

one

IT WASN'T THE WAY he would have decorated the place, certainly could have used a guy's touch: a fist through some of the crap that cluttered the tiny room. He didn't want to get mad, wasn't the point of coming here, not to get mad at décor. He couldn't help it, though. It was like Urban Outfitters and IKEA had squared off in a deathmatch and the debris from the aftermath had landed here.

If he'd had his way—*when* he'd had his way or at least a say—there'd be a big leather recliner, maybe a leather loveseat in front of the TV, not this uncomfortable foam cushion futony thing with orange and pink . . . what

are they? *paisleys*? Plush dolls for pillows? *Two* throws?

It had been so much different when he'd been here. Everything had been different. He'd been different. But mostly the house had been different. Nearly everything he could have claimed as his was gone, every trace that he'd ever lived here erased. What had happened to the couch, *theircouch*, the one they'd spent months' worth of weekends scouting both the big retailers and hole-in-the-wall second hand shops for before finally finding the perfect one at an estate sale they happened upon pretty much by accident. The best couch ever. Leather but not stodgy, not too modern, comfortable, firm but forgiving. Now where was it? Another lost relic of their time together.

But that wasn't the point.

He was here to talk to her.

He was here to get her to listen.

The last of the beer fizzed down his throat, and he set the empty on the coffee table next to too much clutter: a remote, a hair scrunchie, a terrarium, too many candles, GI Joe cereal bowl, a toy soldier bookend (his compatriot and books to hold MIA). Beer was a no-no, but he was mad nervous and needed something to calm himself or he'd have a breakdown. And damn if he didn't enjoy the taste.

His head ached, like it was stuck under a torrent of water, rushing over it, thundering to the point he couldn't really hear anything beyond his skull. He closed his eyes. Dug his thumbs into his temples to try to make the throbbing go away. It was pointless, he knew. Like rubbing your head when you ate ice cream too fast. Maybe she had aspirin. Sometimes that worked. Sometimes.

Up from the couch, slight spin in his head, flush in his cheeks. He certainly wouldn't have spent the money to replace the couch, especially with that uncomfortable thing. Money that would have been much better spent toward getting a decent TV. Maybe it was her wonky aesthetic to keep the tube TV that had been all they could afford, maybe she didn't have the cash—most likely she just didn't care. That had probably been the touchiest subject

between them—*Okay*, the voice in Mat's head said to him, *Let's be honest. There were a lot touchier topics, a lot touchier.*

Let's not even get into it right now, he answered back.

Uncharacteristically, the voice in his head didn't volley back, kept silent. *Anyway, the TV situation . . .*

Yes, the TV situation. He wasn't a film buff so much as he just liked watching movies and hated the tiny screen and the way it bowed out. He just wanted a decent flatscreen, something HD in case they ever got HD cable or a Blu-ray player . . .

"Planning ahead," he'd said to Julia when she finally found him in the electronic section when he was supposed to be helping her look for a couch.

"We don't need a TV, we need a couch."

"But that TV's old."

"If we don't have a couch, what are you gonna sit on to watch that nice big TV in HD that we have nothing HD to watch with?"

Mat said nothing for minute, trying to process exactly what she'd just said. That happened a lot, where she'd say something that sounded like it made sense, had the illusion of being comprehensible, but when you actually paid attention to it really didn't make much sense at all. Sometimes Mat thought it was him that just wasn't getting it. Other times he was pretty sure she was the one at fault, having just spouted a random jumble of words back at him, playing it off like *he* was the dumb one for not following long.

"Besides," Mat had said, standing fast before a 37-inch monolith of a TV, "we already have something to sit on."

"We have a bean bag and a recliner."

"I love that bean bag."

"I want something we can sit on together."

"We can sit in the bean bag together."

"Something we can sit in together and not have half our limbs fall asleep or cramp up. Is that really that much to ask for?"

"But . . ." and he looked back at the TV, already knowing he wasn't going to get, didn't have even a remote chance of convincing her. He felt like

crying, like a little kid who had his heart set on a puppy in the window of the pet store only to be dragged away bawling by his mom who ignored the tears and gave false hope that maybe Santa would bring one, knowing Christmas was months away and the kid would forget by the time “Santa” showed up and left other presents that would be sure to (hopefully) erase any hope of the puppy showing up under the tree.

In the kitchen he opened cupboard after cupboard, drawer after drawer, looking for medicine of any kind. Hello Kitty potholders? Check. Superhero glasses? Full set. Fucking aspirin? No go.

He ventured down the hall toward her bedroom to see if there was aspirin hiding in her bathroom medicine cabinet. First her bedroom. Just as gaudy as the rest of the place. But here, here on the floor was something new. Something that didn't quite fit.

A pair of briefs. Men's briefs. Tightly whiteys, but red instead of white. They looked a bit like the underwear they made for kids, Underoos, that he had as a kid—with super heroes or dinosaurs or whatever on them. Always colorful.

Not long before Julia left, Mat had found a pair of briefs, red, like those on the floor, but with yellow trim instead of white and a big Superman “S” shield emblazoned on the crotch and put them on with a red pillowcase tied around his neck to make a too-short cape. He waited for Julia to get home, practicing the hop into heroic pose—fists on hips, chest puffed out, head tilted up and off to the side—to impress her when she came through the door.

When she finally did, Mat hopped and landed and posed and Julia lost it in a fit of laughter that was far too exuberant and lasted far too long. No guy wants to be laughed at while in his underwear, even if the underwear have a Superman logo on them.

It wasn't just the underwear or the short cape or the ridiculous attempt to be heroic that fed the laughing fit; she had been wound up the entire way home, even feeling anxious since just after lunch. Mat's little performance had been the relief she'd been waiting for, and she lost it. Laughter, she had

come to find, was much easier to explain than tears.

But these red briefs on the floor weren't those Underoos.

These didn't have an "S" on them.

Maybe they were Julia's. No. She was never a tomboy, as much as she'd never been girly. Straddling some spot between the two she could call her own. Flowers and lace, girly things, pretty—but never soft or fragile or dear. There was always an edge to whatever she wore. A sundress had to be paired with her Dr. Martens that had once been white patent leather, she'd painted in overlapping swirls that, from a distance, looked like flowers or the brogues she had worn into weathered things with just enough character to keep from looking like junk (or how junky they looked *were* their character). Hair done up in an ornate updo and she'd wear a frayed concert shirt, the neck ripped out.

In both cases, she'd be wearing leggings. Always leggings.

Certainly not these heavy cotton ball-huggers.

Shit

He wasn't going to let it affect him. First, find the aspirin, then go back to what served as a couch and wait for her to come home. He passed her dresser, shirts and whatnot hanging from the drawers—no one would have accused her of being the neat one of the two which Mat went back and forth between not caring about and being thoroughly annoyed by—and saw the ratty babydoll tank hanging from the top drawer. Still pink, if faded, there it was. He pulled it from the wreckage and held it up so it fell open in front of him. Like a vacuum had sucked the air out of his lungs. Nostalgic gut punch.

He wadded the shirt and stuffed it into his back pocket. Then into the bathroom finally. No more distractions. Medicine cabinet. Open. Wow, lots of bottles. Condoms. Ah, there: Advil. He fought with the top, dumped five into his hand. Slapped them into his mouth and sucked from the faucet.

Julia'd always freaked that he took that many, but he'd explained—until he just started to ignore it—that it was basically prescription strength when you took that many, 1000 milligrams.

OK. Back to the couch. She could be home any minute.

Waiting.

He rolled his head in wide circles, ear touching shoulder, head back, other ear to other shoulder, chin to chest. Slow. Deliberate. Just trying to get the pain to go away. Trying to stave off the nausea that could easily creep up in the wake of the pain.

He didn't know how many nights he'd wake up and sit up in bed, doing the same thing, rolling his head around, trying to not wake up Julia. Even before they'd lived together, even before he'd moved out of his parents house, he remembered always having done it. Half asleep, his throbbing head the only thing keeping him awake, feeling the pain travel from the back of his skull down his shoulders, through his back. Sometimes it went in a straight path down all the way to his lower back. Sometimes more isolated in his neck. Tendons crackled and crunched as he rolled his head around, slowly, over and over, switching direction.

Often he'd fall asleep at some point mid-roll and wake up an hour or two later, slumped over, head hanging down, everything stiffer than before.

He thought maybe food would help—was scared to see what might be lurking in the fridge—when a key went into the lock on the front door.

A laugh. Her laugh. Unmistakable. Any second, she'd be there standing in front of him.

And a guy's voice.

Fuck

He'd like to think he'd moved like a ninja, that it'd been a fluid movement up and over the back of the ugly couch, but he knew it hadn't been. At best it was like a drunk falling down a flight of stairs after a night spent out too late at the bar now attempting to make his way home to his bed to sleep and instead tasting cement and blood on his way down the steps face first—maybe not quite as hilarious, but about as graceful. Fuck grace; at least he'd gotten out of sight before the door opened and in came Julia and presumably the owner of the briefs on her bedroom floor, the same guy he'd seen her with now and then, coming and going (gah! *coming?* did he really need

to think *that* word? coming, *coming* then going).

The whole thing was for nothing, all the careful surveillance, watching for when she left, sneaking in through the window in the back, waiting here, the headache, all of it meant nothing because she'd come home with *him*. Now he was stuck hiding behind the couch with a banged knee and a rug-burned elbow.

He had no contingency plan for getting out. Only talking to her, making his point and leaving out the front door. He was, essentially, screwed.

"I hate when you do that!" Julia said, and Mat closed his eyes, pretended it was him she was talking to. "Get your hand out of your pants."

Whatever he was doing wasn't something he would have done. What was he doing?

Mat could hear something like a rat digging through the walls, realized it was just Julia digging into the stale cereal left in the GI Joe bowl.

"Wanna watch the video?"

Julia squealed. "Again? God, I never shoulda let you film that. I think you like watching it more than doing it."

Squealed? Had it really been a squeal? She wasn't a squealer. But she'd just done it; she'd just squealed.

"That sounds like implied consent." Was he drunk? Was she? "I'm turnin' on the TV."

Then a patter of cereal on the floor.

"Hey, don't throw that shit at me."

"But Rip . . ."

Rip?

"But *Julia* . . ." He dragged out her name "Jooo-liiii-ahhh" in mock exasperation.

Mat curled his upper lip like he'd smelled something rotten then did his best Red October impersonation, periscope up, trying to be stealthy and surface behind the couch, just enough to see what they were doing. He needn't have worried about being seen; they were face to face, tongue to tongue.

Every second he watched was a second he could have been caught, but he couldn't help but stare.

"Okay, but not here. The couch sucks."

"Aw, shit."

He'd been seen. He knew it.

"What now?"

"Not a fuckin' moose rabbit."

She looked back where he was looking. "Jackalope," Julia insisted and smiled, biting her bottom lip, hoping he'd love it.

"Fuckalope. Whatever. When'd *that* get put up?"

Didn't seem he did.

"I've had Morris since I was eleven."

Honestly, Mat had the same reaction when she first hung Morris, the fuckalope, up in the place.

"But when'd you put it up?"

"Duhhh, like last week." The smile faltered a bit, a flicker of something else.

If Mat could have seen the face Rip was making, he might not have despised as much as he did; the face he was making was damn close to the one that wrinkled Mat's own: the stinky face, like something smelled bad.

Rip shook his head in disgust.

"I don't like it."

On that—and pretty much only that—Mat could agree with Rip. He hated that thing, had even kidnapped it once.

"C'mon," Julia groaned, "Morris doesn't need to see what you're gonna do to me."

"What *I'm* gonna do?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Her giggles made Mat sick. Maybe because they were for Rip. Not him. Thankfully they were fading. At least she hadn't squealed again.

No doubt another pair of that Rip guy's wannabee-Underoos were going to end up on the floor. Whatever. Now was his chance. He slid around

to the side of the couch away from the hallway that led to the bedroom. Closed his eyes. Deep breath. Then bolted.

He might not have been a ninja going over the back of the couch, but he was pretty damn smooth getting the hell out of there.