

Undone

CHAPTER ONE

Jess

GRANDMA CHLOE, IF you can hear me from wherever you are, you better be proud of me for sticking this out.

My grandmother died four years ago, but I will always live my life by the principles she taught me. She used to say that when your friends or family need you, you move heaven and earth to be there for them. That's one reason I'm putting myself through the sheer torture of attending a wedding tomorrow—one of my least favorite things to do, by the way, especially in this case, because I'm not just a guest, I'm a bridesmaid. Oh, and did I mention this is the second time I've been a bridesmaid for this couple? I'm basically a saint for doing this.

Or maybe I'm doing this because the bride is basically a saint.

Yeah, that's more like it, and that brings me to the other reason I'm putting myself through this clusterfuck of a weekend: the bride is my best friend, Isabel.

Isabel has big blue eyes and natural curls in a

startling shade of ash blond. She's recently turned thirty-five, but she looks much younger even on rare occasions like this one, when she's wearing a full face of makeup. I think her anti-aging secret is her wholesome lifestyle, which is obviously an extreme measure and not one I'd ever be willing to try myself. I'm thirty-five too, but when I'm not wearing makeup, I look like an aged, freckled version of Pippi Longstocking, if Pippi partied way too much in her twenties.

It's fair to say that Isabel and I are the unlikeliest of friends. She's sweet, I'm sharp. She's kind and gentle and softhearted, I'm... Well, I'm just not. We've had a lot of great times together, but we also have very different approaches to life, and every now and again I wonder why she puts up with me at all. What I don't wonder about is why I've kept her around. Izzy is the lite version of humanity—all of the goodness, none of the calories. She's easy to love, and for the most part, quite uncomplicated when it comes to her friends—a rare trait, and one I value highly.

I'd be lost without her. Completely, hopelessly lost.

Right now, maybe for the first time ever, I wish that Isabel wasn't an exceptional human being. In fact, I'm wishing that last year, when she abruptly decided to divorce my business partner Paul, I'd have done what I usually do when people around me do something stupid—told her exactly what I was thinking. If I'd been harsh enough, she'd probably have cut me out of her life. Yes, I'd have been lost and miserable and sad and I'd have missed her forever, but then again, even feel-

ing miserable and lost and sad would have been preferable to what I'm feeling right now.

Anxious. I'm anxious, which isn't like me at all. I have no idea what to do with such an uncomfortable feeling simmering away inside me, and that's why I've decided to drown it in champagne.

Izzy and Paul sorted their shit out—only this happened just a little too late to stop the divorce, and now they want to get remarried. So here we all are, at their brownstone in Chelsea for the rehearsal dinner before their second wedding takes place tomorrow. There are fairy lights and candles and big vases of fragrant white roses on the long table that centers their dining room. There's soft, orchestral music playing on the speakers. Isabel and Paul are both radiant. It's all so joyous and romantic that it makes me a little ill.

Don't get me wrong: I'm utterly delighted that they sorted their shit out and they're both happy again. It's just that all of his haste and love and joy and renewal means that instead of ordering my first wine for the night in a bar somewhere and scanning the room for a companion, I'm sitting here chugging champagne like it's water and watching the door as if it's about to burst open to reveal some kind of Jess Cohen kryptonite.

Which it kind of is.

Because Paul's brother Jake is due to arrive any second now, fresh off a flight from the West Coast, where he now lives. And...okay. I'm not exactly thrilled about being a part of this wedding party tomorrow, but it's maybe just a tiny bit possible that my imminent en-

counter with Jake has more to do with my anxiety than the festivities themselves.

“What’s up with you?” The voice belongs to Marcus, my other business partner, who’s sitting to my right. He speaks quietly—keeping his voice low, no doubt so as not to upset the other members of the wedding party. Paul and Isabel are opposite me, and Abby, Marcus’s fiancée, is in the restroom. She’s very pregnant with twins. As far as I can tell, being very pregnant with twins means you spend half your time looking exhausted and terrified, and the other half peeing.

“What’s up with you?” I snap at him unthinkingly, and he slowly raises an eyebrow.

“Ho-ly shit,” he whistles.

“What?”

“Jessica Cohen—are you upset about something?” The incredulity in his tone suggests that the very idea of this is impossible. I’m kind of pleased that I’ve managed to fool him into thinking I really am some kind of superwoman, and also immediately depressed that one of my best friends has no idea I have any emotional depth at all.

“Mind your own damn business, Marcus.”

His expression grows serious, and he leans even closer to whisper, “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Things are clearly not fine,” Marcus says, frowning. He glances down at my hands, and I realize I’m

tapping the table. I stop, but as soon as I do, my knee starts to bounce.

“Seriously, Marcus, leave it,” I whisper back to him, but the words come out as a half growl, half hiss, and he winces.

“Okay, okay,” he says, raising his hands in surrender. Just then, the doorbell rings and my heart is suddenly beating so hard and so fast I feel a little faint. I have butterflies in my tummy, and in my back. That’s *not* normal. Maybe I need medical attention.

Isabel squeals and stands.

“That’ll be Jake!”

And off she goes to answer the door, while I try to figure out just how upset Isabel and Paul would be if I tell them I can’t stay for their rehearsal dinner. But what would be big enough an excuse to justify such a dick move? I can’t say it’s a date. That would make me a bitch. What else is there? Why didn’t I come up with an excuse earlier?

Aaaand... Now it’s too late.

My stomach drops. I stop tapping my knee, but now my hands start to shake, so I fold them together and hide them on my lap.

Jake Winton strides into the room wearing jeans and a plain gray T-shirt that stretches over the bulky muscles of his arms and his chest. Goddammit, I *hate* how good he looks. Unlike his brother, Jake is very broad and very tall—far too large for my tastes, really. I like a man I can look eye to eye in my heels,

and Jake is six foot six. I'm good, but even I couldn't manage thirteen-inch heels.

Jake is just a veritable giant in every way. Yes, including that one. Men spend a lot of time worrying about size, but frankly, I'd take a skilled guy with a sensibly sized appendage over a horse like Jake any day. I want a man who can get in there, get the job done, then walk away—leaving me able to walk away too...as opposed to limping away. Maybe it's just me, but I like to enjoy a guy's company and not need an epidural if I want to go to spin class the next day.

Not that I was complaining all that much when Jake and I were together. Probably because he *was* a skilled guy. In fact, I do remember relishing that sometimes-morning-after tenderness because it reminded me of the hours I'd spent with him. I was so lust-addled at the time that I actually thought that was a good thing.

But sex is better without complications like that—delicious memories, emotions, huge dicks. So yes, in hindsight, his is definitely too big. And he's definitely too tall and broad. And too compassionate. And too... *argh*... These days he's just too West Coast. He looks so relaxed, and I can't miss the light tan on his skin and the way that his muddy-blond hair has brightened up several tones. Then again, Jake always loved surfing and hiking. Even when he lived here in Manhattan, he was forever planning trips away to commune with nature or some shit. When his job gets too much, he heads to the outdoors to decompress.

Yes, Jake Winton was and is all wrong for me, in pretty much every way.

I look away, and I plan to continue looking away—but my eyes are drawn back to him and I find myself staring again immediately. I've just missed him so much, and it's been two and a half years since I saw him—apparently that separation has left me weak and hungry. I note the smattering of gray at his temples and just for a moment I wonder if I put it there. Then I do the calculation and realize he'd be thirty-nine now, so I guess a hint of silver makes sense. Also, I'm really not into salt-and-pepper guys, so that's excellent.

Except that it suits him. He is a doctor, after all...a specialist at that, and there's something about the hint of gray that makes him look even more distinguished. And the horn-rimmed glasses? They're new too. He used to make fun of my reading glasses in that flirty, melt-my-panties way of his. He always said they made me look like a sexy librarian.

Seriously, who has sexy librarian fantasies?

Me.

Right now.

I'm fantasizing about a very broad, very tall, very sexy male librarian who's actually a doctor with a huge dick and horn-rimmed frames on his brand-new glasses.

"...glad to be here. Marcus, congratulations on the engagement and the twins and—oh! Hey there, Abby! Wow, you look amazing. When are you due?" Jake's going around the table greeting everyone and by the

time I check back into the conversation, he's already up to me. His gaze lands on me, and after a split second of panic I force my brightest smile. "And Jessica," he says, then he returns my smile with a very tight smile of his own.

There's barely disguised antagonism in his gaze, and it seems I've made a critical error here. I knew I was at real risk of throwing myself at him like some kind of lust-sick idiot tonight, but I figured *he'd* be on his best behavior. I mean, come on: Jake's the nicest guy I've ever met. It really didn't occur to me that he'd *ever* look at me like...this.

It seems that in all of my wasted hours over the last few weeks, worrying about seeing Jake again, I have neglected to consider one very important thing: I'm the villain here. It was my idea to hide our relationship from our friends. My idea to end things. My idea to "give one another some space" after we broke up.

It was *his* idea to pack up and move to California to get away from me, and I probably should have given a little more thought to the level of hurt that might have been behind that decision. I just told myself the job offer at Stanford must have been too good to be true, and that he was probably ready for a change after living his whole life in New York. It was easier to believe my own lies than it was to think about what might actually have been going on for him.

"Hello," he says now.

"Hi, Jake," I say. My gaze lands on the almost-empty bottle of champagne in the middle of the table.

“We need some more bubbles!” My voice is a little too light and a little too high. I glance toward the kitchen, where Marcus’s brother-in-law and a pair of apprentice chefs are preparing our meal as part of his wedding gift to Paul and Izzy. “I’ll just—”

“Sit down, Jess,” Isabel says, laughing. She waves at me, playfully dismissive as she rises. “I’ll get it. You guys can all catch up before we talk through the plan for tomorrow.”

“I need to walk a bit,” Abby says, and she stands with some difficulty. Didn’t she just get back from the bathroom? I move to rise, but Marcus is right beside her and before I’m even on my feet, his arm is around her waist and he’s leading her away from the table.

“Let me come, Abs,” he says softly. “Want to go outside for some fresh air? How’s the heartburn?”

“All good.” She flashes a smile that’s just a little too bright. “Fresh air sounds great.”

That leaves me, Jake and Paul. I mentally beg Paul to stay but because the universe hates me, he stands immediately.

“Sorry,” he says, then he gives us a cheeky grin. “I’ve been waiting all night for Isabel to get distracted. I’ve organized a surprise for the honeymoon and I just need to check some details.”

They’re going to New Zealand for their honeymoon. I’m pretty sure the “surprise” is tickets to a rugby game—Isabel is sports-mad. In any case, Paul leaves the room, and... Now I’m alone with his brother.

I down the last of my champagne in one gulp, then

glance hesitantly at Jake. He's staring at me, his gaze hard, and I try to force myself to be polite and to make an attempt at small talk.

"How have you been? It's been too long," I say. It's possibly the stupidest thing I could *ever* have said to Jake Winton. Jesus. I don't know even why I said it. It's just what people say, isn't it? My voice is all wobbly. Where's my supposedly endless confidence when I need it? Where are those "balls of steel" lovers and business rivals have accused me of having? Oh God. I want the earth to open up and swallow me whole.

Jake sits. He leans back in his chair and surveys me for a moment, then he sighs impatiently.

"We have to play games when the others are around because that's how *you* wanted it to be. But when we're alone, let's not pretend this isn't uncomfortable."

Even as I nod in agreement, I feel my heart sink. There's no mistaking the disdain in his tone. I usually don't give a flying fuck what other people think about me, and I'm still not sure what makes Jake so different... But he is different. And I *hate* the idea that he might hate me.

I'm saved by the return of Izzy with the champagne, and she immediately launches herself into rapid-fire chitchat about the meal. Everyone else returns soon enough too, and at first, I figure the tension between Jake and me will dilute, at least a little, as we settle into the company of our friends.

But I'm wrong about that too. Jake is polite enough to ignore me in conversation, but tense enough to narrow his gaze every time our eyes meet.

CHAPTER TWO

Jake

HERE'S THE THING: I'm a nice guy. I'm a healer by trade—an oncologist, actually, which is a pretty unsexy profession and not one you choose unless you genuinely care about people. I do care about people. I donate money to charity. I help little old ladies cross the street. I rescued a dog last year. Her name is Clara and she's the ugliest fucking thing you've ever seen—as far as I can tell, a cross between a pug, a Brussels griffon, and that ball of hair and gunk that clogs up the bathroom sink after a while. I found myself at the shelter just before closing time on what happened to be the very last day before Clara was due to be “put to sleep.” She looked up at me with her one remaining eye and for some reason I just couldn't bear the thought of the shelter staff putting such a young dog down.

Well, Clara may be young, but she's not exactly healthy or even cute. In addition to that missing eye, she has a terrifying overbite, she's an odd shape, her fur is patchy, and the shelter staff told me they sus-

pected she was abused by a previous owner because she has severe anxiety. I pay more for her monthly medication than I did to adopt her, and I let her sleep not just in my bed—but on my pillow. Sometimes I wake up and she’s actually lying on my face. No matter what I do, her endlessly mangy ears always wind up smelling awful—awful enough that my guests often exclaim some variation on, “Holy shit! What is that smell? Is that a dog?!”

Right at this very moment, I’m paying a dog behaviorist to act as dog-sitter, which is costing me a stupid amount of money. The woman actually has to sleep at my house because Clara can’t go to a kennel and has a very bad habit of shredding everything in sight if she’s left alone overnight.

And despite all of that, I love my dog, because that’s the kind of guy I am.

A nice guy. A tolerant guy.

And yet, I’m sitting here staring at Jessica Cohen, and I’m struggling to find *any* goodwill toward her whatsoever.

I’ve had a lot of time to think in the two and a half years since our breakup, and I’ve come to a few hard realizations about our relationship. I desperately want to confront Jess, and I plan to do just that—*after* the reception. I’m due to fly out for a hiking trip on Sunday night, and I’m pretty sure Paul and Izzy aren’t going to fuck this marriage business up again, so there’s a very good chance tomorrow night will be the last time I’ll see Jess in our lifetimes.

I'll say what I need to say, and then I'll finally be able to let her go.

Izzy hands me a bottle of champagne and I pop the cork. I pour some for Marcus and myself and then Izzy and Paul. Abby returns to the table, so I offer her some too, although I know she won't drink it. She points to her water with a sigh, then I flick a glance at Jess. She already has a flute in her hand, but just as I look at her, she avoids my gaze, lifts her glass and drains it.

I should offer her a refill.

I mean, I *should*. But I can see she desperately wants a refill, so I don't. Jess has always had a way of drawing out aspects to my personality I didn't even know were there. It turns out, she can even inspire me to petty childishness.

"How are things for you?" Paul asks me, when I've finished sharing the champagne. "How's Clara?"

I feel Jess's eyes on me, and just for a minute, I let myself enjoy the possibility that she might think Clara is a girlfriend rather than a particularly high-maintenance pet. It was Jess's decision to end our relationship so I'm sure she's not jealous, but I really do like the idea that she might be. It's ridiculous, and maybe I'm not such a nice guy after all, because I'm deliberately ambiguous as I say, "Clara is great." Then I smile broadly. "Sure makes life better having someone to come home to each night. But I don't need to tell you lovebirds that—how long have you been back home, Izzy?"

"A few months," Isabel says, then she just beams at

me. I glance at Paul, and he's wearing the same stupid grin. I chuckle.

"I can't wait to officially welcome you back to the family tomorrow."

She sighs happily.

"Everything is just perfect, isn't it? I'm so glad you could be here. I know the timing wasn't great..."

I wave her apology away.

"Even the timing was perfect. It was easy to push my trip back a few days—much easier than moving patient appointments if I hadn't been planning a break already."

"Where are you off to, Jake?" Marcus asks across the table, where he sits right beside Jess.

"I'm hiking the John Muir Trail—doing an ultra-light trip, so taking minimum supplies and walking it as fast as I can. I was originally thinking Paul might join me... I thought he'd want to be distracted when his first post-divorce wedding anniversary rolled around." I glance at my brother, then wink at him. "Turns out he had a better idea."

Paul laughs softly.

"I forgot all about that."

"Well, I decided to do it alone anyway. I'm flying back Monday morning and I'll start the trail on Wednesday. I expect to finish in about eleven or twelve days, depending on how I'm feeling as I go."

"How far is this trail?" Abby asks with visible horror. I laugh at her expression.

"About two hundred and twenty miles. I'll try to

average twenty-two miles a day so I can have a few rest days along the way.”

“You do realize you’re completely insane, right?” Abby shakes her head at me and I grin at her.

“Maybe when the twins arrive, you guys can plan a hike with me. Marcus and I can carry the babies in backpacks.”

“That does sound like fun,” Marcus murmurs playfully.

“You know very well that it sounds like my worst nightmare.” Abby scowls at him, and I laugh again.

“There’s nothing like it, Abby. Fresh air. Silence. Disconnecting from all of the noise of modern life is the best way to nurture your soul.”

“Clara doesn’t mind you leaving her, then?” Paul asks, and he’s teasing, of course, but this time I have no doubt at all that anyone who hadn’t made my terrifying pet’s acquaintance would hear this and assume he was referring to a partner. I flick a glance at Jess. I’m both delighted and instantly irritated to see that she’s visibly jealous. In fact, she’s close to incandescent green.

“Clara is incredibly loyal,” I say slowly. “It’s one of her best qualities.”

“She’ll greet you at the door when you get back, and she’ll be humping your leg—” Paul says, and I cut him off hastily.

“Classic Clara. So what’s the deal for tomorrow?” I ask Izzy.

“The food is just about ready,” she tells me. “I’ll run you through our plans when we’re done eating.”

WE SPEND THE next hour gorging ourselves on the incredible four courses the caterers have prepared for us, and just as we finish with dessert, Paul hands me another bottle of champagne. While he and Izzy rise, I quickly top up another round into everyone's glasses. I studiously ignore Jess, then set the bottle on the table between us, so, unlike *everyone* else, she has to fill her own glass.

Yeah. I might not like Jess anymore, but I definitely do not like the guy I've become tonight.

"First, I'd like to thank you all for coming here tonight, especially on such short notice," Paul says. "I never dreamt that I would get a chance to do this again, and it means the world that you'd all be here again to witness it."

"Don't worry," Isabel assures us all. "Tomorrow is going to be very low-key."

She gives us the basics in about thirty seconds: Marcus and I are to meet Paul here at his home. Abby, Isabel and Jess will meet at a suite at a hotel for hair and makeup and whatever else it is that women do on wedding days. Truth be told, I tune out of the details after that because I'm pretty sure it's all I need to know. Instead, I busy myself staring at the roses in the center of the table, just so my eyes are pointed in Jess's vague vicinity, but my staring contest with the roses doesn't last long because my gaze drifts automatically toward her. She catches me and we both scowl, then look away, just as Paul and Isabel take their seats again.

As best man, it's only appropriate that I make a toast, so I reach for my glass.

As soon as I'm on my feet, Jess snatches her own glass up and stands too. We stare at each other just as we've been doing all night, only this time, the moment isn't fleeting. It's still painfully uncomfortable—but neither one of us looks away.

I'm all too aware of the confused gazes around us.

"I was going to make a toast," I say carefully. I am Paul's brother, after all, and the best man, and traditionally a toast would be my responsibility. Besides, I stood up first. The polite thing for Jess to do is to sit down, or maybe even to apologize and then sit down.

Jess is anything but polite.

"I was going to make a toast too," she says pointedly, and she remains stubbornly standing. Her gaze is pure challenge. *I dare you to make a scene.*

I try to wait her out, but we end up standing there in an awkward game of chicken. The moment stretches and stretches until I realize that no matter how long I wait there, Jess is not going to be the first to sit down. Given the opportunity, she'd stand and glare at me until the dinner finished, until the wedding happened without us, until we both starved to death and our bones decomposed. And as the earth crashes into the sun in seven or eight billion years, the last thing my ghost would see would be Jess's ghost, still glaring at me as we dissolved into a ball of fiery doom.

If I don't sit, we're either going to stay here literally forever, or one of our friends is going to have to inter-

vene to break the stalemate. This leaves me very little choice but to say, “Well, ladies first, then,” and soon I’m the one taking my seat while Jess makes a very poetic, very touching speech about how wonderful it is to be in their wedding party for the second time, and how glad she is to see them back together.

The whole time I’m staring at my champagne flute, watching the bubbles rise, trying not to admire how eloquent she is, and trying to talk myself out of acting like a spoiled brat. It’s been well over two years since we split, and we were together for only four fucking months. The woman should have no hold over me whatsoever, and the fact that she does is kind of humiliating.

Jess finishes her toast, and everyone raises their glasses, then she says sweetly, “Jake, did you still want to add something?”

I glance up at her, and she flutters her eyelashes. I rise, lift my glass, and tilt it toward my brother and his lovely bride-to-be-again as I say, “Paul, Izzy, I’m just so happy for you both. Not much to add to Jessica’s wonderful speech, other than to say... Welcome back to the family, Izzy. I couldn’t be happier for you both. To Paul and Izzy.”

As I sit, I glance at Jess, and find her smirking. Yeah, she definitely won the “battle of the speeches.” There’s open triumph in her eyes. As the others start to chat again, she leans forward and whispers, “*That* was for pretending you didn’t see I needed champagne.”

“If that slurred, rambling word-vomit was any in-

dication, more champagne is the last thing you need tonight,” I whisper back. Jess looks like she’s about to leap across the table and rip my face off, so I turn to Isabel and try to slip into her conversation. She’s laughing with Paul about how “lucky” it was that they ran into one another at the vacation home six months ago. I catch the undertone but don’t understand it, so I ask in surprise, “Was that not luck? Did you go out there to catch him on purpose?”

“Oh, no,” she laughs, and then she flicks a meaningful glance to Jess. “It’s a funny story, and you won’t believe it—but it turns out it was all Jess’s doing.”

All roads lead back to Jess Cohen. Of course they fucking do. The woman has a finger in every pie.

“How so?” I ask, but my tone is resigned. I glance at Jess briefly and find she’s smirking at me again.

And then Izzy tells me all about how Jess engineered for her and Paul to arrive at their vacation home for the same weekend away, and how they were both too stubborn to leave, and by the time Monday came around, they were in love again.

“Jess had a hand in bringing us together too,” Abby sighs happily, from across the table. “I was pretty determined that I wasn’t in love with Marcus until Jess tried to set him up with one of the programmers from work. Nothing is more effective for curing denial than hard-core jealousy.”

“Brave of you to intervene in your friends’ lives like that,” I murmur to Jess, and she lifts one perfectly arched eyebrow at me.

“Brave?” she repeats.

“Either situation could’ve worked out very differently.”

“I knew it was worth the risk in both cases,” Jess says, then she leans back in her chair and begins to study her immaculately polished fingernails. Something about her lack of concern for my observation irks me even more, and I lean forward just a little.

“But either scenario could easily have turned into disaster,” I say. “Did you ever think about that before you went about playing God with your friends’ lives?”

“Playing God?” Jess repeats. Her tone rises just as her eyebrows disappear into her hairline, so this is exactly the rise I was looking for.

I shrug and say casually, “Some people might consider what you did in both cases to be...manipulative.”

I’m pretty sure no one was listening to us a minute ago, but in a heartbeat, all of the chatter in the room has stopped. Four shocked sets of eyes are now on me and Jess—and Jess is glaring at me with such intense rage that if I was just a little smarter, I’d be looking for something to hide behind.

Sudden, brutal regret grips me. I can’t believe I let this escalate—but just as I’m trying to figure out how to undo the scene I’ve just made, there’s a sudden shift in Jess’s expression.

Holy shit. And now her big blue eyes shine with the unmistakable gleam of tears.

Jess turns sharply and reaches down for her handbag below her chair. She withdraws her phone and be-

gins to press the screen frantically as if she's texting. She's blinking rapidly, but a smidge of moisture leaks out anyway, and she swipes at it—accidentally smudging her heavy eye makeup.

No one says anything. Perhaps the rest of our friends are in shock too.

"Izzy, I am so sorry," Jess says, raising her gaze. "I forgot I had a date."

The silence has been fraught, but in an instant, it becomes incredibly awkward.

"A date?" Isabel says hesitantly.

"A date," Jess says, as if this is the most normal thing in the world. She picks up her phone again and begins to madly press the screen. "But we're done here, aren't we?"

I suppose we are done. The plans have been discussed, the food has been eaten, toasts have been made. It might even be fine for Jess to leave now, if it weren't so painfully obvious that she's not leaving because we're "done."

The problem with revenge is that it's never as satisfying as you think it's going to be. I wanted to get a reaction out of Jess, to dig the knife in and to twist it a little, because she hurt me, and I wanted her to feel bad. I got exactly what I wanted, but it feels disgusting. I just don't know how to fix this without embarrassing Jess even more... And an embarrassed Jess is likely to be a dangerously unpredictable creature.

There's a flurry of activity happening around the table. Abby and Isabel are trying to convince Jess to

cancel this serious, last-minute, surprise date that Jess is now arguing she absolutely must go on. Paul and Marcus also appear to be convincing Jess that she should cancel her date, without actually telling her that she should cancel her date.

Probably because they're trying to avoid poking the bear. Paul and Marcus are definitely both much smarter than I am.

I'm silent, watching all of this unfold, also trying to figure out exactly what I said that got such a reaction out of her. Was it the manipulation comment? The "playing God" comment? The whole night of awkward tension had built up and up. Did something just get to her?

Maybe she's sick?

Maybe she didn't know I was coming tonight?

Maybe she's been secretly pining after me for two years?

Well, that last one seems unlikely. It was her decision to end our relationship, not mine. I was all in—I had the fucking engagement ring in my underwear drawer, just waiting for the right moment.

I'm still sitting in useless silence right up until Jess leaves. And just as I suspected, the minute the front door closes, all eyes are on me.

"What just happened?" Abby doesn't say the words, she growls them. I clear my throat.

"I didn't mean to upset her—" I say helplessly. I open my hands, because I read somewhere that if you expose your palms to an angry person, you're show-

ing vulnerability and they'll go easy on you. The gesture does nothing to soothe the angry pregnant lady, who rounds on me like she's going to body-slam me.

Isabel approaches from the other side and says sharply, "You upset Jess Cohen. I didn't know anyone *could* upset Jess Cohen. What did you do?"

"She didn't manipulate us," Abby says sharply. "She tried to help us, can't you see that?"

"I know," I say defensively. "I really didn't mean to hurt her. She's clearly oversensitive tonight—"

"Oversensitive!" Abby gasps.

"Jake, do you *want* them to kill you?" Marcus mutters, wincing. I stand, and I throw my hands into the air.

"She did manipulate you guys. I'm glad it worked out for the best but what she did was pretty ballsy, and it all could have ended in disaster. I'm super glad you all ended up together, but what right does she have to interfere in other people's lives like that?"

"If you knew her like we know her," Isabel says, voice shaking with feeling, "you'd understand that her intentions are beautiful. She has a tough exterior, but beneath it, she's one of the most caring, loving people I've ever met. And you upset her tonight, Jake Winton, so you need to fix it before you ruin our day tomorrow. I don't know how you're going to do it, but *you are going to fix it.*"

And there, shimmering in the eyes of my sister-in-law, are the second set of tears I have put in a woman's eyes tonight. I thought I could sit Jess down and have

it out *after* the festivities tomorrow, but apparently, I lack the self-control to keep things civil until then. I sigh heavily, run my hands through my hair.

“You all know that Jess and I have always grated each other.” That’s the understatement of the century. We spent more than a decade clashing, four months fucking and then the past two years pretending the other didn’t exist. Apparently, Jess and I don’t just run hot and cold, we can exist in the same space only as steam or ice. “I’ll go see her now, clear the air and say sorry.”

“Thanks,” Paul says before he sighs. “Jess can be difficult, but so can I. And you get me better than just about anyone, so I know you can handle her.” He gives me a crooked smile. I feel like a heel.

“I really am sorry about this, Paul.”

“I get it. If I had a dollar for every time I said something awkward, we’d be living in a castle of pure gold.”

I slip my wallet into my pocket, scoop my phone off the table and open the Uber app.

“Don’t you want to know her address?” Abby says sharply.

“Uh...”

“She bought a condo. Two years ago.”

Jess and I broke up just before she moved into that place, so she didn’t invite me to the housewarming, but we were definitely together when she was house hunting. I helped Jess pick that apartment, and she actually lived with me while the contractors were remodeling it for her. Abby just has no idea about any of

that, and now I have to pretend I need Jess's address, when I know it by heart because I actually figured I'd wind up living there with her one day.

That's the problem with lies. You tell one, and the next thing you know you're drowning in them. I never wanted to hide our relationship from these people in the first place.

But Jess was adamant that no one know we were ever together, and only in the last few months have I figured out why.