

CHAPTER 1

Jules

Nothing good ever came from swiping right on a guy holding a fish on a dating app. Double red flags if said guy's name was *Todd*.

I should've known better, yet there I was, sitting alone at the Bronze Gear, DC's hottest bar, and drinking my hideously expensive vodka soda after being stood up.

That's right.

I'd been stood up for the very first time by a fish-wielding Todd. It was enough to make a girl say *fuck it* and throw away sixteen dollars on one drink even though she didn't have a full-time salary yet.

What was it with men and fish pictures anyway? Couldn't they choose something more creative, like cage diving with sharks? Also marine animal-centric, but less mundane.

Maybe the fish was an odd thing to fixate on, but it prevented me from dwelling on the awfulness of my day and the hot, sticky embarrassment coating my skin.

Get caught in a sudden downpour halfway to campus with nary an umbrella in sight? Check. (Five percent chance of rain, my ass. I should sue the weather app company.)

Get trapped in an overcrowded Metro train that stunk of body odor for forty minutes due to a power problem? Check.

Go on a three-hour apartment hunt that resulted in two blistered feet and zero leads? Check.

After such a hellish day, I wanted to cancel my date with Todd, but I'd already postponed twice—once for a rescheduled study group, the other when I was feeling under the weather—and I hadn't wanted to

leave him hanging again. So I sucked it up and showed up, only to get stood up.

The universe had a sense of humor all right, and it was a shitty one.

I finished the rest of my drink and flagged down the bartender. “Can I get the check please?” Happy hour had just started, but I couldn’t wait to go home and curl up with the two real loves of my life. Netflix and Ben & Jerry’s never let me down.

“It’s already covered.”

When my eyebrows shot up, the bartender tilted her head toward a table of preppy-looking twentysomething guys in the corner. Likely consultants, based on their outfits. One of them, a Clark Kent look-alike in a gingham shirt, raised his glass and smiled at me. “Courtesy of Clark the consultant.”

I stifled a laugh even as I raised my own glass and smiled back at him. So I wasn’t the only one who thought he looked like Superman’s alter ego.

“Clark the consultant saved me from eating instant ramen for dinner, so cheers to him,” I said.

That was sixteen dollars I could keep in my bank account, though I left a tip anyway. I used to work in the food service industry, and it made me obsessive about overtipping. No one dealt with more assholes on a consistent basis than service workers.

I finished my free drink and kept my eyes locked on Clark the consultant, whose gaze swept appreciatively over my face, hair, and body.

I didn’t believe in false humility—I knew I looked good. And I knew if I walked over to that table right now, I could soothe my bruised ego with more drinks, compliments, and maybe an orgasm or two later if he knew what he was doing.

Tempting...but no. I was too exhausted to go through the whole hookup song and dance.

I turned away, but not before catching the flash of disappointment on his face. To his credit, Clark the consultant understood the implied

message—*thank you for the drink, but I'm not interested in taking things further*—and didn't try to approach me, which was more than I could say for most men.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and was about to grab my coat from the hook beneath the bar when a deep, cocky drawl sent every hair on the back of my neck on end.

"Hey, JR."

Two words. That was all it took to trigger my fight-or-flight reaction. Honestly, it was a Pavlovian response at this point. When I heard his voice, my blood pressure skyrocketed.

Every. Single. Time.

And the day just keeps getting better.

My fingers tightened around my bag strap before I forced them to relax. I would *not* give him the satisfaction of provoking any discernible reaction from me.

With that in mind, I took a deep breath, rearranged my features into a neutral expression, and slowly turned around, where I was greeted with the world's most unwelcome sight to go along with the world's most unwelcome sound.

Josh fucking Chen.

All six feet of him, clad in dark jeans and a white button-down shirt that was *just* fitted enough to show off his muscles. No doubt he planned it that way. He probably spent more time on his appearance than I did, and I wasn't exactly low maintenance. Merriam-Webster should stamp his face next to the word *vain*.

The worst part was, Josh was *technically* good-looking. Thick dark hair, high cheekbones, sculpted body. All the things I was a sucker for... if they weren't attached to an ego so large it required its own zip code.

"Hi, Joshy," I cooed, knowing how much he hated the nickname. I could thank Ava, my best friend and Josh's sister, for that gold nugget of information.

Annoyance sparked in his eyes, and I smiled. The day was looking up already.

To be fair, Josh was the one who'd insisted on calling me JR first. It was short for Jessica Rabbit, the cartoon character. Some people might take it as a compliment, but when you were a redhead with double-Ds, the constant comparison got old fast, and he knew it.

"Drinking alone?" Josh shifted his attention to the empty bar stools on either side of me. It wasn't peak happy hour yet, and the most coveted seats were the booths lining the oak-paneled walls, not at the bar. "Or have you already scared off everyone within a twenty-foot radius?"

"Funny you should mention scaring people off." I eyed the woman standing next to Josh. She was beautiful, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a lithe body clad in an incredible graphic-print wrap dress. Too bad her good taste didn't extend to men, if she was on a date with *him*. "I see you've recovered from your bout of syphilis long enough to sucker another unsuspecting woman into a date." I directed my next words to the brunette. "I don't know you, but I already know you could do way better. Trust me."

Did Josh actually have syphilis? Maybe. Maybe not. He slept around enough I wouldn't be surprised if he did, and I wouldn't be upholding girl code if I didn't warn Wrap Dress about the *possibility* of contracting an STD.

Instead of recoiling, she laughed. "Thanks for the warning, but I think I'll be okay."

"Making jokes about STDs. How original." If Josh was bothered by me insulting him in front of his date, he didn't show it. "I hope your oral arguments are more creative, or you'll have a tough time in the legal world. Assuming you pass the bar, of course."

His mouth curved into a smirk, revealing a tiny dimple in his left cheek.

I held back a snarl. I *hated* that dimple. Every time it popped up, it mocked me, and I wanted nothing more than to stab it with a knife.

"I'll pass," I said coolly, reining in my violent thoughts. Josh always brought out the worst in me. "Better hope you don't get sued for

medical malpractice, Joshy, or I'll be the first to offer my services to the other party."

I'd busted my ass to get a spot at Thayer Law and a job offer from Silver & Klein, the prestigious law firm I interned for last summer. I wasn't about to let my dreams of becoming a lawyer slip away when I was so close.

No freaking way.

I was going to pass the bar exam, and Josh Chen was going to eat his words. Hopefully, he'd choke on them too.

"Big talk for someone who hasn't even graduated yet." Josh leaned against the bar and propped his forearm on the counter, looking irritatingly like a model posing for a *GQ* spread. He switched subjects before I could fire another retort. "You're awfully dressed up for a solo date."

His gaze swept from my curled hair to my made-up face before lingering on the gold pendant resting against my cleavage.

My spine turned to iron. Unlike Clark the consultant, Josh's scrutiny seared into my flesh, hot and mocking. The metal from my necklace flamed against my skin, and it was all I could do not to yank it off and pelt it in his smug face.

And yet for some reason, I remained still while he continued his perusal. It wasn't lecherous so much as it was assessing, like he was gathering all the puzzle pieces and arranging them into a complete picture in his mind.

Josh's eyes dipped to the green cashmere dress hugging my torso, skimmed over the expanse of my black-stockinged legs, and stopped at my black heeled boots before he dragged them back up to meet my own hazel ones. His smirk disappeared, leaving his expression unreadable.

A charged silence crackled between us before he spoke again. "You're dressed for an actual date." His pose remained casual, but his eyes sharpened into dark knives waiting to carve out my embarrassment. "But you were about to leave, and it's only five thirty."

I lifted my chin even as the heat of embarrassment prickled my skin.

Josh was many things—infuriating, cocky, the spawn of Satan—but he wasn't stupid, and he was the *last* person I wanted knowing I'd been stood up.

He would never let me live it down.

"Don't tell me he didn't show." There was a strange note in his voice.

The heat intensified. God, I shouldn't have worn cashmere. I was roasting in my stupid dress. "You should worry less about my love life and more about your date."

Josh hadn't looked at Wrap Dress since he showed up, but she didn't seem to mind. She was too busy chatting and laughing with the bartender.

"I assure you, of all the things on my to-do list, worrying about your love life isn't even in the top five thousand." Despite the snark, Josh continued staring at me with that indecipherable expression.

My stomach swooped for no obvious reason.

"Good." It was a lame retort, but my brain wasn't working properly. I blamed it on the exhaustion. Or the alcohol. Or a million other things that had nothing to do with the man standing in front of me.

I grabbed my coat and slid off my seat, intent on brushing past him without another word.

Unfortunately, I'd misjudged the distance between the bar stool rung and the floor. My foot slipped, and a small gasp rose in my throat when my body tilted backward of its own accord. I was two seconds away from falling on my ass when a hand shot out and gripped my wrist, pulling me back up into a standing position.

Josh and I froze at the same time, our eyes locked on where his hand encircled my wrist. I couldn't remember the last time we'd voluntarily touched. Maybe three summers ago, when he'd pushed me, fully clothed, into the pool during a party, and I'd retaliated by "accidentally" elbowing him in the groin?

The memory of him doubling over with pain still gave me great comfort in times of distress, but I wasn't thinking about that now.

Instead, I was focused on how disturbingly close he was—close

enough for me to smell his cologne, which was nice and citrusy instead of fire and brimstone-y like I'd expected.

The adrenaline from my near fall pumped through my system, pushing my heart rate into unhealthy territory.

"You can let go now." I willed my breaths to come out steady despite the suffocating heat. "Before your touch gives me hives."

Josh's grip tightened for a millisecond before he dropped my arm like it was a hot potato. Annoyance wiped away his previously unreadable expression. "You're welcome for making sure you don't break your tailbone, JR."

"Don't be dramatic, *Joshy*. I would've caught myself."

"Sure. God forbid the words *thank you* leave your mouth." His sarcasm deepened. "You're such a pain in the ass, you know that?"

"It's better than being an ass, period."

Everyone else looked at Josh and saw a handsome, charming doctor. I looked at him and saw a judgmental, self-righteous jerk.

You can make other friends, Ava. She's bad news. You don't need someone like that in your life.

My cheeks flushed. It'd been seven years since I overheard Josh talking to Ava about me, right when she and I were becoming friends, and the memory still stung. Not that I'd ever told them I'd heard them. It would just make Ava feel bad, and Josh didn't deserve to know how much his words hurt.

He wasn't the first person to think I wasn't good enough, but he was the first to try and ruin one of my budding friendships because of it.

I flashed a brittle smile. "If you'll excuse me, I've exceeded my daily tolerance for your presence." I slipped on my coat and gloves and readjusted my bag. "Give your date my condolences."

Before he could respond, I pushed past him and quickened my steps until I hit the chilly March air. Only then did I allow myself to relax, though my pulse maintained its frantic speed.

Of all the people I could've run into at the bar, I *had* to run into Josh Chen. Could the day get any worse?

I could already imagine the taunts he'd pepper me with the next time I saw him.

Remember when you got stood up, JR?

Remember when you sat at the bar for an hour by yourself like a loser?

Remember when you got all dressed up and used up the last of your favorite eye shadow for a dude named Todd?

Okay, he didn't know about the last two things, but I wouldn't put it past him to find out.

I tucked my hands deeper in my pockets and turned the corner, eager to put as much distance between myself and Satan's spawn as possible.

The Bronze Gear had been located on a lively street of restaurants, with music wafting in the air and people spilling onto the sidewalk even in wintertime. The one I was walking on now, while only one street over, was eerily quiet. Shuttered shops lined both sidewalks, and scraggly bunches of weeds sprouted from cracks in the ground. The sun hadn't quite set yet, but the lengthening shadows lent an ominous air to the surroundings.

I walked faster out of instinct, though I was distracted not only by my run-in with Josh but also the dozens of items on my to-do list. When I was alone, my worries and tasks crowded my brain like children clamoring for their parents' attention.

Graduation, bar prep, possibly reaming Todd out over text (no, not worth it), more apartment searching online, Ava's surprise birthday party this weekend...

Wait a minute.

Birthday. March.

I came to a dead halt.

Oh my God.

Besides Ava, I knew someone else with a birthday in early March, but...

I fished my phone out of my pocket with a shaking hand, and my stomach plummeted when I saw the date. *March 2.*

It was *her* birthday today. I completely forgot.

Tendrils of guilt squeezed my insides, and I wondered, as I did every year, whether I should call her. I never did, but...*this year could be different.*

I told myself that every year too.

I *shouldn't* feel guilty. She never called me on my birthday either. Or Christmas. Or any other holiday. I hadn't seen or spoken to Adeline in seven years.

Call. Don't call. Call. Don't call.

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth.

It was her forty-fifth birthday. That was a big one, right? Big enough to warrant a *happy birthday* from her daughter...if she cared about getting anything from me.

I was so busy debating myself I didn't notice anyone approach until the hard barrel of a gun pressed against my back and a raspy voice barked out, "Give me your phone and wallet. Now."

My heart jolted, and I almost dropped my phone. Disbelief hardened my limbs into stone.

You've got to be kidding me.

Never ask the universe questions you don't want answered, because it turns out the day could, in fact, get a lot fucking worse.

CHAPTER 2

Josh

“Don’t say it.” I cracked open my beer, ignoring Clara’s amused expression. The cute female bartender she’d been flirting with had left to deal with the happy hour rush, and she’d been watching me with a knowing smile ever since.

“Fine. I won’t.” Clara crossed her legs and took a demure sip of her drink.

She was an ER nurse at Thayer University Hospital, where I was a third-year resident specializing in emergency medicine, so our paths crossed often. We’d been friends since my first year of residency, when we bonded over our mutual love for action sports and cheesy nineties movies, but she had as much sexual interest in me, or any member of the male species, as she did a rock.

Clara certainly wasn’t my date, at least not in the romantic sense, but I hadn’t corrected Jules’s assumption. My personal life wasn’t any of her business. Hell, sometimes I wished it wasn’t *my* business.

“Good.” I caught the eye of a pretty blond at the other end of the bar and flashed a flirtatious smile. She returned it with a suggestive one of her own.

This was what I needed tonight. Alcohol, watching the Wizards game with Clara, and some harmless flirting. Anything to take my mind off the letter waiting for me at home.

Correction: letters. As in plural.

December 24. January 16. February 20. March 2. The dates of the most recent letters from Michael flashed through my mind.

I received one every month like clockwork, and I hated myself for not throwing them out the instant I saw them.