



grow
something.

equilibrium four

christina c. jones

GROW SOMETHING

CHRISTINA C JONES

WARM HUES CREATIVE

CONTENTS

[Info](#)

[Description](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[FWB](#)

[Misc.](#)

[About the Author](#)

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DESCRIPTION

Plant.

Water.

Fertilize.

Grow.

Please note that Grow Something is a short story - a complete beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

Summer

ALWAYS PAYS EXTRA.

That was the name I'd given him in my head, because I didn't know his real one—a practice I'd developed for all my regular customers, whether I knew their names or not. *A Little Musty on Fridays* was just flat out more interesting than “Angie”

As much as I loved my life, my days could *always* use a little more interest.

The market wasn't usually open on Wednesday afternoons, but *Always Pays Extra* was welcome anytime, with a nickname like his. And, of course, there was also the fact that he was fine.

So, so fine.

Almondy.

So, so almondy.

Deep brown skin like that could *always* get my time and attention, so as soon as I spotted him through the back window, standing at the front counter, I dropped the basket I

was using to collect weeds and made my way inside, grabbing a towel on the way to wipe the dirt from my hands.

“You’re a day early,” I piped, bringing a smile to my face. “What’s wrong, you need another tomato so bad it couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

He didn’t answer.

And *that* was when I took the time to really look at him.

Instead of his usual button-up and tie, *Always Pays Extra* was fully decked out—floral jacquard tuxedo jacket, bow tie, cufflinks, *extra* fresh haircut. A damned boutonniere—fresh white calla lilies and vibrant jade green feathers—was pinned to his lapel, so it was it beyond obvious he was supposed to be somewhere a lot fancier than my little farmer’s market community garden co-op thingy.

“Are you... lost?” I asked, then frowned when he let out a bark of laughter in response to my inquiry. “Okay, better question—are you *okay*?”

I didn’t get a real answer to that either, just a heavy sigh before he scrubbed a hand over his head, messing up his perfectly brushed waves. I stood there, waiting, and he stood there... thinking? Or something? But then he finally lifted dejected brown eyes to mine, and spoke.

“It’s my wedding day.”

My eyebrows lifted. We’d been seeing each other for nearly a year—since I first opened this place up—and he just now wanted to reveal that he was engaged this whole time?

These complete strangers just have NO respect for the fact that they might be your boyfriend in your head these days, sheesh.

“Does your bride... want an apple or something?” I asked, confused about why the hell he was *here* instead of um... at his wedding. Once again though, he found humor in a question that wasn't supposed to be funny at all, shaking his head as he laughed.

“No,” he said finally, bringing his gaze back to mine. “My bride... wants a different groom.”

“*Oh, shit!*” I clapped a hand to my mouth and then immediately drew it back, remembering I hadn't washed my hands. “I *so* didn't mean to say that out loud, I'm sorry.”

He shrugged. “No need to apologize. *Oh shit* is... I'd say it's pretty accurate.”

“Yeah it definitely is,” I nodded. “So why did you come *here?*”

I came for you, Summer. I realized I couldn't marry another woman when the love of my life was right here, with plant fertilizer on her lips and possibly a ladybug in her braids. Meet me at the altar in your white dress.

“I didn't know where else to go,” he said, stepping closer to the counter with a heavy sigh. “I had to turn my phone off because I have family, friends, frat brothers all blowing me up, trying to figure out what the hell happened, when *I* don't even know what the hell happened. I don't even know where Josephine is.”

My lip curled up into my nose. “You were gonna marry a woman named Josephine?”

Nigga that's your problem, right there.

“Well, Josie,” he corrected, like that was better. “She sent me a text saying she couldn't do this – couldn't marry me. And nobody has seen her since then.”

I put up my hands. “Wait. Whoa. Hold up – *she* left *you* at the altar?!” I propped my elbow on the counter, leaning to balance my chin on my fist. This had just gotten *very* interesting. “What you do to Josie, man?”

“I didn’t do anything to Josie,” he defended.

“So why she don’t wanna marry you then?” I asked, crossing my arms as I straightened up. “If you were so good to her, uh – what’s your name?”

“Hudson.”

“If you were so good to her *Hudson*, then why did she leave you at the altar?”

I pursed my lips, waiting for his – undoubtedly – bullshit response, ready to dismantle whatever tired excuse he gave for sleeping with the bridesmaids, or whatever he’d done to run that woman off on her wedding day. And he stood there, seemingly dumbfounded, pondering the question before he pushed out another long, heavy sigh.

“Because she’s braver than I am.”

That unexpected response softened my expression, and I tilted my head a little. “What does that mean?”

“It means... neither of us wanted to do this. But deposits were already paid, we’d already gotten the RSVPs, the plane tickets were bought. We weren’t happy, not with each other. Not anymore. But neither of us knew how to call it off.”

“You knew. You were just cowards.”

His eyebrows lifted, but then the corner of his mouth curved into the slightest grin. “I guess I can’t really argue against that assessment from my current position, huh?”

“Nah, you really can’t. Shout out to Josephine for being the smart one.”

“*Damn*,” he chuckled. “I can’t get a little sympathy or something, you’re just gonna roast me full blast?”

I grinned. “Yeah. Pretty much. Can’t have one of my best customers out here wallowing in self-pity, can I?”

“There it is,” he nodded. “That’s why I came here when I didn’t know where else to go. I knew you’d put a smile on my face – you always do.”

I drew my head back. “Me? Really? I... always thought I was friggin’ awkward every time we interacted, but if you say I made you smile, hey... that is a byproduct I can live with.”

“I appreciate that.”

“You should. And you know what...” I grabbed one of the paper sacks we used as shopping bags, loading it with a few of the heirloom tomatoes I knew he liked. I folded the top of the bag, then handed it to him across the counter. “This week, your nightshades are on me.”

“I appreciate *that* too,” he said, accepting the bag. “I sure do wish you sold liquor though.”

I bowed my head a little, leaning over the counter. “I mean... my granny keeps a lil’ bottle of Jim Beam in the back office, if you... you know... have the fortitude for brown liquor.”

“Brown liquor is the only kind I recognize.”

“Well in that case, you come right on back here,” I said, using a hooking motion with my finger to urge him toward me.

But he didn’t move.

His mouth hooked up in a smirk. “Are we... we’re really doing this? You’re serious?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s a drink, Hudson. Not a kidney transplant.”

“With the day I’ve had, a kidney transplant doesn’t sound that bad.”

“Which is *exactly* why you need a glass or five,” I laughed, coming from around the counter to go to the front door.

“Gonna turn this,” I said, flipping the lock, “Because it was already supposed to be that way anyway, and then you are coming with me, to the back.”

“Lead the way... Ms. Never Wears a Nametag,” he said, his gaze settling on my shirt for a moment before coming back to my face. He was being a good sport, which was commendable, but I could still see the devastation in his eyes. Even if they did both know the relationship was past expiration, well on its way to growing mold, it *had* to hurt to wake up thinking you were getting married, only to find out you... weren’t.

“It’s Summer,” I told him, stopping in front of him.

“Summer Rain. And before you ask, no, my parents were not Carl Thomas fans, but I appreciate the flattery of you thinking I’m young enough to be named after that song.”

His face screwed up. “How did you know...?”

“Because *everybody* thinks they’re the first one to comment on it, and it’s never *not* annoying. You’re on my good side right now. I’m trying to help you keep it that way.”

Hudson’s expression softened into a grin that could be packaged and sold as a supplement to encourage vaginal moisture. “Well aren’t you generous?”

“I do what I can. Follow me.”

Very early that morning, my grandmother and my father had tag-team roasted me about the length of my shorts, with granny declaring my likelihood of getting pneumonia in the ass startlingly high. I felt vindicated now though, with Hudson's eyes carefully following the back and forth of my hips as I led him to the office to drink up Granny's liquor.

There was a lesson in this, about never conforming to the whims of haters, lest they talk you out of a blessing.

I could've been leading this man to a much-needed drink *without* my ass on perfect display, in jean shorts that would've made Beyoncé proud.

Upsetting.

"Have a seat, friend," I told him, pointing to the little seating area Granny had insisted on in the office, which was only ever used when she was entertaining her homegirls. Reaching into the refrigerator under the desk, I grabbed a half-full bottle of Jim Beam Black, then pulled two glasses from the cabinet behind the desk. "So what are we drinking to?" I asked, pouring a glass for both of us.

"The first motherfucker to realize that putting old grains and dirty water in a jug would make you forget your problems," he responded, accepting the glass I handed over when I joined him. "Here's to the original drunk."

"Here, here."

We tapped glasses and then lifted them to our mouths. I hadn't been stingy with his – there were three shots worth of liquor in that glass – and he downed half of it in one gulp, without flinching.

Josie. Josie, Josie, Josie. Why wouldn't you want to marry a man such as this?

“Tell me more about this whole, *we knew we weren't happy, but we weren't getting any younger* thing. Exactly which of your qualities had she decided she could no longer live with?”

His eyebrow lifted. “I... hell, I don't know. I guess... she'd probably say I was messy, but I'd say she was a neat freak. I didn't think we were ready for kids, she did. She was a spender, I'm a saver. I'm decisive – she likes to mull. I can go with the flow – she likes to have a spreadsheet itinerary for the weekend. We just... didn't fit together anymore.”

“Couples with opposite personalities make it work all the time. The differences make it interesting.”

He shrugged, then swigged the rest of his drink. “Maybe for some people. I guess we were missing whatever connecting piece made it possible for them. It's like... shit, I thought she was unhappy because she was waiting for a ring. It had been two years, and I wanted to be with her, so I figured it was time. But... she still wasn't happy. She said yes, and she planned a wedding, but we weren't touching each other. Barely talking. She pulled back, and I... couldn't bring myself to chase her.”

“That... is really fucked up,” I said, finishing off my drink too, and then reaching behind me for the bottle to fill us up again. “Hearing you tell it, you'd really think it was all her fault.”

Hudson's eyes widened. “No. *No*. It's... it's not all on her. It's on both of us in some ways. In others, just on her. In others, just on me.” He stopped speaking to empty his refilled glass down his throat in one gulp. “Fuck it... maybe it's all the way on me.”

“I doubt that.”

“You know,” he drawled on, like he hadn’t even heard me, “Maybe it’s all the way on me.”

“Already said that, boo.”

“I wasn’t making her happy. I tried everything too. I went to empowerment brunches. I bought bundles. I stood in line to buy body glitter for her cause she had to work. I got water kicked in my face at a concert for her, man.”

Damn, Josie. He had you on the floor at Formation World Tour girl?!

“I rubbed feet. Didn’t push sex. Always gave head when we *did* do it. Gave her alone time when she needed it. Whatever she wanted, I... I fucking *tried*.”

I pushed out a sigh, shaking my head as I slow-sipped my liquor. “Hudson... she just didn’t want you,” I told him, bluntly. “And that’s not about you. I mean... *it is* about you, but it isn’t. Haven’t you been with somebody before that checked all your boxes but they still just... didn’t do it for you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get enga—oh... *shit*.”

“Oh shit indeed.” I reached forward, putting a comforting hand on his knee. “You did all this stuff trying to make her happy, when you should’ve dropped her ass because *you* weren’t happy. But nobody wants to say that shit. Nobody wants to be the reason somebody’s feelings are hurt. But look at you now. Drinking liquor in a back office, served by a girl who didn’t even wash her hands before she touched these glasses. That’s just nasty, man.”

“Summer, I—”

“Wait a minute, let me finish. Both of you are stupid. You wasted *years* of prime Tinder hookup eligibility being with

somebody who made you miserable, just for the fuck of it. I need you to do better next time.”

Hudson scoffed. “Next time? There will *not* be a next time.”

Oh, shit. Goddamn Josephine created a new fuckboy for me to know better than to deal with but do it anyway.

“So you... you’re just gonna... okay. Aiight. It’s fine. It’s okay. It’s cool.”

“What?”

I shrugged. “I just... I had never gotten corny vibes from you until literally just now, but I mean it’s cool, you know. Live your life. Go full Drake. Let one fucked up relationship ruin you and all that. Sure. Of course. It’s cool.”

“My fiancée sent me a text breaking up with me thirty minutes before our wedding. Like two hours ago,” Hudson drawled, leaning forward. “I think I can take a week or so to think love is a scam.”

“Sure you can,” I nodded. “Rap about it in a Jamaican accent, whatever you gotta do man. Black men need therapy too.”

“Damn, you are really not letting up off my neck, huh?”

I grinned. “Nope. But I thought you said that’s why you came... unless you *really* came for something else?”

I could tell the liquor was starting to settle in for him, just from his eyes. They’d taken on that glassy sheen, eyelids slightly lowered. As my hand went a little further up his leg though, they widened in surprise.

“I... uh... I don’t...”

“Stop,” I laughed, sitting back in my own seat. “I’m messing with you, Hudson. I know you wouldn’t fuck another woman the same night your bride abandoned you. You might *want to*,” I amended. “But you aren’t that guy.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“It isn’t bad or good, it just is. You’d probably consider that she might change her mind. You don’t want to go home to find her waiting there, waiting for you, but you just came from letting another woman use your face as a chair.”

He shook his head. “She’s not changing her mind.”

“She might.”

“She might,” he agreed. “But it’s still over.”

“If you say so.”

“I do,” Hudson insisted. “It was bad enough I sat in relationship purgatory this long without doing shit about it. What would it make me if I saw this shit for what it really was, and then still went back?”

“Human.”

“I was gonna go with ‘a dumbass’.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive,” I laughed. “But I don’t think you’d be a dumbass any more than someone who takes an extra study session before a test. Just means you haven’t learned the lesson yet.”

“What a nice way to phrase ‘dumbass’.”

“Because I’m nice ass person, duh. And *you* are beating yourself up too much about this. And wherever she is, she’s probably doing the same, like she didn’t do both of you a fucking favor. You should tell her thank you.”

Hudson scoffed. “I should thank her, for staying around when I wasn’t even making her happy?”

“You can’t make an unhappy person happy. No matter who you are. What you do. You’re not responsible for that. You’re responsible for... being faithful, if that’s what y’all agreed on. Being supportive. Being a team player. Good dick. Etc, etc. But ‘making’ her happy? Nothing to do with you, bruh.”

“Ah, hell. You’re on *that* shit.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “I’m on *that* shit, because *that* shit is true. A person could be doing everything in the world to please you, but if you’re not in a place to receive it, what’s the damn point?”

“She was happy when we met,” Hudson argued. “And happy for the first year. And then.... She wasn’t. I was there. I was with her. Now I’m not supposed to take responsibility for it?”

“Unless you were going upside her head, forcing her to be with you... no. You’re not. I know that’s tough to swallow, because when these things end, it’s supposed to be someone’s ‘fault’. But sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes it just doesn’t fucking work anymore, because it just *doesn’t*.”

“That doesn’t *work* for me.”

“It’s gonna have to! Because what... you’re gonna spend three months, six months, a year, wallowing in this shit? For *what*? Penance?”

“Maybe so,” he snapped, scrubbing his hands over his face as he sat back. “I... I’ve watched her... *wither*. She’s not the woman she was when we met, and I couldn’t do anything. Why the *fuck* should I get to just walk away?”

“Because she does. I guarantee you, wherever she is right now, she probably feels awful for hurting you. For embarrassing you. For wasting money on a wedding. But I *promise* you, she does not regret walking away, because she knows its what she needed to do. It doesn’t mean you were a bad guy, it means *she* wasn’t happy in the situation she was in, so she’s changing it. Don’t be so self-centered that you make *her* emancipation about you.”

Hudson shook his head, but didn’t say anything. I could tell he was seething about my words, but I was only relaying the truth – the truth as *I* knew it, at least.

“Look... you say its over for real this time, you’re not going back, all that. So that makes you a single man. No matter what *I* say, you’re going to take however long you need to... do whatever. But – if you’re gonna be single, you cannot be worried about what Josie has going on. She and her family and friends have that under control. You worry about *you*. What do *you* need?”

Across from me, he let out a long, deep sigh. “I need... hell, I don’t know.”

“Yes you do.”

“I don’t.”

“*You do*. So say it. What do you need?”

His face pulled into a frown, eyes going up toward the ceiling. It took him a second, but then he spoke.

“I need... to know my time and attention and care... mean something. I need to know I can nurture something without it... withering and dying in front of me.”

Okay.

I had to take a deep breath myself after that one, but I wasn't no punk so I tucked my little emotions away.

“You ain't said nothin' but a word,” I told him, standing up and extending a hand to him. “You need to *grow something*. And you're in just the right place for that.”

He raised an eyebrow, but stood and followed me on tipsy feet. Back down the hall, out the side door, and straight to the “community” area of the garden. These spots were reserved for people who paid a small monthly fee to plant their own things, in the kind of space that wasn't – usually – readily available in the city.

“So,” I said, turning to face him once we'd stop in front of an empty 4x4 plot. “You're... not really dressed for this, honestly.”

He shrugged, and then started taking things off – probably fueled more than a little by the six shots worth of bourbon I'd fed him, but I wasn't complaining. That nice tuxedo jacket got dropped in the dirt, and so did the button-up he was wearing underneath. Stripping those left him in just a ribbed tank and his nice pants and shoes – a look that was utterly ridiculous, but somehow... still a little sexy.

Maybe because his arms were so thick and firm and I could see his nipples through his shirt.

“Okay, so problem solved I guess,” I said, forcing my eyes to his face. “This will be your plot. You can plant whatever you want, from what we have available here, but if I can make a suggestion...”

He nodded. “Please do.”

“Spinach. You buy it every time you stop by, so I know you eat it. And it only takes about four weeks to be able to

harvest some varieties.”

“That’s it?”

I smiled. “That’s it. In thirty or so days, you are going to have the best fucking salad greens Mahogany Heights has ever seen, and you will have grown them yourself.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Now come on, get your ass down here. Let’s get to planting.”

Hudson had no issues following my directions. He made his row carefully, sowed his seeds, covered them lightly with soil and then gave them a bit of water to get started. He was down in the dirt, pants and shoes ruined, tipsy as hell, but... probably much happier than he’d been when he came to the door, even if it was just temporary.

Well... it was definitely just temporary. Because someone was ringing the bell at the front door of the shop, and it only took a quick glance at the security camera through the app on my phone to know “someone” was here for Hudson. Tuxedo, jade green accents, fresh haircut. Another member of the *too fine to be worth a damn* crew.

While Hudson worked on planting another row of spinach, I got up and dusted my hands off to head inside. At the front door, I opened it just enough to speak.

“Can I help you?” I asked, although I knew I could.

TFTBWAD nodded. “My brother, Hudson... we’re looking for him, and according to the GPS on his phone, he’s here.”

“Damn, GPS tracking, huh? Even with the phone off?”

His eyebrow went up. “How do you know his phone is off?”

“Educated guess. Doesn’t sound like he wanted to be found. You said you’re his brother?”

“I did.”

“His *brother* brother, or his ‘we survived the psychopaths and crossed the burning sands together’ brother?”

“Biological,” TFTBWAD answered. “Hudson is my little brother, I’m Howard.”

“So *you* say.”

Howard’s eyes narrowed. “Huh?”

“Listen, *Howard* – if that’s really your name – obviously this Hudson person didn’t want to be bothered with anyone if you’re *here* looking for him. So, unless you tell me you’re going to take his drunk ass home and get him cleaned up and in bed, away from all firearms and unlocked windows and drugs – prescription or otherwise.... I’m gonna have to send you on your way.”

It took Howard a second to process, but then he nodded. “Like I said... that’s my little brother. We’ll make sure he’s taken care of.”

“We?”

“My wife and I, and the rest of our family.”

I sucked my teeth. “Oh.” Pulling the door open, I allowed him to step in. “And just how cute is this Josie chick? Is she fine enough for how dramatic he’s being?”

Howard stopped, brows furrowed in confusion. “Huh?”

“Hudson is right out here, this way,” I countered, smiling. Taking him by the arm, I steered him out back to the garden where his brother was working on his fourth row of spinach.

“What the *fuck*?” Howard muttered, then turned to me like he was looking for an answer. “What the hell is he doing?”

“Planting spinach.”

“In a damn tuxedo?!”

I shrugged. “That’s better than naked, right?” I offered, only to have it met with a deep sigh.

“I suppose. Especially if he came here drunk.”

My eyes went a little wider about that, but I kept my lips buttoned together as Howard went to retrieve his brother. I stayed where I was, giving them the benefit of relative privacy as they went back and forth, with Hudson finally agreeing to be helped up from the ground, and somewhat dusted off. Howard collected his shirt and jacket, then shepherded Hudson back in my direction.

“Check back in about a week,” I told him as they passed me. “Your seeds will have sprouted.”

Hudson nodded, wearing a goofy-ass, drunken grin I would’ve pulled out my phone to snap a picture of if big brother wasn’t there, scowling.

“Whatever purchases he made, you can go right ahead and void them. He’s not in a state to agree to anything.”

I narrowed my eyes at *Howard*. “What do you think, I’m taking advantage of a customer?”

“You had him in here with the door locked, what should I think? You knew his ass was toasted – it’s obvious.”

“He got drunk *here*, for your information,” I snapped, following them back into the shop. “And he hasn’t purchased anything.” I grabbed the bag of tomatoes I’d put together for him, putting it in Hudson’s hand. “Everything was on the house today.”

Hudson nodded. “Yeah, nigga. It was all on the house. Thank you Summit.”

“*Summer*,” I corrected, biting back a laugh. “It’s Summer.”

“You’re welcome Supper,” Hudson slurred. “With your fine ass. She fine ain’t she Homer?”

“Homer” didn’t reply – he steered Hudson out of the front door, and into a car I hadn’t noticed at first. I didn’t open the door, but I watched through the window until they pulled off. It wasn’t until then that I locked the door and headed back out to the garden.

From the supply shed, I pulled out one of the signs we used to mark off the plots. I took a few minutes to designate Hudson’s 4x4 spinach garden, then updated it on the computer as well, making sure it was set.

Because I knew *Always Pays Extra* would be back to harvest.

CHAPTER TWO

Hudson

Shit.

I didn't have the firmest grasp on the last few days, but if my pounding headache, musty ass armpits, and sour mouth were clues, I'd been on quite a ride.

Through hell.

I pulled myself upright in the bed, taking a second for the dizziness to wear off before I looked around. Looked for any sign that Josie had been here.

There was none.

A quick glance at the open closet said she hadn't even been back yet for her damn clothes, which was honestly a blow to the chest. Josie was all about those clothes, those shoes, those bags... or at least she *had* been. For her to leave them here meant she wasn't trying to deal with me at all, for any reason.

Which was something I couldn't wrap my head around.

I knew I hadn't offended her – I couldn't have, because we hadn't even been fucking talking to each other, not more than what it took to decide on dinner or whether I was watching the game in the living room or bedroom that night.

It was bad.

Really bad.

So bad I wasn't even mad about her not going through with the wedding, I was just... in goddamn limbo.

And I wanted her to come and get her shit, so I could stop being on the lookout for her.

Movement in the doorway caught my attention, and I looked up to see my sister-in-law, Farrah, standing there. "If you're *finally* dragging your ass out of the bed, there's coffee in the kitchen, okay?"

"Finally?" I let out a dry chuckle. "It's been a day or two, chill."

I waited for a smile to break out on her face, but it didn't. Instead, even deeper concern bloomed in her eyes.

"Hudson... it's been *six* days. Not one or two."

With that, she stepped away, leaving me to process that news on my own.

Six days?

I couldn't remember any of that, but the date on my watch confirmed it.

I was supposed to become somebody's husband six days ago, and it ended up not happening.

Thank God.

I looked around for my cell phone, finding it on the floor underneath the bed, completely drained of any battery. I stuck it on the charger and then dragged my ass to the bathroom, flinching at what I saw in the mirror – a nigga that looked

exactly like he didn't know where the last six days of his life had gone.

Addressing my hygiene took quite a bit more time than my usual morning routine because I'd let it go so long. Once I was done though, I felt a lot better – alive enough to venture out of my room after I grabbed the phone off the charger, into where I knew any number of my family members were waiting.

To my relief, it was just Farrah.

She pulled off the headset she was wearing and stood when she noticed me, immediately coming to where I was.

“You hungry or anything?” she asked. “I could fix you something.”

I shook my head. “Nah, I'm good. But thank you.” I took a seat at the counter, glancing at my phone now that it was powered on, and going nuts with messages. Farrah took it from my hands.

“This negative energy is the last thing you need,” she explained. “I'll check for any pertinent messages and delete the other crap.”

She wasn't going to get any complaints about it from me. I already knew the bulk of those notifications were from nosey folks I had no desire to answer to, and I trusted Farrah to distinguish the difference – she worked in that capacity for her husband, Howard.

While she handled that, I got up, fixing myself a cup of coffee. If six days had passed since the wedding that hadn't happened, it meant *I* was due back at work in a few days. I needed to get my head together.

Reaching for the canister of sugar on the counter, my eyes landed on a brown paper sack. Curious about the contents, I

grabbed it, opening to a sight that brought something close to a smile.

Tomatoes, streaked with the signature black and dark green coloring of their heirloom variety – Black Krimms. My *favorite* type.

Summer knew.

Just the thought of her name brought her image to mind – pretty as fuck, with smooth, dark brown skin, enigmatic slanted eyes, full lips. Ass for days. In the time I'd been frequenting her... community garden, farmer's market thing... I'd seen her go through several hairstyles, but this current one, the braids... that was my favorite.

Very... pullable.

And *this* was the reason I couldn't feel *too* sorry for myself about Josie walking away from our wedding. Sure, a conversation would've been nice, but we were so checked out from the relationship that I'd done all this "noticing" of Summer with little to no guilt about it.

Josie didn't know my favorite tomatoes.

Of course I recognized how unfair it was to draw that particular comparison, but my relationship was dead and buried now anyway, so why not?

"Hudson..."

I glanced up to find Farrah looking at me, a grim expression on her face. "What's up? What's wrong?" I asked, my eyes landing on my phone in her hands.

"There are a few texts here from Josie. She wants to know a time when you won't be here, so she can come and get her stuff."

My eyebrows went up. “That’s all? Just... when can she get her stuff?”

Farrah nodded. “Sorry.”

“No, nothing to be sorry about,” I told her, shaking my head. “That’s fine. Text her back, tell her she can come now. I’m going out.”

THE SUNLIGHT FELT DIFFERENT ON MY SKIN.

But, after being cooped up for six days – drinking, apparently, based on the interrogation Farrah launched before I left – that made sense. It also seemed like everybody was staring at me. *Laughing* at me for being the dude who got left at the altar. These days, that wasn’t even far-fetched, especially considering one of Josie’s friends had taken the story to social media. She hadn’t named names, but it was easy enough to figure out. And of course, she’d exaggerated details and flat out lied in some places to make Josie out to be a saint.

Or Josie had lied.

Either way, it was out there, and there wasn’t shit I could do about it other than keep it pushing. Something more interesting among our peer group would happen, and this non-story would fade to black – just like we had.

My trip outside took me from my condo in Blackwood down to Mahogany Heights – a neighborhood I was starting to prefer more than the city. I got coffee at an outpost of Urban Grind, preferred my soul food from Pot Liquor, wouldn’t dream of letting anybody other than Troy at Fresh Cuts bring a pair of clippers near my head.

And, after popping into *Grown* one time to grab a few things so I wouldn't have to venture to my usual grocery store... I couldn't see myself buying produce anywhere else.

Something about the woman at the counter being fine as hell was a great selling point.

In fact, as soon as I walked through the door my eyes seemed to seek her out like a beacon. Another pair of shorts that left those long legs on perfect display, braids hanging down to her ass, and a tee shirt with "*grown.*" stamped right across her breasts.

Yes indeed she was.

When she finally looked up from the customer she was helping and noticed me, she smiled.

"Hudson. I was wondering when you'd be back to check on your spinach."

Despite how I was feeling, I couldn't help returning her smile. "Yeah. Right. The spinach."

"Well, come on then. Let's go see how it's doing."

She took off, like she knew I would follow – and of course, I followed. I'd let an ass like that lead me a whole lot of places, now that I was officially a single man again. As if she was reading my mind, Summer glanced back, wearing the slick smirk of a woman who knew exactly the effect she was having.

I liked that about her.

I liked that a *lot*.

"So... here we are."

She'd stopped at a specific place, proudly gesturing toward the ground. I looked at what she was showing me, then glanced around at the other plots, wondering if this was some kind of joke.

Those barely visible sprouts *had* to be a joke.

"This is... it?" I asked, kneeling closer to the ground, and squinting once I was down there. Maybe I'd been drunker than I thought and planted this shit wrong.

"Bruh-bruh, you planted those seeds what... less than a week ago? This looks great. They sprouted fast!"

I blew out a sigh as I straightened to a stand. "I... guess I expected something else. Something... *more*. This looks like I sprinkled some parsley on something on the ground. For Instagram. Actually, let me just..." I pulled out my phone to snap a picture of this *bullshit*, and Summer laughed, covering the lens with her hand as she stepped closer to me.

"Don't do this spinach like that, okay?" she giggled. "It needs time, like anything else, Mr. Impatient. I know you want to feel like you did something, but you're going to have to give it a few more days. They're little spinach... fetuses right now, not even babies. You wouldn't roast a premature baby, would you?"

"I won't be *roasting* anything at this rate, goddamn."

"You're at a six about this, Hudson, and I need you to bring it to like a two please, alright?" she asked, before her lips spread into yet another smile. "Do I need to take you back to the office again? What's up?"

I shrugged, shaking my head. "I just... I came here thinking I would have something to do. Keep busy, keep my mind off... other things."

Understanding muted a bit of the amusement in her eyes. “Right. Well... I’ll tell you what – when people can’t pay for their plot, or seeds, or whatever, they can kinda... work it off, right? Weeding, watering, garden pest duty, etc. You wanna do some of that?”

“I... sure. Yeah. Why not?”

Summer threw her hands up. “I mean, you don’t have to. I’m just trying to help *you* out. If you don’t want to do it...”

“Nah, it’s good,” I assured her. “That sounds perfect. Show me what to do.”

Maybe I hadn’t noticed it because I was drunk last time, but it smelled like shit out here.

Literally.

Summer explained that it was the fresh compost and manure that super-packed the soil in the garden with all sorts of essential nutrients that the plants needed, but that didn’t make the odor any better. Still, I suffered through it – in gloves – doing whatever was needed to keep myself busy, and keep my mind off whatever the fuck Josie was doing.

Well... mostly.

I hadn’t even seen her face since she’d decided we *wouldn’t* be spending the rest of our lives together. I knew she had homegirls, sure, so it wasn’t exactly surprising she’d stayed somewhere else. But what was irking me – what I *could not* tamp away from the back of my mind was whether the nigga she’d told me I didn’t need to worry about, was a nigga I should’ve been worried about.

Don’t get me wrong.

I *always* had my eyes on ol’ boy.

Her “brother” from another mother *and* father, meaning there wasn’t any goddamn blood relation and I never liked how he looked at her. When I first him, after Josie and I had gotten hot and heavy, I had to set some shit straight with me, and got told he was just “seeing how serious I was about her”.

Bullshit.

He was testing me, to see just how many lingering hugs, “innocent” kisses, and “playful” ass taps I would take.

The answer was “*motherfucker, I will knock your head off your shoulders if you touch her like that again and I am not fucking playing, try me.*”

I got scolded for “scaring” her “friend”.

That whole situation required too many quotation marks to explain for me to believe there was any possible way that her “best friend” hadn’t been knee deep in her pussy on what was supposed to be our wedding night.

But it was fine.

Really.

No... for real, it was.

Obviously the shit with me and her hadn’t worked, and I was glad it hadn’t gone further than it did, but... *still.*

The possibility of her and Eric pissed me off, because she’d assured me that *wasn’t* a possibility, and I trusted her with that. So if she’d *broken* that trust any of the nights she stayed over with “a friend” then that put a whole other spin on this fucked up — “Hudson?”

The sound of Summer’s voice – and her pretty ass face – broke me out of my thoughts. “Yeah?”

“I think this soil is tilled enough,” she said, taking the handle of the tiller from my hands. “And, it’s closing time. You’re all done.”

My first reaction was to glance up – at the bright blue sky.

Summer laughed. “Very funny, but you know as well as I do that we close at four on Tuesdays – and it’s already four-thirty. I had a few people lingering, and you looked like you were over here working something out.”

“Nah, it wasn’t like... okay, maybe a little,” I admitted.

“See there?” she teased, walking off to put the tool away. While she was gone, I pulled off one of my gloves so I could retrieve my cell phone from my pocket, checking to see if I had any messages.

I did.

From Farrah.

Apparently, Josie and *goddamn Eric* were still at my place, packing up her shit. While Josie *did* have a lot of shit, I hadn’t expected it to take this long, especially considering I’d been gone for hours at this point.

Exactly how much inconvenience was I supposed to accept to be a “good” ex?

And did I really give a fuck about that?

“You... are *still* here,” Summer quipped as she approached me again. When she stopped, she propped her hands on her hips. “So what’s going on? You and *Josephine* finally have that talk?”

My eyebrows went up. “What talk?”

“So you *haven't* then.” She shook her head. “What happened instead? Why are you here messing up fresh sneakers instead of wallowing in your heartbreak at home?”

“Because... she's there,” I admitted. “Getting her stuff.”

“And whose idea was it for you to not be there? Yours or hers?”

I sighed. “Hers.”

Summer cringed. “Ouch. And you trust her alone in your place after a breakup like this?”

“She's not alone. Her friend is there. Her *male* friend.”

“Does her male friend like dick?”

“Her male friend likes *her*.”

“Oh *honey*,” Summer crooned, stepping toward me with her arms out. “You need a hug?”

I need some ass.

“And don't you get fresh with me either,” Summer warned, like she'd been reading my mind again, and I gladly accepted her embrace.

She was so damn *warm*.

“That nigga isn't stealing your cologne or anything, is he?” Summer asked, pulling back from the hug. “You know folks be stealing these days.”

I laughed. “Nah, my sister-in-law is there, and Farrah isn't letting shit get past her that isn't supposed to. Howard isn't either, actually. He just got there.”

“Right,” she nodded. “You have that good support system. It's important.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It is. But... while they’re *supporting*, I guess I’ve gotta find something else to do.”

I wasn’t throwing any hints – at least not on purpose – but those words made Summer grin. “*Fine*, Hudson. You can come upstairs with me to pass the time until your ex and her new boyfriend finish collecting her stuff. Come on.”

I wanted to discuss that “*new boyfriend*” stuff, but she didn’t give me an opportunity – again, she was moving without waiting for me to respond. I followed her back into the store, where she locked up, then through a door I hadn’t even noticed before to get “upstairs”.

To her apartment.

“Shoes off at the door,” she told me as I stepped in behind her. “I’m taking a shower. Don’t sit on anything unless you’re taking one too.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So... so you want me to just stand here?”

“I damn sure don’t want fertilizer on anything in my clean apartment, so... yeah. Or, like I said, you can take a shower too,” she said, smirking.

“And then what?” I asked. “Put on the same dirty clothes?”

“I have a washing machine and a dryer. You can wear your towel while you’re waiting for them to finish.”

“I feel like you’re just trying to get me naked.”

“You say that like it’s a problem. *Is it* a problem, Hudson? Am I about to find out that Josie *really* pulled out of this wedding because of a dick deficit or something?”

I scoffed. “*Hell* nah.”

Instead of moving further into the apartment to take her shower, she came back to where I was standing. “Then, again... what’s the problem?”

“There’s not a problem.”

She shook her head. “There definitely is though. You see... if you were really about this life... if you were really ready for what I’m offering here... you’d already be out of your clothes.”

“What exactly are you offering?”

“Pussy, Hudson.” She grinned. “But you already knew that. But you’re not ready to screw someone else, even though you’re mad at Josie.”

I frowned. “How do you figure that?”

“You’re not inside of me right now,” she answered, very simply, like it was obvious. “And there’s nothing wrong with not being ready – your long-term relationship ended a week ago. Your ex is at her place with the one she told you not to worry about, getting her things. It’s a lot to process.”

“What are you,” I scoffed. “A therapist or something?”

“I wanted to be.”

“And why aren’t you?”

“Because I killed my husband. Literally.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Literally?”

“Literally. In my defense, he was trying to kill me. Didn’t try hard enough though, I guess.”

“You’re serious?”

“Deadass. No pun intended.”

I shook my head, seeing her in... not necessarily a different light, but... a *different* light. “So... you decided to start gardening instead of becoming a therapist?”

“I learned how to garden in prison.”

“You’re serious?”

“You asked that already,” Summer laughed. “But... yes. The judge thought killing him wasn’t necessary – obviously, I disagreed. I got a few years. Got out with a good lawyer and better behavior, and now here I am. On probation. And now you know the vegetable pusher’s secret. No hard feelings if you want to turn and run the other way. Felonies *are* a bit of a turnoff.”

“Nah,” I shook my head. “It’s not like that. It’s just...”

“A lot to process when you’re already processing a lot. I get it. I’ll let you out.”

“Could you hold up a second?” I asked, raising my hands. I wasn’t sure if she realized it or not, but her whole breezy demeanor had cracked – right along with her voice.

“I’m sorry,” she said, breaking our gaze to look at the ceiling, the doorway, anywhere but at me. “I don’t even know why I told you that. I don’t... *tell* people. I guess I didn’t want you to feel fucked up alone.”

I chuckled. “Damn. That’s what you think of me? That I’m fucked up?”

“Aren’t you?” she asked. “I’m pretty sure I read an exaggerated version of your breakup on social media.”

“Damn.”

“Don’t worry. It was glowing, compared to the story my husband’s family spun about me. Lucky for me I had that good

lawyer to make them stop.”

“*Damn.*”

“Don’t look it up?” she asked. “Please?”

The glossiness in her eyes made me nod even though I would’ve agreed to it anyway. “Are you hungry?”

“What?” she asked, obviously caught off guard by my question.

I shrugged. “Are you hungry? I’m starving. I can grab us something to eat while you’re showering.”

“You don’t have to make excuses to leave, Hudson.”

“It’s not an excuse, damn. I’m hungry. And my ex is still at my place. So... we may as well eat, right?”

She stared at me for a second before her tense shoulders sank, and she nodded.

“Yeah. Why not?”

CHAPTER THREE

Summer

“Girl, do you have a booty short factory up in that closet of yours or something?” my grandmother asked as I emerged from my apartment to open the market for the day. It was early as hell – too early for a witty comeback, so I kept moving past her to the door.

“Good morning to you too, dearest grandmother,” I tossed over my shoulder as I unlocked the door and flipped the vinyl sign in the window to *open*.

“Is that you talking, or ya’ ass?”

I hefted a sigh. “My ass. Left cheek, right cheek, etcetera and so forth,” I droned, heading back in her direction.

She chuckled over that, holding up a steaming Urban Grind mug. “Come get this coffee doll. You sure as hell need it.”

I did.

I really, really did.

And not even for any fun reasons, like getting my back blown out until the wee hours of the morning by Hudson’s fine ass – he was being stingy with the dick.

Or... dealing with the dissolution of his long-term relationship, coping with his heartbreak or something.

Either way.

I was as sexless as ever, and to add insult to injury, I wasn't sleeping well.

Sleeping worse than usual.

Sleeping *well* wasn't a thing that happened around here, not for me.

The whole "killed a man" thing didn't exactly inspire sweet dreams.

"Thanks, old lady," I teased, taking a seat on the counter as I accepted the mug she'd offered. My eyes closed as I took a careful sip to avoid burning my tongue. It would take a bit for the caffeine to kick in, but damn if I didn't instantly feel a little better.

"You're welcome lil' girl. You want a lil' something extra?" she asked, grinning as she pulled open her purse to show me the bottle of liquor in her purse.

"Really mama? The sun is barely up?" My father's deep voice made Granny roll her eyes as she pulled the bottle into the open, giving her own coffee a generous pour.

"It's five o'clock somewhere lil' nigga," she quipped.

He sighed. "Yeah, *here*. As in five in the morning."

"Five o'clock is five o'clock." Granny shrugged, frowning as Vick – my father – stepped in to plant kisses on both our cheeks.

"Let's stay *relatively* sober today, please Mama?" he asked, confiscating the bottle, against her objections. All three

of us knew it wasn't her only one, but it made him feel better to take it, so I didn't say anything about it.

"I'll have my eye on her," I assured him, and she sucked her teeth.

"I'll have my eyes on *you*, lil' miss hot-in-the-ass. You see those shorts Vick?!"

I gasped. "Whose side are you on?!"

"The side where I'm the only one minding *my* business," she answered, as Vick laughed.

"Ladies – I have to get out of here. Take care of each other, please?"

I rolled my eyes at my granny before I looked to my father, handsome as ever in his Sergeant's uniform. "I'll make sure ya mama keeps her lush tendencies under control, Officer Rain."

"And *I*," Granny interjected, dripping with attitude. "Will make sure ya daughter doesn't kill another nigga, how bout' that?"

My mouth dropped open. "I *knew* I should've hidden this lil wig you got on last time you wore it, this gray wet-n-wavy got you way too sassy today old woman!"

"Goodbye ladies," my father called as he headed, and a customer headed in.

And with that, my day was started.

Just like most days, because my life now was very routine. Very dull, by design. By *my* design. I'd learned to thrive on predictability and sameness. Found comfort in it, actually. Now though, there was one little variable I'd allowed in, like an idiot.

Is Hudson coming today?

For the last nine days, the answer had been: *no, he's not.*

And I was a damn fool for expecting it – or even *wanting* it – now that he knew my history. He was nice about it that night, and we'd eaten take-out and watched TV and honestly had a nice little vibe. But there was no way he hadn't looked me up as soon as he left that night.

He hadn't been back since then.

Despite my attempts to be the same old Summer, I was feeling exactly how his spinach looked – upright, but noticeably withered. A little droopy.

Which is ridiculous, bitch. Get it together!

The market and garden were always popping on Thursdays, so I had plenty to keep me busy. We didn't close until eight tonight, which meant I had thirteen hours to get through, with periodic assistance from Granny and the local college students I hired on as helpers for the long days.

I was too busy to think about Hudson.

To wonder if he was really going to just let those plants die.

Luckily, the day didn't drag. Before I knew it, it was already seven-thirty, and things were winding down. My helpers – and Granny – had left for the day, and the trickle of customers had slowed to a crawl. In fact, I was dangerously close to nodding off when the bell over the front door sounded, and I looked up to find Hudson standing there. For a moment, neither of us said anything, and then...

“Your spinach needs attention.”

I stood up and headed out to the garden, knowing he would follow. He still hadn't said anything, but he let me lead him to his plot, where his spinach had not only fully sprouted, but needing thinning.

"You'll want to pull the extras out by the root," I explained, bending to demonstrate. "Leave four or five inches between each one. And they need watering, badly. It keeps the soil cool. If you're not going to be here to do it yourself, you should put your plot on the care schedule, so your plants don't suffer. Any questions?"

I finally looked in his direction, to find him staring at me hard enough to make me wonder if he'd processed anything I said.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked, after a few seconds had passed.

Quickly – too quickly – I shook my head. "It's just been a long day. Been open since five this morning. I'm tired."

And I know when to fall back.

"I guess I'm not helping the situation, am I?" he said, tugging at the brim of the baseball cap he'd worn. "What time are you shutting down?"

"Eight."

He nodded. "So I've got like twenty minutes to get this done then."

"Yep. Better get to it."

I went back inside, lest I embarrass myself.

Or rather... *further* embarrass myself.

The man probably thought I was some sort of psycho, between my awkward flirting and shamelessly throwing myself at him, and... the prison time. The thought was enough to keep me from going anywhere near him, keeping myself busy by helping the few customers who came in. I refused to let myself even look in the direction of the garden if I could help it. And then, as soon as the clock shifted to eight, I went up front to flip the sign on the door, but didn't lock it.

I took a deep breath as I headed out to the garden to get Hudson, dreading the impending conversation. I'd only taken a few steps when he appeared at the doorway, holding the basket of pulled spinach in front of him.

"I know I'm pushing it, but... can you come take a look for me?"

His request was accompanied with a smile, like everything was normal. Like I hadn't put aside specific things I knew he would like, only to have to add them to the compost because he hadn't shown up to get them.

"Yeah," I nodded. "That's fine."

I followed him out to his plot, where his neat rows of spinach already looked leaps and bounds better. They were already responding to being watered, the delicate new leaves unfurling and straightening up under the greenhouse lights.

"It looks great," I told him, with an encouraging smile. "Good work."

"So they'll survive?"

"Yeah."

He blew out a sigh of relief, and it took everything in me to just keep my mouth shut. But he was adorable.

“So, um... just make sure they get watered, and you’ll want to fertilize them with our compost tea when they get a little bigger.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Cool. So um... I’ll take your thinnings for the compost bin.” I took the basket from him, and took my time carrying it the huge covered barrel, and dumping the contents in. I hoped that he would be gone by the time I got back, but he waited.

Of course he waited.

Neither of us said anything as I walked him to the front door so I could lock it behind him. It wasn’t until he was half-in, half-out, that he turned to me, seemingly with something on his mind.

“Summer...” he started, meeting my gaze.

I broke it, looking at the floor instead. “Yeah?”

“I...”

The sigh he blew out made me look up, but whatever he wanted to say... he must’ve thought better of it – and why the hell wouldn’t he? His shoulders deflated, and he gave me a tight smile.

“Good night.”

I gave him a nod. “You too.”

He stepped out, and I closed and locked the door, and didn’t turn back. Even though the store was closed, it didn’t mean my work was done, so I spent the next hour doing all the necessary administrative tasks that kept this thing running.

Then I went upstairs.

Scrubbed the day off.

Climbed in bed.

But couldn't sleep.

After an hour of tossing and turning, I finally just stopped trying, choosing instead to scroll through the latest happenings on my cell phone.

A post from Urban Grind caught my attention.

The manager – Anika, who was always sweet to me when I stopped there for coffee – had been streaming live from the coffeehouse, where Songbird Dani had been on the stage. I'd missed the surprise concert, but just *thinking* about Urban Grind had my mouth watering for a latte I didn't need this late at night.

But sleep wasn't happening anyway, so what the hell?

I threw on some cute athleisure wear and headed out, planning to just grab my coffee and leave. But there was something about this neighborhood that made it hard to rush, made you want to slow down and soak in the sounds and vibe of the city.

And then, there was the coffeehouse itself.

The warm aroma of coffee saturated the air, providing an instant boost. It was a Thursday night – Open Mic – so the crowd was still jumping, alcohol was flowing, music pumping from the speakers. The energy was so live that, instead of leaving once I had my drink in hand, I found a quiet, dark corner and just... enjoyed the view.

That was the intention.

“Summer?”

The sound of a male voice drew my eyes away from the stage, to find a familiar face grinning at me. It was easy to

smile back as I stood, letting Troy Baldwin pull me into a quick hug.

“Hey,” I greeted him back as we pulled apart. “I wasn’t expecting to run into anybody.”

“Because your ass is *never* out and about,” he countered. “I’m surprised to see you. In a good way though. This is good for you.”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“No guessing, seriously.” Something – someone – else caught his eye, making his smile grow even wider. “Look who I found,” he said, to whoever it was, and a second later his girlfriend, Jules, came bouncing up, with wide eyes.

“*Summer?*” she exclaimed. “Outside, at night? Do you have a date or something?” Jules asked, excited, as she pulled me into a longer, tighter hug.

I laughed and shook my head. “No, I just wanted a coffee. Decided to stay and drink it here.”

“*Good,*” Jules said. “Good for you.”

She meant that.

And so had Troy when he said something similar.

These two were the closest things I had to friends here, and they’d had to force themselves *this* far. They were right to be surprised that I was “out”, because this wasn’t my norm. Even though my natural personality contradicted it, I preferred a... quiet life.

Where people didn’t recognize me and ask me about things I didn’t want to talk about.

Jules was the one I'd met first – she wanted to use the gardens for a photoshoot, and of course I didn't mind. She and I talked, and talked, and talked a little more, and then she told me she'd lived in California for several years.

Which was why she recognized my name.

She had nothing bad to say though – in fact, she was kind. She'd encouraged me to visit a local... group therapy thing. For other former felons, to talk about the difficulty of transitioning into “normal” society, and working, and making friends, and falling in love, and just... *living*.

That was where I met Troy.

Since then, the two of them had been regular figures – popping into the market when they hadn't seen me around the neighborhood, because the market was pretty much my sanctuary from judgment. There, I was just *Summer*, the funny girl that sells vegetables. Customers came in, we talked superficially, we laughed, and we parted ways. That was my life. Giving my customers nicknames and getting too used to seeing them regularly.

Getting my daily dose of human interaction *that way*.

It was a false sense of “knowing” someone, which... was probably how this Hudson situation came about. I'd been so eager to talk and dig in and fulfill my one-sided crush that I'd messed around and gotten my damn feelings hurt.

The whole situation was one to learn from.

“Do you want to come and sit with us?” Jules asked, pulling me from my own, self-deprecating thoughts.

I shook my head. “Maybe another time, but not tonight. I'm gonna finish this up and head home.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “But whenever you wanna hang out, just say the word.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Thankfully, she and Troy had the discernment to leave me to myself, to finish my coffee. Other than that, I was only approached by guys trying to shoot their shot – guys who, remarkably, accepted being turned down with grace. Probably because they knew Cason was on security and didn’t play that shit.

Either way, it worked in my favor.

When I finished my decaf lavender latte, it was time to go. I knew it wasn’t required, but I took my mug back up to the bar to drop it off, leaving my table clear. The bartender accepted it with a smile, and when I turned to go, there was someone standing in my path.

There was *Hudson* in my path.

“Summer,” he greeted, smiling. “I figured you’d called it a night.”

Obviously, he hadn’t.

He’d probably showered, had definitely changed, and apparently there’d been a fresh haircut under that cap. He looked good. *So*, so good.

“Coffee,” I managed to say, and he nodded.

“Yeah... only place I get mine from.” His eyes scanned over me, and I suddenly regretted not putting on my big girl clothes – or at least another pair of booty shorts. “Somehow I never imagined you with a cell phone.”

My gaze dropped to my phone in my hand, then lifted back to him. “Oh.”

He grinned. “Uh... maybe we should exchange numbers?”

Instantly, my face went hot. Where the hell was the Summer from the day his fiancé dumped his ass at the altar?

I shook my head. “Hudson... I can take a hint. You don’t have to do this. We don’t have to... do this.”

“Do what?” he asked, genuine confusion in his eyes.

“Pretend. I mean... You haven’t even been in for your usual veggies, and I know it’s because I freaked you out, which – totally understandable. Felonies aren’t sexy, I get it.”

“*Summer*,” he said, shaking his head as he held up his phone. “Just put the number in the phone.”

He pushed it into my hand, and I accepted it with a sigh. Instead of arguing, I put the damn number in, then gave it back to him.

“There. Now you have it.”

And then I walked away.

Because I *had* to.

To keep any semblance of my self-respect.

Back outside, the cool late-night air soothed my sudden spike of anxiety. This... tongue-tied shit, this wasn’t me. This wasn’t... *Summer*.

At least not the Summer I tried to be.

I was halfway back to my apartment when my phone buzzed. I pulled it out, stopping at a crosswalk to read the text from an unsaved number.

“My bad for being MIA. I’m having a hard time adjusting. I’m not even comfortable in my own damn apartment. I’m sorry. But I’d like to see you tonight.”

While I was reading, it buzzed again.

“This is Hudson, by the way.”

Of course it was.

I pushed out a sigh, then kept walking, letting the possibilities run through my mind. I knew a hell of a lot about having trouble adjusting – too much. The whole ordeal with my ex had taught me plenty about... uncoupling. As convoluted and complicated as my particular situation was, I understood the loss that went beyond the relationship. The loss of community, certain friends, certain... social capital.

I understood not feeling at home in a place that was supposed to be yours.

So I texted him back.

And when I got to the market, I waited downstairs.

And when Hudson showed up a few minutes later... I let him in.

“Are you ready this time?” I asked, turning to face him as soon as we crossed the threshold of my apartment, and closed the door behind us.

He didn't give me a verbal answer. Instead, he cupped my face in his hands, bringing his lips to mine for a coffee-scented kiss that quickly moved to coffee *flavored* as his tongue slipped into my mouth. I whimpered a little as he massaged it into mine, as his hands dropped to my waist, then my ass, gripping and squeezing as he pulled me close enough that I could feel him against my stomach.

There was *definitely* no dick deficit here.

There was... a surplus, of everything right, or at least that's how it seemed, with him backing me into my kitchen

and depositing me on the counter and fisting a handful of my braids as he devoured my mouth like I was the last morsel of the best thing he'd ever tasted. The lips I'd admired on many occasions were just as soft as I'd imagined, and just as skilled. The hands I'd watched palm and pick fresh vegetables were hot against my skin, and nimble, making quick work of my hoodie and tee shirt.

It was only fair that I matched his energy, right?

As quickly as we could get that way, we were both down to nothing, with Hudson rolling on a condom from his wallet. Still seated on the counter, I spread my legs wide, welcoming him home.

Yeah.

Home.

I said what I said.

As far as I was concerned, he was exactly where he belonged, filling me with deep, firm strokes that snatched away my breath. This, too, was just as good as it had been in my head. He was magnificently thick, unreasonably hard, and his mouth on my nipples was...*glorious*.

Maybe beyond that.

He swiped a thumb through my wetness, using that as the lubrication to work my clit, making an involuntary scream rip from my throat. My hands went to his ass, fingernails clenching into the firm muscle as he stroked me harder, and harder, and *harder* and then... stopped.

My eyes had been closed, but I opened them in time to see Hudson taking a seat on one of the barstools we'd pushed out of the way. He gripped me behind both knees, spreading me wide, and then... his head was between my legs.

Hudson's tongue swiped in unhurried, deliberate circles around my clit at first, winding me up before he pulled back to lazy, loose ones that allowed me to catch my breath – gave me a false sense of security before he came back and pressed harder, tight spirals that had me gripping the back of his head. He licked me down and then back up, pushing his fingers into me until he found the spot that made my mouth drop open, and ripped his name from my lips.

If I thought he'd enjoyed my mouth, that was nothing compared to how he seemed to feel about my pussy. His slurps and grunts and growls and groans of pleasure turned *me* on, making me wetter, hotter, making me moan and whimper and groan right along with him as I shamelessly rocked into his mouth. He licked harder, faster as my thighs clenched around his head and my fingers curled around the edge of the counter, gripping for my life as I came.

Hard.

Hudson wasn't giving out time to breathe, time to think, time to recover. He was already back up, slamming into me while my pussy was still throbbing. But he felt so damn good it was no problem, none at all.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he stroked me, rocking into me so hard that I was slipping and sliding in the wet mess we'd made on the counter. My mouth dropped open – and stayed that way – when he hooked one of my legs over his shoulder, plunging so hard, so fast, so deep, that I couldn't even get a sound to come out.

It was too much to take.

But I was taking it anyway.

Every.

Last.

Stroke.

My nerves were on fire, in the best possible way, by the time I recognized the telltale tension in his hips, just before he somehow went deeper. Went harder. Went to places no man had gone before, and planted his flag with a growl, and one last stroke intense enough to send me reeling straight into another, blinding orgasm.

We were stuck like that, for a few moments, before Hudson pulled out, stumbling backward to a seat on the barstool he'd occupied earlier. My eyes were only half open, but I could tell he was grinning at me.

“What?” I asked, when I finally pulled together the energy to prop myself onto my elbow instead of remaining splayed out across my counter.

Hudson's grin shifted to a smirk – the cockiest smirk possible.

“Just wondering if I answered your question.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Hudson

Obviously, I looked Summer up.

But that wasn't why I'd been out of touch.

If anything, looking her up had made me *more* interested in seeing what else was underneath that pretty ass sarcastic exterior.

Instead of being able to focus on that though... life happened.

Returning to work, fielding nosy ass, personal ass questions from coworkers and clients and superiors, all while trying to not turn into the violent nigga at work, especially since I was one of the *few* niggas at work. Cleaning up my social media, getting rid of all of Josie's friends and coworkers and associates, anything that tied me to her. Deleting the pictures. Changing the relationship status – privately, so it wouldn't become yet another thing for motherfuckers to comment on.

Removing *her*.

I stopped just short of blocking her across the board.

I deleted the social media accounts instead.

That had felt good.

At least in the moment.

Afterwards, it had set off a flurry of phone calls and text messages of faux concern, people “making sure I was okay” when I just wanted to be left the hell alone, by everybody except the folks I *really* messed with.

The ones that had, if they could, been physically there this whole time. Not hounding me or anything, just making sure to keep me connected to the world, which I needed.

Maybe I wasn't as disconnected from the relationship as I thought.

Or this was just... the usual cycle of emotions, delayed until the actual breakup happened. Maybe this was the time when a lot of men would rack up on women, fucking their way through the pain.

Honestly... *that* was a little of the reason I'd stayed away from Summer. That girl was a gem, and I didn't want whatever connection we had to be the result of me running away from something.

But it kinda ended up like that anyway though.

Only kinda.

The truth was, I'd already been feeling Summer – the fresh produce at *grown* was terrific, but the view was even better. Somehow, I knew there was *something* with her, before I even knew what her name was.

I couldn't say I'd expected involuntary manslaughter.

According to... pretty much everything – the police report, the evidence, all that – Summer's ex had spazzed on her. There was even video – surveillance cameras inside the house –

showing the whole thing. Summer coming down the stairs with a bag like she was leaving, him going after her, smacking her around. Her fighting back, deciding to leave the bag and just go. Him pulling the gun, them struggling for it... him falling back with a hole in his chest.

Her freaking out afterward.

Not that it wasn't miraculous that she walked away from something like that, but what made the whole thing noteworthy was who the ex was – a pro NBA player from Cali. He was... controversial, to say the least. Flashy, always going at it with other players, fans, the damn league. By all accounts though, Summer was lowkey, turning down reality shows, avoiding paparazzi – she wasn't about that part of the life. She was his high school sweetheart, had only moved there to be with him. Based on everything I could find, all she cared about was finishing school.

Then ol' boy blew out his knee.

Never recovered.

From there, it was a downward spiral.

Drugs, alcohol, the usual shit, and eventually it got to be more than Summer could take. She wanted out, he wouldn't let her.

But she made it out anyway.

Honestly, I wasn't really clear on why she did jail time at all, but to *his* family it wasn't enough. Even with all the evidence – with *video* of what happened – they tried to spin a story of Summer as some gold digger, who'd killed him on purpose to get insurance money, or some wild ass bullshit along those lines.

The stuff she hadn't wanted me to look up.

Like she thought I'd see her differently.

Which... I did.

But like I said, in a good way. Even with the craziness she'd been through, she was this sunny, bubbly person that just made people feel good. I couldn't add up how many times – before my failed wedding – she'd effortlessly brightened my day with an offhand comment about salad greens or even just a damn smile.

That was what had led me to her in my wedding day moment of limbo in the first place.

And then again, weeks later, when I couldn't even find peace in my own damn apartment, because Josie's memory was still running through it, making me want to light something on fire. I could tell my absence had messed with her a little, but she hadn't held it against me, hadn't asked for any in-depth explanation. She just... *got it*.

And no lie... it didn't hurt that the pussy was *amazing*.

Beyond, actually.

That was icing though, because Summer was pretty damned incredible, period.

Four weeks had passed since I walked into *grown* dazed and confused and let Summer get me drunk off my ass and convince me to plant a bed of spinach.

Now... it was a full plot of bright, leafy greenery.

“And you're telling me these *aren't* ready to eat yet?” I called, looking from my plot to where she stood, tablet in hand, doing a cursory inspection of the garden. The weather was *finally* catching up to the season around here, forcing Summer into more coverage than she seemed to prefer.

Yoga pants.

Still a perfect view of the booty without those pesky ass pockets on the cheeks. Personally, I was a fan.

“Hudson, leave the spinach alone,” she answered, without even looking up. “It needs another week or so. Hungry ass.”

“When I planted it, you told me four weeks woman. It’s *been* four weeks.”

“I said *about* four weeks. Meaning, anywhere from four to six. Gotta lead with the upside, duh. Anyway...” she finally lifted her eyes from the tablet to meet mine, wearing a bright ass smile. “I’m surprised you remember that.”

I shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Um... cause you were toasted?”

“You mean because you *got me* toasted?”

“Semantics,” she laughed. “Why do you have a basket and shears? Were you about to harvest from your plot?!”

I frowned. “Hell yeah! You told me four weeks, I thought that’s what you meant!”

Still laughing, she abandoned her place in the garden to come to where I was, taking the basket from my hands. “There is plenty of spinach already bundled and ready to be eaten, if you’re just craving it like that.”

“*Or...* you can slide around the corner to *Stacks* with me. Grab breakfast,” I said, slipping my arms around her waist. “I know you haven’t had anything but coffee this morning.”

“Yeah, because that’s all I can handle, until I... *handle* these taxes.”

My head drew back. “*Taxes?* That shit is months away, why you are stressing that?”

“Because I file *quarterly* taxes, and I got a letter a few days ago about all the ways I’d fucked them up. Whole correspondence was essentially ‘try again, bitch’. So I want to be on top of it for January. I have to doublecheck everything. The community plots vs the ones I use to grow what the market sells, all my inventory, all the—”

“*Summer,*” I interrupted, when I realized she was getting worked up about it. “First of all – *breathe*. Second... why didn’t you tell me about this. I could’ve helped. I *can* help. Whole ass finance guy right here, remember?”

She peeked up at me. “I do. But this isn’t your problem, it’s mine. I can’t afford to hire you.”

“Who said anything about *hiring?*” I scoffed. “It’s nothing for me to take a day to go over this stuff with you, make sure you’re taking advantage of certain deductions, charitable donations for certain things you have in place here, all of that. What kinda dude would I be if I just... sat on skills that could help you?”

She sighed. “The kind who is so sweet he hasn’t yet realized he doesn’t have to work this hard in a rebound relationship? I don’t expect this from you, okay?”

“Wow.” I took a step back from her. “That’s the energy you think I’m on? That’s how you think I see this?”

Her shoulders went up. “Hudson, this all started because your fiancé broke up with you. *Weeks* ago. Not months, *weeks*. Your spinach isn’t even ready to eat yet bruh!”

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t make me any less ready for it. Or... ready for you.” I pulled the tablet and basket from her

hands, putting both down on one of the picnic tables nearby. “Summer, listen... I’m not about to stand in your face and claim I’m not still tight about the thing with Josie – I am. Not as much as before, but yeah, it’s still there. I’m not... asking you to serve your heart up on a platter, or anything like that, just for you to understand... ain’t no *rebound* here. That’s not what I’m on. I wasted so much time withering away in that relationship because I was so worried about hurting her feelings, hurting her mama’s feelings, *my* mama’s feelings, all that bullshit. I didn’t want to be the bad guy, so I sat back and let the shit happen, instead of thinking about what the fuck *I* wanted. And that’s you. That’s *been* you, since before this all went down, if I’m honest about it. I know it’s not cool, but fuck it, that’s what it is.”

Summer laughed. “Wow. How the hell did you make the fact that you were lusting after me while you were engaged... sound sexy?”

“Truth is always sexy,” I told her, taking a seat and pulling her into my lap. “But seriously... you are not a goddamn rebound to me.”

She bit down on her lip, shaking her head. “Hudson... this little vibe we have going on is cute and all that, and the dick is *bomb*, but... you barely know me. I barely know you.”

“Sorry, is that *not* the point of... getting to know each other? That’s what I’m saying, I want all that. The getting to know you, the pissing you off and getting pissed off, fighting and making up, and... helping you with your finance shit while you teach me to garden. All the real shit. I want that. I want you.”

“You’ve mentioned that,” she grinned as I cupped her ass, squeezing.

“Just maintaining my position.”

“Don’t say the word position,” she groaned.

I laughed. “What?”

“It makes my pussy throb, and I’m still sore from last night,” she whined, just before her stomach growled.

“And hungry, apparently,” I countered. “So... about that breakfast.”

RECKLESS.

That was the word that got tossed around in the Serious Conversation™ my mother and Howard had insisted on having with me after I explained my next moves. I was supposed to do what he’d done – marry a pre-approved girl (no offense to Farrah, who I loved dearly, but the truth was what it was), live in a pre-approved neighborhood, have a career in a pre-approved field.

I was ready to buck all of that.

Well... I loved working in finance, so that wasn’t changing, but... most of it.

My parents came from a certain “status” to create a family they expected to live up to that. Growing up, my father was always on mine and Howard’s backs about legacy and shit, and all we wanted to do was make him proud. My mother felt the pressure too – from her mother and mother-in-law, and from my father too. I saw what it did to her, trying to conform to that mold, and pushing it for me and my brother too. After my father died, I swore I would make her proud – would fulfill what they’d been trying to accomplish with us.

Despite the fact that it never really resonated with me.

When we first met, Josie and I had bonded over our similar backgrounds. Laughed off the “arranged marriage” type of vibe our families were on, because we were actually attracted to each other, had things in common. We convinced ourselves that if we’d met under different circumstances, we still would have hit it off.

We *honestly* liked each other.

Loved each other.

Until... we didn’t.

I wished like hell that Josie hadn’t waited until she did to do what she did, but hell... one of us had to. No lie – it was fucking embarrassing that I’d just gone with the flow as long as I did, but I was grateful to her for being willing to flip to table we’d both been pressured into sitting at. We didn’t *have* to eat what was being served, just because someone had been kind enough to fix it.

We could order for ourselves.

“How are you gonna ask me to breakfast and then zone out?” Summer asked, grinning at me from across the table. “Share some of those thoughts you seem lost in.”

“I’d rather discuss something more positive. Like... not renewing my lease on the condo in Blackwood. Finding something here in the Heights. Maybe purchasing something I can renovate.”

“Oooh, tell me more. Something you can renovate as in hiring a crew, or as in, watch some NCDITV and roll up your sleeves?”

I frowned. “N... C... D...?”

“Niggas Can Do It TV. You know, all the Black home reno shows on WAWG.”

“Summer... *wow*,” I laughed, shaking my head. “Yes, though. Rolling up my sleeves and doing it myself. It’s something I’ve wanted to do for a while.”

“That is really dope. And... not to toot my own horn, but ya girl is nice with a power saw and nail gun – I built all the garden boxes and tables, shelves, all that at *grown* myself.”

My eyes went wide. “Seriously?”

“Yup,” she answered, wearing a proud smile. “My lawyer was able to get me transferred to a prison here, so I could be closer to my father and Granny. Every week at visitation, I had them bringing in pictures of possible spaces, I was signing over power of attorney, whatever I needed to do so that as *soon* as I got released, I was ready to bring *grown* into fruition. I devoured every book, bargained so many cigarettes to get control of the TV, all that. *Seriously*. The concept of it came to me in a dream... before everything went wrong. Well... things had already gone wrong, but I mean before they went *sentenced to prison* wrong. I never thought it would happen. But once I ended up sitting in a cage, I made a promise to myself that I was going for what I wanted, that I would build a life that made me happy. That... brought me peace.”

I nodded. “And that’s what *grown* does for you?”

“*Grown* is a start. I still have work to do.”

“I can relate to that.”

“I know,” she agreed. “Lucky for us we’re still young and hot, we’ve got room to figure this shit out.”

“I’ll toast to that,” I laughed, holding up my glass of water for her to tap with hers. “It’s like a plant that stops growing,

right? Stunted. So you have to do some pruning, watering, fertilizing, take special care to get it back right. And then... it flourishes.”

Summer’s head drew back. “Look at you, spitting the plant knowledge and shit!”

I shrugged. “I may or may not have done a little light reading so I’d know what the hell you were talking about without having to ask a million questions.”

That made her smile wider, happiness glittering in her eyes. “I appreciate the initiative. A lot. But, for the record, I don’t mind questions at all.”

“Hudson? I *thought* that was you.”

Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from Summer to see an – unfortunately – familiar face approaching the table.

Kia.

Josie’s other best friend.

The one who’d taken our shit to social media.

A mortified-looking Josie was with her.

“Kia. Josie. Good morning,” I said, choosing to be polite, because I figured I could at least hold on to *something* from how I’d been raised.

“Mmm,” Kia responded, instead of returning my greeting. Josie offered a friendly nod. “This looks cozy. And *you*,” Kia added, looking directly at Summer, who was sipping her latte looking completely unbothered, “look familiar.”

Summer shrugged once she’d put her mug down. “You don’t, but maybe you’ve stopped through the market before? I’m the owner of *grown*. I’m there every day.”

“No. That’s not it,” Kia responded, with an exaggerated gesture of putting her hand to her chin. “*Ohhh*, you know what it is? I used to live in Cali. *You’re* the girl who—”

“Aiiight, step away from the table,” I said, standing up and moving in front of Kia to put some distance between her and Summer. “You spoke, I spoke, and now you can keep it moving.”

Kia’s thick eyebrow went up. “Oh. Wow. Is that... *bass* in your voice, Hudson? I didn’t know you had any of that.”

I chuckled, pushing my hands into my pockets as I met Kia’s sour gaze. “You’re not cute, Kia. In any accepted definition of the word. So why don’t you stop trying and take your ass on somewhere so we can enjoy our breakfast? This shit isn’t necessary. Is it?” I asked, directing the question to Josie, who was looking like she wanted to fade into the background.

“It is though,” Kia answered. “Y’all broke up a month ago and you already have another chick at breakfast?”

“*Kia!*” Josie hissed, her eyes going wide. “I told you not to come over here starting shit. *Let’s go!*”

I shook my head. “Nah. *She* can go,” I said, pointing to Kia, who rolled her eyes. “*You*, hold up – we need to talk. *Now.*”

“There isn’t anything you can’t say to her in front of me,” Kia declared, crossing her arms.

“You’re always minding everybody’s business but your own. Tell your friend to get the fuck outta my face,” I said to Josie, not caring that Kia’s volume was bringing unwanted attention to this interaction.

Josie did though.

“Kia, *please*,” she begged. “Just go, I’ll meet you outside!”

Kia sucked her teeth and then stomped off, muttering under her breath about “*niggas that didn’t grow balls til they got left at the altar*,” and hey... I’d be that, if that’s what it took.

I turned to Summer, asking for a moment before I took Josie by the elbow, shepherding her to a quiet spot near the bathroom.

“What the hell was *that*?” I asked, as soon as I had her alone. “I haven’t given you *any* static about any of this shit, but I can’t have breakfast without your friends starting shit?”

“I’m *sorry*,” she insisted, holding up her hands. “I asked her not to come over there bothering you!”

“Come up with a different way to ask then, cause the next one of your homely friends that tries anything with her, I’m gonna hurt their damn feelings. Kia is lucky I’m in a good mood, cause that shit she pulled, making it seem like I was some kinda fuckboy who’d ran you in the ground before the wedding? I haven’t let that shit go. I owe her words for *that*.”

“I know. I *know*. And I’m sorry about *that* too. I just...”

“Do you have any idea what that shit was like? You’re the one who decided not to show up, *and* you get to play the fucking victim?”

“I *was* the victim, Hudson!” she snapped. “Just not... yours. And I’m sorry for that. I *apologized* for that, on social media, for everybody to see, but you’d already deleted your accounts. I tried to set it straight.”

“Yeah, but the truth never travels like the lie, does it?”

Josie pushed out a sigh. “No. It doesn’t. But I tried, honestly. Because I know it was as much my fault as yours that it went as far as it did. I know you were trying to be a good guy. And I... want to be married. I want a family. Just like you. But not...like that. Not when we *knew* our thing had run its course. I’m twenty-five, you’re twenty-six, and we were getting ready to spend our lives in a marriage neither of us wanted. I know it hurt, Hudson, and I’m sorry, but one of us had to stop the madness.”

“And I’m not holding it against you,” I told her, shaking my head. “Not *that*. But this other shit – having my name slandered, people harassing my girl – *that* shit, you gotta get your friends in check. You could probably start by telling Kia that you’re fucking with her precious Eric, so she doesn’t think you’re sitting around lonely. She’d probably be less pressed about what *I’m* doing then.”

Her eyes went wide. “Why would you think me and Eric —”

“Because the damn blinders are off, J. Are you gonna deny it?”

Her gaze dropped to her feet. “I... *can’t* deny it.”

“Well then,” I shrugged. “Tell Kia’s funny-looking ass that nigga never wanted her cause his nose was always open for you. If she can’t accept that, fuck her. You were brave enough to stand me up for a whole ass wedding, but you’re okay with hiding a relationship that makes you happy? That makes sense to you?”

She looked up, meeting my gaze with glossy eyes. “No. But—”

“Nah, but nothing,” I told her, shaking my head. “You want me to tell her? I’ll tell her for you. But I’ll be goddamned if you blew up both of our lives to still not be happy.”

“She’s my *friend*, Hudson!”

“Then she’ll understand, or you’ll find a new friend with some common damn sense. She’s been chasing that nigga since ’02, and he’s still running. Running to you.”

“Where was wisdom when we were using grunt signals to make decisions for that goddamn wedding?” Josie asked, half-laughing, half crying.

“I don’t know. I wish I did. But... shit, it’s here now. Here we are. We burned it all down... now we gotta rebuild. May as well do it our way.”

She scoffed. “And *Summer Rain* is the way you’re rebuilding?” she asked. “Kia told me all about her – how she ___”

“Pump your brakes, J, I ain’t judging you about Eric and his khakis, you can keep your thoughts on my felon bae to yourself,” I declared. I really wasn’t trying to hear it.

“Fair,” she agreed. “I... just want to see you happy. I swear.”

I nodded. “The feeling is mutual. As far as I’m concerned, we’re good. I mean, not *right* right now but—”

“Eventually,” she filled in for me, laughing.

“Yeah. Exactly that.”

We looked at each other for a second, then somehow, nonverbally agreed to a parting hug – probably a remnant of the friends we used to be. She went her way and I went mine,

back to where Summer was tucking into the plate of crepes – *my* crepes – that must have been delivered while I was gone.

“Sorry about that,” I told her, taking my place at the table again. “Had to have an overdue conversation.”

“You feel better now?” Summer asked, after she’d swallowed.

“I do. But I’m *so* sorry about that. How her friend tried to...”

“Come for me?” Summer shrugged. “Yeah, that was pretty fucked. It’s actually the first time it’s happened to me here, even though I’ve been kinda expecting it. Wanna know something though?”

I leaned forward. “Always.”

“It didn’t sting as much as I thought. Probably because you Iyanla’d her.”

My eyebrows went up. “Huh?”

“You went all,” – she smacked the table – “*Not on my watch*. It was pretty sexy. And you called her ugly.”

“I didn’t call her... *ugly*.”

“Oh you *definitely* did,” Summer laughed. “But I like that. Call all these bitches ugly over me. I’m here for it.”

I chuckled. “I’m not. I just... I didn’t like the way she came at you, interrupting our conversation while I’m trying to get to know you and shit. What were we talking about, anyway?”

Summer propped her elbows on the table, chin in her hands. “We were talking about me riding you after breakfast.”

The corners of my mouth turned up as I leaned in. “Were we?”

“Mmhmm. So... eat your breakfast,” she purred, damn near making me come across the table for her when I felt her hand push up my thigh.

“Fuck this breakfast,” I countered, making her laugh as she shook her head.

“Nah. You have to eat. You’re going to need all your energy.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Summer

“That nigga must be laying it low and spreading it wide *real* good, the way you’re bouncing around here these days,” Granny teased from her seat on the deck that separated the garden from the market, where she sat shelling peas from her huge home garden – peas she would later blanch and freeze to sell.

I looked up from where I was trimming tomatoes off their vines. “He sure is.”

“I already know it. What his Daddy look like?”

I straightened, propping my hands on my hips. “His father passed a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She crossed herself. “Rest in Power to him. He got some uncles then?”

I laughed. “Shouldn’t you be asking about his *grandfather*?”

Granny frowned at me. “Nawl. What is an old ass man going to do for me?”

“You’re too much!”

“It’s not me. I wore the curly wig you like again today!”

Shaking my head, I went back to my task of harvesting tomatoes. Hudson had been around enough by this point that I'd had to introduce him to my father and Granny – who'd been on unexpectedly good behavior the whole time. I found out later she hadn't wanted to scare him off.

“With those wide hips of yours, you better gone head and let that boy put a baby in you. Get my first great-grand out of the way before I go back to the Lord.”

As if me or Hudson were thinking about a damn baby.

As if *she* had more than a solid 40% chance of going to be with the Lord, instead of going the *other* way.

In any case, it was almost five weeks to the day that Hudson had stepped through those doors and told me it was supposed to be his wedding day. I was gonna have to send Josie a fruit basket or something, cause her trash had turned into *my* consistent dick, and I was grateful.

Not that dick was all Hudson had to offer.

He was a helluva “finance guy” guy too – I'd been wanting the vacant space next to mine, to expand both the garden and the market, but it seemed like such a big step I hadn't done anything about it yet.

I was scared to.

But Hudson wasn't.

He'd done enough digging to figure out that the space was foreclosed, and heading into an auction I would've missed because I didn't know it was happening. I was able to apply for the loan I needed just under the processing deadline, which meant that by the time the auction happened – if I was approved, which he was confident about after looking at my books – there would be nothing holding me back.

I gave him so, *so* much pussy for that.

Maybe a little too much.

He had a noticeable limp when he showed up on the deck to greet my grandmother, then came toward me with a basket in his hand, grinning.

“I’m ready to harvest my spinach, woman.”

I put down my shears, leaving them beside the basket of tomatoes as I straightened.

“Then I guess you’d better come on.”

We met at the edge of his plot, to look at the bright, healthy, gorgeous spinach plants he’d grown. Since the night we’d run into each other at Urban Grind, he’d been here damn near every day, tending to his plants and others in the garden, or tending to my business or tending to me, or chilling on my couch while he pored through real estate listings for the perfect place to make into his own.

I smiled as he looped an arm around my waist, pulling me into him with a contented sigh before he dipped his head to kiss me.

“Thank you,” he whispered against my lips, then kissed me again.

“You’re welcome. Congratulations.”

His eyebrows pulled together in confusion.

“Congratulations?”

“Yeah,” I said, drawing back to gesture at the plot. “You did it. You... *grew something*.”

He smiled, and shook his head, grabbing my hand to squeeze.

“Nah. *We* grew something.”

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING GROW SOMETHING! I HOPE YOU enjoyed Summer and Hudson’s story!

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Sometimes an argument turns into more than it should - people take it further than it has to go. But that doesn't always mean the end.

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FWB

“Umm... are you okay?” I asked, and not just as small talk. Not really. I genuinely wanted to know, because I genuinely cared, and not only because, as he’d mentioned, we were in business together.

When it was convenient, Rich and I were friends.

“Yeah,” he replied unconvincingly, running a hand over his waves like he was trying to smooth them down. A nervous thing he did that I wasn’t sure he even noticed. “I started to call you,” he admitted, eyes narrowed as he focused his gaze on me. “A few nights ago.”

My eyebrows went up. “Oh? Why didn’t you?”

He pushed his hands into the pockets of the insulated vest he was wearing, offering another shrug. “I didn’t know if you were... still on that, you know?”

Oh.

Still on that = still on him.

And why the hell wouldn’t I be?

Rich Meyer was something like a fantasy of mine – If you could still call something a fantasy once you’d already experienced it. Tall and handsome, pecan-skinned, and a

fellow pastry chef to boot, which was actually how we'd met fifteen years ago.

We'd both broken our parents' hearts by shunning traditional degrees, instead pursuing our passions by enrolling in the culinary program Blackwood State University offered. The shared coursework had us spending lots of time around each other, which led to us becoming friends, and realizing we were both from Blackwood. Years passed of working in different kitchens, bringing notoriety to those places for our work.

Eventually, opening a place of our own together in Mahogany Heights became a no-brainer.

So did sleeping together.

Just that part, though, none of the messy relationship stuff that came with it. Especially since we were going into business together. Dating someone you were tying your – meager – life savings to was a disaster waiting to happen, and we were smarter than that.

Much smarter.

“It would've been fine,” I told him, even though that wasn't exactly the truth.

Honestly?

It would've been more than fine.

He'd been with his last girlfriend damn near two years, during which he'd been off-limits to me. Rich wasn't a cheater anyway, but even if he was, I wasn't willing to knowingly assist that kinda thing.

And before that, I was with someone.

So... I guess I understood why he might think I was “off that” since we had been “off that” for years now, simply because of timing.

But the years hadn’t made him less tall, or less fine, or less of a friend. Hadn’t made him any less of a chef I admired. Nope, time had only served to amplify all the things I found so appealing about Rich, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

The “benefits” part of our friendship had long been stagnant.

“Really?” Rich asked, his expression dropping into a bit of a frown. “I thought you and—”

“You thought wrong,” I countered before he could even get it out.

“Even though you were in here doing the I got some dick dance last week?” he asked, referring to the celebratory milly-rock I was prone to spontaneously break into in the twenty-four-hours following an orgasm.

I shrugged. “That was last week. And it wasn’t that good anyway. Like... barely over passing.”

Shaking his head, Rich laughed. “C’mon Greer, you know I see that nigga in the gym twice a week, right?”

“In the gym doing what?” I crowed, unconvinced. “No way he’s in there doing the same things you go there to do, cause those arms? I’ve made royal icing tougher.”

“Daaamn,” Rich cackled, following me back to where I was decorating the cookies to finish today’s orders. It was Halloween, which had meant a week filled with lots of pumpkins, ghosts, black cats, etc.

It was a lot of work, but that style of cookie was my absolute favorite.

“You don’t really have to clown him like that, do you?” Rich asked, not giving me any space at the decorating table. Even sweaty from a run, he smelled good as hell.

“Just being honest... with my friend.”

I turned to face him at the same time he propped hands on either side of me against the table, boxing me in. He left just enough space that we weren’t actually touching, but I certainly wouldn’t have minded if he hadn’t.

“It’s been a long ass time since I’ve tasted you,” he murmured, words that made me expel a deep breath. “I mean... your food.”

I wet my dry lips with my tongue. “Well... your mouth has been occupied with other flavors. It seems like you might be hung up on a certain profile, actually.”

His eyebrow went up. “That’s what you think my morning run was about?”

What I thought was that those words should’ve never left my mouth, considering that I wasn’t supposed to even care what Rich did.

Who Rich did.

“It doesn’t matter – let’s focus,” I said, trying to course-correct the conversation before I gave him the wrong impression. “I’m single. You’re single. We could both stand to get reacquainted. So...?”

“So what’s up?” he asked, moving his hands to my waist. My body responded before my mouth could, pressing toward him, not giving a damn that he was a little sweaty.

“Boy, the weatherman wasn’t lying when he said it was cooling off out there!”

Rich and I sprang away from each other at the sound of Adell’s voice, coming from the back entrance of the bakery. She always came in early on Mondays to start the prep work for her fantastic cakes – before Rich showed up, I was expecting her.

Now I wished she’d go the hell away.

We weren’t in her sightline at all, and I knew she was just hollering out to whoever might be here, but still.

By the time she rounded the corner to the decorating area, Rich was gone, and I had my frosting bag back in my hands.

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty chilly,” I agreed, putting a smile on her face.

“You look flustered – it’s not too warm in here for you, is it?” she asked, her grin turning to concern as she stepped closer to me.

“No, I’m fine. Just getting ready for this busy day.”

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Christina C. Jones is a best-selling romance novelist and digital media creator. A timeless storyteller, she is lauded by readers for her ability to seamlessly weave the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of Black characters in nearly every romance subgenre. In addition to her full-time writing career, she co-founded Girl, Have You Read – a popular digital platform that amplifies Black romance authors and their stories. Christina has a passion for making beautiful things, and be found crafting, cooking, and designing and building a (literal) home with her husband in her spare time.