

“Do you mind?”

*Mind?*

No. Never. Of course not!

Okay, calm down, Dawn. *It's just...it's just Jack Malone standing in front of you.*

There is an embarrassingly long silence between his question and my audible answer. And it's because I can't find words anywhere in my brain while it lasts.

“I don't mind,” I say as normally as possible. “Y...you can have a seat.”

It's midnight and still raining like crazy, but I couldn't get any sleep. I conceded to insomnia fifteen minutes ago and came out here. It's the wide-open space in the back where Joe and I hang out. I wasn't expecting to see or be joined anyone, much less the famous Jack Malone. How did he even find this place?

I was enjoying my solitude but this...this is an upgrade; I'll allow it.

“I'm Jack, by the way. Jack Malone.”

My God, he's gorgeous. So fucking gorgeous in person and he smells exotic. His eyes, a gentle hue of brown, are all up in mine and giving...me...butterflies? I didn't know what that meant until now.

“I'm Dawn Grayson.”

“Yeah, the lady from earlier,” he says with a smile that I absorb and give back with a little extra. I'm worried that I'm not being myself around this guy.

“So, you.. attend the State College, right?”

“Yeah, Management,” I say.

“Oh, Business School. Explains a lot.”

Now, my attention is all his. “About what?”

“About me not meeting you before today. I'm sure you're more familiar with my friend Rory.”

How do I tell this errant beefcake that I don't give two shits about his friend Rory? I'm interested in who's sitting in front of me—which is...rather...odd.

Have I always had a crush on Jack Malone? Does this even count as a crush? It's only been two seconds.

*Focus, Dawn, focus.* What was it he said again? Oh, right, *Rory*.

“Yeah, yeah, he’s...he’s a classmate.”

“I see,” says Jack with a nod. “You run a pretty solid joint here. It’s a nice place, and peaceful.”

Yeah right. This dude’s either being really nice or his room doesn’t have plumbing issues.

“Thanks...I guess.”

Awkward silence.

I fidget with the keys to my room while he stares into space for a full minute. The relentless monsoon batters the roof more violently than ever, and a few raindrops ricochet at us with the wind, giving me refreshing chills.

I need to keep talking to this guy. Do I speak or wait to be spoken to?

“So,” Jack rekindles our conversation. “For how long have you been working here?”

*Ah, thank God.*

“As long as I can remember. I was reportedly the most famous receptionist here when I was seven. Guests didn’t wanna go; I was that good.”

“Ha-ha, so you are a guru in this business?”

“Naturally,” I reply with an air of confidence. “I learned from the best.”

“I like that.”

“And I like you.”

*Okay, hold on a damn minute, Dawn Grayson! What the hell was that?!*

Jack’s eyebrows arch in surprise at my unsolicited confession. I couldn’t help it, and I hope that this poor dude doesn’t make me out to be some desperate creep.

I am aware that I’ll look back on this moment for the rest of my life and fucking cringe, but now, I cannot show remorse or regret. I said what I said.

“I like you too, actually.”

*Yeah right.* Classic damage-control tactic.

“You know, you don’t have to say that back for courtesy or anything like that...”

“No no no no, I totally mean it. You are pretty...likeable,” he says with a killer smile to seal it.

Much as I wish to blame this on being drunk or ‘not being myself,’ it’s none of that. I’m just—at this moment—oddly smitten by this familiar stranger and believing all his lies.