-shaky hands. “It’s filthy.”

I breathed through my nostrils. “Nobody cares what I look like here, Mom.”

“You should. How you look is how you feel.”

*If only it was that simple.* I lay against the pillows, my heart aching with loneliness. My father fidgeted in his chair, his face set in a rigid mask of discomfort and impatience. He was chomping at the bit to escape. I knew the signs.

“So what are Dominique and François up to?” I didn’t really want to hear, but it would divert attention away from me.

My mother clapped her hands together. “They are *wonderful*. You would not believe the impact they are having at the store, would she, Patrick?”

For the first time since they’d arrived, my father looked pleased. Well, maybe not quite that, but at least distracted. “François

designed a new layout for the men's section and has introduced a wonderful new cashmere line, and Dominique is being featured in our print advertisements," he said.

"She could be a model, don't you think, Patrick?" my mother said. That had been her dream for herself, but she'd married my father and gotten pregnant with François.

My father nodded. They had always made me feel like I fell below the standards of pristine beauty of the rest of the family. My features were a bit too big, my cheekbones weren't sculpted before I got sick, my lips were too full, my ears stuck out a bit and pointed at the tips like some sort of demented elf. Now I was yellow with tubes coming out of me. However, as my mother never failed to remind me, at least I was finally thin!

"Your sister and brother are working so hard to support you," my father added.

*Support me? How, exactly?* So I was part of some family legacy I didn't want, even if I stayed alive long enough to benefit—which looked increasingly doubtful? This party line had been trotted out to me before. It was, I knew, the story they told themselves to make themselves feel like saints.

Most of the time, I maintained emotional brick walls between me and my family for my mental health, but the pain in my body punched holes in those carefully constructed fortifications.

Dr. Abebe swung through the door like an angel of mercy. "Jules!" he cried. "My favorite—" His words died off as he caught sight of my parents.

My parents' eyes went wide when they took him in. They weren't involved in my medical care at all. It had taken too long after my diagnosis to clue into the fact they had no desire to be. I was fairly certain that a young, casual Ethiopian doctor was not what they had in mind when I obliquely referenced my "liver team."

Their loss. Dr. Abebe was the best doctor I'd ever had.

"Please excuse me," Dr. Abebe said, his manners impeccable. "Am I interrupting some family time?"

"No." My father got out of his chair. "We were just leaving."

"Are you Jules's parents, by any chance?" Dr. Abebe asked.

“Yes, we are *Juliette’s* parents,” my mother said, emphasizing my official name.

“Pleasure to meet you. Your daughter is one of my favorite people.”

My father and mother exchanged confused glances. They’d never thought of me in those terms, especially not since I’d become sick.

“She’s ill,” my father said, clearly confused. How could sick people also be favorite people? In his world, it was unfathomable.

“I believe Jules is aware of that.” Dr. Abebe shot me an incredulous glance. “People who are fighting a disease can still be extraordinary. One does not preclude the other. On the contrary, often illness brings out the truest parts of a person’s personality.”

“That’s nice,” my mother said with a brittle smile. “Well, we must be off. Goodbye.” She gave me a regal nod and swept my father out of the room.

Dr. Abebe watched them go, then turned to me with an incredulous expression. “I’m sorry,” he said simply.

I nodded. “Before you ask, my siblings are the same, if not worse.”

He sat down in the chair my father had been occupying, splaying his legs and looking completely at ease compared to how my dad had perched there, stiff as a store mannequin. I let out a heavy gust of air.

Dr. Abebe examined my face with his lovely, sympathetic eyes. “I see now how they wouldn’t be the type to consider donation.”

“God, no.”

He looked at me, a funny twitch in his lips.

“What’s up?”

“As you know, you’re very sick.”

“I was feeling a bit better, but now my fever is spiking again.” No point in mentioning my heartsickness—they didn’t have any medicine for that. I lifted the arm with the IV in it. “Aren’t the antibiotics helping?”

“A bit, but it’s clear from your labs this afternoon they’re no longer enough to keep the sepsis at bay. We’re running out of time.”

I looked at him, colliding reactions banging up against each other in my brain and my heart.

I couldn't leave now, not with so many things still left to do. My business. Helping Alan get out of his financial black hole. Falling in love. Having children... I'd never admitted this to anyone but Alan, but I longed to have children of my own and bring them up celebrating their differences and their flaws. I dreamed of having a happy, chaotic, imperfect home full of art and books and music and friends and laughter—the exact opposite of my sterile home life growing up.

At the same time, being this sick was so hard. Every moment of every day was a struggle. I was losing, piece by piece, everything that made me *me*. It was all such a battle, and I was so damn exhausted.

I dropped my head, unable to reconcile it all. "I know," I whispered. "I can feel it." A lump stuck in my throat.

"It's not all bad news." Dr. Abebe swatted my leg under the white-and-blue hospital blanket with the chart he held in his hand.

"But it *is*. I checked my emails and phone messages this morning, and still no donors have come forward."

Dr. Abebe's lips curved up. "Maybe you think you haven't found anyone, but I came here to let you know someone came forward yesterday to inquire about donating to you."

My heart leaped in my chest. "What? Who?"

"They have asked to remain anonymous."

"Is it someone who knows me?"

"I can't say." Dr. Abebe laughed. "Do I need to find the definition of 'anonymous' in the dictionary?"

"That's torture! I didn't even know that was a possibility. Can they do that?"

He nodded. "Yes. I guess we haven't talked about it as anonymous donors are quite rare. I know you're as well versed in this process as anyone, but I have to remind you there are still a lot of steps to go through before this actually happens. *If* it happens. I'm not actually supposed to tell you about it at all, but I figured you needed a little sliver of hope to hold on to right now."

He was right. I could hardly make sense of my thoughts. “How fast can they go through the qualification process?”

“Normally it’s three weeks,” he said. “But given your current state, I’ve managed to expedite this person’s work-up. They are being tested all day, every day for the next five days. They barely have time to breathe they’re so busy going from appointment to appointment. You need to remember, though, that many things can disqualify them from donating. They could also pull out at any time if they have second thoughts, right up until they’re put under anesthetic.”

I knew all that in a theoretical way, but it hit differently now that we were discussing an actual donor and an actual transplant. *My* transplant. “Not knowing is going to be torture.”

A rogue thought wormed its way into my mind. *Tom?*

“Jules, the situation is you will not know until the staff, or maybe me, come in to inform you we’re prepping you for surgery. You know the brick wall they maintain between donor and recipient for living donor transplants.”

I did. Everyone at the transplant emphasized that ethical boundary. I couldn’t get my hopes up it was him. He’d given no indication, yet...

“I realize how hard it is,” Dr. Abebe continued. “But this is something to hang on to, isn’t it? Was I wrong to tell you?”

I shook my head. “No.” Even if it wasn’t a sure thing, hope was like one of those rings you grab on to in the metro in Paris—something to grip to keep me from toppling over.

He grinned. “I thought so. Anyway, keep working on your end. It’s better to have backups. Don’t give up.”

I shook my head. My mind, newly invigorated, searched for new people I could contact. “Never. Can I bust out of here soon and do my antibiotics at OPAT? I should get back to work.” Being in the hospital never failed to make me feel even sicker.

Dr. Abebe sighed deeply. “I think you already know the answer.”

My body did, but my mind didn’t want to accept it.

“Your kidneys are tanking,” he said. “And your blood clotting ability is next to nothing. You can’t stop the antibiotic treatment. In



fact, we need to add a third one. My goal is to get you as stable as we can for transplant, which means you'll need to stay put."

I twisted the hospital blanket between my thumb and my forefinger. I knew he was right, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow. "Will you keep me up to date on the donor, even if it's bad news?" Knowing felt impossible sometimes, but in my experience, it was always preferable in the long run to not knowing.

"I'll try, but as I said, I shouldn't even know this information, let alone pass it to you," he stressed. "By the way, I should warn you—do *not* try to find out. This hospital is zealous about confidentiality. It could destroy our chances."

What choice did I have? "All right."

"Good, because at the stage we're at, we need your transplant to happen."

So here we were. This was the moment I had to stop play-acting being a healthy person.

He stood up, rubbing my shoulder as he did. "You're one of the strongest people I've ever met. Hang in there just a little longer."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Even with the new antibiotics, my fever wasn't going away.

Two days of hovering between lucidity and all sorts of fever-distorted dreams later, the door to my hospital room opened. I knew it had to be Alan, but deep in my stubborn soul, I wanted it to be Tom.

Alan walked in, and my heart warmed and sank at the same time. No Tom. Beside him instead was a handsome man I vaguely recognized.

"Jules!" Alan gave me a kiss on the cheek. He looked different, somehow. There was a new glow in his eyes. The other man approached the bed but stayed a few feet behind.

"Don't bother telling me I look good," I said. "I know I'm not."

"So the kidneys haven't improved?"

I shook my head. "Still failing. Dialysis starts soon." There had also been chatter about moving me to the ICU, but there was no point in worrying Alan about that if it wasn't a sure thing.

"It goes without saying that's all complete shit, of course, but I have something that might cheer you up."

Where had I seen Alan's friend before? I knew I had. I just couldn't place him. Alan pulled him forward, so he was standing by the bed rail as well. There was something calming about his presence that had me combing through my fractured memories of the past few days.

"Hello, Jules," he said. "Do you remember me?"

"I do, but I just can't place from where or when?"

He smiled, sheepish. "I expected that. You weren't in great shape when we met. I was one of the paramedics who brought you here in the ambulance."

"Oh!" The pieces snapped into place. "Yes. You put in my IV, and you'd heard of PSC."

He nodded. "I couldn't get you out of my mind," he said. "Luckily, Alan and I exchanged numbers when he was completing all the paperwork." He used hands when he talked, like he was conducting an orchestra. It was mesmerizing.

"Is that so?" I sent Alan a veiled look, and he blushed.

Alan shrugged in a way I knew meant, *Can you blame me?*

I couldn't. The overall impression of this guy was lovely. The complete antithesis of Ghastly Gary.

"We met for a drink the other night," Alan said. "And Tarun told me he couldn't stop thinking about your case."

Tarun nodded. "My father had PSC."

A sound of surprise escaped my mouth. That was a crazy coincidence. There were so few of us that outside online support groups, we rarely crossed paths in real life.

I immediately twigged that Tarun used the past tense—either his father died, or he was transplanted. There was no curing PSC without a new liver and bile ducts. Even then, it was often just a temporary measure. Aside from the usual complications that went along with any transplant, PSC returned in 30 to 40 percent of people.

"Did he get a transplant?" I asked, dreading the answer.

Tarun's mouth tightened. He shook his head. "He did not get his in time. He died in the hospital waiting. He was only forty-seven."

Ugh. It was one thing to know the stats and quite another to hear about an actual person who hadn't gotten a transplant in time. My windpipe shrunk, and my breath felt like it was being forced through a straw. *That could be my story too.*

"I'm so sorry," I managed. "Truly."

He nodded. "I still regret I wasn't old enough to donate. My mother wasn't the same blood type, but I was."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

It was unquestionably too young, but I could only imagine the guilt Tarun carried about that timing even now. So often we tortured ourselves over the impossible.

“I hate that so many of us don’t get one in time,” I said. That reality impaled itself in my heart like a jagged piece of broken glass.

“Me too.” Tarun made a gesture of his fingers that reminded me of a waterfall. “When I met you, and then when I met with Alan over drinks and he talked about your difficulty finding a living donor, it got me thinking.”

I sat up ramrod straight and gasped. It wasn’t Tom. Tarun was the anonymous donor! Could I just ask? Dr. Abebe’s words rang in my head. No, I shouldn’t. It could jeopardize everything. This was torture.

“I’d like to donate if I check out,” he said. “I know it’s early days, but Alan told me your blood type, and I’m a match.”

I gulped in air. *Tarun was going to save my life.*

Alan stood behind him with an ear-to-ear grin. He surreptitiously wiped away a tear.

My mouth opened and shut like a goldfish in a bowl. I’d dreamed about this moment for so long, but there were no words to encompass the hurricane of emotion I felt. “Are you *sure*?” I finally managed.

“Jules!” Alan reprimanded me. “Don’t start trying to talk him out of it!”

Tarun laughed, a lovely warm sound. “Don’t worry, Alan, she can’t. To me, this feels meant to be.”

“I cannot tell you what this means to—”

Tarun, ever gracious, shook his head to waylay my thanks. “I’m not technically supposed to tell you anything. They told me I should stay anonymous until I’m done with the evaluation process, but Alan swore you could keep a secret.”

I nodded fervently. Especially when my life depended on it.

“I’m drowning in appointments over the next few days,” he said. “But just know I’m extremely healthy and will do everything humanly possible to qualify.”

The whoosh of relief and hope and gratitude and disbelief made my hands shake. I opened my mouth to speak but let out an animal-sounding sob instead.

Tarun, and Alan of course, had given me proof that not everybody was as undependable as my old friends and my family. I just wished Tom could have been in the first camp, not the second.

The dam of fear and despair broke me open, and I started to weep. Alan held me while I soaked his shoulder with tears. At some point Tarun reached down and placed his palm lightly on my head like a benediction.

The tears eventually subsided. "They're happy tears," I explained, my voice catching. "Tears of relief. To think a total stranger would offer to do this? It's the bravest, most generous thing a human being could do. It means everything to me. Thank you."

He smiled. "Tears can be many things all mixed together, I've found. Remember, I haven't qualified yet," he cautioned me. "But if I've given you a bit more faith in humanity, even for a while, I'm glad. What I really want to give you, though, is a new liver."

"To think you would do this for me," I managed.

"I'm doing it for me too." He took a deep breath. "And for my father. Thank *you* for the opportunity to close this circle."

He gave me a smile. "I hate to run, but my shift starts in ten minutes. Besides, I'm sure you two want to talk." He winked at Alan as he disappeared out the door.

I stared at Alan, openmouthed. He mirrored my expression exactly, his eyes huge. "*Right?*" he said after a few minutes of telepathic conversation.

"Holy shit!"

"I know!" His eyes were shining.

"I can't believe Tarun is doing this," I marveled.

"I *know*." Alan tapped something on his phone, and "The Dog Days are Over" by Florence and the Machine started blasting. I swayed along, as much as my sick body allowed, to the music without ripping out the multitude of tubes and lines. The sun broke through the Pacific Northwest clouds and flooded the hospital room with light. After the song and our dancing had finished, Alan flopped down in the green chair.

"Finally!" he shouted at the T-Bar ceiling. "Some good fucking news!"

“Fuck yes!” I shouted. It was a good thing I had a private room. “But I can’t in all good conscience neglect the crucial issue at hand. Are you dating Tarun?”

He blinked, folding his hands together modestly and fluttering his lashes, an incongruous sight paired with his plaid lumberjack shirt and Timberlands. I laughed at his pantomimed coyness.

“That’s a very forward question,” he said, employing a Southern belle voice.

I reached over to slap him, but the IV machine beeped in protest, so I gave him the middle finger instead. “Throw me a bone! I’m like one of those Regency heroines in a decline. Only this gossip can save me. Spill.”

“Um. Hello. Lest we forget I came into your bedroom to find a naked Tom Davenport sprawled across your bed. We haven’t adequately exhausted *that* topic yet.”

That clouds moved over the sun then; Mother Nature’s timing couldn’t have been more impeccable. Even in the midst of this happiness, Tom’s absence was a black hole of disillusionment in my heart. I remembered the naked hunger in his eyes and the way he held me and that relaxed, peaceful expression on his face while he slept.

*Stop it.* I wouldn’t waste a single thought on him. Not now. I wouldn’t let his abandonment ruin this moment.

Alan’s expression had turned dreamy. “That was an unexpected treat.”

“We’ll discuss Tom later,” I said, desperate to get off the topic as quickly as possible. “Don’t pretend you’re not longing to talk about Tarun.”

He held up his hands. “Okay, okay, you got me. We’re not officially seeing each other yet, but we did have an amazing makeout session after drinks. I’ll admit it—I have a serious crush. I almost don’t want to believe this and get my hopes up, but I think maybe, just maybe, the feeling is mutual?”

“Oh, it is,” I confirmed.

“Do you think so?” He leaned forward in the chair. “Why?”

I tapped the side of my head. “Women’s intuition.”

Alan sighed. "Isn't he gorgeous?"

"Are you kidding me? Complete snack."

"He's so *nice* too," Alan said. "After Gary, I realized how important that is to me. No more narcissists and losers. Tarun is truly a good person."

"Yeah, I kinda got that impression when he offered to *donate his liver to me*."

Alan chuckled. "Exactly." He held up an index finger and searched his phone with his other hand. "Wait! We're forgetting something important for this momentous moment. You with a possible new liver and me with a possible new love interest."

"What?"

"The rest of our soundtrack, silly."

Within seconds, music filled the room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Over the next few days, I didn't have much time to think about anything. My kidneys were the first to fail. Everything started to deteriorate at once, and I was moved to the ICU.

There, my consciousness began to blur around the edges. They told me they were giving me heavy medications for pain and myriad other things to prop up my body and keep it going long enough for Tarun to qualify.

There was no day or night in the ICU, just bright fluorescent lights that seemed to burn through my eyelids when they were closed, the hum of so many machines, and the low murmur of concerned voices.

When I was awake, information came to me in strange flashes. I looked at my arm when they added another IV and didn't recognize how waxy and bright yellow it looked.

Alan's voice woke me out of another medication-laced stupor.

"Jules," he said. "Can you open your eyes?" There was something wrong with his voice. Something bad had happened.

I opened them and looked around. Same bright whiteness, same whooshes and beeps of ventilators and machines. "What day is it?" I asked.

"Tuesday," he said.

"How long have I been in here for?"

"The ICU?"

"Yeah."

"Five days."

Alan's eyes were full of tears. Did I look *that* bad?

Beyond him I caught sight of Tarun. He was openly crying, fat tears rolling down his beautiful cheeks. *Please let them be happy tears.*

"What's going on?" My heart seized in my chest.

"They don't want me to donate," Tarun said, his voice catching on a suppressed sob. "I'm so, so sorry."



I couldn't take it in at first. My hope was gone? Since the moment I was diagnosed, I knew in an abstract way this disease could kill me. I realized now, deep down, I had never truly believed it.

"Everything checked out," he continued. "Except our bile ducts wouldn't line up. They said it wouldn't work anatomically. I was so sure it was meant to be. I—" His voice cracked.

Tarun had been my last hope. Even though I wanted the pain to stop, I wanted to live more than anything. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Alan was squeezing my hand so tightly I thought my fingers would shatter. Tears were rolling down his cheeks too.

"They wanted to tell you," Tarun said. "They didn't want to let me in here, but I insisted. I owe you that, at least."

"Tarun," I managed. "You don't owe me anything. You tried."

He shook his head, taking in a shuddering breath. "You don't need to make me feel better," he said. "That's not your job."

One of the ICU nurses came over and said he had to leave. They were not indulgent about visitors in the ICU. "But—" he protested.

"It's okay," I managed. "Thank you."

The nurse pushed him in the direction of the door. Alan stayed put.

I didn't say anything for a while. How much longer did I have left? A week? Two days? Two hours? "I'm not going to get my happy ending," I murmured, trying to feel out the sharp edges of this new reality.

Alan knuckled away his tears, but his eyes just refilled again. "You can't lose hope," he said. "There is still the possibility of a deceased donor."

Technically, yes, but that possibility was so small it basically didn't exist. Without the hope of Tarun, I was in free fall. It was time to say the things that mattered.

"I love you, Alan." Now that everything else was fading away, the only thing left standing was love.

"I love you too, my Jujubes," he choked out and squeezed my hand even harder, as if he could anchor me to life.

There was nothing left to do but cry together until the nurse booted him out too.



I don't know how long I slept. They dosed me up with a whole bunch of medications. Consciousness became a slippery thing—difficult to hold. It could have been hours; it could have been days.

I woke up to someone shaking my shoulder. “Jules, Jules. You have to wake up.”

I blinked into consciousness. Dr. Abebe leaned over my bed.

“What?” I croaked out.

“We've found you the perfect donor.”

There must be some mistake. Wires got crossed in hospitals all the time, especially in Transplantland. Dr. Abebe must not have been informed about Tarun.

“No.” I shook my head. “There's a—”

“I've been waiting years for this moment. Just let me savor it.” He was grinning wider than I'd ever seen.

I almost didn't have the heart to puncture his joy, but it would be cruel to let this go on. “It's a mistake.”

“No mistake, Jules.”

“Tarun didn't qualify,” I said. “Didn't they tell you?”

His face would fall now, surely. Instead I watched it fill with glee. “We have another donor.”

“A deceased donor?”

“No.”

My confusion wasn't just from the opiates now. “There's no one else.”

“We'll do explanations after.” He waved his hand. “Besides, I'm not allowed to tell you anything besides the fact we have a donor and two side-by-side ORs—one for you and one for him.”

*Him?*

“He's being prepped for surgery now, so we need to move. Come on, let's get this party started.”

*This is really happening?* “But—”

He shook his head. “Believe it. This is your time. You need to prepare somehow—most people do—but in my experience no one ever feels prepared for a transplant.”

“Then what do I do?” I demanded, panicked. This wasn’t a dress rehearsal.

“Your only job is to climb aboard the roller-coaster and hang on tight.”



I was washed and shaved and sterilized within in an inch of my life by a cheerful Polynesian nurse wearing a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt over his scrub pants. Before I knew it, the porter was rolling me and my entourage of IV poles to the OR.

My heart was in my throat. I didn’t know if I wanted to cry or laugh. *How is this really happening? Who is this mysterious donor?* The T-Bar ceiling tiles passing above my head didn’t provide any answers.

I tilted my head forward enough to see a set of wide, heavy-looking double doors ahead of me drawing closer.

“Jules!”

That was Alan’s voice. He was standing on one side of the doors and waving wildly at the porter to stop. He reached out for me, but the porter blocked him with his arm. “You can’t touch her. She’s sterile for surgery.”

Alan let out strange sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. It expressed exactly the tangle of colliding emotions in my heart.

“I have to get her in,” the porter told him. “We’re already running late.”

“I just need to wish her good luck.”

“You have thirty seconds,” the porter said. “I’m sorry, but it’s for her.”

“Okay,” Alan agreed, flexing and unflexing his hand. He wanted to grab on to me, I knew, but the time had come for me to go

somewhere Alan couldn't follow.

"How did you know to come?" I asked.

"They called early this morning. You're getting your transplant, Jules!" His fists tightened with excitement, his face wet with tears.

"It all happened so fast. I have no idea how. Who is it?"

"They wouldn't tell me, but I'll be there when you wake up. I'm not moving from this hospital until I see you after surgery. You can do this, Jujube. I love you. You're my best friend, and I don't know what I'd do without you, so you have to make it through. You have no other choice, so there."

My chest didn't feel big enough for all the joy and fear and relief and apprehension inside. "I love you too. You deserve everything good. Tell Tarun! He needs to know because—"

"I must get her in," the porter interrupted, apologetic.

"He's right," Alan said. "We can do the crying and stuff afterward. I've already called Tarun. He's overjoyed."

I blinked. "Okay." My voice was shaky. "Good."

"It's showtime," Alan said. "Go crush it."

I nodded, feeling strength filter through me at his words. I'd been waiting for five years for this chance. Goddamn it, I was going to fight with every ounce of my being.

The porter hit the button on the wall beside the doors, and they swung open. He pushed me through to the next part of my life. I hoisted my arm, IV tubes and all, into the air in a final salute to my best friend.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The porter maneuvered my stretcher into a sort of holding pen where lots of other patients in stretchers were lined up against a back wall. The whole place smelled even more strongly of antiseptic, and it was noisy with loud conversation and beeping machines. He handed my file to another man and tapped my ankle through the sheets. “God bless you, Juliette Kelly.” Then he was gone.

I had never been religious, but somehow that simple kindness had tears pricking my eyes again.

The next several hours would decide everything. My future. Life or death. My brain was straining at the seams, unable to comprehend the enormity of it all.

The man with my file was already wearing a surgical cap and had a mask dangling from one ear. His eyes raced over the first page of the file. “Good morning, Jules!” He greeted me like an old friend. “It looks like you’re getting a transplant this morning! A heart, right?”

Panic seized me. “No! A liver—”

“I was just trying to lighten the atmosphere,” he chuckled.

I slapped a hand across my pounding heart. “Are you trying to kill me before I get into the OR?” I asked.

“No, no,” he clucked. “So, are you ready for this?”

“I think.”

He raised his bushy eyebrows. “You don’t want a new liver?”

I nodded wildly. “Yes! Yes, I mean I want it. It’s just all happened so fast.”

He pursed his lips, flipping through the papers and scanning my file. “PSC, huh? The black box of hepatology. Fascinating.”

“Having it—not so much,” I said with some acerbity.

He nodded. “I meant for doctors, not so much for patients like you, of course. I need to tell you some things now. Are you listening?”

“Yes.” *Remember the roller-coaster, like Dr. Abebe said. Just hang on tight.*

He cleared his throat. “Living donor liver transplantation is one of the biggest surgeries we do at this hospital. My job is to inform you of the risks, including, but not limited to, blood clots, embolism, infection, cardiac arrest, hemorrhage, and death.”

“I know.”

“Do you realize you might never wake up from this surgery?”

I swallowed hard. I knew their job was to give this spiel to protect their own butts for liability, or insurance, or whatever, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. “Yes.”

“Do you still want to go through with it?”

“Definitely.” My body was shaking, but this time it was fear, not sepsis. *Just hang on.*

“Can you sign here?” He placed a clipboard in front of me and slipped a pen in my hand. “It basically just summarizes what I told you and says you agree to proceed.”

I signed. It looked nothing like my usual signature, but I figured nobody would be performing authentication.

He took the clipboard back. “Perfect. I’ll see you in the OR. I’m head of the three teams of anesthesiologists that will rotate throughout the surgery. Usually it takes twelve hours or so.”

I knew it was long, but twelve hours?

“Just an advance warning. The OR will seem as busy as a train station during rush hour in when they roll you in. Don’t let that intimidate you.”

I nodded, aware of the one huge overarching question he hadn’t answered. “Do you know anything about my donor?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m on your surgical team. Your donor has a separate team in the next OR. We move back and forth during surgery, but he’s not my patient. You are.”

Again, *he*.

“He’ll probably arrive soon. Donors and recipients all wait here before going into the ORs. The two surgeries are precisely synchronized.”

“Right.”

After he left I started at the ceiling, not knowing what to do with the wave of emotion cresting within me. *Hang on.*

There was bustle as another stretcher was slid in the space beside mine. When I turned, all I could make out was they were wearing a puffy medical cap over their hair and had an IV in their arm. Could it be...?

They would hardly stick my donor in the slot beside me if anonymity was so important. I craned my neck a little farther at the same moment the person in the stretcher turned toward me.

His eyes went wide, and mine felt like they were popping out of their sockets altogether.

*Tom.*

“It’s *you*?” I gasped.

His face was as pale as it was at the lab when he’d fainted. “Just thought I’d drop by and say hello,” he said, attempting a joke, but the catch in his voice gave him away. “I thought this was an original idea for a second date.”

So many emotions rushed into my throat that no words could get out. All I could manage was a froglike croak.

He shook his head on the hospital pillow. “This isn’t the right time for jokes, is it? I’m still slow on reading a room, as you can probably tell.”

“How...?” It was all I could manage to get out.

“I applied to be a living donor for you that night—the last time I saw you. Every minute since has been taken up with appointments and tests and assessments.”

“But you never came by.” All this time, when I thought Tom was ghosting me, he’d been fighting to save my life.

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t trust myself to see you so sick and not let it slip out. I couldn’t bear the idea of getting your hopes up if it didn’t work out.”

Everything was reshuffling in my brain. It was almost too much to take in. “I thought you freaked out and bailed.”

“I’m definitely freaked out.” He blinked. “But bailing on you never crossed my mind.”

“But, Tom.” My breath caught on a sob. I had to revise everything I’d been thinking about him, and panic filled me that I didn’t have the time before they took us in. “You’re afraid of needles!”

“Terrified, but I figured you must have been frightened all this time. It never stopped you. If you could be this brave, I could get some needles. So what if I faint?”

“You fainted?”

“Twice.”

I shook my head, disbelief pinging around in my mind. “This is all so hard to absorb.”

“So you’re saying you *don’t* want a large chunk of my liver?”

“I just...” I protested. “I *do*.”

“You should,” he said. “My liver is perfect. I never drink, and you know how much time I spend at the gym.”

“I believe it, but do you realize how big this surgery is? What you’re risking?”

He rolled his eyes and nodded, his cap making a rustling noise. “They’ve warned me only about ten thousand times.”

I reached under my hospital blanket and fumbled for his hand. He grabbed it and held on tight. Our palms fit together perfectly, just as I remembered. Soon his liver was going to fit inside me too. A tsunami of emotion filled me with tears. Tom was doing this for me. *Tom*.

“Nice hat,” he said, his voice quavering. I’d forgotten about our puffy surgical hats.

“Glass houses.” I sniffed. “It covers up your annoying hair,” I complained through tears.

“My hair is definitely top on my list of worries today.” Tom’s eyes were getting misty too.

“Are you scared?” I whispered.

“Petrieved. You?”

I could manage only a nod.

“At least we can be terrified together.” He squeezed my hand harder, and I squeezed back, and for a minute or two we stayed like that, connected by so much more than just our touch.

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to know it was you,” I said. “But they rolled you right beside me.”



“I told them I needed to retain anonymity only until the surgery was definitely going ahead.” He waved his free hand around the waiting pen and the bustling doctors and nurses. “This doesn’t feel like a dress rehearsal.”

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t.” I circled his palm with my thumb, and our eyes caught.

“Ever since that first time in the lab, your hand feels right in mine.”

It did.

“You’re going to be okay, Sparks,” he said, his voice low and penetrating. “I know you will.”

The OR porters came in seconds later and found us staring at each other and gripping hands between hospital beds.

“I love you, Tom,” I said as he was being rolled away. “For doing this.”

I had no idea if he heard.

**AFTER**

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Something was blowing into me but at the wrong time, suffocating me instead of letting me breathe.

*Am I dying?*

Why did dying hurt so much? My body was pain and suffocation. That's all there was. I tried to move my leaden arms so I could swim to the surface. A shout came from nearby, and something pressed on my chest, pushing me down again—all the way to the bottom of the ocean.



I was still drowning. If I was dying, why was it taking so long? *Am I alone here?* I thrashed like a goldfish out of its bowl.



My eyelids flickered open. *Too bright.* I had to tell them I couldn't breathe. What was this thing in my throat—a tube? Was I really moving, or was I just imagining it?

A face I recognized hovered in front of mine. *Alan.* Where was I? Why wasn't he helping me?

I tried to call out for him, but only a horrible bubbly sound came out.

"She's waking up! I think she's asking for help."

"Shit," another voice said, one that was female and harassed. "She shouldn't be awake yet. We need to keep her under while she's intubated."

I swung my hand up to yank the thing that was choking me out of my throat. Then maybe I could tell them I couldn't breathe. There

were a lot of noises now. *Are those coming from me?*

“Is your friend hard to sedate?” the female voice asked.

“Do something!” Alan yelled. “She’s terrified.”

There was jostling around my arm, then unconsciousness mercifully gathered me in.



I spluttered. *I couldn't breathe!* Why were they pouring water directly into my lungs?

I had to pull that tube out. I tried but my arms went nowhere. It was like someone had swaddled me up too tightly in a blanket.

A woman came into view. “I’ve attached your arms to the bed,” she said. “I hate to do it, but you were trying to pull out your vent. Try to relax. I’ll put you back to sleep.”

Relax? Who was she kidding?

“Alan!” I mouthed.

“I’m here, honey.” I felt pressure on my arm. “Close your eyes. You’re on a lot of drugs but clearly not enough. You’ll be asleep again in a few seconds.”

I mouthed his name again.

“Can’t you untie her arms?” he said to someone. “This is barbaric.”

A mumbled response, something about me not remembering.

Tears started rolling down my face.

“Ah shit.” Alan stroked my forehead. “Don’t cry, honey. The surgery went great.”

Surgery? A name was already in my mouth, one that felt like it had been waiting there forever. “Tom?” I mouthed.

“Tom’s fine,” he said. “They’ve already moved him down to a regular ward. You have Tom’s healthy liver inside you, Jules.”



I woke up on the heels of a deep breath. I took another, then another. I could breathe! I could inhale air and exhale it when I wanted to.

I cracked open an eye to see a stretcher flush up against mine. That hadn't been there before, had it?

"It's completely against the rules for patients to come up as visitors in the ICU," a male voice said. *A nurse.* It rushed back. I was in the ICU. Liver. Transplant.

Someone muttered Dr. Abebe's name, and the nurse made a "humph" sound. "I've already ordered a porter to take you down, so make it quick. She's not going to be lucid with the opiates she's on. Don't expect her to make any sense."

"That's okay," Tom's voice rumbled, scratchier than usual. "They set me up with this morphine pump, so I'm not exactly lucid either. I just needed to see her."

A swoop of dark hair. One of my two favorite forearms in the world reaching toward me. Tom was sort of propped up on his stretcher.

"Tom?" My voice came out like an unoiled hinge.

Tom took my hand in his. I remembered the feeling of it from before the transplant. It still made me feel warm and safe and alive.

"Hey there," he said, his voice soft. "They're mad at me for demanding to see you, but it turns out being a donor does carry some weight with the more sentimental personnel. How are you?"

"I was drowning," I managed to say.

"Really? That must have been awful, but you're not now."

"No." My throat was raw, like I'd swallowed glass.

He smiled with a look in his eyes that stole my newfound breath. "You're so much paler already. You weren't olive skinned at all?"

I shook my head, my vision clearing a bit more. "How are you?"

"I think I might be getting better with needles," he said, not letting go of my hand. "Exposure therapy works, apparently."

I laughed but started coughing until I groaned because daggers were being plunged, sharp and deep, into my stomach. Right. That had been sliced open.

“I’m feeling pretty much like they told me to expect—like I’ve been run over by a large truck.” He smiled. “I’m nauseous all the time and have a tube jammed up my penis. I’m not exactly pleased with that state of affairs, let me tell you. I have my own morphine pump, though.” He nodded toward a contraption hung on the side of his wheelchair. “It helps.”

The nurse inserted himself between our beds, but I could still see Tom. “All right,” he said to Tom. “You’ve seen for yourself she’s still alive and we’re taking good care of her. You can’t be in here, and you shouldn’t be sitting up for this long. The porter is here to take you back to your room.”

I noticed only then that Tom was clutching a yellow pillow shaped like a liver—but a liver with a stitched-on smiley face—against his abdomen.

“Am I hallucinating, or are you holding a liver stuffy?” I asked.

“It’s not your painkillers.”

“Nice.”

He winked. “Hate to disappoint you, but I did this only for the liver swag.”

I managed a smile.

And for a split second there, I remembered who I was, between all the pain and trauma and drugs and everything else.



Alan hovered beside my bed.

“What day is it?” I asked. Time was such a stretchy thing.

“Jules,” he said. “It’s so good to hear you talk. It’s Thursday. It’s been five days since your transplant.”

*Five days? How is that even possible?*

“I saw Tom.” My mind was cloudy from sleep and painkillers, but his visit was burned into my memory.

“I know. I popped in and said hi to him on my way up just now.”

“How is he?” I asked.

“Green. Literally, his face is green from nausea. They say that’s to be expected after giving away more than half your liver, but hand to heart, his skin is literally the color of a lime.”

I chuckled a bit, then stopped when the realization set in. Tom was feeling terrible because of me.

Two nurses came over and started fiddling with bags and dials on my IV poles. I could finally look up enough to see two IV poles, one on either side of me, bending under the weight of all the IV bags and boluses.

“Good morning, Jules,” one said as she checked my IV sites and the lines stuck all over my body. “How are you feeling today?”

“A bit better I think.”

“You’re doing very well,” she said. “It’s only five days after your surgery, and there’s talk about you being moved to the step-down unit in about forty-eight hours.”

“That’s amazing,” Alan said. “You see? I knew it.”

“It’s still early days,” the nurse warned. “But it’s looking good. Was that man who visited yesterday your donor?”

“Yes.”

“Is he your boyfriend?” she asked me.

It wasn’t until I opened my mouth that I realized I didn’t know the answer. We’d fought, and then become friends, then we’d had amazing sex...and now he’d donated his liver to me. We’d become so much more. I had no idea what it was.

I slowly raised my unbound hand and placed it on my chest for the first time. Ow. It stung and ached and stabbed. The gauze over my incision was thick under my fingertips. Tom’s liver was in me now. I was finally lucid enough for this to sink in, but how could such a surreal thing be true? From now on, with every breath, Tom would be keeping me alive, bringing me back to life from the inside out. Would I ever be able to assimilate this piece of knowledge? It still felt surreal.

The nurse and Alan were giving each other awkward looks. Right. They were expecting an answer. Maybe I wasn’t all that lucid yet. I still had that swimmy feeling from the drugs being pumped through my IV. “I don’t know.”

The nurse chuckled. “Well, in any case, half the staff here have already fallen in love with him. He’s a bona fide hero, not to mention gorgeous. Well done.”

Something tugged inside me that had nothing to do with post-surgical pain. He wasn’t just that obnoxious tech bro Tom Davenport/Thunder Días anymore. He was a legitimate hero, and he deserved every accolade. I would have to share him with everyone.



The next morning the nurse on shift shook me awake.

“Goarph” was my painkiller-laced morning greeting to him.

“The lab is here for your morning blood draws,” he said.

I tried to lift my head a bit. The daggers plunged into my torso and twisted viscously. Uh oh. They’d mentioned something about switching around my pain control plan, which I should have known meant they were reducing them.

I flung out my arm and barely noticed when the lab tech took blood. The pain dwarfed anything they could be doing with a tiny needle. “I’m in a lot of pain,” I grunted.

The nurse patted my arm absent-mindedly while he fiddled with an IV line. “Your body is waking up from the trauma, and it’s *not* happy, but I have good news.”

“What?”

“We’re moving you to the step-down unit this afternoon!”

My pain was so bad my brain stalled on the word “moving,” even though I knew I should be overjoyed about the forward progress. “Great,” I said, trying to muster the expected enthusiasm.

“That’s the top news story around the ICU this morning. Well, that and your gorgeous donor. Is he your boyfriend?”

*That again.* Tom deserved every accolade and admiring glance, but it just made the confusion of where he and I stood now that much more palpable.

“To be determined,” I said, trying to make light of it.



“You better lock that down quick, honey, because he’s going to be in high demand.”

*Oh god.* Healing was taking everything I had. I didn’t feel up to being worthy of Tom right now, especially since he’d rightfully acquired this new hero status. The pressure of it all rose like a cresting wave in front of me, and I didn’t want to still be underneath when it crashed down.

If I could somehow manage to get healthy and normal, maybe I had a chance at an actual relationship with Tom. Maybe I could have certainty again—enough to take a risk with my heart. But that felt like a very far way away from where I was now.



When I reached the step-down room, Tom and Alan were there to welcome me. Tom stood, using only a walker for support. He’d swapped his hospital gown for a pair of sweatpants and a white T-shirt. He looked almost normal, whereas my pain had grown steadily more than I could handle as I was moved between the ICU and the ward.

I was straight up falling behind in a race I didn’t even know I’d entered.

They were promptly kicked out, and a no-nonsense nurse came in with a bright-yellow biohazard disposal container with a the symbol on front that looked like it belonged to the Jedi alliance.

“What’s that for?” I demanded.

“It’s school time. One of the important things here in this ward is for you to learn about and practice taking your antirejection medications. You’ll be taking these for the rest of your life so your body doesn’t reject the new liver. If you stop taking them, you’ll go into rejection, and left untreated, you will die. Clear?”

“As a bell.” So they didn’t sugarcoat things after transplant, either.

My skin prickled with a cold sweat. When I had dreamed of life post-transplant, it was bathed in a halcyon glow. All my energies had been focused on one thing—surviving until then.

As relieved as I was to be on the other side, the reality of ongoing pain, the sense of alienation from my own body, and now the knowledge that transplant brought with it another set of risks and limitation was sinking in. I wasn't at the end point; I was just at the beginning of a different version of the same fight.

"Why the biohazard container?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to know the answer.

"One of the two types of medication you will be taking is cytotoxic, meaning it causes cancer and a bunch of other not-so-nice things. The wrappers and boxes need to be disposed of in this biohazard container and taken to a pharmacy for disposal. We can't have any of this substance getting into the water system or hurting anyone."

I struggled to compute this information. It made no sense.

"But I'm going to be *swallowing* it," I said, trying to understand.

"Yes," she said implacably.

"Every day." So I could end up dying of cancer instead? Surely I was missing something.

"Twice a day, actually."

"So it will expose me to higher risks of cancer and all those other things?"

She nodded. "Correct."

"But..." My mind reeled. Was I really not out of the woods after all?

"When the doctors explained about the transplant basically exchanging one condition for another, this is the cold, hard reality of what they meant. Transplant extends your life, but it carries its own set of risks. It takes time to adjust to that, but you may as well start now."

She left me alone with my new medications and biohazard container. I pulled the covers over myself and curled up as tightly as I could. I covered my mouth with my palm.

That seed of heaviness expanded outward from my heart. I'd been so sure my life would be nothing but bright sunlight after transplant—that it would be perfect.

I knew in an abstract way there would be issues afterward, but somehow I'd pictured those as minor. I thought transplant would finally launch me on an upward spiral after years of going downhill. Now I felt confused and disoriented, like I was lost in a maze, only a completely different one than before.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They discharged Tom the next day.

The first night after he went home, he came to visit me in the hospital with his laptop loaded with the rom-com *Last Holiday*.

He was wearing soft jeans and a white long-sleeved jersey. He didn't look like a hospital patient anymore. He looked like a regular, gorgeous man, albeit a little paler and one who had saved my life. I was still in a hospital gown and hooked up to two IVs. It felt in that moment like we existed in two separate worlds.

"We've been in a weird hospital time warp," he said, that old awkwardness back. Did he, too, sense something fundamental had shifted between us? "But we're getting close to December. Alan told me you love this movie and it was suitably festive."

He had lost a bit of weight in the days after surgery, but it just made his muscles look more chiseled and his face more striking.

"Queen Latifah and LL Cool J?" I said, trying to act nonchalant, even though I felt anything but around Tom all of a sudden. "What's not to love?"

Tom was a hero now. Everyone adored him. I felt a prickle of self-consciousness around him I'd never experienced before—a sensation of no longer being his equal and the knowledge that, after the enormity of what he'd done for me, I never could be.

He hit play, then sat in the chair beside my bed. He fidgeted, trying to find a comfortable position. I sensed I wasn't the only one who didn't have a playbook for this chapter of getting back to regular life. Neither of us knew the rules.

Halfway through the movie, the cafeteria staff brought me dinner, including the extra three chocolate butterscotch puddings I'd ordered.

"What's with all the puddings?" He burst out laughing—a little throwback to the old dynamic between us.

“They’re the only thing I actually like at the hospital.” I smiled. “I guess you don’t know this, but I’m kind of obsessed with pudding. Don’t you like it?”

He shook his head, his eyes sparkling. “Clearly not as much as you.” *Ah, this. If we can just recapture this.* For a brief second, we were Tom and Jules again, not a liver recipient and her donor, or people who had slept together and never had an opportunity to discuss it.

When the movie finished, he leaned forward to pack up his laptop. “You probably need to sleep,” he said, smiling.

My mind was racing, just as it had been through the movie.

“What did you think of the film?” he asked, that stiffness back in his speech.

“I love it.” I looked down at the flannel hospital blanket instead of him. “How could I not?”

He nodded. “It was good.”

I wanted to lob a bomb in the middle of this rigid civility between us. “Except...”

“Except what?”

“I love the part where she finally stops waiting around to follow her dreams, but a huge part of her happy ending is finding out she was never ill in the first place.”

Tom’s eyebrow quirked up. “You don’t like that?”

I shook my head. “It feels too easy.”

Tom watched me, considering. “For you I bet it does,” he said finally. “I mean, your deliverance from being sick took a lot more than that.”

Our new reality struck again like a sledgehammer. “It did. It took you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I meant being sick for so long and having to get to and through transplant. Still, you are a bit like her character, aren’t you?”

“How do you mean?”

He slid his laptop into a sleek black leather case. “You were facing many of the same things she was, but not anymore. The part

where she finds out she's going to live at the end and get her happy ending—that's like you now, isn't it?"

His eyes were asking a far bigger question than his words expressed. On the straight facts, yes. I was at the happy ending now, or at least within reach of it. Why, then, in the days since the surgery, did my happily-ever-after keep moving just beyond my reach?

I felt grateful but also battered and disoriented—worried about this new future I didn't know I'd have. I'd been expecting my life to fall into place, not to feel so *messy*.

In front of me was this man who had given me every bonus day I now lived, but nothing felt simple the way I thought it would. How could I repay Tom for saving my life? It was one thing when we were frenemies who slept together, but now everything was different. There was Tom my donor and Tom my frenemy-turned-fling. I couldn't reconcile the two. Could any sort of relationship withstand that much pressure?

"Oh! I almost forgot," Tom said, reaching into his laptop bag. "I brought you this."

With a flourish he placed the Parthenon glitter globe from my office on the bed stand. "I know you have a long road ahead of you, and I thought a little inspiration might help. Is Greece the first place you want to go when you can travel?"

It was a sweet gesture, but reality prickled through me. They had taken out my feeding tube and arterial line, but I still had a bile drain and two IVs. Being well enough to travel felt as impossible as reaching the summit of Mt. Everest, even with a new liver. This was not at all how I imagined I'd feel.

"I have to wait a year after transplant before I get the green light to travel, you know," I said. "And even then, I'll have to be stable."

"You will be," he said with absolute certainty—certainty I wasn't feeling.

*Will I?* I wished I'd gotten his confidence along the right lobe of his liver.

So many expectations. Too many. "I'm tired," I said. It wasn't an excuse so much as incurable honesty.

“Of course you are,” Tom said, ducking his head. My throat ached with the guilt of not being who he expected me to be after all he’d done.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what? Don’t be. I’ll be off.” He pulled a black hoodie over his head.

He moved so easily, like the surgery was a mere blip in his life. “Good night, Sparks,” he whispered as he reached out to clasp my fingers. He looked preoccupied.

“Sorry, not feeling very sparky tonight.”

“That’s okay.” He dropped my hand and walked to the door. “Sleep tight. You’ll feel more like yourself tomorrow.”

But who was I now, anyway?



The information I’d received left me battered. Balancing antirejection drugs with rejection and the fact they slowly killed off my remaining kidney function would be a constant seesaw for the rest of my life. I was taught the signs of rejection, and the hepatologist warned me what to watch out for that might indicate PSC was coming back. Each new piece of information was another boulder added to my shoulders.

Yes, the transplant would enable me to live, but my “new life” was the exact opposite of carefree. Even the shower I’d managed to take didn’t help.

Tom swept in the door, looking like the Tom I argued with that first day at Hubtech. He was wearing his black-and-white outfit and radiated health, ambition, and a take-no-prisoners energy.

When he got closer, I could make out eager expectation in his eyes.

“You’re back at work?” I gulped. *Work? It felt like another life.* It dawned on me then that I didn’t know anything about the pitches or investment round or gossip at Hubtech. I hadn’t even thought to ask Alan. Worse, I wasn’t remotely interested.

The idea of returning like Tom and diving into all that again was paralyzing to me, but here was Tom, invigorated with life and excitement.

“Yes!” He grinned. “The transplant team warned me it was early, but I couldn’t stay away.”

He sat on the side of my bed instead of the chair from the night before. “You showered!” he said. “That’s fantastic. You’ll be back at work in no time, you’ll see.”

Excitement was rolling off him in waves. Instead of being contagious, it stung with the humiliation of being handily lapped in a race. I would never be able to keep up.

“It was amazing,” he said, grabbing my hand. “It felt so good to be myself again. Peter and Alan even organized a little party with the most delicious espresso cheesecake from this new place one block over. I’m so pumped, I can’t even tell you.” He leaned over and kissed my earlobe. Instead of the usual shivers, my ears started ringing. I reached a shaky hand to my forehead. *Too much. Too fast.*

“It’s going to be so perfect when you come back too,” he continued, still in his own world. “We can work hard, then sneak out for lunch together, and—”

“It might be a while until I come back,” I said, at a loss to explain how I was feeling without sounding whiny or, worse, ungrateful.

“I don’t think so. You’re doing so well. You’re just a little bit behind me.”

What was wrong with me that I didn’t share Tom’s positivity?  
“Tom—”

“We’re going to set the world on fire, you and me.”

Did he just assume we were going to be together now that he’d done this? Part of me wanted that—the part I’d thought I’d be after my transplant. The *actual* me, though—uncertain, fearful, overwhelmed—couldn’t handle the expectations.

It hit me then with full force. I wasn’t capable of being what Tom expected. Besides, so much of the past five years had been controlled by my illness, I couldn’t stand the idea of anything being decided for me now. I wanted to determine my own future for once.



“Dr. Abebe said I can take you home soon if everything continues to go well,” he continued, blithely unaware of my inner turmoil. “I was thinking. What if I move in and take care of you for as long as you like? I can’t stand the idea of you being alone. What do you think?”

How could he not realize I needed space, and time, and to not have things decided for me? How could he not see that all the fear and pain and uncertainty I thought transplant would cure in a heartbeat was still with me in this new life and how devastated I was to discover that?

He watched my face, expectant, but I couldn’t give him the reaction he wanted. I just couldn’t pretend. I needed to get off Tom’s bullet train of recovery. I needed time and space. I needed to *breathe*.

“No,” I said. Even if I couldn’t be what he wanted, I would give him the only thing I still had—honesty.

He shook his head, curled my fingers around his hand, and kissed them. I felt nothing—numb to my core. “You’re going to be out before you know it, and I’m going to love you into feeling like yourself again.”

*If only that could work.*

“No, Tom.” I made downward motions with my hands. “You have to understand—this is all going too fast.”

He sprang up from the bed as though I was suddenly as toxic as the medications I ingested every day. “I don’t understand.”

“Look, I’m so grateful for—”

“It’s not your gratitude I want.” The hurt and ferocity in his eyes made me flinch. “It never was.”

I took a deep breath, struggling to find the words to explain the mess inside me. “You’re moving too fast for me,” I said. “I need things to slow down. Our relationship wasn’t exactly stable or a long-term thing before this happened.” I waved my hand between his body and mine to underline what I meant.

He grabbed my hand again. “But this *did* happen.”

“Yes, and now I don’t know what to feel. I owe you my life. We slept together once. We’re friends, but I don’t know what we are yet or what we might become or...not.” In those hours we were

unconscious in side-by-side ORs, the stakes had become vertiginous.

His face drained of that glow he'd started to regain. He let go of my hand and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You must be feeling a bit unsure too," I pleaded. "You know... shaken up by everything."

He shook his head and fixed me with dark, burning eyes. "I've never been surer of anything in my life."

My anger rose. "Can't you understand how overwhelming it is to be rushed? Do you think I owe you a relationship because you gave your liver?"

He huffed with disbelief, then stalked around the room, raking his hair. "What are you talking about? Of course not."

"I'm not up to owing anyone anything right now." However disappointed Tom was, I could guarantee I was more disappointed and bewildered by myself.

"*Owing* me? I don't think that," he said bitingly. "I never did. This donation was a gift to you, not a debt to be repaid. There are no strings attached. Ever."

"That's not the way you're acting."

He threw up his arms. "I have no idea where this is coming from. I know you've been through so much, but don't you dare twist my motivation. I've gotten a lot of things wrong in my life, but donating to you was something I did right. You cannot take that away from me. I didn't donate because I expected anything of you."

"Why did you do it, then?"

He breathed out a whoosh of air. "Because there's this spark inside you that's special. Where do you think your nickname came from, anyway? It's annoyed me, it's aggravated me, it's captivated me, but one thing was certain—I could not stand by and watch it be extinguished. Not when I could do something."

Tom had put his finger on the issue without meaning to. "That's the thing," I said. "I need time and space to find that spark again."

"Why?" He shook his head. "It's still there. I can see it as much as I see your blond hair and big brown eyes."

I shook my head. I couldn't feel it anymore. Had it been snuffed out?

"Jules," he pleaded. "Help me understand."

How could I when I didn't understand myself? "I don't think I can."

He stood there, his hands trembling. "I thought with you I'd found the home I've been looking for my whole life. Are you telling me I was wrong?"

*Home?* I was nobody's home, not even my own. I shook my head.

Without a further word, he got up and left the room, relegating me to his past.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tom didn't return. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said he always moved forward, never back.

The morning I got the news I was going home, Stewart popped by for a visit. Regret and relief warred within me. Even though all the IVs and drains were out, I felt incredibly far from normal.

"Jules!" he said as he walked toward the bed with open arms. "Welcome to the other side!"

He sat down in the chair beside me. I showed him my arms. "Thanks," I said. "But look, I don't even have any IVs for you to put in or take out."

"Hey," he said, ripping open a bag of fruit jellies and popping a few in his mouth. "This is my coffee break. I'm coming to visit you as a friend. I hear you're not going to be a patient much longer."

"News travels fast."

"The IV team moves all over the hospital. We know all the hot gossip. How are you finding it over here, in the overtime of life?"

I twisted the hospital blanket between my fingers. If I could be honest with anyone, it was Stewart. "Not at all what I expected," I admitted.

I expected shock or concern, but instead he nodded, imperturbable as ever. "Life rarely is."

"Really? I expected the post-transplant road to be straight and clear, but instead—"

"It's all twisty and blocked by an eighteen-wheeler jack-knifed across four lanes?"

"Yes." Relief poured through me. "I don't know who I am anymore or what my relationship is with Tom, my donor."

"The guy you slept with before the surgery?"

I searched the foggy memories of that day. "How do you know that?"

“You told me, honey, but I’m not surprised you don’t remember. You were running a fever of one hundred and four.”

I shrugged. “Right. As you can imagine, it’s complicated. I’m a mess. I don’t know how to fix it.”

Just then Stewart’s pager started beeping. He turned it off and looked at me, the understanding in his eyes everything in that moment.

“That’s urgent. I’m sorry to leave you like this. Just know there is no one way forward for us second chancers. Healing can’t be rushed. Your body has to recover after all the trauma it’s been through. So does your mind.

“But...how?”

“It means slowly reintegrating all the parts of yourself you had to disconnect in order to stay alive. It’s not a quick thing, nor is it a straight road. There’ll be lots of switchbacks—trust me.”

His pager beeped again. He looked down at it and winced. “I really should go.”

I nodded, blinking back tears. He understood. His answer was not exactly the quick fix I wanted, but it contained a truth that resonated to my core. I had a lot to think about. “Thank you, Stewart,” I said, and then, like the angel of mercy he was, he was gone.



Before the transplant I somehow imagined I would be skipping out of the hospital, but in reality it didn’t work like that. Now that Tom had taken himself out of the picture, Alan came to pick me up. I moved slowly toward his car, every step an effort, like concrete blocks were attached to my legs.

“So!” Alan said, trying to drum up excitement once we were on the road. I blinked at the bright daylight, even though it was gray and overcast, as it was for weeks at a time in late November in the Pacific Northwest. “Do things look weird?” he asked, clearly not knowing what to do with my mood. “Different?”

I squinted at a large outdoor equipment store as we drove past. Two people were walking out carrying a kayak. “I can’t even fathom the idea of kayaking,” I said out of the blue.

Alan shot me an alarmed look. “Neither can I, but that’s hardly a revelation for either of us. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

I sighed. “I don’t know if things look different or if I’m just different.”

Alan gave me the side eye from his position behind the wheel. “What happened with Tom?” he asked. I’d known Alan was up to his eyeballs preparing for the GoodGuides pitch, so I hadn’t told him yet. We usually gave each other hour-by-hour status updates of our lives, but I’d needed some time alone with it first.

“He’s barely met my eyes at Hubtech in the past few days,” Alan continued when I didn’t answer. “And we were becoming good friends. I also haven’t heard him mention your name once. A week ago he could manage to find a way to drop it in a conversation about cryptocurrency in Latvia.”

“He assumed we were together. I told him I needed time,” I explained gruffly, trying to ignore the lead weight in my heart. “He took it as a rejection. He’s moved on.”

Alan stared at me, openmouthed, and swerved out of our lane.

“Road!” I shouted.

He swerved back just in time. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath. “I thought it was mutual with you and Tom.”

I rubbed my eyes. “It was, but it was such a weird time, and I was so sick. I thought I would come out of the transplant the same person I was before I got diagnosed, but that’s not how it’s working out. I’m just not ready to embark on a ready-made relationship with a bunch of expectations. Tom gave me his liver. Do you realize how uneven that would make us as a couple? I owe him my life.”

Alan grimaced. “It *is* a hell of a trump card.”

I tried to find the right words. “I can’t handle the pressure of catching up to Tom and being enough for him right now. I’m not sure I ever will.”

“Is this going to stop you coming into Hubtech? The investment round is closing in soon, and I think it would boost everyone’s morale

so much to see you. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow,” I said. “Maybe after the weekend? I need time to regroup first.”

Alan couldn't hide his crestfallen look, but he was too good a friend to be anything but understanding.

“How are things going with Tarun?” I asked, wanting to turn his thoughts to happier channels.

He flashed me a grin—one that came directly from his heart.

“I'm falling pretty hard,” he said. “I've spent a few nights at his house.”

“And?”

Alan shook his head, red steadily creeping up his neck. “Even better than I expected. He's blindsided me with his loveliness. I never saw this coming.”

“That's the way it is with the best things in life, I guess.” I thought of my shock as Tom's stretcher was rolled beside mine in the OR queue. No matter what had happened since, Tom had created one of the greatest moments in my life.



The next morning I gingerly got out of bed, diligently counted all my new pills—antirejection, blood thinners, bile thinners, and lots more—on the kitchen counter, and swallowed them down with a tall glass of water.

Alan had given me the tour of my place the night before. He'd kept all my plants watered and washed the sheets. He'd filled my cupboards and fridge with my favorite groceries—mandarin oranges, dark chocolate, thick Greek yogurt, locally made granola, and honey from Neighbours. He'd also made sure I had plenty of coffee filters and bags of coffee set up in a neat line beside the coffee maker.

He had wanted to spend the night to take care of me, but after thanking him and hugging him and assuring him one hundred and three times I would be just fine and would call him if I felt the

slightest bit off, I managed to get him out the door and shut it behind him.

Now I wandered around the loft in the silver light of the winter morning, adjusting the paintings on the walls, straightening things that didn't need to be straightened. The quiet echoed in my ears—no beeping of machines, no yelling or weeping from other patients, no nurses and specialists popping in throughout the day.

It was just me. It felt like too much and not enough at the same time.

I meandered into the bedroom and made the bed, thinking back to how badly Tom and I had tangled them that first—and last—night. They'd been twisted around my left ankle and around his right arm, and I'd scratched and torn to get them away, so I could get even closer to that comforting warmth of him. It had been so good—truly, the most transcendent sex I'd ever had. Tom made me feel with every groan and caress and whisper of my name that we'd been making love, not just having sex.

He said he'd thought he'd found home in me. What I hadn't told him was he felt like home to me too. But the transplant had ripped an uncrossable chasm between my old life and new life, whatever that was going to be. I felt like I was straddling the two sides, clinging on for dear life so I didn't fall in between.

I needed time to learn how to navigate this new place, but Tom had warned me himself: he didn't have time for anything but forward motion. Sitting still for a while, figuring things out—that was not his way.

Guilt gnawed at me. I longed to show him how thankful I was in the context of all that.

I looked at my laptop plugged in on the dresser, where it had been since the night Tom and I slept together. I'd almost forgotten it was there.

I knew what I could do for Tom, or at least try to do. Find Brian Meeks, that foster father he'd been so desperate to locate. That was *it*.

I sent up a little wish he was still alive somewhere. I'd always had a gift for finding things—I had the type of brain that couldn't rest until



I found answers, and the whereabouts of Brian Meeks was the perfect problem to set my mind to.

Solving it was the least I could do. There was no question of me repaying Tom for what he'd done for me—there was nothing I could ever do to even that score—but maybe I could do something that would give him closure, at least.

I took my laptop over to the desk with its gorgeous view of the harbor. Maybe I could give Tom the only good part of his past.



The next morning I woke up eager to get back to my detective project. I'd discovered from online trolling that, besides the company website for Silobase and his LinkedIn profile, Tom Davenport had virtually no social media presence. Thunder Días had none at all.

It made sense. Tom had dedicated his adult life to overcoming his beginnings. Even if he had the acquaintances to make social media worthwhile, which he'd told me before he didn't, I was certain he would have run a cost-benefit analysis in his head and deemed it not worth his time and energy.

That was where I could help. GoodGuides was tailored for social media, and all of us there were well versed in it. When looking for a missing person, it helped.

Brian didn't have an account under his name. That would have been far too easy, but when I started searching for his hobbies, like chess, in account names I found a person who went by the handle "BeaconChessChamp." Beacon Park. That was where Tom said Brian played.

I sent that account holder an Instagram message, asking if they knew a Brian Meeks.

I got an answer asking why I was interested.

I wrote a quick note saying it was about a foster child Brian had helped. Low and behold, BeaconChessChamp sent a message that Brian had moved to the Mainland, but it included an email address.

A buzz ran up my spine. I'd come this far. I remembered how badly I'd needed answers when I was sick. I hoped Brian Meeks might do the same for Tom. For the first time in a long while, something felt good and right.

I composed an email, hoping it would eventually reach Brian.

*Dear Brian,*

*You don't know me, but my name is Jules Kelly. I'm writing to you about a foster child you helped long ago. His name when he lived with you was Thunder Días, but now he goes by Tom Davenport.*

*He has spoken to me of you, and how happy he was living in your house, and how much the year with you changed him. I need to thank you and maybe at the same time do something for Tom by letting you know what Tom recently did for me.*

*Five years ago I was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease of the bile ducts and liver called PSC. There is no treatment or cure. The only way of prolonging life is through a liver transplant. A living donor liver transplant was my only hope, but I was nearing death and had found no eligible donor.*

*Tom and I work side by side at a tech start-up collective known as Hubtech. He is the CEO of the database security company Silobase. I'm the CEO of a company called GoodGuides.*

*Without fanfare, Tom went through all the testing and donated the entire right lobe of his liver to me in a living donor liver transplant three and a half weeks ago.*

*Your foster son saved my life. Selflessly. Courageously. Generously.*

*I know he's been trying to find you and reconnect. I think it's important you know this about him—Thunder is a hero, even though he would never admit it. I believe the year of love and acceptance he had from you is a huge part of that.*

*I'm including his phone number and email below, as well as the address for Hubtech if you would like to get in touch with him. For him, I truly hope you do.*

*Warmest thanks,  
Jules Kelly*

I hit send, closed the laptop, then sat on the couch with a mug of coffee. While I was writing the email, my grip on the edge of my new life became more solid. I didn't know where I was going, but at least I knew I could hang on until I figured it out.

My phone buzzed. I took it from the pocket of the silk kimono I wore. *Alan*. "Can I convince you to come to the office tomorrow?" he pleaded. "Everyone is dying to see you."

Everyone except one person, but Tom could never again be my enemy.

I couldn't build a new self if I stayed in my loft. A seagull flew up to my window then and cawed at me, egging me on.

"Yes." I texted back, fear and something I couldn't name making my heart beat faster. "Can I hitch a ride?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I headed for my closet for the first time since Tom had been in there choosing purple and green hospital clothes. Alan must have brought them back and put them away at some point. What should I wear to my first day back at Hubtech?

Running my fingers along the collected sequins, velvets, and linens made my stomach swoop with vertigo, like I'd just popped out the other side of a time warp.

Thinking back to Tom's confusion and concern that morning left me feeling wistful. He was so much more complex than just a tech bro, or a foster child, or a sex god, or the man who had stalked out of the hospital room without so much as a backward glance when I rejected him that final time.

I'd checked my email first thing, but there was no reply from Brian. The possibilities were endless. Had he passed away? Had he moved? Had he quite simply changed email providers?

Despite the typical West Coast winter weather—cold sleet hit my windows and the clouds were black and low—being inside my wardrobe gave me a nice flicker of...something. I reached for my favorite pair of moonstone earrings and slid them in.

Once I was dressed in loose jeans that didn't hurt my stomach and layers of sweaters and scarfs to protect against the cold, damp weather, I stood for a long time in front of the tall mirror in my small closet, trying to reconcile this changing person in front of me.

My skin was rapidly reverting to its natural Irish pale, and the steroids I'd been pumped with post-transplant made my dark blond hair shampoo-commercial thick and wavy. I left it down loose, something I had never done for work.

My brown eyes still looked huge in my face, but maybe they'd always been that way? My lips were healthier color of red, and I swiped a layer of dark gloss over them.

I still needed to regrow Tom's liver and put on some weight, and the doctors had told me the only way of doing that was consuming insane amounts of protein, whether it be through massive steaks, protein bars, or fistfuls of almonds. My appetite wasn't fully back. No surprise, given the plumbing they'd done on my insides, but I was trying.

I wasn't the version of me I was before my diagnosis, and I was no longer the pre-transplant me. Thanks to the right lobe of Tom's liver, I was someone new.

It was time to get to know her.

I waited on the sectional for Alan, savoring the scent of coffee in my favorite mug. I gazed out the windows. A crew of rowers sped under the bridge. Three seagulls wheeled around in the updrafts of wind. How could I have changed so much, at a cellular level, when everything else stayed more or less the same?

It hit me how naive I'd been to think I would wake up after transplant to my old carefree life.

Even though I wasn't in a hospital gown anymore, connected to ten thousand tubes, I'd experienced too much, seen too much, and still lived under threats—just new ones. Rejection, infection, repeat PSC, the toxicity of antirejection medications... They were all part of my new reality.

Could I make peace with the new me and make a life for her?

I couldn't unlearn the fact that life could turn on its head in a snap of the fingers. I'd seen that my body could betray me from one moment to the next. I needed to find footholds. Small, solid ones.

I ran my hand over the soft velvet couch, turning that strip darker. I loved that. I loved my view and watching the rhythms of the harbor as the seaplanes and boats came and went. I sipped my coffee. It burned hot against my tongue—black and bitter enough to register on the Richter scale. I still loved that. Could I cobble together some sort of new existence with these things? Oh, and my moonstone earrings. I liked them too.

I heard the familiar clatter of a key in the door, and Alan came surging in. He took in the scene. "You're dressed!" he said, his face

lighting up. Of course I had Alan, and that in itself counted for so much.

“I am,” I said. “Did you think I was going into Hubtech in pajamas?”

“Nobody would have cared. They just want to see you. Mac and Annie and the rest of them were chomping at the bit to visit you in the hospital, but I held them off. Was I right?”

“Definitely,” I said. “I was in no shape for socializing.”

“Whew!” He threw his hand up to his forehead. “I was worried I did the wrong thing. Anyway, you look like you’re ready for socializing now. What is going on with your *hair*? It looks like you’ve just had a Hollywood blowout.”

“Right?” I pointed at my head and laughed. “Isn’t it wild? I’m thinking it must be the steroids.”

“Or maybe along with Tom’s liver he passed you some of his Greek-god hair genes.”

I chuckled. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Is that even a thing?” Alan asked, passing me a coffee from Neighbours. I put my mug down on my coffee table and took it gratefully.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve heard of vague stories about people inheriting traits of their donors, but I never took them seriously.”

“He’s a part of you now,” Alan said. “I was thinking about this last night. Whatever has transpired between you and Tom, you are sort of a chimera now with him inside you. Isn’t that wild?”

“I know.” How was I supposed to wrap my mind around that and parse out who Tom was outside the mind-boggling gifts he’d given me—a liver, a future, possibly great hair...

“Are you worried about seeing him today?”

I sighed. “It’s going to be weird, but like you said, he’s a part of me and my life forever, even if I can’t be what he wants right now.”

Alan nodded. “Maybe Tom assumed too much, but he strikes me as a black or white kind of guy.”

I thought of his self-help books, his daily regimen of gym and Muay Thai, his devotion to hard work, his showroom apartment, and even his work uniform. “He definitely is—I think he’s just

programmed that way.” Or he trained himself to be that way to survive. “The problem is for me, since the transplant, nothing feels clear-cut or definite like I expected.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Alan said. “What your body and mind have been through is insane. Good things in life need time to settle, like champagne.”

“You’re right,” I said, struck by the truth in Alan’s words. “How has Tom been acting at work?”

Alan rolled his eyes. “More driven than he’s ever been. He hasn’t smiled or laughed since he left your hospital room. He’s driving his employees crazy.”

My heart went out to him. Even if his employees didn’t see it, it sounded like he was hurting. Maybe only I could see being exacting and autocratic was Tom’s way of coping.



I made it to the top of the Hubtech stairs only slightly out of breath. It was incredible to feel that way instead of gasping for air.

With Alan by my side, I scanned the atrium for Tom, my heart in my throat. I longed to see him as much as I dreaded it.

There were the gorgeous yellow couches. There was the indoor tree. Had it grown an inch or two in the time I was gone?

No Tom. If he’d stayed away because he was hurt and angry, I could hardly blame him.

It was weirdly quiet. *Wait a second.* What did Alan have up his sleeve? I spun around to him. “I don’t want this to be a big deal.”

He scoffed. “Jujube, you getting your transplant *is* a big deal.”

I took a step backward, but Alan grabbed my arm. “I gave strict instructions to everyone to keep this extremely low key and not overwhelm you. There will be no balloons or sheet cakes or anything like that.”

I gave him serious side eye.

“But I can’t stop people being excited to see you.”

My shoulders dropped. He was right. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

We neared the glass doors to our office, and I could see everyone seemed huddled in the center of the shared space. It looked like everyone from both teams was there, but even now, I had eyes for only one person.

Tom was in the middle of the huddle, dressed in his simple work uniform. His gaze locked on to mine, and even after everything, a jolt of lightning coursed through me. *Yowza*. I hadn't expected that.

I couldn't look away from him. I'd expected his eyes to be shielded and distant, but instead there was warmth and welcome in their dark depths. What had I missed?

He looked better than anything I'd seen in my life. The memory of his body over mine rocketed through me, electrifying every cell. *I thought with you I'd found the home I'd been looking for my whole life.*

Alan nudged me. "Jujube, your mouth is hanging open."

I snapped it shut. "Thanks," I muttered.

Alan opened the doors and ushered me in. Everyone was clustered in the no-human's-land that was neither GoodGuides nor Silobase. Here they all were, mixed together the way Tessa had dreamed of.

Mac was the first one at my side. Her hair was now a beautiful shade of turquoise, and she'd gotten a new nose piercing that suited her perfectly. "Can I hug you?" she asked and promptly burst into tears.

"I'd love that," I said. "Just be gentle. My stomach is still pretty sore."

She did, and it felt so good to smell the frankincense essential oil she always wore. "We missed you," she said through shuddering breaths.

"I missed you too." I looked up to see Annie, holding hands with Peter and giving me a little wave. A lot happened in a month.

Tessa came storming up from behind, grabbing me around the waist. *Guh. The daggers!* I yelped, and she slapped her hands to her face. "I'm such an idiot! Did I hurt you?"

I winced. "I'm still pretty tender."



She took me by the shoulders, blocking everyone else from view. “Why didn’t you *tell* me, Jules? I know I can come across as a ball-breaker sometimes, but when I think of all the ways I could have supported you...” She shook her head.

Part of me did regret I hadn’t taken advantage of that, but if I had to do it all over again, I wasn’t certain I would choose differently. I shrugged. “I didn’t want people here to see me differently.”

“Why?”

“Because Hubtech was one of the only places I still felt like myself.” I put my hand on her yellow silk dress. “Sometimes it felt like it was one of my only lifelines.”

After a few seconds, she nodded. “I think I understand that, but please know I’m here for you now, okay?”

“Okay.” She stepped aside and left me to greet and accept the well-wishes. It was a lot. The whole time Tom was always just out of reach. Just when I was starting to wilt, the person I was most desperate to talk to appeared beside me and took my arm.

His grip felt warm and sure. I searched his face in vain for any trace of anger. He’d been furious with me. He’d left me in his taillights.

“Your hair,” he said with round eyes.

So we were acting like nothing had happened? “I think it might be some sort of weird transplant gift from you,” I said.

“It’s beautiful.” He blinked, then turned to the crowd. “Sorry, everyone,” he announced. “Jules and I have to leave now to go to an appointment at the hospital.”

The grumbles of protest took a while to subside. What was going on?

He managed to draw me away from the others. “She’ll be back tomorrow!” He gave everyone a cheery wave before steering me out through the atrium and down the stairs. “Is your stomach good enough for the stairs? At first, just standing made me sweat with effort, let alone going up or down.”

Why was he acting like he hadn’t stalked out of my hospital room? “You’re wearing your hair down,” he said. “It looks”—he swallowed—“very nice.”

“I thought you weren’t talking to me.” My head spun with bewilderment.

“I guess I wasn’t,” he admitted as we reached street level. He pulled me into the gusty wind and cold rain.

“I’m so confused right now,” I burst out. “What’s happened?”

“I’ll tell you in the car,” he said and beeped the doors open on his sleek Mercedes—black, of course.

He helped me in, then went around and slid into the driver’s seat. I could only stare at his noble profile, torn between resentment at his high-handed behavior and throbbing curiosity.

“What’s going on?” I demanded as soon as he pulled away from the curb.

“Do you know who called me last night?” he asked, maneuvering the car deftly through a construction zone.

“I don’t know...the hospital?” I guessed. That’s where he was taking me, after all.

“No. Brian Meeks.”

Oh. *Oh*. “My email reached him? I wasn’t sure because—”

“Thank you,” Tom said, staring straight ahead, but his clenching and unclenching jaw made my blood go cold. Was he furious at me for reaching out on his behalf? But then his chin quivered, and he clenched his jaw to stop it. I had it wrong. Tom wasn’t angry—he was working hard to stem his emotions.

He checked his watch. “We’re a bit early. Do you mind if I park down by the water, so we can talk for five minutes?”

“I’d like that.” I still didn’t know what we were early for, but that didn’t seem to matter as much anymore.

We lapsed into silence while Tom drove to a sheltered cove on the far side of the harbor with a fine view to the bascule bridge raised high to let a tall sailboat through.

He parked the car, and only then did he look at me. “Sorry,” he said, his hand hovering by his door handle. “I need to get out and pace around. Do you mind? I’m having a hard time sitting still today.”

“Sure.” We both got out. The wind was blustering, and the occasional icy raindrop fell from the sky. I pulled my velvet coat

tighter around me and leaned on the hood of Tom's car, watching him walk back and forth on the ocean walkway in front of me.

I didn't understand what was going on in that mind of his, but I was conscious of wanting to gather him in my arms to offer him any comfort I could. I tried to imagine the enormity of what he must be feeling—having Brian Meeks come back from his past like that. I could understand what it was to have emotions that felt too big to contain. That's how I'd been feeling since the transplant, and what Tom, only a week ago, could not understand.

The seagulls cried behind Tom in a raucous chorus.

His perfectly tailored pants clung to those muscular thighs. I loved how they hung low on his glorious hips, and I remembered how good it had felt to explore them with my mouth. If things weren't so complicated between us now, I would call him over and pull him tight against me, kissing all that nervous energy away.

Finally he turned to me. "I talked to Brian on the phone for four hours last night."

"I'm so glad!" I said.

"How did you find him?"

I smiled, hands deep in my pockets to keep myself from reaching out to touch him without thinking. "A little thing called social media. Maybe you've heard of it?"

He stood facing me and put his hands on his hips. "But I tried that."

"Well, I used it in a roundabout way, I guess. Also, I'm very good at diving down social media rabbit holes."

"I feel like an idiot. Well, I am an idiot. I should have tried harder."

"You're not an idiot. I saw from your lack of accounts that it's just not your thing. It's a valid, even sane, choice these days. I hope you didn't mind me sticking my nose in it."

"Why did you?"

I let out a breath, trying to formulate the right words. "With everything that happened between us..." I waved my hand in the space that separated us, knowing that beneath our clothes, we had matching scars. "I couldn't leave things like that. You deserve to be happy, Tom, and to get the answers you need."

He brushed the bridge of his nose. “Even after I’d left your room in a huff when you tried to explain you were still shell-shocked?” He sounded curious, not angry.

He had recognized I was shell-shocked, not just rejecting him. This was a new development. “Especially then. I know why you reacted that way. It’s what you had to train yourself to do to survive when you were young.”

“It was,” he said softly.

“I was also dealing with my past that night and still am, even though it’s honestly the last thing I imagined I’d be having to do right now. I wanted to find a way to let you know I understand how complicated all this is, but I appreciate you—so much.”

He came to the car and leaned against the hood beside me, not touching but so close I caught a whiff of his cologne and vanilla soap. I dug my hands in my pockets deeper still. “Brian lives in Vancouver now.”

“Ah, so that’s why you had such a hard time finding him.”

His brows pulled together as he examined my face. “Yes. My name change didn’t help either.”

“I figured that would be the case.” The need to lean into him rocked through my body, but I couldn’t. Not now.

He checked his watch again, and my eyes caught on his prominent wrist bones. “We should leave soon, or we’re going to be late. But I’ve done a lot of thinking, both alone and on the phone with Brian. I didn’t sleep much last night. I want to propose something.”

My heart quivered with something between panic and eagerness. “What? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

He placed his hands bracingly on my shoulders. It was touch but not at all the type I craved. “I propose we be friends.”

“Friends?” That word had never felt so empty.

“Yes. I pressured you, and I realize now how wrong I was to do that. I was still sore and disoriented after the surgery, and I reverted to my old habit of removing relentlessly forward in times of stress. I should never have tried to drag you along. I apologize.”

“It’s okay.” I blinked. This was not *at all* how I saw this day going.

“Brian pointed out last night how I needed to break this habit of leaving. He was right. I never told you this, but Brian reached out to me a few times after I moved to that new foster home—the bad one. I never responded because at that time in my life, I figured if I couldn’t go back, if I couldn’t live with him anymore, what was the point?”

My heart ached for the grief and confusion that had led Tom to such a conclusion.

“We probably could have stayed in touch if I hadn’t been such a stubborn asshole, to borrow your word.”

“You were only a kid.”

He shook his head. “Because of that I’ve lost all these years knowing him. I’ll never get those back.” Tom’s fingers dug tighter into my shoulders.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I refuse to do that with you,” he said, but I got the impression he was talking to himself as much as me.

“But you wouldn’t.” I had to make him understand. “Even if you tried and I went along with it for a while—because as we both know I can be as pig-headed as you are—your liver is in me, keeping me alive. I could never have stayed angry or distant for long.”

He scratched his forehead. “Maybe that’s true, but either way, I’m going to make it easy for you.”

My stomach dropped. “What do you mean?”

“I vow to you I won’t ever stray beyond the bounds of friendship or put you in any awkward situation. I’ll always be there for you, but you’ll be free from any obligation toward me. I want you to be able to trust me, because I am determined to stay in your life... If you’ll have me.” His last words contained a note of uncertainty that made me want to pull him close and hold him tight.

“Wow,” I said shakily. “You’ve done a lot of thinking.”

His mouth quirked. “Like I said, no sleep last night. So friends?”

How could I refuse him this?

I had wanted him to slow down, and he had. In typical Tom fashion, he’d gone above and beyond expectations and applied screeching brakes to our relationship to keep it neat and tidy. The

thing was, with Tom, whether I'd hated him, or desired him, or owed him, none of my feelings about him had ever been neat and tidy.

Yet here he was, his hands buried deep in his black overcoat, his dark eyes pleading. I had to give him this, because wasn't it exactly what I'd asked for?

"Friends," I agreed.

His shoulders dropped with relief, but mine inched closer to my ears.

"Now, can you tell me where we're going?" I asked.

"Group therapy at the hospital."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

We argued the whole way to the hospital and as we climbed out of his parked car.

I wasn't ready for this. I stood in the parking lot, staring up at the hospital in front of me, and my heart started to race. I put my hand over it and could feel it beneath my palm, trying to pound out of my chest.

"It's too much to be back here," I protested. "Besides, I've never told anyone this—it's embarrassing—but I've never been to therapy. I lied about that to the transplant team."

"I've never done therapy before either." Tom beckoned me forward. "I'm terrified too, but I think we need to do this. We need to be brave together."

I swallowed hard. Hadn't I been brave enough for a lifetime? What had come over him? He hustled me into the hospital and onto the elevator.

Being here with Tom deflated that argument before I spoke it out loud. Tom had donated his liver, and he wasn't backing out. I felt a strange echo between the two of us of those very first days at Hubtech. If Tom was going to do this, I had no choice.

He reached into his satchel and passed me a wrapped rectangle.

"What's this?"

"A protein bar. We need to power-eat protein for the next few months. I taste-tested a whole bunch in the past few days and made a spreadsheet."

*Of course he did.*

"This one scored the highest for taste and protein. It's also fairly natural as far as energy bars go."

I took it. "Thanks."

"I bought you chocolate caramel."

How had he remembered those were my favorite flavors? "No pierogi-flavored?" I tried a joke.

He chuckled. “Unfortunately not.”

I leaned against the wall of the cavernous elevator—big enough to fit a stretcher inside, ripped open the package, and took an angry bite. Dammit. It tasted almost as good as a chocolate bar. “Thank you, Thunder,” I muttered.

“Do you think you’ll annoy me by calling me Thunder?” he asked, a mischievous tilt to his mouth.

“I was hoping so.” We got off the elevator.

“It doesn’t bother me. Not anymore.”

The memory of moaning it against his ear when he was inside me blindsided me. I stopped right in the middle of a hospital hallway and sucked in a breath. A crumb of the energy bar caught in my windpipe, and I began to cough like a maniac.

Tom patted my back until I cleared it. “Are you all right?” I wasn’t really, but I couldn’t share why with him. I nodded. We walked on until Tom stopped.

“We’re here,” he said. I looked up. Unit 3G2. The transplant ward. Our transplant ward.

It felt so wrong somehow to be here standing upright and not lying on a stretcher. Everything looked different. A trolley wheeled by one of the lab techs clattered by us, and I jumped.

Tom looked pale.

“You okay?”

“I keep thinking someone’s going to tackle me and start sticking needles in my arm again.”

“Yeah. I feel like they’re going to put one of those godforsaken hospital gowns on me.”

“This is a bit surreal.” He frowned. “But this first time coming back will be the hardest, don’t you think?”

“I can’t imagine it will ever be easy.”

“I guess that’s the way it works with PTSD.”

“PTSD?” I stopped in my tracks. “I don’t have—”

Then I stopped. When I thought of PTSD, it was always related to war veterans, but could it happen with medical battles as well? Could that be part of the reason I’d been feeling so lost and untethered since the transplant? “I never considered PTSD before,” I admitted.



“From what I’ve recently learned, I would be shocked if you didn’t have it.”

“How do you know about PTSD, anyway?”

“I started reading up on it since I talked to Brian last night.”

That was just like Tom to plunge into researching a topic backward and forward as soon as it sparked his interest.

I thought of his childhood. “Do you think *you* have PTSD?”

“Brian thinks I must. It’s logical.”

There was so much new information to process, but we were nearing the lounge. I smelled the scent of hospital coffee and heard a chatter of voices.

“Tom,” I said warningly, my feet feeling suddenly encased in molasses.

He stopped and looked at me. “You know what the group calls themselves?”

I shook my head.

He smiled. “The Transplant Rogues,” he said. “How could you not belong in a group called that, Sparks?”

Somehow this made the panic recede a bit. We stepped into the noisy room just as a bell started ringing inside.

“Coffee time is over!” A handsome young man around thirty-five shouted as he rang some jingle bells. The hubbub in the room, where about fifteen people were clustered around in groups chatting, subsided a bit but not as much as I would have expected.

The jingle bell man glanced at me and rolled his eyes. “What I would give right now for a bullhorn. You’re new, right?”

I nodded. “Living donor liver. Recent.”

He shook my hand. “Harry. Heart and lungs two years ago. Welcome.” He glanced at Tom.

“This is Tom,” I said, my voice a bit stronger now. “My donor and —”

“Friend,” Tom supplied. He was standing behind me, but I wished I could see his expression.

Harry didn’t gush over either one of us; he just acted as if this information was completely normal, which here, it actually was. Maybe Tom had been on to something bringing me here. There was

something indescribably comforting about talking with someone who understood the transplant experience without me or Tom having to fill in the blanks.

“The donor group is just one room over,” Harry told Tom. “Sorry, you two missed the coffee beforehand, but we’re here every Thursday. Anyway, it’s hospital coffee, so it’s nothing to get overly excited about, as you know.”

“Great.” Tom gave me an encouraging look. “I’ll see you after, and if there’s any point in the meeting when you need me, I’m just next door.”

I nodded.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Harry said and ushered me to a chair. Tom nodded, but there was still a worried little crease between on his forehead as he left.

After a minute or two, Harry sat down and began the meeting. Everyone found a chair pretty quickly after that. “All right,” he began. “We have a new rogue today, so let’s start with introductions.”

The guy beside me took the lead. “Matt. Kidney.”

“Jennifer. Lungs.”

“Mohammed. Heart and liver.”

“Kanoux. Heart.”

And so on and so on until there was only me left. I cleared my throat. “Jules. Living donor liver.”

People in the circle waved and said welcome. I couldn’t quite muster anything besides “thank you.” I was far too amazed to find myself in a room with so many people who had been through transplant journeys like mine in all their permutations.

“You can just listen today, Jules, or you can talk,” Harry said. “We know this first session can be hard when you’re fresh out of the hospital. It can even feel impossible.”

Yes. “It does feel impossible,” I said, my voice cracking. I hadn’t planned on saying anything, but the understanding in these people’s faces snapped something that had been pulling tight inside me, and words just poured out. “It *does* feels impossible,” I said again. “I feel so guilty feeling this way, after receiving this gift...”

My eyes began to well up. The whole room of people just sat with me, not telling me not to cry, not trying to cheer me up, and not trying to explain away my pain. They just sat with me, silently present and open, the way Stewart had done. I finally wiped my eyes and managed to speak again. "It's hard to find the words to explain."

Everyone in the circle nodded. "You don't have to explain yourself in this room," Mohammad said. "We get it."

And as I scanned their faces, it hit me for the first time. *They do get it.* In this space I was seen and accepted and not judged for how everyone thought I should feel.

After that I sat and listened, holding space for everyone as they told their tales of triumphs and troubles, guilt and trauma.

From their stories, patterns emerged. Post-transplant life was a gift, but that didn't mean it was easy. Bumps in the road seemed to be norm rather than the exception, and for us, every one of those bumps brought a cascade of PTSD.

"I thought I would just go back to who I was before the transplant," I said at one point. "But I didn't. Now I don't know who I am."

Harry nodded. "Transplant changes you on every level. It takes time to get your bearings in this new landscape. My advice would be this—let it change you. Trying to go back to who you were before you got sick is impossible, not to mention crazy making. You're not that person anymore."

"Give it time," Mohammed said. "The sun will come through the clouds again, but you have to be patient."

I rolled my eyes. "Not one of my strong points."

Everyone laughed.

Harry smiled. "You're like the rest of us, Jules. You've earned your black belt in surviving; the hard thing is remembering how to live."

At the end people came over and hugged me. They didn't say a word, just let me know I wasn't alone in this. As the donors came into the room, the noise level increased.

I searched for Tom. He was one of the last people to come in. His eyes looked suspiciously shiny, as though I wasn't the only one who

had been crying.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked, his voice quiet and low.

“Yes.”

He reached out, maybe to take my hand, but then checked himself and dropped it to his side. Damn. *Just friends.*

We drove in silence on the way home. I had so much to process from the day and I was sure he did too.

When he pulled up in front of my apartment building, I wanted to reach out and touch him, but I couldn't in all good conscience blur the boundaries he'd so clearly set. “Thank you for... Well, thank you, Tom.”

He frowned. “You have to stop thanking me, okay? I intend to be a good friend, Jules. I'm trying to learn how.”

My heart made a funny beat. “Complete success so far.”

He smiled then, but his eyes didn't crinkle up in the corners. “Do you need help going up? You must be sore after moving around so much today.”

I was, not to mention crying during the meeting with the Rogues, but Tom had already made most of his day about me. I was sure he wanted to get back to Hubtech for the last few hours before everyone, except him, clocked off for the day. “I'll take the elevator.”

“I'll drop off dinner tonight. Is six o'clock okay?”

“You really don't need to do that.”

“I know,” he said. “But I want to. We need to keep you well-nourished while you heal.”

Tom was moving headlong into this friendship project so thoroughly I got the impression he'd forgotten he also needed to feed himself. “You too!”

“Me too. I doubt you feel like cooking. I know I don't. What do you feel like eating? How about pierogi?”

“You really do know the magic word.” My stomach grumbled. Oh my god. *Hunger.* Welcome back, long-lost friend. “I could murder some pierogi.”

“Done.”



That night, at six o'clock on the nose, Tom arrived at the door with piping hot pierogi along with thick sour cream and fried onions. He also brought a huge box of those delicious protein bars, an eight pack of lime Greek yogurts, and a massive variety pack of pudding.

"You didn't need to do all this," I protested as he set the bags on the kitchen island and started to pull things out. "Anyway, you just had abdominal surgery too. You shouldn't be carrying all these things."

"I keep forgetting that," he said as he popped things into the fridge and placed the box of protein bars in a convenient corner of the counter.

"I'm clearly going to have to look after you too."

His gaze whirled over to me, his eyes wide.

"What?" I asked, my ribs feeling too small for my lungs. "Friends look after each other. That's the way it works."

He shook his head. "Nothing. I tried these lime Greek yogurts two days ago." He tried to gloss over that strange moment. "They're packed with protein and delicious. I thought you might like to try them."

"And the puddings?"

He shrugged. "I figured you need some stuff you just really like."

*You. I like you.*

Wait. I couldn't tell him one thing and then change my mind. He was so committed and convinced about this friendship. I owed it to him to take it seriously.

When he opened the pierogi bag, my mouth watered.

"You're all set," he said. "I bought some pierogi for myself too, so I'll just take them and be off."

"Don't go. Stay!"

He tightened the fingers where he held on to the handle of the bag, then released them. "That's very kind to offer," he said in a

Carefully modulated voice. “But I didn’t expect to stay. You need to rest.”

He turned to go, but I reached out and grabbed his forearm. Familiar heat shot up my arm. His gaze widened and fixed on my face. “Stay,” I repeated. “I’d like the company while I eat. Also, while we’re arguing, our pierogi are getting cold.”

He broke into a smile then, but even now he was still holding a part of himself back.

“We can’t have that,” he murmured, and a shiver ran through me. “But I won’t stay long, and I insist you sit on the couch while I plate our pierogi.”

“Maybe we should sit at the table,” I gestured to mostly unused dining room table at the side of the big windows.

“Do we have to?” he asked. “There are few places in the world I like better than your pink velvet couch.”

Surprise stopped me for a second. “Really? It’s not too frivolous and decadent?”

“It’s both those things. Maybe that’s why I love it.”

“The couch it is.” I sighed with pleasure and went to my favorite corner of the couch. Tom worked quickly and brought me a plate with eight plump pierogi on it.

I was definitely hungry, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been able to eat this much. “Tom, there are eight pierogi on here.”

“So?” He sat down and sighed deeply. I remembered that sigh. He’d let out the same sound when he’d sunk himself into me. No. *Friends.*

It was a fascinating spectacle to watch how Tom, who usually held himself so rigidly, completely let himself go when he sat on my couch. His long legs splayed out under the coffee table, his shoulders dropped, and he let that huge, glorious body of his sink into the velvet softness. There was something incredibly erotic about it.

“I’m never going to finish these,” I said. If I couldn’t have Tom, at least I could distract myself with food. I was already cutting into the first pierogi.

He shrugged. “I’ll finish what you don’t want.”

I laughed and sank my teeth into the pillowlike texture with the sharp hint of cheese inside. I groaned.

I saw a flash of fire in Tom's eyes that made me stop midchew. Now I was craving something else entirely. If sex had been that good when I was brewing sepsis, what would it be like when I was healthy?

*Down, Jules.*

"Sorry," I gulped. "They're just so delicious."

"No need to apologize." His voice was strained.

Before I knew it, I had polished off all eight pierogi. "I can't believe it. I ate everything." My plate was so clean it looked like I'd licked it.

"Bravo," he said. "That makes me happy."

Warm contentment seeped through my body, along with a shiver of anticipation for what pleasures were going to come next. *I'm happy too.* The world felt like it suddenly burst into color. I slid my plate on the coffee table in front of me.

Tom angled his body toward mine. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Something just happened—I don't know if I can explain it."

He narrowed his gaze, studying my face. "Can you try?"

"The pierogi tasted so good. I'd forgotten food could taste like that. It hit me all at once how so many experiences in my life were blunted by feeling so horribly sick all the time."

Tom schooled his face into a controlled expression. I could tell it took effort by the twitch in his jaw. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yes. It was just shocking—and sudden." How I loved this grave, contemplative expression of his—the intense look in his eyes, the slightly open lips. "It's all because of you," I said. "Because of your liver."

He shifted his shoulders. "I wish you could recognize how you did ninety-nine percent of this journey on your own," he said. "My part was just the tip of the iceberg."

I couldn't accept that. "Lift up your shirt," I ordered.

He jerked back. "What?"

"Lift up your shirt. I want to see your scar."

He tugged on his bottom lip. "Um."

“Not like that,” I said, although even my own words didn’t convince me of that entirely. “As a donor.”

His broad shoulders fell. “I guess that’s all right, then?” He didn’t sound convinced, which was understandable given our “just friends” rule. To be fair, I wasn’t exactly sure where I was going with this either, but I knew I had to see his scar. He stood up.

I watched, transfixed, as he undid his white dress shirt button by button. Slowly he drew the sides of the shirt aside, revealing muscled honey perfection underneath.

He was so beautiful it knocked the wind out of me. I gulped.

He drew the right side of the shirt farther over. There it was. A bright red line that ran from his right pectoral muscle down close to the center of his stomach and then veered to the vicinity of his belly button. He’d have the scar forever because of me.

I reached out to trace it. Starting from the top, I ran my index finger slowly down, down, down. His stomach muscles quivered. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back, making a low hissing sound.

“Does it tickle?” I asked. If this was unpleasant for him, I would stop.

“No.” His voice sounded like it came from a far way down.

The electricity from touching him was so intense I wouldn’t have been surprised if my hair was dancing on its ends.

“Do you want me to stop?”

He let out another hiss. “No.”

At last I pulled my finger away. He let out a breath of air that reminded me of when he’d finally sunk into me. That melting sensation came back under my sternum and between my legs. I itched to explore every part of him, over and over again. Just like I’d been blindsided by the deliciousness of the pierogi, my head whirled with how much I wanted Tom.

Tom’s eyes opened again and locked on mine. The air buzzed with the memories of the night we’d had together. It had started right over there, at the kitchen island, and ended so explosively under my soft duvet, just behind where we stood.



Tom reached down and grabbed our plates. “Now you’re fed, I’ll be off.”

“You don’t need to...to...” I struggled to find my bearings.

He turned his back to me as he loaded the plates in the dishwasher, but I saw him shake his head, as much for himself as me. “I need to let you rest,” he said. “And I still have to do some work at home.”

“Oh yeah. The pitch is coming soon, isn’t it?” I was so out of the loop. “Of course you do.” *This is what you wanted, Jules. This is what you asked for.*

He shrugged his jacket on. “What time do you need to be at the hospital for labs tomorrow?”

“Early. Seven o’clock.”

“I’ll be here at six thirty. I’ll bring coffee.”

“You don’t need to,” I protested.

“I want to,” he said. “Talking to Brian made me realize I need to be better at staying instead of leaving. Rest up.” He hurried out, shutting the door firmly behind him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Tom did indeed show up the next morning with coffee. For the next week he kept me stocked in pudding and protein bars, even keeping duplicate supplies of both at Hubtech. He kept his word about not giving me any reason to think he wanted more than friendship.

Life was getting hectic for everyone at Silobase and GoodGuides. Everyone, that was, except me.

I reached the top of the stairs and passed the yellow couches. The rumble of conversation was louder than usual, and a whiff of espresso permeated the air. It was only two weeks from the investment round on December twentieth, and Hubtech was operating at Defcon Two.

I'd missed so much. No-one had the time or mental bandwidth to get me up to speed now, and anyway, Alan and the team seemed to be doing brilliantly on their own.

Alan, Peter, and Tom were clustered around Peter's desk, deep in conversation. When they broke up, Tom waved and something to the other two. Alan turned and immediately looked stricken.

I smiled back. The last thing I wanted was for Alan to worry about me when he had so much going on. Maybe I should tell him about my ambivalence about my future at GoodGuides sooner than later. Today felt like the right time to set him free to fly with his own wings.

He walked my way. "Jules. Tom just mentioned something that made me think. Are you feeling terribly left out? I feel terrible for neglecting you."

I reached out and patted his arm. "No need to feel sorry, but if you can spare me ten minutes for a quick coffee, there is something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

He grabbed my arm and steered me toward the stairs. "Between Tarun and the pitch, I've been neglecting you, haven't I? God, I feel like a terrible friend. I will always make time for you. I hope you know that."

“Of course I do. You can stop apologizing, because you’re the *best* friend in the world. Stop your self-recriminations. Uncalled for.”

“Hmph” was all he said, seemingly intent on self-flagellation. We got to Neighbours. Freshly toasted mozzarella, basil, and tomato paninis and steamed milk never smelled so delicious. It was quite something to experience the world a second time around.

We ordered and sat down in the far corner of the space. I loved how the seating was set up like a big, jumbled living room, plenty of places to curl your legs and plonk down a coffee cup.

“We’ve left you out in the cold,” Alan said without preamble.

I snorted. “You have not, you numbnut. There’s no way you could loop me in now after I’ve been MIA for so long. The investment round is right around the corner, and GoodGuides doesn’t have a second to lose. Bringing me up to speed is a waste of time and energy.”

Alan’s mouth twisted. “You’re too good to me.”

“No better than you are to me. I only want what’s best for you. It’s been like that since we were seven.”

He clasped my hand tight. “Don’t I know it. You didn’t let me sink into that hole of depression and bankruptcy and worthlessness after Gary.”

“Well, you didn’t let me sink either,” I countered. “I don’t think I could have done this transplant without you, but now that we’re out of the worst of it, I’ve been thinking we need to widen our circles of support. What do you think of adding in Tarun?”

Alan’s face turned a telltale pink.

“Still going well?” I said, more a statement of fact than a question. I’d never seen Alan this radiantly content.

He clapped his hands together in glee and squealed. “I’m moving into his place at the end of the month.”

I shrieked, then clapped a hand over my mouth when a bunch of heads spun in our direction. “What?”

“I’m so in love,” Alan gushed. “He’s so wonderful. He helps people all day at work and then he volunteers at the homeless shelter twice a week, and he’s an amazing cook. That reminds me,

I've been meaning to ask you if you can come for dinner at his place on Friday night?"

"I'd love to."

"I was thinking of asking Tom too. Would that bother you? It'll just be the four of us—your transplant crew."

My heart leaped when Alan said Tom's name, but I tamped it down. "It wouldn't bother me at all. Everything is very amicable between us now."

Alan cocked a skeptical brow at this but didn't question me further.

"I have something to say to you too," I said. "About GoodGuides, and my role in it—"

"Like I said," Alan interrupted, "we just need to get this investment round behind us and then you can—"

"Stop!" I held my hands up, laughing. "That's not what I meant. What I wanted to say was I think my heart isn't really in GoodGuides anymore."

Alan's back stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Don't stress." I put my hand on his knee. "This is actually the highest form of compliment when you look a little closer. It means you're doing amazing on your own. I think you need to take over as CEO. As for me, I need to get out of your way."

"No! How could you think I want that?"

"I don't, but as your best friend, I think you *need* this. More than that—you've earned it."

His mouth opened and shut. "But where would that leave you?"

"It would leave me to figure out what I really want to do."

"I thought that was GoodGuides."

I sighed. "I was thrilled to start GoodGuides when we did. It was the perfect solution for that time in my life. You knew about me being sick. It got me out of working with my family, which was an absolute godsend. It kept my mind busy. Most importantly, it meant I could spend my days with you."

"I doubt that would have been fun. I was a complete disaster after Gary left."

“Maybe, but I saw how GoodGuides could be a way for you to get back on your feet.”

“Then why would you want to leave?” Alan demanded.

I sighed at the bewilderment in his face. “This last month proved something I always knew. Deep down GoodGuides is your thing, not mine. You weren’t in a place to realize it, but you are now.”

“Are you just saying this to make me feel better about leaving you out recently?” Alan narrowed his eyes at me. His suspicious look had not changed one iota since he was seven years old.

“I’m saying this because it’s true.”

“But what are you going to do? You’re not going back to Kellys, are you?” A mask of horror slid over his normal expression. It pinched at me that my family hadn’t reached out since I got out of the hospital, but I could create a new family in this new life, with me and Alan as its nucleus.

I laughed. “They gave me a liver transplant, not a personality transplant.”

“Then...what?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but I’m excited to figure it out.”

Alan shook his head. “I can’t stand the idea of you not working with me. You’re not going to stop all at once, are you?”

“Of course not! What do you take me for? I can consult for as long as you need me. A reason to get out of bed every day will be a great thing. Besides, I can’t survive too long without seeing you.”

“Promise?” Alan said, a new light in his eyes. It was time for Alan to step into his future, and deep down I could see his heart knew it, even if his brain hadn’t caught up yet.

“Promise.”



On Friday night, Tom insisted on picking me up to take me to Tarun’s for dinner.

When I opened the door, my mouth dropped open. Gone was the black-and-white uniform he’d worn when we went to the therapy at

the hospital. Instead, Tom had on that pair of perfectly worn jeans I'd seen him wear at the hospital, but instead of a white top, he wore a dark green sweater with—be still my beating heart—a turtleneck.

Longing surged through me. My mind wandered.

*Tom was stretched out on my couch, completely relaxed, holding me in his arms. The fire crackled as the rain pattered against the window. He kissed the back of my neck and slowly pulled the tie of my silk kimono, letting it fall open. His broad hands cupped the curve of my waist. I slipped my hands underneath that glorious soft sweater and pushed him backward against the velvet couch, unzipping those soft jeans and sliding them down his hips...*

"Are you feeling sick?" Tom asked me, his forehead pleated with concern.

"Uh. What? No!" My face was burning. "It's just...color! Your sweater. It's green."

*Nice recovery, Jules. That sounded totally normal. Not.*

He lifted one of his broad shoulders. "I figured it was about time for a change. It's cashmere. Want to feel how soft it is?"

I yearned to but didn't trust myself to stop at the sweater. "What about your color blindness?"

His face brightened. "I figured a way around it. I set up an appointment with one of those consultant people at a store—*not* Kellys," he stressed.

"You mean a stylist?"

"That's it! Peter informed me I needed to update my look, so he set me up with this woman he knows named Annabelle. I was nervous, but she was very nice, actually. We came up with the idea of writing the color of things on clothing tags and what goes with what. Like I know this is green." He pointed to his sweater.

Jealousy had a tight grip on my windpipe. I was certain Annabelle was probably young and beautiful like most stylists. She'd been no doubt charmed by Tom's uncertainty paired with his commanding physical presence. Who wouldn't be? I'd bet she was far simpler than me—not a transplant patient and not somebody walking around with Tom's liver inside and all the emotional messiness that entailed.

*Mine.* I wanted Tom to be mine. That truth reverberated through my body. Was this what Harry had meant at the first Transplant Rogues meeting, about the hardest task for recipients being learning how to live again? Was Tom part of that for me?

Tom cleared his throat. I broke his gaze to reach in the deep pocket of my wool coat to grab my keys. I joined Tom in the hallway and locked the door behind us. “You look very nice,” I mumbled without looking up.

My heart thumped. This was more than just gratitude for Tom. More than a feeling of guilt or that I owed him. I wanted him for reasons that had nothing to do with the transplant. I wanted Tom for Tom—and all the contradictions that made him the man he was.

Was I brave enough to storm Tom’s “just friends” wall and take a stab at creating this new life for myself? I’d had to be brave for so very long—did I have any left for him?



Alan opened the door to Tarun’s apartment and beckoned us in. “Welcome!” he said heartily, but I knew from those pale strips on his cheekbones that he was nervous. “Look, Jules, Tarun is almost exactly opposite you across the harbor.”

I let myself be led over to the windows, and we peered out over the bridge. “I’ve often wondered if I could see your place with binoculars.”

*We.* That was adorable. I peered at the lights on the sailboats docked at the marina and the rain lashing Tarun’s windowpanes. “You probably could,” I said, then turned around to find the source of the delectable smell of onions, garlic, and turmeric.

Tarun’s place wasn’t as big or lofty as mine, but unlike me he’d probably bought it with his own hard-earned money. He’d decorated in shades of bright orange, saffron yellow, and fuchsia, the perfect antidote to our gray winters.

“It smells delicious in here,” Tom said after taking my jacket to hang on the hooks in the hall. “What *is* that?”

“Let me show you.” Alan winked and ushered us into the kitchen, where Tarun was masterfully overseeing six different pans and pots on a professional chef range.

Tarun tucked a white dishtowel into the tie of his white apron and leaned over to give me a kiss on the cheek and Tom a handshake. “Welcome to my home. I’m making my mother’s famous Rajasthani dinner, and she would have my head if I messed it up. Alan, can get you a drink, and you can all chat until I’m ready here.”

“It smells unreal,” I said.

“No more compliments,” Tarun said. “You’ll jinx it.”

I laughed.

Tom peered down with interest. “This is making me think I need to learn how to cook.”

Alan grabbed both of our arms and pulled us out of the kitchen. “We have to leave him to it. Tarun is a focused chef, but the results are more than worth it.”

“Maybe you don’t know how to cook,” Alan said to Tom as he led us to the pillow-festooned couches and pressed glasses of wine in our hands, “but I see you’re finally branching out from your usual dress code. Bravo!”

“Peter recommended his stylist,” Tom admitted, his skin taking on that rusty hue. He waved his hand from his shoes—gorgeous leather, I noticed now—to his drool-worthy sweater. “This is all her.”

Alan flicked me a quick glance. I tried to remain impassive, ignoring the molten jealousy erupting inside. Alan pursed his lips in understanding. I hadn’t fooled him for a second. “Peter is an extremely stylish dresser,” he said. “Good choice. You look far more relaxed.”

*I could relax him even more.*

Tom shrugged. “I thought maybe it was time to break out of my uniform.” That green cashmere sweater over those shoulders... My mouth started to water, and not just for Tarun’s feast.

“Do you mind if I ask about that work uniform?” Alan said, sipping his wine.

“Of course not.”



“Did you have just one set of clothes, like one pair of pants, et cetera?”

“Jules asked the exact same question a while ago.” Tom let out a deep, hearty laugh that I’d never heard before. Where had *that* been hiding? Had reconnecting with Brian Meeks brought it out? The new clothes, the laugh... Tom was changing and evolving. I was too, but would our different paths ever intersect in a romantic way again? Could I push things around so they would?

“Well?” Alan prompted.

“No.” Tom shook his head. “But the answer is even more ridiculous. I read up on how to dress for success, and because I’m color blind, the black-and-white combo seemed like a safe option. I found a suit that fit and a type of white shirt I liked, and I bought multiple copies of each.”

“Wow,” Alan murmured, nodding. “Despite your superhero looks and ways, you’re just as weird as Jules and me at heart.”

“Probably weirder,” Tom said.

I clicked my tongue. “I doubt that. Alan and I are pretty peculiar.”

“It’s true. I didn’t have anyone to teach me about life stuff, so I had to teach myself. The results are spotty at best.”

Did Tom have any idea how amazing he was? “I wouldn’t say that at all.”

Tom’s gaze flew to mine, but unfortunately so did Alan’s, so I couldn’t say anything more.

“Dinner is ready!” Tarun called from the kitchen. “Bring your wineglasses!”

Alan hopped up. “Let’s go. He gets quite bossy about hosting.”

“And you love it,” I guessed.

Alan grinned. “Of course I do.”

Alan sat us down, and we watched, spellbound, as Tarun brought a series of beautiful copper dishes to the table, filled with the most delectable food imaginable. The air was heavy with scents of cumin, turmeric, and so many other things.

“This smells incredible,” I said. “I can’t thank you enough for having us.”

Tarun sat down and exhaled deeply. “I think it’s going to be good, but it’s always a delicate operation getting everything ready at the right time.” He explained the delicious food in front of us—onion kachori, laal maans, ker sangri, gatte ki subzi... I lost track after that.

Two hours later, filled with delicious food and lively conversation, we moved to the couches. It warmed my heart to see Alan in this new life that fit him perfectly.

“You don’t know how happy I am to see you well and recovering,” Tarun said when we were all comfortable. Alan and I sat on one couch and immediately collapsed into each other like we always did. Tarun and Tom perched on the other, not quite as comfortable with one another yet. “I was so devastated when they told me I wasn’t a viable candidate. I so regretted telling you I was even being tested. You didn’t make that mistake,” he said to Tom.

Tom shrugged. “I couldn’t bear getting her hopes up if it didn’t work out, but I don’t know if there is a clear right and wrong way to go about the donation process. It’s high stakes no matter which way you approach it.”

Tarun leaned back on the couch. “I’m curious, how is it between you now? Is it strange to be connected in such a tangible, physical way?”

I glanced at Tom. So much had happened, and I felt so many things at once, I was incapable of summing it up into something as neat as words.

Tom cleared his throat. “Speaking for myself, it’s not awkward. Jules made the wise call that we should limit our dynamic to friendship. I didn’t take it well at the time, but now I’m grateful.”

“You are?” Alan asked, then bit his lip, but not quickly enough to keep the question from flying out.

Heat crept up my throat.

“Yes.” Tom twisted his fingers together. “Before that I was making a mess of things, assuming things I shouldn’t.”

“No!” I said, and both Alan’s and Tarun’s eyes widened. Heat flooded my face now. “I mean, it wasn’t just you.” My words came out in a rush. “I was all over the place. I realize now it was normal with the trauma I’d experienced, but—”

Alan reached over and squeezed my hand, sensing my distress. "It's okay, Jules."

Tarun deftly turned the conversation to other channels.

When we finally bid Alan and Tarun goodnight, I hugged them both and gave Alan a kiss on the cheek. "Lucky," I whispered in his ear.

"You could be too," he said with a meaningful glance at Tom. He smiled cryptically my way and shut us in the hallway.

Was he right? Could I grab Tom's hand right now as we walked toward the elevators and pull him against me? How would he react? Was I ready to start claiming things I cared about in this new life, even things I had botched in the past?

The elevator doors opened, and Tom ushered me in like a gentleman. The inside was paneled with mirrors. I was confronted by hundreds of reflections of Tom's beautiful profile and the distance he carefully kept between his body and mine as the elevator began to descend.

*The only way to learn how to live again is to...live.*

My heart pounding in my ears, I smushed my fists against the buttons in the elevator, stopping our carriage with a jolt.

Tom's cheeks drained of color. Fine. I could be brave for both of us.

"I'm done waiting." My voice caught on the urgency pulsing through my veins.

"But the stairs wouldn't have been be quicker—"

Words were taking too long. I took a flying leap into Tom's arms and locked my ankles around his waist. I panicked as I started to slide down over his hips, but his strong hands caught my bottom and hauled me back up. Ignoring my pride, I wrapped my arms around his neck and found his lips with mine. There they were—soft and warm and strong. I kissed him with every ounce of pent-up longing and regret I'd been feeling since he walked out of my hospital room.

His stubble prickled my lips, and that scent of vanilla and cologne intoxicated me even more. A shudder ran through his entire frame. I traced that delicious curve of his upper lip with my tongue, and he sagged into me.

“I want you,” I murmured against his mouth.

His entire body went rigid against mine. *Wait. He isn't kissing me back.*

I heard a loud ding and the chatter of voices.

I turned to see the elevator doors open wide. Rom-coms had lied. When people hit all the buttons in the movies, it always jammed the elevator. How was I supposed to know it didn't work that way in real life? And when the woman leaps into the man's arms at the end, he's supposed to *kiss her back*.

“Sorry,” a harassed-looking woman waiting in the lobby said. “But I have to get to my apartment to pay the babysitter.”

Tom lowered me gently to the ground, grabbed my arm, and hauled me out of the building.

Outside, he stopped by his car, parked a few feet away. That's right. He was my ride.

I reached for his hand, but he snatched it away as though mine was a live ember. It sank in then, like an anchor drifting to the bottom of the sea—I'd gotten this completely wrong.

I backed up against the passenger door, just like I had when Tom gave me that incendiary first kiss outside the Ukrainian Cultural Center.

This time, though, Tom was glaring at me, hands on his hips. His chest rose and fell rapidly. “What was that?” he demanded finally. “I thought we agreed to stay friends.”

“No, we didn't. *You* decided.”

“But at the hospital—”

“What I said at the hospital...” I trailed off. How could I explain this so he would understand? “Things feel different now. I was disoriented and overwhelmed, but now I realize it's always been more than just friendship with us.”

He took a step back, his eyes flashing with hurt. “This can't happen,” he said, his voice as stony as his expression. “Not like this.”

My mind raced as I tried to decode what he meant. “What do you mean?”

He raked his hand through his Greek-prince hair, making it look even better, as always. “You were right. I was too much. This”—he stabbed the damp air between us with his index finger—“is too much for you right now. I would rather have you as my friend than be your training-wheels boyfriend you’ll discard as soon as you learn to ride your bike again.”

A sharp pain lodged in my heart thanks to the edge to his words. “It’s not like that.” I knew it to be true now, but how could I get Tom to believe me? I was playing for keeps at last, but it struck me I had no idea how.

“You already did it once,” he said, the stricken look in his eyes finally revealing just how much pain I’d inflicted on him. “I’m just finding my heart. I can’t risk it like that—not again.”

“I won’t change my mind,” I protested.

“How can you know that? Everything is so entangled. Your sense of obligation because of the transplant, the pitch happening so soon, this new life you are still trying to figure out... Of course you don’t know what you want. Who could blame you?”

My shoulders fell. I felt deflated, yet Tom’s liver was inside me, keeping me standing and healthy despite the fact I fingers ached to trace the sharp lines of his cheekbones and the blunt planes of his shoulders.

“Jules,” he sighed. “Staying friends is simple. We have nothing to lose as friends. I just... I just can’t be a post-transplant mistake.”

“You could never be a mistake,” I said fiercely. “Never.” There was so much more than that, but I couldn’t find a way to make him understand.

“You can’t know that,” he whispered, facing me now.

I started down at my perfectly worn leather boots. How could I convey to his wounded heart how deep my feelings were for him? “Did you know that in the ancient world,” I said at last, “the heart didn’t have the role it does today?”

He blinked those long, thick lashes. “You’re giving me a lecture on medicine in the ancient world, Sparks? Now?” His words were soaked with disbelief but also a welcome note of amusement.

“I have a point. I promise,” I said, warmed, despite everything, with his use of my nickname.

“In that case, don’t keep me waiting.”

“Don’t be so bossy, Thunder.”

His lips quirked up at that.

“What I was going to say, before I was so rudely interrupted, was the Babylonians used to believe the liver was the seat of life and the soul of the human body. Up until the seventeenth century, livers had the same spiritual significance as the heart does now.”

“Interesting,” he said, but his wrinkled forehead showed confusion.

I took a deep breath. “The way I look at it now is like this—when you gave me part of your liver, you gave me a part of your heart to keep safe. I need you to know I take that seriously.”

His mouth opened slightly, and his whole body leaned toward me like we were magnets. For a split second I thought he was going to press me against the car door and kiss me like he’d done before. My heart pounded so hard the blood rushed in my ears. *Please.*

He leaned away from me again. “We both have PTSD and other things to sort out with therapists,” he said in a gruff voice. “You *did* find a therapist, didn’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. Last week. Did you?”

He nodded. “The safest thing for both of us is to just stay friends. It’s logical.”

Logical or not, it was a very quiet drive home.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The morning of pitch day I woke up and examined my scar in the bathroom mirror before getting dressed.

My fingers traced over the lines of puckered skin, now fading from dark pink to a paler pink that in some spots almost matched my new skin tone. The cells were hard at work in my body, knitting the old and the new together, healing, creating something that wasn't there before. The scar felt incredibly sensitive to touch—not sore exactly, just extremely alive.

It reminded me of the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*, where shattered bowls and other crockery were fixed with seams of gold, highlighting and honoring the broken places. Could I learn to treat myself like that?

I pulled on clothes and shuffled toward the coffee maker in my dozy, precaffeinated state. My glitter globe of the Parthenon was on the kitchen windowsill. I picked it up, savoring the cool, heavy feel of it.

Tom had brought it to the hospital to inspire me to heal and move forward in a straight line to a new life. With his usual decisiveness, he'd assumed recovery was a straightforward matter. I'd made the same mistake. I shook the globe. The glitter whirled around in a thousand different directions.

When it settled, it sprinkled the roof and columns of the Parthenon in a completely new way. Maybe healing was more like this—not an uninterrupted line on a graph but a period of chaos and beauty that never followed a predictable pattern. I didn't need to measure myself against anything or anyone. This was my unique journey.

I flicked the switch on the coffee maker and opened the first of the line of medicine bottles lined up on the kitchen counter. Those would never go away, regardless of how much I honored my scars or

healing. This juxtaposition of the transcendent and the annoying was my new reality.

Tom's refrain of *the safest thing for us is to stay friends* rang in my head. It hadn't stopped pinging around my brain since that night at Tarun's.



I brought coffees for Mac, Annie, and Alan as well as a huge box of locally made doughnuts for everyone.

In the past two weeks everyone at Hubtech had been so crazed with preparations that I'd had no opportunities to talk to Tom or even Alan, for that matter. I dropped in almost every day and helped wherever I could. This meant doing tasks that ranged from ordering tacos for lunch to writing the copy for the new, improved GoodGuides website.

An atmosphere of barely suppressed panic throbbed through Hubtech, punctuated by shrieks of panic and nervous laughter. I brought the goodies into the glass office where my desk was. Mac was standing with Annie and Alan by Alan's desk, consulting his computer. She saw me struggling, trying not to spill the coffees.

"Let me help you!" She trotted over and freed me of the coffees. I set the doughnut box down on my desk.

"I brought sustenance!" I declared, touched by their pale, strained faces.

"Gather around." I stretched my arms out wide. "Group hug. It looks like you guys need it."

Wordlessly, they huddled in and leaned against me, their breaths hot and close. I relished having them in my lives and being able to be here for them this morning, even though GoodGuides was no longer my baby.

"No matter what happens," I whispered, "you guys are going to knock this out of the park. I know it."

"It is weird now competing against Silobase," Annie said. "I mean, they feel far more like friends and colleagues now than competitors."



“And you’re dating Peter,” Mac added, always one to get to the root of the matter.

“That may be so,” Alan said bracingly. “But we’re not competing with them so much as ourselves.” Proud bloomed in my chest. Alan sounded every bit the leader.

“Alan’s right. Eat a doughnut and have some coffee and know I’m with you in spirit the whole time. Good luck.”

“You’re not staying?” Alan broke away so he could get a better look at me.

I shook my head. “You guys got this. I have to go to a Transplant Rogues meeting, but I’ll be here for announcement party in two days.”

“But—” Alan sputtered.

“This is your time to shine,” I said. “I know you’re going to be amazing.”

With a final hug, I slipped out the door to find Tom.



He wasn’t easy to locate.

After a thorough search, I found him alone in one of the private videoconferencing cubicles, also used for phone calls, podcasts, or just grabbing some peace and quiet. Unlike most of the doors in Hubtech, these ones were made of wood, not glass, but they each had a porthole in the middle. The space inside was tiny, with barely enough room for two people, but I could see Tom’s head bent over his laptop screen.

I knocked on the porthole window. Tom almost jumped out of his skin. When he saw me, his Adam’s apple rippled with a swallow. He waved me in.

I slid open the door and into the small space. I shut it behind me to block out the louder-than-usual hum of Hubtech.

*Tom.* The space was filled with him. That smell of crisp cotton and burnished leather made my head spin. I flattened my palms against the door behind me to keep myself from reaching for him.

His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows—it was a day for hard work and concentration day, after all—but I yearned to lean in and *lick* those forearms.

*Down, Jules.* I cleared my throat. He only wanted me as a friend. Besides, it was far too early in this healing journey for either of us to leap into any kind of romantic relationship, even if it wasn't with each other. If only the woozy need filling every cell of my body would listen.

I cleared my throat. "Hi, Tom. I won't bother you for long."

He blinked. "You're not bothering me."

"I just wanted to wish you good luck."

His eyes were dark, impenetrable, and shielded. "Thank you," he said. "But aren't I the enemy today?"

That's right. I hadn't told him about taking a big step back at GoodGuides. I'd leaped on him in an elevator instead. Anyway, Alan's change in position almost felt beside the point. I touched my scar through the raspberry velvet jacket I'd chosen for the day. "You could never be my enemy now, Thunder." My voice caught on the words.

He stood up suddenly. From the doubt in his face, he must have underestimated the space, because it felt like he was everywhere. The air thickened with him, with us, and I was sure he could hear the gallop of my heart. My gaze was at the exact level of his clavicle, where his pulse beat like a drum.

I searched my mind for anything to keep my fingers from undoing the second button on his white shirt, then the one after that, and sliding my palms over the flat planes of his back muscles.

"I see you went with the traditional outfit today," I said, my voice reedy.

He took a gulp of air. "I didn't want to risk making color mistakes with my new clothes."

"That makes sense." It would be no distance at all to lean forward and plaster myself against him like I longed to.

"Is this weird for you today?" he asked, flexing and unflexing his fists. "Going back to these old roles we started with, when everything is so different now?"

I nodded. “Definitely. I want you and Silobase to win, but of course I want Alan and GoodGuides to win too.”

“That’s what I meant, by the way, that last meeting when you stormed out. I said I didn’t consider you or GoodGuides competition for the simple reason you feel like allies. I never had the chance to explain myself.”

Memories flooded back. Of course he didn’t, because after that meeting, we fought and made love. Then I developed sepsis and passed out and went to the hospital and almost died, until Tom donated the right lobe of his liver to me. “Wow, our relationship has not followed any kind of established pattern, has it?” I marveled.

He snorted softly. “It’s not what I’d call cliché, no.”

We stared at each other for what felt like a long time, tethered by an electric connection that, whether anger or gratitude, had coursed through my veins since the first time I’d heard his voice.

“There’s no map for us,” I said, as much to myself as to him.

Tom shook his head. “I don’t think there is, but I don’t regret any of it.”

“Me neither.” I could hear his heart thumping now, and mine fell into the same rhythm. “I want nothing but happiness for you, in whichever form it comes.”

He took a step closer, until we were almost, but not quite, touching, closing that small space between our bodies where the atoms spun faster. “That’s all I want for you too,” he whispered.

He placed his palm flat on the door behind me. *Please kiss me.*

Instead he rubbed the edge of my velvet sleeve between his thumb and forefinger. “This is beautiful,” he said. “Can you tell me what color it is?”

“Deep pinky red, like a raspberry.” My voice came out tattered around the edges.

“I wish I could see it properly,” he said, his voice gruff. “I wish I could see so many things properly.”

I inhaled him deep. Hard and soft. Sweet and tough. I could never get enough. “I think you’re doing better than you give yourself credit for.”

He smiled then, wistful. “I hope so.”

He wasn't going to break his vow. My heart ached as it sank deep. I shook my head. I'd interrupted him long enough. "Right. I'm going to let you get back to it. Go get 'em, Thunder."

"I'll be seeing you in there, right?"

"Actually you won't. Alan and I decided he should take over as CEO and—"

"What?"

"It was time. I'm out of the loop and couldn't answer questions properly. Alan is firmly on his feet. GoodGuides is his future, but I've been thinking recently it may not be mine for much longer." My words came out in a rush.

"What will you do?"

I shrugged. "Figure it out I guess now you've given me the gift of time to do that. I saved a lot of money when I was sick. Besides Hubtech, my loft, and the hospital, I didn't do much else."

He raised an eyebrow. "But your coffee budget?"

I chuckled. "Shut up."

His smile made the breath catch in my throat.

"Are you going to finally travel to Greece?"

"Eventually, I hope."

He sent me a strange, regretful look I couldn't decipher.

"What?"

"There was a time I'd hoped to go to Greece with you myself. That was presumptuous now that I think about it."

I couldn't let him think that. "No! I would have loved it. Actually, I would still love it. You look like you have some Greek in you." I pressed flatter against the door, as I wanted more than anything to run my fingers through his glorious hair to demonstrate my point.

"As a matter of fact, I don't think so. Brian managed to gather a few snippets of information about my biological parents over the years."

"Really? What did he find out?"

"Not a huge amount, but he did learn that my biological mother was Colombian, from a tiny island near Nicaragua named San Andrés. I did some research. The people there are descended from pirates, apparently."

That thick nose bridge, the high cheekbones, the dark, deep-set eyes, the mass of black hair—it made sense. “I can see you with a cutlass and an eye patch.” I nodded. “I can *totally* see it.”

We stared at each other until I remembered I’d intended to leave a few minutes before. “I’m going now.” I slid open the door and stepped out of the tiny room. The air seemed cavernous in the main space of Hubtech, with not nearly enough Tom in it.

“Are you going to stay until afterward?” he called out.

I shook my head. “No, I’m going to the support group now, but I’ll be at Tessa’s party in two days when she announces the winner.”

He nodded, then jerked as if he remembered something. “Do you have enough protein bars?” he asked.

“You brought me enough protein bars to survive Armageddon.” I laughed.

He rubbed his nose. “Yeah, moderation is one of the things I’m working on with my therapist. I don’t do anything halfway.”

It was true. Work. Exercise. Dressing. Love...especially love. Tom was black or white. All or nothing. Maybe I hadn’t been ready before, but now I wanted it all. “You’re perfect just the way you are,” I said. “Good luck.”



I walked into the Transplant Rogues meeting conscious of a palpable sensation of relief. Even though my people were at Hubtech, being there during the pitches just didn’t feel right. I didn’t know exactly where I belonged now, but at least I was learning to trust my gut as to where I didn’t.

Mohammed pressed a cup of coffee into my hand. “Black like your soul.” He grinned, and I gave him a hug. For this next hour, I belonged here.

Harry called us to our seats, where we launched into conversation about the complex nature of healing sparked by my snow-globe moment that morning.

“I am so guilty when I feel jealous or angry or sad or greedy,” Kanoux said. “Before my transplant I was so sure I’d be too big of a person to have any negative emotions afterwards. I’m alive. Surely that’s all that counts, isn’t it?”

Harry shook his head. “Who says being healed means no longer experiencing the full range of human emotions? Our transplants didn’t turn us into gods.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mohammed muttered, and we all laughed.

“A health crisis can make us more human, but I don’t think it can make us less so,” Harry mused. “Humans have all sorts of emotions, so I think we owe it to ourselves to experience those without guilt.”

“But emotions are so messy,” I groaned. “I always believed if I got a transplant, my life would be so neat afterward. So perfect.”

Everyone laughed at such naiveté. We were all learning in our own way that perfection was impossible in post-transplant, just as it was in life.

Harry shrugged. “You know what they say, life doesn’t have to be perfect to be wonderful.”

I let the overwhelming truth of that ricochet through my bones.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I stood in front of the huge window in my loft and watched as a group of four kayakers in bright yellow boats shot underneath the bridge. It was late the next day, and the December sun made pink diamonds sparkle on the water. I wanted to be in one of those kayaks, and I knew they ran lessons from a shack on the dock in front of my building. Maybe in the summer I could give it a try.

What had seemed so impossible on the way home from the hospital now felt doable. Progress had somehow happened without me noticing. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't feel rushed.

The doorbell rang as I stared out, enjoying the pressure of excitement for the future building up in my chest. I knew it was Tom. He'd called earlier and asked me out for dinner although he wouldn't tell me what it was about, despite my questions. My mouth was dry and my stomach flipped as I went to open the door.

I would never tire of finding him on my doorstep. Gorgeous, still learning, fierce Tom. My eyes roved over his dark blue jeans, brown loafers, and royal blue shirt that made his complexion look even more sun-kissed and beautiful than usual, despite it being the middle of winter. *Ah. The pirate in him.*

"You look fantastic." I smoothed down the velvet of my dress. I'd paired it with black tights (it was almost Christmas, after all) and tall suede boots. I'd braided my newly thick and shiny hair like a Viking warrior. A black cashmere coat and scarf completed the look.

"You look perfect." Tom's complexion took on that rusty undertone. He tilted his head toward the elevators. "Shall we?"

"You won't tell me where you're taking me?" I locked up the door.

Tom shook his head with a mischievous curve to his lips. "Secret."

I blew out a breath as we walked to the elevators. "You can be annoying, you know?"

“Oh, I know.”

“So how did the pitch go?” I asked. “Alan called me right after. He seems to think theirs went well.”

“Ours did too,” Tom said. “Peter and I were happy with it.”

We stepped into the elevator. Tingling with the memory of my humiliation last time we’d shared one, I leaned against the opposite wall from Tom. “Tell me more.”

As the elevator dinged at street level, Tom shook his head. “Tonight isn’t about work or the pitch.”

“Then what’s it about?”

“You’ll see.”

At the restaurant, I held my breath as the hostess led us through the maze of tables. I couldn’t figure out why had he chosen this place, which was one of my family’s favorites. I vastly preferred the Ukrainian Cultural Centre.

Only highfliers came to this place. Was that what Tom wanted to be? I knew he felt he needed money and success, but I never dreamed he was angling for social status.

She ushered us to a table where an elderly Black man was already sitting. The pieces snapped into place. I exhaled in relief.

His face was wrinkled in the gracious way of people who smile and laugh often, and he was wearing a red sweater that looked well loved. Propped against the table was a beat-up wooden cane.

Tom’s face softened, losing all its hard angles. “Jules,” he said. “I’d like to introduce you to Brian Meeks.”

Brian, Tom’s beloved foster father, surveyed me with an air of bemusement. Leaning heavily on his cane, he stood up to greet me.

Warmth flooded through me to see the soft glow on Tom’s face and the affection in Brian’s. I could tell immediately Brian was somebody worth knowing. “Can I hug you?” I asked, my eyes filling with tears.

“As if I’d refuse that,” he scoffed. “I may be old, but I’m not stupid.”

I wrapped him in my arms. He smelled of fresh pipe smoke and Tide laundry detergent. “Thank you,” I whispered in his ear.

“For what?” he whispered back.



“I think you played a part in Tom saving my life.”

We sat down, and Brian studied me. His eyes were warm and brown and shrewd. “I think it had much more to do with you. I need to thank *you* for finding my little Thunder for me. I’d begun to lose hope.”

*Little Thunder?* I gave Tom a pointed look.

His cheekbones turned scarlet. “Please don’t make fun of me,” he begged.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Little Thunder.”

“Sit, Jules,” Brian urged. “How are you feeling now?”

“Better every day. I mean, I still have a lot of medical stuff going on—fine-tuning my antirejection medication, baseline exams, all that, but if things go well, they should get more and more spaced out. Thanks to Tom.”

Tom looked between Brian and me with the expression of an indulgent parent admiring their newborn. “It makes me so happy to see you two meet.”

“I needed to find you for him,” I put my hand over Brian’s. His skin was cozily wrinkled, soft and warm under my palm. I gestured at Tom. “To let you know how Tom saved my life. I also wanted to do something good for him, especially—Well, never mind that.”

Tom’s gaze sharpened.

Brian nodded. “I knew no matter how hard life tried, it would never extinguish the kindness in Tom. And from what Tom—it’s still strange calling you that, Thunder—tells me about his life since he left me, it has certainly tried.”

“He deserves so much credit,” I said, meaning every word. Tom had no idea just how extraordinary he was.

“Stop it.” Tom frowned, the tips of his ears crimson. “I’m right here.”

We ignored him.

“He was always so modest,” Brian continued. “Never able to accept a compliment at face value.”

“Brian,” Tom moaned. It was such a delight to see the shadow of his younger self. “Stop! I’m hardly a paragon of virtue. Jules will back me up on that.”

Brian chuckled. “No need to remind me! I’ll always remember how you never came across an injured animal without bringing it home to nurse it back to health, and I can never forget the time you filled my birdbath with gasoline and blew it up in the middle of the road, or the time you almost burned down the apartment building by climbing on the roof and smoking a stolen pack of cigarettes. He was a holy terror,” Brian said.

I was still laughing when the hoity-toity waiter came to give us menus—all in French, of course. I knew this was part of why my family and their ilk loved this spot so much. The snobbery was part of the appeal.

“There aren’t any prices.” Brian stared down at the embossed menu.

“My treat.” Tom smiled over the top of his.

“This seems like an awfully fancy spot,” Brian observed.

Tom bit his lip. I began to suspect he hadn’t thought through his choice of restaurant. Perhaps he chose it to show his appreciation to Brian as well as his success. Maybe Tom wanted to spoil Brian, and maybe even me too. “How did you hear about this place?” I asked him.

“I researched it,” he said. I should have known. “It kept coming out in the top three choices for a special meal in Victoria. Have you been here before?”

If Tom only knew the number of torturous family meals I’d endured in this exact spot. “Yes.” I smiled.

I wanted to suggest we decamp somewhere a little less pretentious, but at the same time I didn’t want to embarrass Tom when he’d clearly thought he was offering us a special treat.

I was trying to figure out how to unobtrusively assist Tom, and perhaps Brian, with the menu—which I knew backward and forward—without embarrassing them when a familiar high-pitched voice behind us made me jump in my chair.

“Juliette! What a coincidence!” There was my mother, dressed in a capped-sleeve Chanel dress despite the cold weather, clutching a black patent leather purse. “Oh, you look so much better,” she cried.

“Mother,” I acknowledged coldly. I hadn’t seen them since before the transplant. I knew Alan had kept them apprised via texts during the most critical moments, but since then they’d been AWOL. It wasn’t my biological family who’d been there for me when it counted. It was the family I’d gathered around myself—Alan, Tarun, Mac, Annie, and of course Tom. I knew without a doubt where my loyalties lay.

“Goodness, what a change. Patrick! You must come over and say hello to your other daughter. “Dominique! François! *Venez!*”

I groaned, not daring to look over and see what Brian thought of all this. Soon the four other Kellys were gathered around our table. I made the requisite introductions, re-introducing them to Tom as not only their brief dinner guest and my coworker at Hubtech but also the man who saved my life.

Dominique batted her eyelashes. “That’s so *romantic*.”

Tom cleared his throat. “Jules and I are just good friends.”

My heart seized as loss echoed through me. I bit the inside of my cheek to try and hide it showing on my face. Brian was watching me. We exchanged glances, and I could tell he was not missing a thing. I gave a tiny, helpless shrug.

“What about work?” my mother asked. “Have you finally gotten out of that start-up thing, Juliette?”

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “I’m taking time to figure out what I want to do next.”

“Why do that?” my father said. “Now that you’re fixed, you can come and work with us at Kellys again, where you belong.”

“Fixed?” I repeated. He couldn’t possibly mean that the way it sounded, could he?

“Yes, I mean, you were sort of damaged goods when you were sick, weren’t you?” My stomach clenched. *He did*. “Now that you’re healthy again, you can pick up right where you left off, be a part of the family legacy—”

I opened my mouth to tell my father precisely where he could shove the precious family legacy, but Tom beat me to it. He leaped up from the table with a clatter of cutlery and china and clutched the

back of his chair, probably to keep himself from punching that smug look off my father's face.

"Jules never needed to be fixed," he said in a low growl. "She was never broken." His eyes flashed with danger. He was formidable. My heart skipped a beat. He was magnificent.

"That's very gallant, to be sure," my mother tittered. "But she was...hmm...non-functional, let's say."

"Wake up!" Tom snapped his fingers in front of them, and rapacious gazes from all over the restaurant locked on our table. "You are so blind. When will you open your eyes and see what's in front of you?" He waved his hand my way.

My father shrugged, and his face turned a florid pink. It was clear he didn't understand what Tom was shouting about.

Tom's knuckles were white from gripping his chair so hard. "Jules is the fiercest fucking warrior I've ever met," he said, his voice vibrating. "If you fail to see that after all this time, then you are truly beyond help."

I tried to remember another time when they'd been stunned to silence, and I couldn't dredge up a single, solitary memory. Tom had achieved the impossible, and he'd done it by fighting for *me*. Goose bumps prickled my arms, and my chest rose and fell with the effort of trying to contain the surge of emotion welling between my ribs.

Brian ended the stalemate by starting to clap slowly. The tables around us joined in, then everyone, it sounded like, in the restaurant. *Fiercest fucking warrior* was murmured from person to person.

Brian, still clapping, turned to Tom and me. "On that note, how about we get out of here? This place was giving me the heebies anyway."

"Hell to the yes," I agreed. I stood up and helped Brian out of his chair, hooked one of his arms in mine, then hooked the other around Tom's. We marched out without so much as a backward glance.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Tom said when we burst out onto the sidewalk.

"Pierogi?" I ventured.

Tom winked. "You read my mind."



We were welcomed warmly at the Ukrainian Cultural Centre. Before we knew it, we'd tucked our legs cozily under one of the card tables in the main room.

As usual, a cluster of men played cards in the corner and a fire crackled in the fireplace. The smell of frying onions wafted from the communal kitchen.

Brian glanced around, soaking it in. "This place is more my speed. Real food. Real people." His shoulders, I noticed, had dropped several inches.

Tom winced. "Sorry about my choice of restaurant. It didn't feel right as soon as we walked in, but when I saw your family, Jules, I knew for sure I'd made a misstep. No insult intended."

"None taken." I shook my head. "I know what they are." Pressure was building behind my eyes as I replayed Tom's words and, even more, the fury and passion behind them. "Thank you for saying what you did." My voice hitched. "It means more than you can know you saw me as...well, not as some broken thing."

"Saw?" Tom raised a brow. "No, Jules, I see you like that. You *are* a fierce fucking warrior, whether you're fighting a rare disease, supporting your best friend, setting your limits with me, or embarking on a completely new life."

Brian's brown gaze moved from Tom to me with a shine of satisfaction.

"That's how I see you too," I managed to say.

How things had changed from my first impression of Tom as an entitled tech bro. I knew now how he'd had to fight to overcome his childhood scars, how he'd had to teach himself this thing called life from a young age, and how he'd still, despite all that, taken a massive risk to save my life. Tom was even more of a warrior on the inside than he looked like on the outside.

"How I wish they let you stay with me," Brian mused. "But I'm so proud of you. Despite what you went through after, it couldn't change

who you are at your core.”

The pierogi came, and we devoured them with enthusiasm. Who knew that big emotions hollowed out huge appetites? It felt so comfortable to have Brian with us, and it definitely cut the tension I felt with Tom when we were alone.

When it was time to pay, both Brian and I pulled out our wallets.

Tom waved his hands. “None of that. My treat, like I said before.”

“But—” Brian said.

Tom picked up the bill and read it. “You two cost me the princely sum of twenty-two dollars and fourteen cents. Somehow I don’t think it’s going to ruin me.” He left us to charm the two women manning the old-fashioned cash register.

As soon as he was gone, Brian angled himself towards me. “Why aren’t you two together?” he demanded. “I’ve been sitting here between you two for the past hour trying to figure it out, but I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Wow,” I said. “Okay. Direct then.” The question was a knife twisting into my heart, but it was obvious that Brian asked it because he cared.

“I told Tom after the transplant I couldn’t commit to a serious relationship right then,” I explained. “I was still in the early stages of healing, both emotionally and physically. I felt completely overwhelmed. Tom, on the other hand, already had our entire future mapped out in his head.”

Brian nodded, a rueful expression on his features. “Young fool. He’s always had a habit of getting ahead of himself, but what’s holding you back now? You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

I didn’t even consider denying it. He’d seen the truth; I was sure of it. “Of course I am.” I tilted my chin toward where Tom was laughing with the women at the cash register, handsome and tall and sincere in his black overcoat, his hair even wavier than usual from the rain. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, all my limbs heavy. “How could I not be?”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

I exhaled. “I tried again recently.” Heat crawled up the back of my neck. “I...er...jumped him in an elevator.”

Brian's mouth became a perfect circle. "Oh."

"It wasn't smooth or elegant, but it was heartfelt," I tried to defend myself.

Brian chuckled. "I don't doubt it. And?"

"Tom made it clear he just wants to stay friends to keep things simple between us. I mean, he has a point. We haven't exactly had a standard love story."

"But it makes no sense. He's crazy about you." Brian frowned as he watched Tom drop a bill into the tip jar. "But I can see how rejection is like a hair trigger for him to defend himself."

I shrugged. "It makes sense, given his childhood."

"But it's hurting him," Brian insisted. "As you've probably discovered, Tom does nothing in half measures. He loves you. That much is clear."

Was it, though? "He's already rejected me once. I have to respect his boundaries."

Brian tsked. "I know that boy. Trust me, he needs you in his life to you *push* his boundaries. He's stuck in a quagmire of his own making."

"He didn't make that quagmire on his own," I said. "I did my part."

"Maybe so, but you can't give up on him. Keep trying."

I watched Tom as he strode toward us, a grin on his face. I wished this new me had a better idea of what I should do.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

My appointment with Dr. Abebe was right before the monumental “decision” party at Hubtech.

When I was called into Dr. Abebe’s familiar office, he was just getting up from his desk. He came toward me with his arms wide open. “You look fantastic,” he said and wrapped me in a bear hug. “Ah! I’ve been dreaming of seeing you healthy like this since you became my patient.”

We stayed like that for a long time. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. How lucky I was to have stumbled into his office that first day and to have someone as dedicated and funny and *human* as him by my side.

“Thank you.” We finally broke apart, and I saw that his eyes were as teary as mine. “You’re truly one of a kind,” I said. “Not only are you an incredible doctor, but there was never a moment I felt like you were treating me as a case, not a human being. I’m so lucky.”

Dr. Abebe shook his head, still taking in the sight of me. “No, I’m the lucky one,” he said. “And to think people don’t believe miracles exist when all they have to do is look at you.”

“I think *you’re* the miracle,” I said.

“You.”

“No you!” I argued, and we started laughing. Before my transplant, I didn’t come out and say the things I felt, worried they would be corny or come off as maudlin. Now I knew life was too short and too uncertain not to.

He waved me to the chair, but instead of going behind his desk, he sat in the other chair beside me. He reached over his desk and grabbed a manila folder. “I know you’ve been following your labs too, so you’ll have seen for yourself they are absolutely pristine.”

I grinned. “I almost can’t believe it, after so long of them being so terrible. I always felt like a naughty student getting a bad report card.”



“And now you’re top of the class,” he quipped.

“Exactly. It’s a head-spinning turnaround. But...” I trailed off, trying to put into the words the lingering unease I still felt.

“What?”

“It’s unsettling somehow, like part of me is waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

He steepled his fingers under his chin. “I think that’s normal, especially after so many years of difficulty. Realistically, as you know, there can be episodes of rejection and other complications, but we’ll deal with those as they come up.”

I nodded.

“Are you going to the Transplant Rogues?”

“Yes,” I said enthusiastically, thinking of Harry and the rest of the gang who just inherently understood my experiences in a way no one else could. “I was so resistant, but it’s even better than you promised.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What about your work?”

“We made my friend Alan the CEO, and I’m slowly phasing myself out. GoodGuides served its purpose for me. I wish Alan and the team nothing but the best, but it just didn’t fit anymore. I’m going to take some time and give myself some space for things to settle.”

He nodded. “You’re not the first of my patients to come out the other side of transplant a changed person. Sometimes old things just don’t work anymore. After all you’ve been through, you understand there is no time to waste putting up with anything that doesn’t feel right.”

I nodded. “Exactly. Everything counts more. I didn’t get the certainty I wanted, but I did get the memo that life is no dress rehearsal.”

“The way I see it, that’s a pretty good trade-off.” Dr. Abebe considered me.

“But I was so sure I would know exactly what to do.” I smiled ruefully. “And I was so completely wrong about that.”

He chuckled. “Transplant isn’t a guarantee of certainty. It never has been and never will be. Life has no guarantees for anyone, sick

or not, when it comes down to it. The problem is the majority of people out there in the world live like their future is guaranteed.”

This made me think of my journey and all the other once-healthy people I’d crossed paths with in the hospital. “You’re right. I know it on a visceral level that I never did before getting sick. I can’t unknow it, even though sometimes I wish I could.”

Dr. Abebe tilted his head. “Do you, though?”

My life post-transplant felt infinitely more fragile and precious and intense than what I had before. I held the knowledge deep in every cell of how there was no time to waste. “I guess not,” I said, surprising prickling through me.

He rubbed a hand over his chin. “I don’t think you’ll ever be able to view the world through your pre-transplant eyes. Now that Tom has given you bonus time, you know how much it counts. Every second of every day has meaning. This too is a gift, Jules, and it can live alongside the trauma you’re trying so bravely to work through. Human beings often try to reduce things to binaries, but the trauma and wisdom you gained can, and I’m sure does, coexist.”

My thoughts, of course, went to Tom. Could love and learning thrive side by side too?

A new sense of peace stole over me like a warm sunshine. “Thank you,” I said. I didn’t *have* to make sense or reconcile the trauma and the joy, the glorious and the annoying. I could just let them be.

“No. Thank *you*,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’ve come to realize my patients—like you—teach me every day that time is infinitely precious. How could that not be a gift?”

I could almost hear a click as the puzzle pieces snapped into place inside me. “I guess that’s the ironic thing about facing death—there’s no better crash course in learning how to live.”

Dr. Abebe’s mouth stretched into a huge smile. “That’s it! That’s exactly it. I suppose now the question is, what do you want from your bonus time?”

*Tom.* That was the only thing I knew for sure amongst all the unknowns.

I stood abruptly. “I have a party at Hubtech I need to be at.” I glanced at the clock above Dr. Abebe’s desk. It was already late. I was probably the last patient of the day. “Do you want to come?” I asked out of the blue.

“Seriously?”

Life was too short for stupid social boundaries between me and this man who had become such a huge part of my life. “Why not? It’s going to be great. Tessa, the director of Hubtech, is making it a true blowout.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “I *would* like to see this place you’ve been talking about for so long.”

“Then, come on,” I said. “I’ll drive, but we have to hurry.” I was ready to start making the most of every second.



I herded Dr. Abebe up the stairs. “You’re so slow!”

“There’s lots to look at!” he protested, his head craning around to take in the atrium space. “This place is amazing.”

“It’s all Tessa.”

The atrium was buzzing with people. I scanned the room for Tom. *He has to be here somewhere.*

Tessa was holding court on the opposite side of the atrium wearing a canary-yellow silk dress. She matched the couches perfectly. Of course she did.

“You have to meet Tessa,” I told Dr. Abebe. “She’s the brilliant mind behind all this.” I wanted to grab a bit of time to talk to Tom alone if I could and if Dr. Abebe was entertained that would be easier. Luckily he caught sight of exactly who I was heading toward and followed eagerly.

“Stunning,” I heard him murmur.

“Tessa!” I pulled up in front of her, and she grabbed me in fierce hug.

“Jules! What’s this I hear about you bowing out of—” She caught sight of Dr. Abebe, and her words dropped off, not something I’d

seen happen with her before.

“I’d like you to introduce you to Dr. Abebe, my transplant hepatologist and the most wonderful doctor in the world.”

“Hush,” he said to me, but his eyes stayed arrested on Tessa’s face. He put out his hand to shake hers, and their eyes locked. They completely forgot me in that instant, and I didn’t mind one bit. *Tom.*

“Please don’t call me Dr. Abebe,” he said to her. “My name is Ajani.”

She cleared her throat. “Tessa,” she said, still holding his hand. “It’s an absolute pleasure to meet you. Thank you for helping Jules, from, well...” She waved a hand around the incredible space, and her wooden bracelets jangled. “All of us.”

I took a few steps back, then a few more. Neither seemed to notice.

I scanned the crowd again and spotted Alan holding Tarun’s hand near Mac, Annie, and Peter on the opposite side of the crowd. I tried to make my way through the hubbub. Maybe they would know where Tom was.

Halfway across, I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder and whipped around. There he was, standing in front of me, looking handsome and unsure and imperious all at once and just so utterly *Tom.*

Behind that formidable chest there was a heart that had been brave and generous enough to give me a second chance at life. I had to talk to him this time, not just tackle him in an elevator and start kissing him. I had to tell him what was in my heart. If he didn’t feel the same... Well, I would figure out what to do then, but I had no time to waste. “Tom,” I said, my voice catching on his name.

“I was looking for you.” He enclosed my palm in his, and our fingers meshed together seamlessly. His grasp felt big and warm and right. “We need to talk.” His eyes transmitted the same urgency and desperation that churned within me.

“Yes,” I said. “We do. I have something to say—”

“Quiet please!” Tessa’s voice boomed over the noise of the crowd. “I have a very important announcement to make.”

Everyone shushed except me. I sighed heavily. I knew Tom had to be here for this, but impatience drummed through my veins.

“First of all,” she began, “I just want to say I could not be happier with this year’s subsidized start-ups, GoodGuides and Silobase. From the very start, I felt these companies were complementary, even though they didn’t know it yet.”

Laughter rumbled through the room. It was true. At the beginning Silobase and GoodGuides seemed like complete opposites, just in the way I felt with Tom. Now everything had been turned on its head. I made a little circle on Tom’s palm with my thumb. His eyes flared with such heat that my knees shook. *Had he changed his mind?*

“I’m happy to say both companies have learned the errors of their ways,” Tessa continued. “From this investor round, I could see very clearly the profound influence they had on each other and how much that has benefitted and accelerated both companies’ evolution.”

“Who won?” somebody from Silobase shouted from the back.

Tessa wagged a finger at the offender. Dr. Abebe was standing a few steps to her right, and from what I could see, he could not take his eyes off her.

Alan moved over to the other side of me and grabbed my hand as Tarun held on to his other one. With Tom holding my other hand, the four of us formed a human chain, far more interconnected than separate.

“Both pitches reflected this,” Tessa said. “Let me tell you that in theory, there wasn’t a loser—only winners.”

Silence fell over the room. The air felt heavier, weighed with anticipation. For me it wasn’t just for the winner of this pitch; it was far more for that hunger in Tom’s eyes. My heart skipped a beat.

Tom caressed my hand with his thumb just like I’d done to him. I shivered from head to toe, wanting to leap on him right then and there, just like I’d done in the elevator, to hell with the consequences. *No, Jules. Use your words this time.*

“But the angel investor did have to choose one, and she did.”

*She?* The angel investor was a woman?

“The winner is GoodGuides,” Tessa announced, and her eyes met mine. “Congratulations to Alan and his wonderful team as well

as Jules for her vision, of course.”

Alan seized me, knocking the breath out of me, and smacked a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!” He jumped up and down. I wanted to celebrate with him, but... My heart broke for Tom at the same time. All his hard work...

I was hugging Alan back when I felt Tom’s hand slip from mine. *No!*

Cheers erupted, but Tessa made another shushing gesture, and they dropped. Tom had moved a few feet away from me, beside Peter. “Last but not least,” she said, “I would encourage Tom and Alan and their teams to seriously consider the benefits of continuing to work together. There is an untapped well of possibilities here, and they demand to be explored. Now, enjoy this fabulous party!”

People were whooping around me. Mac and Annie came to hug me, and by the time I turned around to find Tom, he was shepherding the crestfallen Silobase employees into the office with Peter.

Brian came up to me then. I hadn’t realized he was here. “Congratulations are in order, I believe?”

“Brian!” I gave him a hug. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I stayed on an extra day,” he said, his eyes following where Tom disappeared out of sight.

I frowned in Tom’s direction. “I’m thrilled for Alan and GoodGuides, of course,” I said. “But I’m worried about Tom.” It was more than that of course. The hope that had leapt in me when he took my hand was now dangling, sickeningly suspended in every thud of my heart.

Brian peered at me. “Will you be here for him?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Brian traced the hooked top of his cane. “Then I think our Thunder will bounce back. Knowing him, he’ll be trying to make his team feel better. He feels a lot of responsibility for them. I don’t know if you noticed, but there were a lot of disappointed faces.”

“I noticed,” I said grimly.

“I’ll stay here for him,” he said. “But I think it’s you he really needs to see.” He tapped his cane on the wooden floor. “Come to think of it.

I might as well get a nice glass of champagne while I wait.”

“I’ll wait for Tom,” I said.

“I know you will.” With that, Brian wandered off in the direction of the champagne bar, where I could see Dr. Abebe and Tessa deep in conversation.

I lingered by the doors to the shared GoodGuides and Silobase office space, right near the virtual meeting cubicles where I’d wished Tom good luck two days before.

I watched Tom and Peter give their team a pep talk. Slowly, the more Tom and Peter talked, the team members’ expressions started brightening incrementally, like the sky after sunrise.

Finally they started filing out one by one. I watched, tapping my foot as Peter left and Tom typed something on his computer and hit a few buttons. Eventually he opened the door and came into the main space again.

He scrubbed his face with his hands, not spotting me right away. When he did, he stopped in his tracks.

The intensity of his gaze made me freeze. A chill ran up my spine, quickly replaced by a gush of desire. *No time to waste, but this time use your words, Jules.*

In one fluid movement, Tom stalked toward me, took my arm, and dragged me into one of the cubicles. He shut us in with a bang and slid the lock closed. The broad white cotton over his shoulder blades completely blocked the porthole window.

“I’m so sorry!” I cried, dizzy with his proximity. I reached my hands to cradle his bristly jaw. The vanilla scent of his laundry soap and the oiled leather of his cologne and his ragged breaths made me want to throw myself against his solid chest. *Words, Jules. Words.* “I’m happy for Alan, but you deserved it too. What can I do?” I begged.

“Console me.” His voice came out scratchy, full of need.

*Gladly.* I tilted his precious face down to mine. “I need to tell you something.”

“Well, I need to kiss you,” he countered.

“No. I have to talk first this time.”

He exhaled, impatient. “Fine, but make it quick.”

I took a deep breath. “I love you so much, Tom. I want you no matter how you come to me. So what if we’re both imperfect and healing? I want to be messy with you and make so many mistakes with you, then try to fix them or at least laugh about them after. I realize now how precious my minutes are—minutes *you* gave me. I know I have so much to figure out, and so do you, but I don’t know if I can waste many more of them not kissing you.”

“Then don’t,” he said in a whisper, not moving from the door. His aged-leather cologne filled every one of my senses.

It was a challenge, just like the ones we’d relentlessly issued after we first met.

“I won’t.” I went up on tiptoe. *Of all the days to wear flats.* “Are you ready for me, Thunder Días?”

“Of course I’m not, but I’m sure as hell not going to let that stop me anymore.”

I dragged his head down so his lips met mine. The first touch of the velvet softness of his mouth amid the bristle of his midday beard drew a full-body exhale out of me. *This.* Maybe life didn’t offer much certainty, but for once I knew I was exactly where I needed to be.

He hauled me against him and then up, his strong, wide hands cradling my bottom as I wrapped my arms around his neck to kiss him more deeply. Tom teased my lips with his tongue. Every atom of my body was on fire. Surely we couldn’t... Not here, with the party on the other side of the door.

“Not here,” I gasped.

He swore under his breath. “You’re right. Even if we haven’t had a normal relationship, maybe we should draw the limit at public exposure.”

“Yeah.” I groaned. “And I was planning on doing more talking too.”

“You were?”

“Yes.”

“I realized something,” he said suddenly, still holding me tight against him, our breathing fast and ragged.

“So have I.”



We both started babbling at once. “Okay, you first,” I conceded, curiosity and nerves roiling through me.

“You know the other night, when I said you were a fucking warrior?”

“God, yes. I loved you for that.” I kissed him again, quick though so we didn’t get carried away before we finished emptying our hearts to each other.

“Well, that, and a few conversations I had with Brian, got me thinking.”

“Oh?”

He nodded, tightening his arms around me. “The truth is I never wanted us to be friends, but I thought that’s what you needed. After you rejected me that first time, I fell back into protecting myself, like I’d always done. I never stopped wanting you, though.”

I shook my head, my hair flying wild around my face. “Me neither.”

“I realized I needed to be a fucking warrior too. I need to be as brave as you are, but it’s harder for me with my heart than the rest of my internal organs, apparently.”

“The Babylonians would have said that’s actually your liver.”

“Hit pause on your Babylonians, and let me finish, Sparks,” he said in a mockingly stern way that I adored.

“Yes, Thunder.”

“I have to learn to not always let that old need to protect myself get in the way, but I’ll probably make mistakes. Lots of them. This work is hard. Really hard, but good hard, you know?”

I nodded. I was just beginning to understand the concept of “good hard” and all the things that were worth pushing through to get to a more whole-hearted, more meaningful life. “Do you know what I realized?”

The room seemed heavy with mutual urgency. “What?”

“That I really, really want to do those difficult things with you by my side, and me by yours.”

He kissed me then with every ounce of built-up longing and passion that I echoed back at him with every particle of my being. “I want that too,” he said. “More than anything.”

“More than pierogi?”

“Even more than pierogi.”

Joy exploded in me, so much I couldn't believe it wasn't shining out of my eyes and ears like sunshine. “Wow.”

His eyes danced. “My pants are feeling tight. That's how much better you are than pierogi.”

Our words had been fantastic, but the thought of Tom's snug pants made me remember just how much more of him I needed. “Really?”

“What did you expect? It's you.”

I let out an incoherent sound.

“I need to get you to your loft and in that big, soft bed of yours,” he growled. “There's not enough time to do everything I want to do with you.”

My knees liquified again at the thought of it. “I need that too.”

In record time, we were rushing out of the cubicle and across the atrium hand in hand. Tom screeched to a halt in front of Brian, who was chatting with Peter and Annie.

“Brian,” Tom said, trying but failing to catch his breath. “Would you mind if I ducked out with Jules?”

Peter and Annie stared at us with wide eyes, but Brian's impish gaze went Tom to me, then back to Tom. His warm face broke out in a grin. “If you don't, then I really have taught you nothing.”

With a chuckle he waved us away. Tom, still holding on to my hand, whisked me down the stairs and out the door.

“Wait! I drove Dr. Abebe here!” I remembered belatedly.

Tom stuffed me in the passenger seat. “The way he and Tessa were looking at each other, I think you'll be doing him a favor by leaving him stranded.”

I laughed as Tom sped through the rainy streets lit up for Christmas with tiny white lights.

He screeched to a halt in front of my building and pulled the parking brake.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I lurched over the gearshift and kissed him, unable to waste one more second without our lips touching.

Once I did, there was no breaking us apart. He dragged me roughly over the gearshift and half onto his lap. His tongue danced with mine, tasting like everything I ever wanted, filling me with heat and life and *Tom*.

Suddenly his horn started honking. I glanced down, having a hard time catching my breath. “Shit, I think that was my hip.”

“I need to get you upstairs,” he said, wearing that expression of single-minded determination that had annoyed me so much when we first met. Now it made me melt everywhere.

I would never know how much time I had—nobody could—but now I understood the magic and privilege of every second. Not a moment with Tom was a moment wasted.

He half carried, half dragged me into the elevator. I pressed him against the wall, and he held me firm against him with his mouth hot against mine. When the elevator dinged, I fished my key out of my pocket, and he swooped me up in his arms and carried me to the door. Once inside, he transported me into my bedroom.

Self-consciousness pricked at me as he set me on the bed. “My body looks different,” I warned him.

“I want you any way you come to me,” he said, tipping me to the side to shuck off my coat.

“The scars—”

“Don’t forget, I have the matching ones,” he said. “That time you ran your finger over mine... I swear, I thought I was going to die on the spot. Our scars are the most badass thing ever, Sparks.”

“I think mine is more impressive than yours,” I said as he pulled off my boots.

He peeled off his coat. “Let’s see, shall we?”

I scuttled to the edge of the bed, where I undid his buttons with shaking fingers and plunged my palms under his shirt, skirting the smooth, warm muscles that felt even better than I remembered.

He dragged my dress over my head, leaving me in only my bra, underwear, and tights. He made quick work of the tights.

With soft, light kisses, I traced the deep purple line of his scar, shaped like a hockey stick, all the way down, then followed its curve. Tom's formidable body trembled under my hands. "This scar is my favorite thing," I murmured against his warm, delicious skin.

He arched his head back and sucked in air between his teeth with a hiss.

"Enough torturing, Sparks," he huffed and pushed me backward.

He crawled over and kissed against the bed, then down to my scar.

Mine was bigger than his—it started between my breasts and went down to my mid-torso, then branched off on both sides, the right side wrapping right around my flank. It was also, I was fast discovering as I squirmed under the butterfly wings of his lips, even more sensitive than I'd thought.

"What do you think will happen if our scars touch?" I gasped, the need to feel Tom moving inside me becoming unbearable to resist.

"I think this whole bed—no, wait...your whole *apartment* might burst into flames," he growled.

I busied myself with his zipper, then slid his pants down his hips, clumsily using my feet to help. His boxers were stretched with his erection, as impressive as I'd remembered. I pushed them down with my feet and took him in my hand.

He muttered something inarticulate against my ear. His hot breath had my hips rising already to get closer to him.

"I need more." I arched beneath him. "I need all of you."

"Greedy," he huffed but plunged into me. Goose bumps rose under my palms as I gripped him tight against me. "But I'm greedier."

"Let's make so many mistakes together," I groaned as he thrust all his energy and perfect imperfection into me.

He dropped a kiss on my lips, then reared above me with a sound ripped out from his very soul. "I can't wait."

## EPILOGUE

### *One year later*

I stared at myself in the mirror of the Hubtech bathroom. My thick, wavy hair had stuck around, so maybe there was something to the theory that we took on traits of our donors.

My skin was back to its Irish paleness and the whites of my eyes had completely lost any tinge of yellow. I'd put on weight, and besides the odd migraine brought on by my new medication regimen, I felt healthy and full of energy.

Most importantly, I felt loved.

There was a knock at the door. "Everything okay in there, Sparks?" Tom asked.

Things were more than okay, considering we were at a party at Hubtech celebrating my and Tom's one-year liversary and GoodGuides going public.

Even better, Tom and I had made quick, messy, glorious love on our pink velvet couch before leaving to come here. My loft, and my beloved couch, had become ours when he moved in six months ago.

"All good," I called back. "I'll be out in a second."

Tom was probably a little more concerned than usual as I'd just dealt with a second episode of rejection a few weeks before. As Dr. Abebe had predicted, nothing was certain in life or in Transplantland. There were always bumps on the road, but thanks to Tom's unwavering support, Dr. Abebe's skill, and a few medication adjustments, my liver numbers were solidly back on track.

The first time it happened, Tom got incredibly stressed, and all those old abandonment fears came rushing back at the exact same time my medical PTSD surfaced like an angry bear. Thanks to lots of talking and doubling down on our biweekly therapy sessions, not just with the Transplant Rogues but with our own personal therapists, we'd managed to survive the tsunami.

Luckily, a few months into our coupledness, we'd made a pact that seeing as we couldn't emotionally fix each other, we wouldn't try. Instead we agreed to work through our baggage with our therapists while loving each other as hard as we could.

I opened the door. Tom leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets, surveying the buzzing crowd. His eyes sparkled when he saw me emerge.

"Hey." He opened his arms wide. "All good?"

I nodded and gratefully walked into them, relishing the strong circle of warmth as he wrapped them around me. He rested his chin on the top of my head like he often did. *Home*.

"I'm still thinking about what happened on the pink couch before we came here," I murmured against his chest.

I felt the rumble as he laughed. He dropped a kiss on the crown of my head. "So am I. Can we do it again when we get home?"

I tilted my head up at him. "I'm counting on it."

Somebody behind me put a hand on my back. I whipped around to find Alan and Tarun grinning at us.

The four of us had become so comfortable with one another that our unit felt more like family than the family I was born into. We did Sunday brunches and weekend trips to the Gulf Islands and even Tuesday night music bingo at our favorite pub.

"This is the exact spot you two first met, isn't it?" Alan asked us, mischief in his eyes.

He was right. It was.

Tom groaned, a noise that even now made me think of all the things I'd like to do with his golden, naked body. "You hated me so much, Jules."

"Deservedly so, with the way you were talking. Luckily things, and people, change."

Even with the transplant behind us, life was still the crazy roller-coaster Dr. Abebe had told me about before I was rolled into the OR. Instead of trying to control it or ask a certainty of it that it could never provide, I now tried to content myself with just hanging on and enjoying the ride.

“As Jules takes endless pleasure from pointing out,” Tom admitted, “I was indeed acting like an asshat.”

“Correct,” I said. “But you kinda made up for it, you know?”

“Stop,” Tom said, the tips of his ears turning pink.

We all chuckled, as the enormity of Tom’s gift and my inability to make things even had become a shared joke between us four. It was all so ridiculous—so very Tom to do something that heroic and try to shrug it off like it was no big deal.

“Nervous?” Tom asked Alan—a blatant attempt, I knew, to steer the conversation away from himself.

“A bit. You?”

“Probably about the same, but no matter how it shakes out, I feel like we did an incredible job,” Tom said, that old confidence about work still intact.

After the investment win, Tom and Alan had started to seriously talk about Tessa’s suggestion of further collaboration. The talks went so well that three months after that night, Silobase merged with GoodGuides. Tom became the COO under Alan.

Tarun and I had joined forces to try to curb the work talk between the two of them whenever the four of us did something social. So far we had about a fifty/fifty success rate.

Peter and the rest of the Silobase employees had seemed delighted with the turn of events. They were working in a now incredibly well-funded start-up with a fun culture and two extremely different and complementary leaders. Peter headed up the database division, and he and Annie managed to remain civil—most days, anyway, even though they’d had a bad break-up a couple of months after Tom and I got together.

Besides that, the collaboration had gone so well the company was going public in a few days.

“You guys should be proud of yourselves,” I said. “No matter what.”

I was proud of myself too. I had started volunteering at the transplant clinic at the hospital, focusing on patient care and making sure patients had an advocate when things got lost in communication or, in the case of referrals and prescriptions, just

plain lost. That, plus some boosts from Dr. Abebe, had helped me get a newly created (and paid!) position as the patient care coordinator there. I didn't know if it would be a long-term career, but for right now it fit. I got to see Stewart and Dr. Abebe often, and I hoped I made the transplant patients feel like they had someone who understood in their corner.

Mac came toward us, grabbing my hand and Tom's. "C'mon," she said. "I designed a special cake for you guys. Come see."

"What? Did you know about this?" I looked at Tom, but he was biting his lip and fiddling with something in his pants pocket. What was up? *Wait... Was he about to...* "Tom?" I said, my voice weirdly high pitched.

He shook his head. "No, I didn't know."

I narrowed my eyes in question. "What's going on?"

He just smiled. "Nothing. Let's eat cake."



We lay on the couch catching our breath with half our clothes on and the other half scattered around the floor or the back of the couch. Tom had made good on his promise to repeat that morning's pink couch interlude, and then some.

"Wow." I was trying to catch my breath. "Thunder is as Thunder does."

Tom had been playing with my fingers but now bent his head and bit one. "Takes one to know one."

He reached behind him to his black pants, which he still wore on important days. The black-and-white outfit was more for nostalgia's sake than anything else, because he had me now as his wardrobe consultant. Sadly, so far he'd resisted my attempts to get him into any kind of brighter colors or tie-dye. So many things were a work in progress.

He dug around in his pant pocket. When he turned back to me, his hand was shaking. I looked down at his fingers, where he held a black velvet box.



I sat up like a spring, my heart in my throat. Tom slid off the couch to his knees.

“Is that...?” I stared at the black box, wide eyed. “For a moment at the party, just before the cake, I’d thought—”

“I was going to do it then,” he admitted. He sucked in a deep breath. “But then at the last moment it felt too expected. I mean, when have we ever done anything in the traditional way?”

“Never,” I whispered, blinking. Was this really happening?

“It felt this needed to be between you and me. No pressure. No audience. Just us.”

I nodded, my eyes filling with tears and emotion so big in my chest that my ribs felt like they were being pushed apart.

At the liversary party in front of our friends would have been the traditional, tidy way to propose, but somehow here at home on couch, half-dressed and sweaty from lovemaking, felt so much more *us*. Messy, imperfect, works-in-progress us.

He swallowing. “I have no idea if I’m doing this right. I’m so afraid of screwing it up.”

Love for him surged through me, and I caught his hand holding the box in mine. “It’s me, Tom. We’re allowed mistakes, remember? You can’t screw this up.”

He took a deep breath and straightened his spine. “Jules Kelly. My Sparks. Can I be your happy ending? Will you marry me, and we can continue this adventure as husband and wife?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice shaking. “I want to spend as many more minutes with you as I can.”

He exhaled in relief. He flicked open the box and stared down at the ring inside, his forehead pleating in consternation. His gaze flew to mine, troubled. “I don’t know how this is supposed to go. Do I put it on your finger, or do you? I’m sorry, I—”

I laughed. “This is brand new for me too. Believe it or not, this is the first time I’ve been proposed to. Let’s just do this our own way, like everything else. Put it on me, and let’s see if it fits.”

He slid out a beautiful vintage-looking filagree ring. In the center was a diamond flanked by two pink stones the exact color of our couch.

“The couch...” I began.

“I know.” He grinned, his voice hitching. “It’s a fluke, or maybe it’s meant to be, depending on how you look at it. They’re pink topaz. Brian gave me this ring when I told him I wanted to propose. It was his wife’s, and he’d been keeping it for me ever since he met you.”

A sob escaped me then. Brian still lived in Vancouver, but we saw him at least once or twice a month; either we took the ferry over to the Mainland or he came here to the island to stay. In many ways he became a father figure for me too. “I love it,” I cried. “We need to tell him I love it!”

“He’s coming over tomorrow.” Tom grinned, his shoulders dropping. “You can tell him yourself.”

“I will. I love you, more and more each day.”

Our lips met for a long time after that. When he finally pulled away, he had a heady combination of relief and mischief in his molten eyes. “For the record, let it be noted I was right when we first met.”

“About what?” I scoffed.

“You *were* a distraction.”

“Hmph,” I answered. “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“I meant a distraction of the best possible kind.”

“I guess that’s acceptable, then,” I said mock grudgingly, admiring the sparkle of the ring on my finger in the lights from our Christmas tree. “Now that I think about it, I’m not such a fan of happy endings anymore. I don’t think we should aim for that.”

He blanched. “What do you mean?”

“They’re too tidy—too neat and unattainable.”

When Tom laughed, I felt it vibrate through the warmth of his glorious chest. “In other words, not us?”

“Exactly, and not *life* either.”

“What should we aim for, then?”

I kissed that spot on his neck that always made his toes twitch, and he groaned. “How about we collect perfect moments?”

He tightened his arms around me. “I like that. Life doesn’t have to be perfect to collect perfect moments.”

Life wasn't perfect, and Tom and I certainly weren't, but perfect moments were everywhere, like Tom slipping the engagement ring on my finger with trembling fingers.

They were in the way Alan and Tarun looked at each other with such love. They were in the moment Tom and I hit the buy button together for our plane tickets for Greece and Columbia, a whole new horizon of travel opening out in front of us. Most of all, they were in that memory of seeing Tom lying on the stretcher beside me before our transplant and realizing what he was about to do for me.

He not only gave me the gift of time to experience more perfect moments but filled my heart every day with a love that created them.

"Let's negotiate it over pierogi," he suggested.

A perfect example. "Just when I thought you couldn't get any better, you prove me wrong."

"I know any moment involving pierogi is a good one for us," he murmured, kissing me gently. "And seeing as we're building a collection...".

"Keep them coming," I breathed against his ear.

## THE BONUS EPILOGUE

Would you like to read the bonus epilogue for Unlikely Match featuring Tom and Jules embarking on their post-transplant trip?

Just go [here](#) to get yours!

## THE GRAPEVINE

Interested in receiving Laura's updates, sneak peeks at her new work, bonuses, as well as exclusive contests and giveaways, insider news, plus countless other goodies? Just go [here](#).

## *Thank You*

I have many people to thank for *Unlikely Match*, as I do for all my books. First of all, a massive thank you to all my readers who have been with me through it all (including several trans-Atlantic moves and my liver transplant!). I couldn't and wouldn't do this without you.

As always, *Unlikely Match* was an international effort. Thank you to Jolene Perry in the US for her amazing developmental editing. Sally Glover is back to freelances and did an amazing copy edit. Enni Amanda in New Zealand (and now Finland!) at Yummy Book Covers created the perfect transplant romance book cover and interior design.

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I could not have gotten through my PSC journey without the support and help from my PSC family who I found through PSC Partners Seeking a Cure (if you have PSC, that should be your first stop!).

Thank you for the transplant teams in Calgary and Edmonton for being so pro-active and saving my life. To my PSC doctor in Calgary, my transplant surgeons in Edmonton, and everyone working on unit 3G2 at the University of Alberta hospital—you are miracle workers.

I couldn't have done any of this without my squad of girlfriends who always commiserate with my challenges and cheer for my triumphs. You make life a gazillion times more fun, fascinating, and filled with laughter. Special thanks to Lara and Helen who flew from London and California to be by my side when I woke up with my new liver.

As always, thanks to my husband and my daughters for giving me the best reason of all to fight and continue fighting. Thanks for Pepper, our rescue dog, for keeping me company on the couch and being my writing muse (she's snoring beside me as I wrote this).

Special shout-out to my Grapeviners who have become friends as well as readers. I love you guys.

Lastly, please sign up to be an organ donor, and support opt-out organ donation systems where you live.

## *About Laura*



Laura Bradbury is the author of the bestselling Grape Series, the award-winning cookbook *Bisous and Brioche*, the romcom *Oxford Wild*, and the Winemakers Series of Contemporary Romance novels.

She started pursuing her lifelong dream of writing the day after she was diagnosed with PSC when she realized that the fear of dying with her words still left inside her far eclipsed her fear of failure. Besides a living donor transplant, Laura did a law degree at Oxford, married a Frenchman, and ran off to France after graduation so she would have something to write about. Sign up for her [beloved monthly Grapevine](#) or find her on IG at [laurabradburywriter](#) or on her website at [www.laurabradbury.com](http://www.laurabradbury.com).



## *Author's Note*

Unlikely Match plumbed my personal experience of living with PSC and my journey towards a living donor liver transplant in 2017. It is deeply personal, but at the same time not at all my story.

Jules's family was a combination of what some of my PSC friends had to deal with, plus a solid dose of imagination. The Kellys are definitely *not* at all modeled on my family, thank goodness.

This story is really for all of us who have experienced an acute health crisis. It is hard to explain the mind shift that happens and just how isolating and disorienting it can feel. I wanted to try to do my version of representing us in romance and commercial fiction.

I adored Jules and Tom, and their fiery, opposites-attract dynamic. I think they taught each other about life and about themselves, which really is the heart of romance (besides sex and fun, obvs!).

Hubtech is based on a real place in Victoria, Canada. This amazing co-working spot is called Kwench Club and was created by my friend Tessa. My friend Sarah was the designer and brainchild of the amazing atrium area. I spent many days in this dynamic co-working space (with the gorgeous yellow couches) writing Unlikely Match.

I started writing about the pierogi in Unlikely Match well before Russia invaded Ukraine, but I just want to say the heroism and tenacity of the Ukrainian people is awe-inspiring. I sincerely hope they can be left in peace.

This is the first ever book I've set in my hometown of Victoria. However, it is definitely fictionalized as Victoria is not big enough to have a transplant clinic. I actually had to go to Edmonton, Alberta for mine (one province over).

PSC is a strange and poorly researched orphan disease, and I cannot commend enough the work that PSC Partners Seeking a Cure does in support, research funding and grants, and just general

lobbying and awareness. A cure is out there. We just need help and funding to find it.

What I said about PSC being a beast of a disease is true, but keep in mind that, like most auto-immune diseases, it affects every person differently. Everyone is on their unique path. My PSC family are the are badass group of people I've ever had the privilege to come across. I adore and appreciate them.

Please sign up to be an organ donor, and support opt-out systems wherever you live. This simple legislative change could eliminate waiting lists in one stroke.

## FIND LAURA ONLINE

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