

Chapter 18: Mouse

I hate seeing Deidre cry. I'm just grateful that we are finally out of the glass, so that I can hold her hand properly.

Despite everything that happened, the night is gorgeous. Clear skies show white pinpricks of stars and a thin sliver of a crescent moon. The air is cold and crisp, but warm for December. My breath mists in the air, now that I've removed the protective helmet of the moon suit.

The waters of the Hudson lap softly underneath the bridge we walk over. The Harlem skyline is dark against dark, with only a few lights glowing on the horizon. I feel bushy-tailed -- a kind of wide-awakeness reserved exclusively for those hours between midnight and dawn.

"I'm sorry," Dee says, wiping her eyes with the cuff of the suit.

"For what?"

Even in the darkness, I can see the brilliance of her smile. "You're a constant mystery."

I still have no idea what we're talking about, but I like the look she's giving me, and the warmth of her hand in mine. "I aim to please."

"Seriously, Mouse. I would have thought you'd be the last person to understand."

I don't really understand Dee's hysteria. Amariah is fourteen, and, more than that,

one of the smartest kids I've ever met. If anyone can get along on her own, it would be Rye. I shrug. Love makes people crazy. I know that fact pretty intimately.

Personally, I'm just glad Rye's teenage rebellious disappearance derailed our conversation about Frank and the Medusa and my betrayal.

Dee and I walk along in silence for a while, shoulder to shoulder. Leaving behind the waterfront, we make our way down the sidewalks. Parked in the streets are various odd contraptions: solar powered go-carts, wind surfing boards, and things so odd, I'm not sure what they do or how they're powered. I didn't even realize I'd stopped to stare until I feel Dee pulling me along.

"Such a boy," she mutters.

"Yeah, right. Like my Y chromosome makes me a gear head," I say. "You're the same way, Ms. I-think-I'll-build-a-LINK-interface-from-scratch."

Dee laughs. My heart soars at the sound.

All too soon she's leading us up concrete steps to a brownstone. I'm a little nervous to see a cop car parked out front, but Dee hardly pays it any notice. We go up to a door that's painted bright purple. I can see the color clearly thanks to an old-fashioned cast iron lamp hanging above it. A long wooden box in front of a large picture window holds evergreen boughs and some kind of orange berry on bare branches--bittersweet, maybe? I stare at the arrangement while Deidre rings the bell.

"Oh my god." Dee's voice is quiet, stunned.

A man so handsome he should be shot as a mercy killing for the rest of us is holding the door open. He looks sort of familiar in that I-could-be-a-vid-star way, like I've seen him as the hero hundreds of times before. I can only pray this is the gay friend.

"Michael," Dee says. Letting go of my hand, she rushes into his out stretched arms.

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I'm secretly very grateful that Dee and Michael been fighting non-stop for the last ten minutes. Luis, Amariah, and I sit in tandem on the Victorian style couch, coffee in one hand and a cookie in the other, watching the fireworks. By my reckoning, Dee is winning.

"Look at you. You're cop! Just like nothing happened," Dee is saying. "I can't fucking believe it! You come waltzing back to earth and God finds a way to reinstate you to the force. That is so wrong. I've never gotten my job back, and I'm the one who's been down here working my ass off. Raising a child on my own. I could have used a police officer's salary."

Michael has the wisdom to look a little sheepish. Then he puts his foot in it, "God works in mysterious ways."

"Bad move," I hear Luis mutter into his cookie. I nod in agreement. From the red building under Deidre's chin, Michael is about to get an earful, that is, if she doesn't just haul off and smack him one.

"What?!"

Honestly, I think she's capable of a much better salvo than that. Maybe she's just working up to something better. I glance over Rye's head at Luis. He raises his eyebrows in expectation, as well. We turn back to the show.

"What?!" Dee sputters again.

Michael takes a step backward and knocks into a bookshelf. A glazed pottery

bowl rattles, threatening to take a tumble. Michael puts his hand on it, steadying it. Luis and I release a breath of nerves. "Good save," I mutter.

"One point in his favor," Luis whispers.

"Shhhh, you guys. This isn't a game," Rye chides.

Luis rolls his eyes over her head. I suppress a smile.

"God works in mysterious ways?" Dee explodes. "Are you kidding me? Last time I saw you, you... were so different. Now here you are, looking like the first time we met. How the fuck does that work?"

"Yeah, answer that one if you can," Luis says quietly.

Michael takes a deep breath. "When we return, everything is wiped out, made clean. Everything." The way he emphasizes the word, it seems to carry extra weight, though I can't fathom his meaning. I look to Luis for a play-by-play, but his attention is rapt, and I can't catch his eye.

"There's a kind of template," Michael continues. "It's sort of like, when we return after a long time, we revert to what we're supposed to be. Us at our best. That's who I am again. The broken man you remember has been healed."

"But at what cost? And how did you beat the rap, Michael? You and I both were involved in a jailbreak, remember? Black out."

"Hey, I did that," I protest, although it's a lie. I wanted to have done it. Dee had called me and requested my help, but I'd just completed the virus, when the lights of New York went out as if by magic.

"Shhhh," both Rye and Luis admonish me.

Michael shrugs helplessly. "God blinds their eyes."

Dee's face is a dark maroon now. "Blinds? Gah," she can hardly get the words out she's so mad. "Oh that's just great! That's just fantastic. Why can't God blind people's eyes to my past? I'm still called Jezebel. There's still a warrant out for my arrest!"

I hadn't known that. I glance at Luis and Rye. The expressions on their faces make think this is news to them too. I find I'm weirdly jealous. I'm used to being the only wanted criminal around. Now I'm just some kind of normal -- I've done my time, paid my debt. That's not cool. I console myself with a big bite of chocolate chip.

"I'm sorry, Deidre," Michael says. He looks it too, to his credit.

"I'm not sure that's good enough."

"Horray," I cheer from the sidelines. "Go team."

"Whose side are you on," Rye hisses through clenched teeth. Luis gives me a warning glance over her head.

The answer is obvious: mine, of course.

"Sorry," I say, but only because of Luis' look.

The kid glares at me like she can sense my insincerity. I give her my best innocent look. When that only makes her frown harder, I point to her mom and dad, reminding her the show ain't over yet. We both turn back to see how things have progressed. I absently take a sip of my coffee.

Dee's arms are crossed in front of her chest, which looks kind of odd thanks to the puffiness of the environmental suit. Michael stands on the opposite side of the coffee table, scratching the back of his neck, staring at his boots. Luis' cat, a calico, has roused herself from wherever she was hiding in order to sit in the middle of the glass topped

coffee table, contentedly licking her private parts.

"When you say God wiped out 'everything,' what does that mean exactly," Dee asks. Her voice is sad now, and, I notice with fear, a little less angry. She reaches down and gives the cat a gentle pet on the top of her head. She looks beseechingly up at Michael. Hmmm, I think, not good body language -- too open. I like it better when Dee keeps herself wrapped tight and at a distance.

Michael senses the shift too. He gives her one of those awkward lopsided grins that chicks dig on oafs like him. "My memories are... well, they were fuzzy," Michael says. "But, I have to say, seeing you... well, it's coming back in a rush. I've really missed you. Both."

The collective, mental "aw" from Rye, Luis, and Deidre is nearly audible over my gagging. Rye bumps my knee with hers. I give her my "please, could he be any more overt," eye roll/grimace combination.

Dee, at least, isn't completely melted by his easy words. She still eyes him skeptically. "So what next," she asks.

"I thought I'd..."

He stops. My heart skips a beat. What? Go home with her? Go away? Go far, far away? I'm on the edge of my seat.

"Well, that is, if it's all right with you, I'd like to..."

Come on, already, spit it out.

"Why don't you come home with us, Michael," Deidre says, her voice soft, but her eyes not quite looking at him.

"What!" I'm out of my seat. "No way! Are you nuts?!"

I suddenly realize Michael and Dee are staring at me, and coffee has splashed on my moon suit and is quickly making its way to the hardwood floor. The remains of the cookie are squashed in the fingers of my other hand.

Beside me, on the couch, Rye and Luis are hugging with joy. "Sit down, Mouse," Rye says, tugging on the pants leg of my suit.

"No. You can't bring a cop back to the commune," I insist. "That's just... well, I mean, it'll make some people very uncomfortable. Anyway, I'm sure it's in the rulebook: no cops. Back me up here, Rye."

"It is late," Luis says, "Or early, depending on how you look at it. You might just want to stay here for the night."

"Yeah," I agree, and then realize that this is not the result I was looking for either. "I mean, no. You should go."

"I don't want to impose," Michael says.

"Yeah," I say. "There's no room."

Amariah breaks in, "We could sleep on the couch and there's the spare room."

"Why don't you stay, Michael? We probably should talk," Dee says.

"All right."

"Aw no," I mutter. I turn to commiserate with Amariah, but she's jumping up to and give Michael a hug. Pretty soon Dee joins them. It quickly becomes a very sickening little family tableau. I look to Luis for a little support, and he's wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. Seeing my look, he gives me an apologetic shrug. "I'm a hopeless romantic," he says.

I collapse back into the couch. "Great."

