

**I**t only took one look for Jules Darcy to know that the past year had been a complete and total lie. Just one glimpse of Nick through the window and the careful threads of her feigned indifference, each one of them so painstakingly stitched into place, unraveled around her. One heart-stopping moment and she was forced to acknowledge that maybe she hadn't moved on at all.

*Jesus.* She knew she hadn't gotten over him. A cross-country move to Las Vegas, a sudden career change, all of the little things she'd done to convince herself she was strong enough to forget, and she was right back where she'd started a year ago. Trying to make herself believe he didn't matter. Trying to make herself believe that those few weeks with him hadn't meant anything. Trying to pretend he hadn't completely undone her, scattering her heart like shards of broken glass.

"Julian?" Her dad's voice cut through the haze of her shock. Blinking out of it, she forced herself to focus on her father, who was looking down at her with a furrowed brow. "You okay?"

Even his assistant, Deb, had stopped scribbling last-minute notes on her legal pad and was staring at her over the rim of her glasses. The fluorescent lights in the hallway seemed strangely warm, and Jules fought the urge to pull the suddenly too-clingy fabric of her silk blouse away from her heated skin. Male laughter drifted through the gym's door. Not Nick's laughter, though. God, she remembered his laugh. It was low and deep and warm, filling all the hollows within her.

Dammit, no, she wouldn't think about him now, and she gave herself a mental shake. It had only been a quick glimpse through a smudged window. There was no way he was in that room. Just to be sure, her gaze darted back to the glass, but her dad had shifted in the hallway and his wide shoulders now blocked her view. But she didn't need

another look to know that seeing Nick had been a figment of her imagination. He was a fighter with a rival league, and he wasn't here. Fate wouldn't be that sadistic. One single glimpse of a stranger who reminded her of Nick was not going to send her spiraling backward into the past. She wasn't that person. She was stronger than that, and guys didn't make her swoon—especially on her first day at work.

Squaring her shoulders, she gave a competent nod, already feeling better. “Yes. Of course. Just going over what I plan to say.”

“Don't worry about it.” Her dad shrugged, muscles flexing under his white button-down. “It's your first day, and this is only a fight-week briefing. Standard operating procedure. I'll introduce you, give a pep talk to the guys, and then go over the new protocols for Saturday.”

“But I should say at least something about the campaign. That *is* why you hired me.” As the director of marketing, a position her dad, the president of the World Fighting Championship, had asked her to take on, she was in charge of the new campaign he was so excited about. The one that would take the WFC from B-list entertainment to a world-class and respected sports organization. The campaign that was already at least a month behind schedule, thanks to her predecessor's incompetence. She was doing her father a huge favor taking this on, but it seemed petulant to have to remind him of that yet again. “I haven't met most of the fighters and trainers I'll be working with—”

“Now's not the time.” He waved away her concern. “Deb's scheduled meetings with the guys who need to be brought up to speed.”

“Meetings?” She glanced at Deb, the attractive middle-aged woman who had been her father's assistant for years.

The woman adjusted her glasses as she looked down, scanning the legal pad in the ever-present leather-bound planner in her arms. Peering up again at Jules, she had the grace to appear a little sheepish. “The first one’s after this. Your father didn’t tell you?”

Jules had had limited interaction with Deb before starting the job, but her impression had been that the woman knew everything that went on in the WFC. The mistake hadn’t been hers, it had been her father’s. He’d forgotten to include her, as usual.

Stifling her frustration, Jules swiped her finger over the screen of her phone, already knowing that she’d find no meetings in her calendar. “I don’t have anything,” she said a moment later, and glared at the one person responsible. “Dad. You have to make sure I’m included on these things. I can’t do my job if I don’t know what’s going on.” It was becoming clearer by the second why the league’s marketing was floundering.

Holding up his hands in surrender, he smiled slightly, and his dark blue eyes, identical to her own, were reasonably contrite. “Honest mistake, Julian.” He glanced to Deb. “Make sure she gets copied on everything from now on.”

Deb’s too-vibrant-to-be-natural red hair bounced as she nodded and gave a friendly smile, scribbling something down in the planner. “Of course, Craig.” Then she smiled at Jules. “Now that your email address has been set up, I’ll make sure you’re cc’d, and your calendar synced for client meetings.”

“We’ll meet back in my office right after this with the new guy,” her dad said.

Jules glanced back down at her smartphone, managing to contain her grimace at the way he insisted on calling her Julian. It was her name, but it was awful. She’d

exclusively gone by Jules since her parents' long-overdue divorce almost fifteen years ago, which was when she'd stopped seeing her dad with any sort of regularity.

She had lunch plans today with Megan, who was like a sister—only better, because unlike her actual family, she'd chosen Megs. It was a shame she'd have to cancel. Megan had been out of town since Jules had moved to Las Vegas last week, and she hadn't seen her yet. When her dad had called asking for her help, Megan had been the one to talk her into accepting the position, and had insisted on taking her out for lunch on her first day. They'd have to reschedule. Considering Jules didn't know anyone else in town, she had plenty of free time.

Maybe they could make it drinks after work instead. She had a feeling she was going to need at least one.

“Let's get this over with.” Her dad pushed open the door to the gym as she typed out the text to Megan.

But the second she stepped into the room, the frustrating distraction with her father faded away and her fingers froze, hovering over her phone. The back of her neck felt hot, the skin almost too tight as it prickled a warning. She ignored it. Nick wasn't here and she wasn't looking for him. Finishing her text quickly, she stopped next to her dad.

They'd walked into the lounge area of the state-of-the-art gym Craig had recently added to the WFC's offices in northwest Las Vegas. Plush couches in gray microfiber framed the area, with tables next to a juice bar and fancy vending machines filled with protein bars and energy drinks. A few fighters wearing workout gear were sprawled on the couches and looked up to greet her dad the moment he walked in.

She noticed they all did that—acknowledged him as soon as he entered a room. Calls of “Hey, Darcy!” and “Morning, boss” came from across the room. They respected him, and from what she had seen, the feeling was mutual. She couldn’t stop the pang of jealousy, but she pushed it out of her mind. It didn’t matter. She was here to do her job and maybe make peace with her dad, that was all.

No one had noticed her yet, so she used the extra few minutes to prove to herself that she was imagining seeing Nick. Her gaze continued past the men to the wall of windows that looked out onto a string of strip malls and chubby little palm trees with the desert mountains in the background. A row of treadmills had been placed in front of them, but they were vacant, so she kept looking across the gym to the weight benches.

And then her eyes slammed into him.

Nick Giannakis was leaning against one of the stools near the sparring mats. His rich brown hair was pulled back in a knot at the crown of his head and he was talking to a fighter standing with him. He slung a white towel over his shoulders, then used his hands to demonstrate a hold and they both smiled. If she had any lingering doubt it was him, it was gone with that smile and the crazy way it made her stomach flip-flop.

She knew how good it felt when he turned that perfect smile on her. She knew exactly how his square, stubbled jaw would abrade her palms as she brought his soft lips to hers. The weight of his hard, muscled body on top of hers. How gentle his large hands could be when they touched her body and how he could reduce her to aching need with just his fingertips. How deep and warm his dark brown eyes were and how they made her melt. And despite her attempts to forget, she remembered how they had filled with hurt the day she’d told him it was over.

Fuck. This was bad. Her hands trembled, and her first instinct was to get the hell out of there, but her feet wouldn't cooperate and she stood rooted to the tile. Starved for the sight of him, she couldn't look away. Her eyes strayed down to the faded black T-shirt pulled tight across the well-developed muscles of his broad chest.

When her dad started talking to the group she tried her best to look away. She couldn't process anything as her gaze trailed over the Greek words tattooed around Nick's left bicep. She remembered the times she'd traced those symbols with her fingers, with her mouth. He'd given her about a million different translations: *What's up, Doc?*; *"Oh my God, they killed Kenny!"*; and *Do not feed after midnight* were some of her favorites. One night, he'd finally confessed their true meaning as they'd lain in his bed: *I bow before no one.*

Her dad saying her name jerked her out of the memory of how Nick had crushed her mouth beneath his after that confession. Her face was hot as she looked around the room of fighters and trainers. She managed to give a perfunctory smile and nod before her dad moved on to discussing the upcoming fight night. For once she was glad of his take-charge attitude and the fact that she wasn't really needed at this meeting. Of their own accord, her eyes slid back to Nick, who'd now noticed her. His hot gaze pinned her in place as he stood straighter, his jaw clenched, and the butterflies in her belly took flight.

He'd been so angry that she'd walked away, and it looked as if a year hadn't changed that. His eyes were alive with the emotion, even as they blazed with the heat that had always been so quick to flare between them. She could feel it even now, warming her from the inside, making her fingers ache to touch him.

“I’m sure I don’t need to introduce this guy,” her dad was saying. “We’ve all watched him fight and progress as an elite athlete. It’s my pleasure to introduce Nick Giannakis and welcome him to the WFC.” There was some applause interspersed with “pretty boy,” “fuck you,” and even a wolf whistle.

Nick finally, *finally* stopped looking at her to nod at the guys and raise his hand in a dismissive wave. His cocky smile was firmly in place, and the others would never know what had just occurred between the two of them. If anything even had. God, was he even half as affected as she was, or had she imagined it?

She took his distraction as an opportunity to flee, despite the fact that the meeting wasn’t over. Her heels clicked on the floor as she ran down the hallway and up a flight of stairs to the women’s restroom near her office. Hands still shaking, she pushed the door open and nearly fell against the counter, her palms resting against the cool porcelain of the sink as she stared at herself in the mirror. She was startled to find that she still looked composed. Her dark blond hair was still pulled back in a sleek pony, not a strand out of place. Her cream blouse was still neatly tucked into her skirt. She still looked put together, even though she was in the midst of falling apart.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, pulling air into her lungs and forcing everything else out. After a minute, maybe two, she opened her eyes, staring down her absurdly calm reflection. She’d had a lot of practice pretending everything was fine. So Nick was here. It was only natural she would respond to him. Even if their time together had been three of the best weeks of her life, it had only been three weeks. She refused to fall apart over it. *She* had ended it.

Once she got over the shock of seeing him where he wasn’t expected, she’d be fine.

Lifting her head, she looked into the mirror again and forced a calm she didn't feel. She'd simply avoid him. He'd be in the gym training most of the time. How hard could it be?

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Nick Giannakis shifted his weight and leaned his hip against a stool, ignoring the heavy stares of the dozen or so fighters in the gym. He smoothed a hand over his hair, tucking a stray strand that had fallen loose behind his ear. Forcing a smile, he turned to the fighter standing next to him, the only one in the room he knew. The only one not judging him, as far as Nick could tell.

Whatever. Let them judge. He was here for a reason. Reasons, really. Money. Opportunity. The chance to prove himself against a new crop of fighters.

"Hell of a fight a few months ago in Chicago," he said, nodding his approval. "Can't remember the last time I saw someone actually pull off a crucifix submission."

Gabe Maddox snorted, the corner of his mouth tipping up in a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "You haven't been watching my fights regularly then." He shoved a hand through his blond waves and began tugging on his hand wraps.

Five years ago, he and Gabe had been roommates while fighting and training together in Nick's hometown of Chicago. Gabe was a few years older than Nick, and after dominating the local light heavyweight division, Gabe had been snapped up by the rapidly growing World Fighting Championship. Not long after Gabe left, Nick had signed a lucrative contract with the WFC's biggest rival, the Imperial MMA League. And while he'd been happy there, he'd also started to get restless. Sure, being the middleweight champ was great, but there were no new challenges. So when the WFC had come knocking with their offer, he'd jumped on it, burning a bridge and probably

making a few enemies in the process. But Craig Darcy was a fucking legend. When he called, you didn't say no.

Nick guzzled the rest of his water and rubbed the sweat from his brow before slinging his towel over his shoulders. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so keenly aware of every single movement, no matter how small. Every blink, every swallow, every breath. He wasn't one to shy away from attention—pretty much the opposite, actually—but this was different. This wasn't him being a fame whore. This was living under a fucking microscope.

But it would all be worth it. No risk, no reward.

“You gotta teach me that crucifix,” said Nick, spreading his hands wide.

Gabe let out a low chuckle. “I'll choke you out any day, pretty boy.”

Nick laughed, really smiling this time, and felt some of the tension slide out of his shoulders. The activity in the room slowed, and he glanced toward the door. The legend himself had walked in, clad in a designer suit and flanked by two women. A middle-aged redhead and a gorgeous blonde, who—

Jesus fucking Christ. It was her. *His Jules*. The woman who'd torn his heart into shreds, then set the shreds on fire. His body woke up at the sight of her, and everything came rushing back. How hard and fast he'd fallen for her. How free and alive she'd made him feel. How she'd tossed him aside like a piece of fucking garbage when she'd had her fill. Hurt, anger, and lust all coiled together, tangling into a hard, dark knot right in the center of his chest. Their eyes locked and he clenched his jaw, curling his hands into fists around his towel. Her eyes, those ocean blues that he'd wanted to drown in, held his, bright, but otherwise unreadable. Cool and collected, but that's not how he remembered her. Her sleek blond ponytail and perfectly tailored blouse and skirt taunted him. He

remembered her disheveled, wild and panting. Begging. Moaning his name. Craving and needing, anything and everything he had to give.

But it was stupid and pointless to let his brain go there, because he'd given her everything he had, and it hadn't been enough.

"Morning, everyone." Craig's deep voice rasped through the room, but Nick could barely hear him over the blood thundering through his ears. "As you may have heard, we've got some new faces around here. First, I'd like to introduce my daughter, Julian. She's the new director of marketing for the WFC, so you'll be seeing her around."

His Jules was Craig Darcy's daughter? Fan-fucking-tastic. Exactly what he needed right now. Yep. Fucking perfect. The owner's daughter. Jesus.

After Darcy introduced him, Nick raised his hand in a wave, somehow managing to tear his eyes away from Jules. He took a shaky breath and smiled, his entire body stiff with the anxious tension running through him. His eyes snapped back to where Jules had been, and he honestly didn't know if he was pissed or relieved that she'd left. He weighed the two options, and decided to go with pissed.

Yeah. Definitely pissed.

But he stood rooted to the spot, not giving in to how badly he wanted to go after her. To find her, and . . . what, exactly? His dick twitched against his jock.

At least one part of his body knew exactly what he'd do if he got Jules alone. A series of images seared through his brain, hot enough to burn. Jules, naked and riding him with abandon. Her lips stretched around his cock, his hands tangled in her hair. The creamy skin of her inner thighs, soft against his cheeks as he tasted and tormented her until she begged him to make her come. Fucking her against a wall in a nightclub bathroom. Fingering her in the back of a cab, not enough to get her off, just enough to

drive her wild. Smacking her sweet little ass as he slammed into her from behind, his name falling from her lips. He'd almost come at the sight of his handprint marking her soft skin. Marking her as his. Watching the sun rise over Chicago with Jules in his arms, her bare skin warm against his. Feeling as though he'd found a piece of himself in her that he hadn't even realized he'd been missing. The way she'd seen him, not through him, but into him. They'd become completely addicted to each other. At least, he'd become addicted to her. To the way she felt, the way she made him feel. Big, and good, and happy. He'd thought what they had was real. But it hadn't gone both ways.

He'd given her everything, laid himself out like a goddamn feast for her, and she hadn't even told him that she was Craig Darcy's daughter. Fuck.

Silence hung in the room, and he belatedly realized that while he'd been staring at the empty space Jules had left behind, Craig had asked him a question, or said something that needed a response.

He adjusted the towel around his shoulders and tipped his chin up, hoisting his smile back into place. "Just here to work, boss."

Craig arched an eyebrow and half smiled before continuing. "As many of you have heard, we're stepping things up here at the WFC. We're growing the organization, bringing on some big fighters, and taking our marketing in a new direction." He glanced at where Jules had stood and gave a small shrug when he saw she'd gone. Something about the gesture bothered Nick, that tiny shrug hitting him low in the gut. "We've got a big fight night coming up this weekend, and this card is fucking great. I want all of you there for the fights, doing press, and at the after party. For the first time it'll be on a major sports network, so I want all of our fighters to show up. Be visible. I'm so proud of the talent on this card—Gabe Maddox." He smiled and pointed to the man standing next

to Nick. “You finally get your shot at the belt. You’ve earned it.” The room exploded in shouts and applause, but Gabe wasn’t affected, just tipped his head in a nod and crossed his arms over his chest. “By the end of this year, every MMA fan out there will forget all about Imperial. *We* will be the league to watch, with the best fighters, and the best fights. We want everyone talking about the WFC, about our fighters, about our events. So you do your part, and go out there and fight like your lives and careers depend on it. Put on a show for the fans, and I’ll do my part to make this the best fucking MMA league in the world. We’re going big, guys, and you’re all part of it. Good luck, everybody.”

The fighters all applauded as Craig turned to go, murmurs of “thanks, Darcy” and “you got it, man” echoing through the room. All Nick could do was stare at the door, pressing his weight into his feet to keep himself rooted against the stupid need to chase after Jules.

“Hey.” Gabe elbowed him. “You good?”

Nick nodded, still staring at the door.

Gabe flipped his hand in a dismissive wave. “These guys, they’ll get used to you. Let them get their ribbing in and they’ll forget about it in a few weeks. Don’t let them get to you.”

“They’re not.”

No, the guys weren’t getting under his skin. But Jules? Fuck, she’d gotten under his skin like a tattoo, and seeing her again only made everything sharp and raw.

A vibration sizzled through him, and before he could talk himself out of it, his feet were moving across the gym floor and he’d yanked open the door. But of course there was no sign of her. He stood in the deserted hallway, his hands on his hips, sucking

down air as though he'd just gone three rounds. An ache flared up in his chest, a longing sensation twisting around his heart, around his lungs like knotted rope.

It fucking hurt to see her again, after what she'd done to him. After what she'd given him, and then taken away.

He turned and stalked back into the gym, needing to hit something.



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