

TOUCH OFF

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To my early readers,

Thank you for believing in Touch Off before anyone else did.

Chapter 1

Then

(2018)

I ran away from solitude. I liked noise and commotion, wanting to disappear into the crowd, never to be found again.

That was me, running among the flower beds in parks, chasing butterflies and smiling at the sun's warmth.

Those were our moments: My friends and I at Hawkers Asian Food Street, eating Roti Canai, laughing between bites at Harper's jokes, and gulping down water when we choked.

Harper, my number one best friend, was a blonde girl whose locks slipped into her mouth with every whip of her head and who studied people's behavior as if they were her favorite books. She didn't judge others; she tried to understand the reasons behind their actions.

And creative Ella, my second best friend, added art to everything she did, from her words to her flowing boho-style maxis. She dreamed of a perfect man who would bring her fantasies to life.

And then there's me, dragging myself through my internship hours, whining over my team members' mistakes and hiding my face over my own.

I couldn't go a day without hours of texting with Ella and Harper.

Our weekend plans almost always started like this:

"What's the plan?" I'd ask, even though I already had a plan.

"Let's go to the art gallery or the bookstore," Ella would say.

"Why not watch a Panther's game?" Harper would propose a desire Ella and I always vetoed.

I'd suggest the name of a historical place we had already visited dozens of times.

"Not again," they'd groan in unison.

"One shouldn't break their connection with history," I'd argue.

"I think I'll be busy this weekend," Harper would say, remembering some forgotten task.

"I'll come, but in return, you'll have to go to the library with me," Ella would bargain.

I'd hesitate because a trip to the library with Ella meant getting roped into one of her long-winded romance novel summaries. But wasn't I the one who needed her to hear my history rants?

And when the weekend arrived, despite her important job, Harper would show up in her colorful glasses and high ponytail. We would go on a long drive to Mooresville, our favorite library. We would spend half the day in its musty atmosphere and then the afternoons exploring the pages of history in some museum or savoring the present in a sunlit park. At night, we'd collapse in my living room, surrounded by takeout containers, ready for our usual movie marathon: Horror thrillers, Harper's favorite. Ella would scream at every scene, and by the end of the movie, I'd be just as jumpy. Those nights, I wouldn't let Harper go.

Ella had to travel a long way for work, so she would leave. Harper and I would lie on my bed and talk about everything possible until two in the morning. That day would become one of the most beautiful days of my life.

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Chapter 2

Now

(2024)

I hate showing up at a gathering when I'm dealing with physical pain. Unfortunately, that's my situation right now.

My temples throb, and the low murmurs around me sound like mosquitoes buzzing. I stand before a potential client, showing the same smile I use in business dealings and in meaningless small talk.

"There's something about your mother that draws people towards her," Jonathan says with a sly smile. He is a clever businessman and owns the Roxen Hotels chain. Selling him something isn't easy.

And yet here I am, helping Owen reel Jonathan in. He believes Jonathan will be easier to convince because of his friendship with my Mom.

"She's a force. I admire her," I say.

"I wonder if you might outshine her," he replies with a playful glint in his eyes.

Comments that compare me to my mother always make me uncomfortable.

"I don't see it happening," I reply.

Owen speaks from my right side, "Why don't we get down to business?"

I glance up at him, his blue eyes, half a foot higher than mine, shine with an indomitable spirit.

"What do you have to say?" Jonathan asks, raising his eyebrows at Owen.

Owen slips his hands into the pockets of his slacks and begins talking about his latest analytical software, designed to predict customers' needs. Meanwhile, I try to study Jonathan's facial expressions, but they don't reveal much.

"Am I the first person to buy this product?" Jonathan asks as Owen finishes.

"More than two hundred customers have tried it and left positive reviews," I say.

"Sounds good, but I already have an analytical software working."

"Currently, you need a manager at each hotel to handle the data. With Guest Pro, a single person can oversee all your locations from one dashboard," Owen replies.

Jonathan thinks for a moment. "Send me the demo. We'll take a look." He smiles and leaves us to meet a woman in a blue dress.

"Think he'll bite?" Owen asks with a hint of eagerness in his voice.

"Who knows?" I respond, rubbing my temples with exhaustion.

When I see Nora walking toward us with her husband, I wish I could magically skip this moment. She plays the role of my business rival, constantly competing with me at every step.

She is smiling widely, hanging onto her husband's arm. Dan is a film director in his late forties. Since Nora married him, she hasn't missed a chance to flaunt her happiness in front of Owen and me. She thinks I stole Owen from her. But he's not the kind of man who can be claimed by anyone.

After boasting about her recent trip and new diamond ring, she asks, "Word is, you two might get married, but from where I stand, it doesn't look likely." Her gaze bounces between Owen and me.

"Marriage kills love. We're better off as we are," Owen says before I can respond.

I glare at him, and he shoots me an apologetic glance.

We dated years ago, but now there's nothing between us but a solid business partnership, yet he always tries to make Nora believe we're more than that.

Nora winces at his words. I feel a prickle on my skin. Someone's watching me. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a man in dress pants and a crisp white shirt. That profile... it's unmistakable.

It's him. It can only be him.

My heart flutters wildly, like a bird beating against a cage, and my gaze snaps to him, taking him all in at once before stopping on his gray eyes. The intensity of his gaze shatters my defensive walls I have built piece by piece over the years.

I stare at Nick Jasper, the man I had fallen for and lost. The one who kept everyone at arms' length, but he let me in. Who made only one friend in his life, and that was me. Who said we were meant to be together.

He lied.

Memories of us flood my mind: his days and nights with me, our long conversations, our movies, and cooking sessions. His care for me, always finding excuses to touch me. The feel of his arms when he carried me to the room. The look in his eyes in bed. His words.

For a moment, I forget all the pain his leaving gave me. Just for a moment, my heart beats with a joy I hadn't felt in so long.

Five years. After all this time, here we are, just a few steps away from each other. Nick stands motionless, stiff, unblinking. So different from the man I knew. Yet the same.

Just when I am convinced I am over him, he shows up, and I am back at square one, standing in the doorway where he gave me our last kiss.

I had wished never to cross paths with him, though I knew it was likely in the same industry. I'd told myself a thousand times what to do if it happened. But now that he is right before me, all my strategies fly away like dry leaves in the wind. I don't know what to do, so I do nothing.

I'm not even breathing.

My mind is spinning, and I can't summon the strength to tear my eyes away from his. He still has that power over me that would leave me helpless. Frustration begins to build within me.

"Someone you know?" Owen's question pulls me back into the hall full of people. I glance at him with blank eyes and look back at Nick. He looks away, and a pang goes through my heart.

I panic.

Why does he still have an effect on me? Why is my face burning? Why is he here? And how am I supposed to act around him?

I turn and try to compose myself, blinking away the sting in my eyes.

"Just an old classmate," I say, my throat closing in, suffocating my lungs. My body burns. The headache is unbearable now.

"You look pale," Owen says with concern.

Fortunately, Mrs. Thompson, Mom's friend, sees me and flashes a beckoning smile. I escape Nick's line of vision and Owen's curious eyes.

Now, there are plenty of people between Nick and me, but his presence still torments me. The memories of him that had faded a little are now resurfacing like fresh wounds.

I need to leave, but there's someone else I have to talk to before I can finally get out of here. As I manage to speak to Mrs. Thompson, my gaze shifts to the glass wall, beyond which a pool sparkles in the sunlight. Maybe I can find some peace there. I excuse myself and walk outside, taking deep breaths in the cool air.

I'm okay. I can face him without falling apart. I'm not that broken girl he left behind. I'm stronger now. I am not sad. Just furious. I clench my fists, steadying myself.

"Renee!"

I swirl toward the voice that once strummed my heartbeats, but now it only scrapes my wounds. He stands by the door, his hand tightly gripping the handle, his eyes...

His eyes are a whirlwind of emotions. I know it's just because of our friendship, but it still gives me a little satisfaction that he shares in my pain, even if it's the slightest bit.

Despite my anger, I can't help but watch his features, noting what has changed and what has remained the same. There's a new seriousness in his eyes that used to stay narrow most of the time and smile more than his lips. His once unruly curls are now meticulously side-parted, and his body has gained more muscle. The shape of him flashes in my mind, and a stream of our intimate moments follows. My head pounds. I tear my gaze away from him.

He takes a deep breath and leaves the handle. His lips open and close before he speaks. "Are you okay?" The same tone he used when he would worry about me, the exact words he would say whenever he sensed I was in trouble.

For five years, I haven't been okay. How can he ask me this now? I want to yell at him, but I do the opposite. I force a smile, throwing my hands up. "Don't I look okay?" If he wants to know whether I've been miserable without him, he'll never find out.

A faint smile tugs at his lips. But why does his smile seem so wistful?

"Of course! You look..." His eyes travel down the length of my body. The temperature I had managed to cool with deep breaths rises again under his scrutiny. When he looks back up, I see a reflection of myself in his dark, searching eyes.

"Good." His eyes rove over my face, almost hungrily, like he used to when we would get close.

I swallow hard, forcing my emotions back into line. He shouldn't be looking at me like this.

I draw in a careful breath, lifting my chin and crossing my arms over my chest. "So, how have you been?"

He blinks, glancing around before meeting my gaze again. A moment of silence. A skip of my heartbeat.

"I've missed you."

The words stir a mix of satisfaction and rage within me. There's no way he missed me the way I wanted him to.

"I haven't." I tell him.

He narrows his eyes, and I realize I've let my anger slip through the cracks.

Keep it together.

"Glad to hear that," he says, relieved.

I give him an indifferent look. "I should go now. It's...nice seeing you after all this time."

I have no idea if I've convinced him that he means nothing to me. But I don't stay to check. Turning on my heels, I make for the door.

"You haven't changed." His words stop me when I grip the handle.

I look at him with burning eyes and grit my teeth. "No, you're wrong. I've definitely changed."

I step into the hall. I can't stay here any longer for anyone. I make my way through the crowd, lose control, and look back to catch a glimpse of him. He's facing the pool now, his hand lacing the back of his neck, head thrown back.

If I am miserable, he is carrying a piece of it too. I don't know whether to cry or laugh at it. I turn and leave the hall. By the time I reach my car, memories of past play in my mind like scenes from a film. My eyes get blurry. I rub them hard, get in the car, and slam the door shut.

On the way home, I relive the pain of the past. The moment I'm inside my apartment, the tears spill over. I collapse onto the couch, pulling my knees to my chest, the solitude hugging me like a friend.

"I hate him," I tell myself. Someone laughs inside me.

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