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It Starts with Us

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Chapter One

Atlas

The way *ass whole* is misspelled in red spray paint across the back door of Bib's makes me think of my mother.

She would always insert a brief pause between syllables, making it sound like two separate words. I wanted to laugh every time I heard it, but it was hard to find the humor in it as a child when I was always the recipient of the hurled insult.

"Ass . . . whole," Darin mutters. "Had to be a kid. Most adults know how to spell that word."

"You'd be surprised." I touch the paint, but it doesn't stick to my fingers. Whoever did this must have done it right after we closed last night.

"Do you think the misspelling was intentional?" he asks. "Are they suggesting you're so much of an asshole that you're a whole *entire* ass?"

"Why do you assume they were targeting *me*? They could have been targeting you or Brad."

"It's your restaurant." Darin takes off his jacket and uses it to pry a large shard of exposed broken glass out of the window. "Maybe it was a disgruntled employee."

"Do I have disgruntled employees?" I can't think of a single person on payroll who would do something like this.

The last person I'd had quit was five months ago, and she left on good terms after getting a college degree.

"There was that guy who did the dishes before you hired Brad. What was his name? He was named after some kind of mineral or something—it was super weird."

"Quartz," I say. "It was a nickname." I haven't thought about that guy in so long. I doubt he's holding a grudge against me after all this time. I fired him right after we opened because I found out he wasn't washing the dishes unless he could actually see food on them. Glasses, plates, silverware—anything that came back to the kitchen from a table looking fairly clean, he'd just put it straight on the drying rack.

If I wouldn't have fired him, he would have gotten us shut down by the health department.

"You should call the police," Darin says. "We'll have to file a report for insurance."

Before I object, Brad appears at the back door, his shoes crunching the broken glass beneath his feet. Brad has been inside taking inventory in order to see if anything was stolen.

He scratches the stubble on his jaw. "They took the croutons."

There's a confused pause.

"Did you say 'croutons'?" Darin asks.

"Yeah. They took the whole thing of croutons that were prepared last night. Nothing else seems to be missing, though."

That wasn't at all what I was expecting him to say. If someone broke into a restaurant and didn't take appliances or anything else of value, they probably broke in because

they were hungry. I know that kind of desperation firsthand. "I'm not reporting this."

Darin turns to me. "Why not?"

"They might catch whoever did it."

"That's the point."

I grab an empty box out of the dumpster and start picking up shards of glass. "I broke into a restaurant once. Stole a turkey sandwich."

Brad and Darin are both staring at me now. "Were you drunk?" Darin asks.

"No. I was hungry. I don't want anyone arrested for stealing croutons."

"Okay, but maybe food was only the beginning. What if they come back for appliances next time?" Darin says. "Is the security camera still broken?"

He's been on me to get that repaired for months now. "I've been busy."

Darin takes the box of glass from me and starts to pick up the remaining pieces. "You should go work on that before they come back. Heck, they might even try to hit up Corrigan's tonight since Bib's was such an easy target."

"Corrigan's has working security. And I doubt whoever it was will vandalize my new restaurant. It was a matter of convenience, not a targeted break-in."

"You *hope*," Darin says.

I open my mouth to respond, but I'm interrupted by an incoming text message. I don't think I've ever reached for my phone faster. When I see the text isn't from Lily, I deflate a little.

I ran into her this morning while I was running errands.

It was the first time we've seen each other in a year and a half, but she was late for work and I had just received the text from Darin informing me we had a break-in. We parted somewhat awkwardly on the promise that she would text me once she got to work.

It's been an hour and a half since then, and I still haven't heard from her. An hour and a half is nothing, but I can't ignore the nagging in my chest that's trying to convince me she's having doubts about everything that was said between us in that five-minute exchange on the sidewalk.

I'm definitely not having doubts about what *I* said. I might have gotten caught up in the moment—in seeing how happy she looked and finding out she's no longer married. But I meant every word I said to her.

I'm ready for this. *More* than ready.

I pull up her contact info in my phone. I've wanted to text her so many times over the last year and a half, but the last time I spoke to her, I left the ball in her court. She had so much going on, I didn't want to complicate her life even more.

She's single now, though, and she made it sound like she was finally ready to give whatever could be between us a chance. However, she's had an hour and a half to think about our conversation, and an hour and a half is plenty of time to form regrets. Every minute that passes without a text is going to feel like a whole damn day.

She's still listed as Lily Kincaid in my phone, so I edit her contact info and change her last name back to Bloom.

I feel Darin hovering, looking over my shoulder at my phone screen. "Is that *our* Lily?"

Brad perks up. "He's texting Lily?"

"*Our Lily*?" I ask, confused. "You guys met her once."

"Is she still married?" Darin asks.

I shake my head.

"Good for her," he says. "She was pregnant, right? What did she end up having? A boy or a girl?"

I don't want to discuss Lily because there's nothing to discuss yet. I don't want to make it more than what it might be. "A girl, and that's the last question I'm answering." I focus on Brad. "Theo coming in today?"

"It's Thursday. He'll be here."

I head inside the restaurant. If I'm going to discuss Lily with anyone, it'll be Theo.

Chapter Two

Lily

My hands are still shaking, even though it's been almost two hours since I ran into Atlas. I can't tell if I'm shaking because I'm flustered or because I've been too busy to eat since I walked in the door. I've barely had five seconds of peace to process what happened this morning, much less eat the breakfast I brought with me.

Did that actually just happen? Did I really ask Atlas a series of questions so awkward, I'll be mortified well into next year?

He didn't seem awkward, though. He seemed very happy to see me, and then when he hugged me, it felt like a part of me that had been dormant suddenly sprang to life.

But this is the first moment I've had to even take a bathroom break, and after looking at myself in the mirror just now, I kind of want to cry. I'm splotchy, I have carrots smeared across my shirt, my nail polish has been chipped since, like, January.

Not that Atlas expects or wants perfection. It's just that I've imagined running into him so many times, but not one of those fantasies starred me bumping into him in the middle of a hectic morning, half an hour after being the target of an eleven-month-old with a handful of baby food.

He looked so good. He smelled so good.

I probably smell like breast milk.

I'm so rattled by what our chance encounter might mean, it took me twice as long to organize everything for the delivery driver this morning. I haven't even checked our website for new orders today. I give myself one last look in the mirror, but all I see is an exhausted, overworked single mom.

I make my way out of the bathroom and back to the register. I pull an order from the printer and begin making out the card. My mind has never been more in need of a distraction, so I'm glad it's been a busy morning.

The order is for a bouquet of roses for someone named Greta from someone named Jonathan. The message reads, *I'm sorry about last night. Forgive me?*

I groan. Apology flowers are my least-favorite kind of bouquets to assemble. I always end up obsessing over what they're apologizing for. Did he miss their date? Did he come home late? Did they fight?

Did he hit her?

Sometimes I want to write the number for the local domestic violence shelter on the cards, but I have to remind myself that not every apology is attached to something as awful as the things that were attached to the apologies I used to receive. Maybe Jonathan is Greta's friend and he's trying to cheer her up. Maybe he's her husband and he took a prank a little too far.

Whatever the reason for the flowers, I hope they mean something good. I tuck the card into the envelope and stick it into the bouquet of roses. I set them on the delivery shelf and am pulling up the next order when I receive a text.

I lunge for my phone as if the text is about to self-destruct

and I only have three seconds to read it. I shrink when I look at the screen. It's not from Atlas, but rather from Ryle.

Can she eat French fries?

I shoot a quick response. **Soft ones.**

I drop my phone onto the counter with a thud. I don't like for her to have French fries too often, but Ryle only has her one to two days a week, so I try to make sure she gets more nutritious foods when she's with me.

It was nice not thinking about Ryle for a few minutes, but his text has reminded me that he exists. And as long as he exists, I fear that any type of relationship, or even a friendship between me and Atlas, *can't* exist. How will Ryle take it if I start seeing Atlas? How would he act if they ever had to be around each other?

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

I stare at my phone, wondering what I should say to Atlas. I told him I would text him after I opened the store, but customers were waiting before I even unlocked the door. And now that Ryle has texted, I've gone and remembered Ryle exists in this scenario, too, which makes me hesitant to text Atlas at all.

The front door opens, and my employee Lucy finally walks in. She always seems so put-together, even when I can tell she's in a bad mood.

"Good morning, Lucy."

She flicks hair out of her eyes and sets her purse on the counter with a sigh. "Is it?"

Lucy isn't at her friendliest in the morning. It's why my other employee Serena or I usually work the register until at least eleven, while Lucy puts arrangements together in the

back. She's much better with customers after a cup or five of coffee.

"I just found out our place cards never arrived because they were discontinued, and it's too late to order more. The wedding is in less than a *month*."

So much has gone wrong leading up to this wedding, I have half a mind to tell her not to go through with it. But I'm not superstitious. Hopefully she isn't, either.

"Homemade place cards are in style," I offer.

Lucy rolls her eyes. "I hate crafting," she mutters. "I don't even want a wedding now. It feels like we've been planning it for longer than we even dated." *That's accurate*. "Maybe we'll just call it off and go to Vegas. You eloped, right? Do you regret it?"

I don't know which part of all that to address first. "How can you hate crafting? You work at a flower shop. And I'm divorced; of course I regret eloping." I hand her a small stack of orders I haven't gotten to yet. "But it *was* fun," I admit.

Lucy goes to the back and starts on the rest of the orders, and I go back to thinking about Atlas. *And Ryle*. And Armageddon, which is what the two of them in my brain at the same time feels like.

I have no idea how this is expected to work. When Atlas and I ran into each other, it was as if everything else faded away, including Ryle. But now Ryle is beginning to seep back into my thoughts. Not in the way thoughts of Ryle *used* to occupy my mind, but more in a way that feels like a roadblock. My love life has finally been on a straight path with no bumps or curves, basically because it's been nonexistent for well over a year and a half, but now it feels like there's nothing but rough terrain and obstacles and cliffs ahead.