

Ty Undone (working title)

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Chapter 1

Rooster Mike screamed.

Ty didn't need to look to know the red feathered, strutting bastard was right outside the door. And that bird knew exactly what he was doing. Ty lay in his bunk, staring at the plywood ceiling, plotting Mike's demise.

Ring around the rosie, pocket full of posies.

*Rooster Mike's gonna fly, way up in the sky,
He's got a rocket jammed in his pocket,
And two strapped to his thigh, this Fourth of July.*

The red numbers on the old Sony alarm clock glowed 5:47. He'd found a sticker on the bottom: *MFGD 1979*. The thing was twice his age.

Mike hollered again.

Enough. I am going to strangle and obliterate the fucker. Ask google "how many firecrackers does it take to dismember a chicken?"

Regardless, rise and shine. He threw off the covers and swung his legs onto the floor. His bare feet met the cold linoleum.



The room was small, dark, and smelled of fertilizer and machine oil. It was a walled-off twelve-foot square at the back of the nursery's storage building. But it was his. No roommates, no bunkmates. Just him and the hum of the AC and the mini-fridge. He opened it and grabbed breakfast—a couple of chorizo and egg tamales.

He grabbed his towel and headed around to the front of the building. There was a single door to the bathroom and shower. The hot water heater was dead again, so it was an ice

shower. He wedged a forty-pound bag of potting soil against the door—the lock was busted—and stepped under the spray.

The shock of the cold hit him hard. He washed quickly, shivering. Back in the room, he tied his damp, dark hair back into a ponytail and pulled on his worn bib overalls and a loose long-sleeved t-shirt. Isabella had given him a floppy sun hat with an enormous brim. He jammed it on.

Tuesday morning. The sky above was flat gray, brightening at the edges with desert orange. The big white greenhouse thermometer already read seventy-nine degrees. It would be triple digits by noon.

Isabella was already out in the yard, trailing a long hose down the aisle of hibiscus.

"Good morning, boss."

She turned the spray toward a thirsty shrub. "Hey there, handsome. Did you eat?"

"The last two tamales."

"Rose is making more, I'll bring some tomorrow." She scanned the yard, eyes narrowing behind her sunglasses. "Can you keep going with the seedlings?"

"Of course."

"And put them up front. Maybe they'll actually sell!"

"Got it."

"And where's your water jug? Make sure you drink a lot today, okay? I don't want anybody passing out from heat stroke on my watch."

"I'll be fine. The shower's my morning jolt. Then your coffee is the chaser."

She laughed, shaking her head. "So the heater is still out. I can call the guy."

"Don't bother. I'm low maintenance. That's why you keep me around."

"I am paying you, Mr. Low Maintenance, remember? So get busy. A lot going on this week." she teased, spraying a little water near his boots. "But yeah, you're our diversity hire."

"I know. I check all the boxes." Ty's tone had some extra sass.

"All of them." She paused over a struggling gardenia. "Sweetheart, grab me the shears?"

Ty jogged to the desk, found the shears and brought them back over. "You know, what am I going to do when there's no one calling me such terms of endearment? Sweetheart, honey, dear? Maybe you and Rose should just adopt me."

"I'd love that. I'll ask her. Then we could get rid of the cat. He's too old and doesn't make it to the litter box. You are house-trained, right?"

"Pretty much."

Isabella laughed. "No matter." She smiled back, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. "You'll just our miracle love child." She turned back to the plants, humming the opening notes of the Supremes' "Love Child."

Ty left her to it and headed for the shaded potting bench by the front gate. In an hour, the place would feel like a baking sheet.



Chapter 2

A Honda Civic beeped in front. Maya hopped out, leaned in to give her girlfriend a kiss, and breezed to the counter at seven sharp. She tossed her bag down and booted up the ancient desktop.

"Good morning, people."

Isabella looked up from the register. "Happy Tuesday."

Ty leaned against the counter, eyeing Maya's empty hands. "Wait. Where's the Matcha Mama coffee?"

"Line was too long."

Ty looked at Isabella. "Boss, we're in trouble. Maya without her latte is like Charlie without his crack."

Isabella smirked. "I'll make a fresh pot. Double strength."

"I don't know. That may not be enough. Might have to send her back to rehab."

Maya narrowed her eyes, delivering her best vulture glare. "Starting early today, are we?"

She peered at his wet hair. "Still got goosebumps I hope. How was the shower?"

"Brisk. I like it."

Maya shook her head as she watched the POS come to life. "See? Weird. She would fix the water heater if you asked her."

"It's fine. It wakes me up."

The big clock on the wall clicked to 7:00.

"Ready?" Isabella asked.

"All systems up. And I do need coffee." Maya yawned and then pointed at the front. "Go open the gate, runt."

Ty grumbled something to himself. *I know a word that rhymes with runt...* He grabbed the keys and jogged to the front gate. He unlocked the chain and pushed a cinder block aside so the suspended gate could slide open. The metal rollers screeched, echoing against the morning traffic. Last thing, he dragged the A-frame "Bella Adobe Garden Center" sign to the side of the county road.



Maya carried a tray of seedlings over to the potting bench for him. As Ty took them, a pearly white Range Rover pulled in, ignoring the parking spots and stopping right in the entrance. A woman in a ritzy yoga outfit spilled out, sunglasses perched on her head, big hair, arms waving and shouting into her phone. Her lips looked like pillows.

Maya froze. "Oh no. Trout pout. She's all yours." She did a 180 and walk-ran to get occupied behind the counter.

The woman ended her call and scanned the yard. She spotted Ty.

"Excuse me! Can you help me, please?"

"Sure." Ty wiped the dirt off his gloves on the front of his bib and walked over.

She stopped mid-sentence, staring at his name tag. There was just a single letter 'T'. This seemed to short-circuit her brain.

"What's your name?"

She wasn't asking his name. She was asking *what are you?*

"It's Ty."

"Okay, Ty..." She still didn't look convinced. "I need three of those agaves. The big blue ones. And four bags of the good garden soil. Not your generic bags, okay. Can you load them in the back? But carefully. And put some plastic down first. I can't have dirt in my car. I just had it detailed."

"We don't have plastic," Ty said. "I can get you a tarp, but you'd have to bring it back."

"That's too much trouble."

Isabella appeared with a stack of recycled cardboard liners. "We can place the pots in these."

The woman addressed Isabella now, ignoring Ty. "Fine. But tell... her? him? ... to be careful. I don't want a mess."

Isabella and Ty shared a look. Then a quick shrug to forget it.

Ty maneuvered the large plants into the boxes and set them in the back of the SUV. The moment the hatch clicked shut, the woman was back in the driver's seat, back on her phone, and peeling out of the lot.

"Happy lady," Ty said, watching the dust settle.

"Delightful," Isabella said.

Ty grabbed a paper towel from his back pocket and wiped his face. The heat was already rising off the asphalt. Maya was already helping another customer—an older Mexican woman in a sun hat—greeting her in rapid Spanish.

"Is Miguel coming in?" Ty asked.

"Thursday and Friday," Isabella said. "We have the wedding delivery. By then the truckload of mulch will be here, so eat your Wheaties."

"Got it." Ty flexed a skinny arm. "I'm gonna get ripped, right?"

"Doubtful, sweetheart." Isabella patted his shoulder and headed back to the shade.

Chapter 3

Maya cranked the volume until ranchero music blasted across the entire nursery lot. Without neighbors to complain, the bass thumped freely against the dry air. The DJs screamed with manic energy, their rapid-fire Spanish competing with jarring car-dealership ads and mattress sales.

"I'm going to try and learn. I took it in high school." Ty leaned against the counter under the large awning, pouring a cup of ice water.

Isabella nodded. "Good idea. You'll pick it up fast. Your brain's still young. Take the old laptop and watch some YouTube videos. But keep it plugged in—the battery's shot."

"Aren't you worried he'll watch porn?" Maya asked, deadpan.

"Maya, stop!" Isabella laughed.

Ty flashed Maya the finger as he gulped his ice water.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Maya smirked.

Ty was back with the potting, up to his forearms in the potting mix, when gravel crunched near the gate. A pristine, old Tacoma rolled to a stop.

The driver stepped out—trim, corporate, mixed-Asian he guessed, with dark hair a bit long. He wore regular jeans and a fitted shirt. He scanned the yard and saw Ty at the stand.



"Hi, excuse me." The man's voice was warm, uncertain. "I'm looking for some plants—actually, a bunch—for planters on a balcony."

"Of course." Ty peeled off his gloves. *Great.* He must look like a total hick: dirt-stained, smelling of fertilizer, sweating under a ridiculous, sombrero-sized straw hat.

He tried to sound professional. "What kind of plants are you thinking about? You said for a balcony?"

"I'm not sure, but it needs to be something I can't kill... like I always do, in like two weeks." The man smiled.

Ty relaxed a fraction. "Ah yes, one of those people. Floral Abandonment. Planticide. The Grim Flower Reaper."

The man blinked, startled, before letting out a laugh. "Wow. Impressive adlib. But yes, exactly that. Maybe I should just go artificial?"

"On a balcony here? The UV will turn it to dust in six months." Ty gestured for him to follow. "We can help. We'll email you weekly nagging reminders."

Ty led him down the main aisle, pointing out the hardy varieties suitable for large boxes. "It's a large balcony, and I haven't put anything out there. A missed opportunity." He smiled again. "I'd like something nice to look at in the morning and during long Zoom calls."

"Natives are your best bet: hardy, low-maintenance." Ty stopped in front of a row of flowering shrubs. "These *chuparosa* would be perfect. They bloom almost year-round." He turned, offering a quick smile. "If you water them."

"Chuparosa?" He repeated the word carefully. "That's a pretty name. What does it mean?"

"Hummingbird flower."

Ty looked at the flower as the man reached out, brushing the top of the red bloom with his fingertip. "Gorgeous. Okay then. Let me figure out what I want and I'll let you know. Is this the right email?" He held up his phone. Ty squinted in the sun to see it as the man watched him.

"Yes, that's it."

"Great, thank you."

Ty nodded back. The man smiled and headed back to his truck.

Chapter 4

By late morning, Ty needed a short break and went to the counter. The other two were there under the metal awning. A huge overhead fan blew the dry air around. Isabella perched on a stool, phone pressed to her ear, stuck on hold with a supplier. Maya sat opposite, decimating a bag of chips.

She pointed a salty finger at Ty. "What did that guy want? The one in the Tacoma?"

"Some custom planters for his balcony."

"You were chatty."

"Shut up."

Maya smirked and crunched another chip. She nudged the donut box on the counter.

"Hey, eat that last one."

Ty peered inside. One lonely jelly-filled remained. He shook his head. "Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's got a butthole."

Maya choked and coughed out a chip. "What?"

Ty held up the pastry and pointed to the injection site.

Maya stared at him. "Are you from fucking Mars?"

Isabella hung up the phone. "What now, you two?"

Maya thumbed at Ty. "Did you know that donuts have buttholes?"

"Really?" Isabella stayed calm, looking over the top of her glasses.

"Not all of them!" Ty protested. "Only these, the jelly ones!"

"Show her," Maya ordered.

He held up the donut and displayed the sphincter.

Isabella sighed, shook her head, and went back to the invoices.

"And Ty has a new friend," Maya announced. "A cute guy was here and they 'connected'!"

"You have a death wish." Ty turned to Isabella. "Boss, if I wanted to bury a body, where's a good spot? Out past Marana?"

"Sure." Isabella didn't look up from her paperwork.

"I'm not afraid of you, stick boy. I outweigh you by twenty pounds." Maya rolled up her sleeve and planted her elbow on the counter. "C'mon. *Mano a mano*." She grinned. "By the way, have you ever had your hormone levels tested?"

Ty raised himself up on the stool and glared.

"Both of you, stop!" Isabella groaned. "And Maya, that's mean. You can't say that. It's harassment." She looked at Ty. "Dear, please don't report us to the state."

"He wouldn't do that." Maya faltered a moment. "Right?"

"I haven't decided," Ty now sensing an opportunity. He let the question hang a moment and then turned to Maya: "Bring me a double hummer latte every morning for two weeks, and I'll think about it." He grabbed his gloves and hat and strutted off across the lot.

END OF EXCERPT