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The Exes

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Chapter 1

Now

What they don't tell you about betrayal is that it eats you slowly. Long after the raised voices and slammed doors, after the tears – if there are any – it makes a home where your Good Feelings live and begins to gnaw at fond memories, trust, intimacy. And gnaws until you're full of holes, nothing left untouched but paranoia and the distinct sense of having loved a stranger.

Paranoia and loneliness are what I'm left clinging to as my husband cries in the room next door. I think about banging on the wall, telling him to quieten down. There is still music and laughter vibrating up through the floorboards from the party downstairs, but I'm worried that people will hear him. I've already been humiliated enough; I don't need our guests to hear our marriage going to shit, too.

A hollow wail pierces the room and my hands curl into tight fists. I close my eyes, breathe evenly. I'm not sure how or why he's the one in pieces when it's him who's destroyed our relationship, but here we are. Once I would have gone and furred myself around him. Made myself soft, pliable. A petal around a wasp. That might be how my mother raised me, but I've long since grown tired of watching women like her try to sweep dust from men's eyes while they have planks in their own. Planks the men usually put there.

Downstairs, someone changes the track to ABBA's 'Dancing Queen'. A dull pain begins to throb through my thumb, and I realize that the kitchen knife is still gripped in my hand.

The fleshy tip is pressing into the blunt edge of the steel above the handle. I will myself to let the knife go. For a moment, it feels like I can't. I won't. But then I remember the blood already on my hands, still unclean after all these years. The violent rages I can't clearly remember. And with the ghost of that darkness haunting me anew, I tuck the knife beneath the crisp, cold underside of the pillow on the guest bed.

I can't let that white-hot rage loose. Not again.

I sometimes wonder, if we'd met at a different time, in a different place, whether things might have ended differently, too. I don't think there was ever really the possibility of a happy ending. So much stood between us – so much history, so much blood – that the way things have worked out is sort of fitting.

Despite that, I really do think it's a shame that things have turned out this way. I did love you. I think. Perhaps.

I would have certainly given you almost anything you'd have asked of me. I guess, though, when the chips were down, what you wanted was something I just couldn't give.

I'm sorry for everything I've done.

I'm sorry for what I've put you through.

But now, after everything, I think we both have to agree that what we have between us needs to come to an end. As much as we've been at odds, I don't believe you'd fight me on that. As much as we've been at odds, I think you'd agree that only one of us can come out of this marriage alive.

Chapter 2

Then

Watching without being seen is an art I've mastered, but this afternoon, I'm sort of hoping I am. Seen, that is. It's a surprisingly sunny afternoon on Christmas Eve, and I'm sitting in an East London food hall, pretending to work on my beat-up laptop, half-paralysed by a desire to be noticed and an abject fear of it. He's several benches away from me, a devastatingly handsome smile on his face as the dark-haired man beside him speaks. My eyes latch on to the firm press of their shoulders against each other and I wonder what it would be like to have his shoulder against mine. Wonder what the over-tinselled tree behind him would look like in a home of our own. Although at this point in my life, not feeling lonely at this time of year would be a true Christmas miracle.

Occasionally, I lose sight of him as the abacus rows of heads shift between us, but it's enough for me, for now. Right on cue, as if to stop me from gorging myself on him, the table of twentysomethings sitting across from me slide along to let a new friend onto their bench, obscuring the view of the man I came here for. They snap pictures and squeal, mouths wide, eyes gleaming. I'd probably look that jolly, too, if I were a bottle and a half of prosecco deep.

For a moment, my stubby, bare brown fingers hover over my keyboard, the speed-typing test on my screen counting the clock down to zero. It takes an effort not to waste time staring at the young women, disappointed. I can't afford to

drop so much money so often to look like they do. I can't even really afford to be sitting here, knocking back oat milk flat whites at almost four pounds a pop, but he's here, as I knew he'd be. Can't a girl allow herself a little treat?

I can imagine what life would be like were he mine. Or not quite 'imagine' – I've never seemed to have the creativity for that – but I slot myself into visions I've seen. The happy couple next door with the six-grand pram (I've googled it). The loved-up newly-weds on the latest season of my favourite reality show. I can take the scalpel of my limited imagination to cut around the young woman, lift her out of the picture and insert myself in. And in doing so, I can see how I would be happy with Him. Secure, for once.

'Anything else?' a voice asks behind me. I jump, startled. The incredibly friendly staff here have an incredibly quiet way of creeping on you.

My eyes try to see through the throng of bodies. See if he's seen me. If he discovers I'm here, he'll want to know why, and I'm not sure my flimsy excuse will cut it.

'Um, sure. Another oat flat white, please.'

'Sure! Coming right up.'

Anxiety supercharged by caffeine hitches my heart rate up a notch. I can't tell if my man has looked this way. A break in the sea of heads seems to be forming but is quickly filled by a middle-aged couple taking a seat a couple of benches down. My eyes snag on the way the man catches the woman's elbow to ease her down, her pale hand going to cradle what I can now see is a rounded belly. I'm elated for her. I'm terrified by the force of the Want that rips through me. A hand goes to my flat stomach.

I come to the conclusion that if I can't see him, then surely he can't see me, albeit aware that I might be falling victim to toddler logic. Truth be told, I'm not sure James

has ever really seen me. I first met him a year ago when he was showing me around the office. I say 'office'; really, it was a single tiny room in a co-working space. His business with his brother, Will, was still very much in its infancy, although things had been growing, fast, and they suddenly found themselves with more employees and admin than they could handle. The business, East London Chill, was an organic CBD-infused lager company. It was a rapidly successful venture. I was the thirteenth employee to join the company and liked to think of that as a lucky thing, despite the fact that I, entirely inexperienced, somehow represented the company's whole HR department in addition to my role as office manager. Now there are thirty of us, and I'm still the entirety of HR.

Fortunately, James is a good boss. Hard-working, fair and kind. He's pushed to get his brother, Will, into line (although, admittedly, Will might have just run out of employees to sleep with). His unwavering sense of Goodness is exactly what's drawn me to him and why I'll never have a chance. That, and the way his cheeks dimple when he's trying to hold in a laugh. The zeal he has for the small details, for how and why things work, making the most mundane process feel interesting. The easy way praise trips off his tongue – easy but earnest – I could bathe in it. His passion. His drive. His togetherness.

Liking James is Nice. If there's anything the therapy I can't afford has taught me, it's that I'm normally drawn to the wrong men like a moth to a flame. Therapy, and what happened to my sister.

I don't like to think about it. The mere thought makes me want to peel my own skin off and hide in it.

It would hurt.

And it would deserve to.

Still, even if my taste in men is improving, I have a lot of damage to heal. Too much to allow myself to get close to someone new. As long as I hold James at a distance, as long as I only allow myself to daydream about him, we can both remain safe.

The sea of bodies between us shifts again and a merciful parting in the waves brings him back to me. He's in a soft-looking jumper with sleeves pushed back and jeans, Will in his customary sharp suit beside him. They have always had this yin and yang pull, Will's loud, impulsive recklessness a foil for his younger brother's reassuring calm. Even visually, Will's dark hair and blue eyes seem a deliberate challenge to James's sandy colouring and brown irises. The brothers seem to be in opposition in every way possible, aside from the timbre of their voices. Sometimes I have to wonder how long it will be before that friction ignites into a fire that will burn the whole business to the ground.

'One oat flat white!'

I'm startled, hand flying up in surprise and knocking over the glass of water in front of me. Straight onto my laptop.

'Shit!'

I expect a dramatic snap, crackle and pop, or at least a gentle fizzing. Instead, the screen slowly flickers, a quiet death. Cursing my incurable clumsiness, I take the laptop, turn it to its side and give it a shake. The waitress behind me is flapping unhelpful concern.

'Oh my god. Sorry. Are you okay?'

Trying my best to rescue an unsalvageable situation, I flatten the laptop as best I can and flip it onto its front to drain. The backup laptops at work are even older and buggier than this one, and while Will might have declared them fit for purpose, it's not like he does enough real work to know.

'Some napkins would be great, please,' I say.

She claps her hands together in decisive agreement. 'Yes, of course.'

When I look back up from the mess before me, my body goes stiff. I have taken my eyes off the brothers for a moment and now looked back to where they were to find them both gone.

Panic digs its fingers into the crevices of my jaw and squeezes, clenching it tight. While my eyes dart across the room, I try to keep my head still. Try not to make my scanning too obvious, lest I give away my intentional watching of them, should they now be watching me. Keeping my wits about me, all I can do is –

'Natalie.'

My head swings around. James stands behind me, eyes crinkling gently in the corners, face lighting up like it's made his day laying eyes on me. In his hands are large fistfuls of white napkins from the bar.

'God, James!' I'm good at faking surprise. I'm good at faking a lot of things. But I know James always comes to this food hall with his laptop to work, and I knew he had set up a meeting with Will and the owners today.

'I heard the ruckus all the way across the room. Thought I'd save the waitress a trip.'

'Um, thanks.' I try to tell my body to relax.

'Here, let me.'

He starts dabbing at the table, allowing me to take a handful of tissues from him and mop at the ruined slab of tech.

'Sorry about your laptop.'

I shrug. 'It's a piece of shit anyway.'

'Your boss should really get you a new one,' he says with a knowing smile. 'Taken?' He points towards the slice of space opposite me. I shake my head, trying to smother my surging excitement. 'I wasn't expecting to see you here.' He leans

against the table as he slides onto the bench. I try not to stare at the momentary tensing of the muscles in his fore-arms. James gestures at the laptop that I've left face down, draining. 'Please tell me you weren't working on Christmas Eve. I know I have to, for my sins, but if Will's asked you to —'

'No.' My palms flash honesty at him as they fly up. 'No, I promise no work stuff.' There's not even a trace of suspicion in his eyes. He can't have seen me lurking here. 'Is Will around, too?'

He shakes his head and I'm embarrassed by how quickly the excitement leaps up again. 'No, he's off to meet some friends. I said I'd say hello to you and help rescue you from your laptop situation, then fire off a few more emails.' His head cocks to one side. 'I'm in here all the time. How come I've never seen you before?'

My stomach tightens. 'Well, I usually prefer sitting in a café nearer my flat, but it was closed. I remembered you'd recommended this place, but I didn't think you'd be here today of all days.' Lie.

James gives me a curious look. 'What's the c—'

'Anyway, forget me, I can't believe you're working on Christmas Eve.'

He laughs, a laugh that comes from deep within his chest and wraps the both of us in a gentle warmth. If he'd planned to grill me, it seems the plan has been quickly forgotten. 'True,' he says, 'but that's the price of being the boss.'

The waitress drifts back into view, sets another wodge of napkins down in front of me. I thank her, not taking my eyes off James as I try to assess whether he's seen through me. If he can smell the deception and desperation. 'Well, please, don't let me stop you if you need to be cracking on.'

I've already noticed the glances at the MacBook poking

out of his rucksack. The weariness that crosses his expression. Will gets to be Mr Charisma, never slow to volunteer for a sampling meeting with a potential new stocker, spending an afternoon laughing and schmoozing over beers. James is the one who keeps the books in order, the orders on time, the time-blind new hires on track. Without him, the business would surely fall apart or descend into chaos.

‘But I think you’ve probably earned yourself a break?’ I add.

That smile returns, broad shoulders relaxing as he looses a sigh. ‘I think you’re probably right.’ He juts a chin towards my coffee. ‘What about you? Maybe we can swap that for something stronger?’

I’ve already watched him sink a beer – otherwise, I’m sure this offer wouldn’t have come. James has always been good at keeping boundaries in place with his employees, where Will has not. But now he wants a drink. With me.

I’d have been content even if my excursion only went as far as watching him from a distance. It’s better than sitting at home alone, tempted to embrace the company of a mother who’s mastered an art of cruelty so casual that you often don’t know you’ve been wounded until you find yourself bleeding many hours later. But this . . . this is everything I’ve dreamed of.

‘I think I’d like that,’ I say with a level of chill I don’t feel.

‘Excellent.’ A naughty grin stretches across his face, and I’m left a little breathless by how inviting it is. I flash a grin back at him, ignoring the rising alarm in the back of my mind. We have the distinct energy of two teenagers bunking off school.

‘What d’you fancy?’ he asks.

What would the alluring cool girl order? ‘Assuming they don’t stock any of our stuff, I’ll have an Old-Fashioned, please.’