

Chapter 5: _____

Flora

It had been a week since Flora had seen any of her friends. She parked her car farther down the street in case Julie came by to see if she was home. Steve stopped texting her. And Flora stopped responding to those who did try to get in touch with her. A few conversations with her parents were fruitless, though they offered her whatever support she needed.

A knock at her front door almost pulled a scream out of Flora. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle any sound.

"Flora, come on, I know you're in there."

Thump, thump, thump.

If Flora hadn't recognized Julie's voice, she would've grabbed the baseball bat resting next to her hall tree. Flora waited for Julie to leave.

"Open up, Flor," Julie said.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Flora's eye caught the doorknob turning. She hadn't locked the door. She *a/ways* locked the door.

"Flora?"

Julie turned the knob and pushed at the door. It only opened about two inches thanks to the chain lock.

Flora tried to stay silent as she backed away from the door in case Julie spotted her from any of the gaps, but in doing so, she stepped on her umbrella holder with the heel of her shoe.

"Flora," Julie said, softer and quieter this time. "Stop avoiding me, please. I know you're there. I heard that sound. You're literally right there."

Flora sighed.

"Fine, fine. Move back so I can open the door."

Flora closed the door, unlatched the chain, and opened the door to see her best friend looking at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"Are we fighting?" Julie asked, walking in slowly.

"No," Flora said, closing the door and turning the locks. "I'm just having a hard time facing everyone, I guess."

They crossed the floor to the living room and sat down.

"I assume you heard about my lunch with Steve?"

"No," Julie said. "What happened?"

Flora grabbed a pillow and hugged it close to her body.

"Long story short? I was an asshole."

"Did you have to reject him *again*?"

"Yes, but it was for a job interview as a paralegal. He was just trying to help and I bit his head off and then walked out of the restaurant," she said.

"That is kind of shitty, Flor."

"Yeah."

Flora rested her chin on the pillow.

"I should call him and apologize. I just haven't built up the courage to face him yet."

"Honestly, you've been dodging calls and texts from everyone. We're all just concerned, you know?"

"You're right. I'll make some calls tonight. Pinky promise," Flora said, offering a pinky.

Julie hooked Flora's pinky with her own and nodded.

Flora went to the kitchen for a couple of glasses of wine.

"Are you ready for some good news?"

"Um, yes, obviously," Flora said, handing a glass of burgundy to Julie.

"Remember that casting call you refused to even consider?"

Flora raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," she said. "What did you do, Jules?"

Julie pulled out her laptop and pulled up an email.

"Don't be mad."

Hi Flora,

Thanks for applying for [TBD]. We would like you to interview for a position in our project. Please arrive between 3pm and 7pm May 4 with your registration number. We look forward to meeting you!

Regards,

The Team at PursuitPlay

Flora shook her head and laughed.

"That doesn't guarantee anything, and besides, I wasn't interested," she said.

Julie took a swallow of wine, placed her glass down on the coffee table and turned and took Flora's face in her hands.

"Listen to me. You owe it to yourself to do what you said you were going to do. Stop being afraid. You need to risk something at some point or you're going to miss out."

Flora pulled away and glared at Julie.

"Oh, like *you're* Ms. Adventurous. Why don't you do something like that?"

Julie laughed.

"I did plenty," she said. "That year after college that I don't talk to you about. Why do you think I don't tell you anything?"

"Because you're afraid I'll judge you for being a sex tourist?"

Julie hopped off the sofa as if it were suddenly on fire.

"*That's* what you think I did?"

"I wouldn't judge you, though!"

"I wasn't a sex tourist, but even if I had been, so what? At least I did *something*."

Flora put her hands up to gesture to Julie to sit back down.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, but I didn't know why you went to Peru and Africa and then backpacked across Europe. And you wouldn't tell me, so I had to fill in the blanks."

Julie sat down and sipped her wine.

"I remember sixth grade," Julie said. "You wouldn't come to my sleepover. I thought you hated me, even though we were friends at school. And then there was summer camp. You were so excited to go and you kept pushing me to sign up. Then as the bus pulled up, I looked around and you were nowhere to be found. You just didn't show."

Flora frowned and nodded.

"But you know that it was my parents that made the decision; not me."

"Yeah, but it took you years to tell me what was going on," Julie said.

"I get it, though," Flora said. "I mean from my parents' point of view. They were worried about what could happen."

Flora twisted and untwisted the tassel on the pillow laying between them.

"I think the only time I've ever witnessed the stodgy, stick-up-her-ass Flora let loose, and I mean really let loose, was spring break our sophomore year."

Spring break was full of good memories shared between the two friends, but Flora also recalled getting blackout drunk. Beyond that, she couldn't remember what happened to her that night. She woke up in someone else's motel room, along with what seemed like forty other college students. And there were bruises on her body. Julie was the only soul she told about that night and she swore she'd never be that careless again.

"It's just that the one time I did something risky, the worst happened," Flora said. "My parents were right."

Julie took Flora's hands in hers to stop her from fidgeting with the tassel.

"Not every risk is going to result in disaster," she said.

"I haven't been diagnosed with anxiety, you know," Flora said.

"I know."

"Some anxiety is healthy, actually."

"Yup. That's true. Otherwise I'd have died a long time ago," Julie said, a smile forming.

A familiar but long-forgotten emotion bubbled up in Flora's chest. It seemed to be a mix of adventure, defiance, and something Flora couldn't quite identify.

As soon as Julie went home, Flora put on her "clean the house" playlist and started with clearing the empty wine glasses from her coffee table. Between the dusting, vacuuming, and mopping, Flora stole glances at her laptop at her dining table. Her thoughts kept going back to the email and audition or interview, or whatever it was.

She knew Julie was right; this was a huge departure from the typical for Flora. The old her would never consider it. Then again, Flora didn't even know what the job was.

I could just go, she thought.

Flora pulled her phone from her pocket and texted Julie.

Flora: Fine. I'll go.

Julie: To the audition?!

Flora: INTERVIEW

Julie: Whatevs. Yes, that!

Flora: It can't hurt to at least find out what it's all about.

Chapter 6: _____

Bryn

Marilyn ordered a cheese plate and sparkling water for herself. Bryn said he'd stick to water. The still kind. The *free* kind.

He waited for Marilyn to make her offer, but Bryn didn't expect much. At this point though, he might say yes to wearing a clown suit in a kid's show if it meant he could keep his gym membership and buy groceries for the foreseeable future.

"Okay, here's the deal," she said. "Keith told me you don't do kid's shows."

"Oh man," Bryn said. "I called it."

Marilyn cocked her head.

"Even if you were open to doing a show for and with kids, I'd never consider you as the lead. I remember how things went on the set of *Same Family*, Bryn."

She made a good point. It wasn't just the old adage about sharing a screen with kids or animals.

"Okay, good," he said.

"We were thinking you might be open to starring in a reality show."

Bryn exhaled and leaned back in the upholstered high-back bar stool. He always said he'd find a new career if it came down to him doing reality TV shows or commercials, but that was ten years ago. He wasn't entirely sure there was a new industry for him at this point.

"I don't know, Marilyn," he said.

"It pays well," she said. "And it's a win-win. You'd get back on Fribble's radar. I'm sure there'd be press to do because they're putting a lot into this one."

A server appeared with a cheese plate and flatware. Bryn waited as the server laid a cloth napkin on Marilyn's lap and put plates in front of each of them.

"Try the goat cheese with these macerated cherries," Marilyn said.

Bryn waved the invitation away and sipped his water.

On one hand, Bryn was in a fantastic position: He had an offer for a starring role in an indie film that had James Riven attached to it and Fribble wanted him to be a lead in a new reality show. On the other hand, he didn't want either.

"I appreciate the offer, Marilyn," he said. "I need to think about it. Is that okay?"

Marilyn kept her attention on the cracker in her hand, carefully spreading cheese and placing cherries on each quadrant. She laid the knife down and took a bite of the cream cracker, somehow not dropping a crumb to her lap or plate.

Without a word, she reached into her bag to pull out a pen, reached for a cocktail napkin, and wrote a figure on the thick paper. She pushed it toward Bryn.

Bryn's eyes widened and his eyebrows raised. It was far more money than he'd expected.

"Is that—" he started.

"Per episode," Marilyn confirmed.

Bryn had to internally slap a hand over his mouth to avoid accepting without hearing the terms.

"How long do I have to think about it?"

"I can convince the team to hold off looking for another has-been for a week, I think," Marilyn said, dabbing gently at the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

"Thank you, Marilyn," Bryn said.

He stood up to leave, but turned back to say something. He hesitated, holding the question as though holding his breath.

"Was there something else?" Marilyn asked without facing Bryn.

"Yeah. You avoided me at the studio and in the offices the other day. Why are you helping me now?"

Marilyn took a long swallow of her water and plucked the quarter of lime from the rim to suck on it.

"I could tell you it's because I respect your body of work or something about our generation needing to stick together," she said. "Honestly, I think this particular role is something that would benefit you in many ways."

As Bryn stood there surveying the room searching for a better explanation from the walls, floor, or patrons there in the Manor Highland bar, Marilyn held her phone out to the bartender to pay and quickly exited with one last goodbye to Bryn.

Bryn threw his keys on the kitchen counter at home and pulled vegetables and thawed chicken from the fridge. As he prepped his dinner, he thought about the two roles. Marilyn gave him zero context for the reality show. And James didn't seem to have much faith in the success of his nephew's film.

Though Bryn was sure the reality show would be a hit (reality shows were a global obsession), he wasn't sure where he could go with his career afterward. The indie film seemed like a step away from the silver screen and toward the big screen, but there was no guarantee.

Bryn stopped chopping veggies and nodded to himself. He reached into the fridge to pull out a few more ingredients, washed his hands, and then called Cheryl.

"Hey Cher-bear, whatcha doin'?" he said. "And before you answer, can I make you dinner tonight?"

"I never say no to a free meal," she said.

"It isn't entirely free."

"Nothing is."

"I just need some perspective."

"What time?"

"Give me about half an hour and it'll be in the oven."

Bryn heard what sounded like thick glass banging against thick glass and metal.

"Sure. Will white wine work?"

"Bring whatever you'd like, Cher."

They hung up and Bryn went back to chopping and seasoning. About forty-five minutes later, Cheryl knocked at his door.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, handing him a bottle of wine.

"No worries," he said. "I always plan for that. Dinner should be done soon. Want me to pour you a glass?"

"Thanks."

Cheryl took off her jacket and walked into the living room to take a seat. Bryn joined her, setting a glass of wine on a side table and sitting across from her with a glass of water in hand.

"Not drinking tonight?" Cheryl asked.

"Fun fact: I stopped drinking about ten years ago."

Cheryl looked up at the corner of the room, seeming to recall the nights out with Bryn.

"But you always go out for drinks with the cast," she said. "Even just a few nights ago. You bought everyone shots."

Bryn smiled and leaned forward.

"Ever notice that I'm always the one to suggest a place? I know the bartenders at most of our haunts and they know to only ever give me sparkling water with a lime or still water in a shot glass. Tea, if we're drinking whiskey."

"Huh."

Bryn nodded and sat back in his chair, crossing his legs.

"I had to quit, especially after what happened with Zack."

Cheryl gave Bryn one of those tight, close-lipped smiles and nodded her understanding.

"Well, let's get into it. Why do you need me?"

Bryn told Cheryl about the contract, the meeting with Riven, the impromptu meeting with Marilyn, and then waited for a reaction.

"That's wild," she said. "But I can't tell you what would be best. That's up to you."

"Yes, but what could Marilyn have meant? And is Andrew Riven even a name that anyone knows?"

Cheryl opened a browser on her phone and did a search for the new director.

"It says here that he's directed a few short films, but none of them were picked up for any big festivals. Just some small local ones," she said.

A timer sounded in the kitchen.

"What about news of any new reality shows?" he asked from the kitchen while pulling out a steaming tray of caramelized meat and veg.

As Bryn plated dinner and placed everything on the dining table, Cheryl walked over with wine in one hand and her phone in the other.

"It says here there's a new show from Fribble that debuts in the fall, but it doesn't have a name," she said. "Producers Keith Kenward and Marilyn Morgan."

Bryn nodded.

"That's probably it."

Cheryl set her wine down and plucked a roasted cherry tomato from the tray while reading from her phone.

"There's not much else," she said. "But I can ask around to see if anyone knows anything."

"I need to know more by next Sunday. I have to choose one or the other because they're filming at the same time."

Cheryl sipped her wine again and then raised a finger.

"I'll bet it's a dating reality show."

"For fuck's sake," Bryn replied. "I hope not."