

Excerpt Opening - Chapters 1,2,3,4

Ty Undone (working title)

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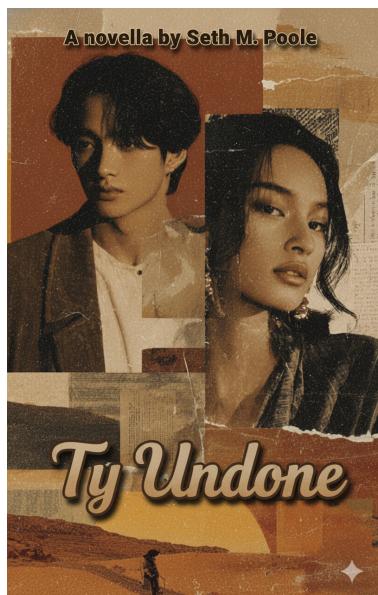
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Chapter 1

Rooster Mike screamed.

Ty didn't need to look to know the red feathered, strutting bastard was right outside his 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 strapped to his thigh,

Gonna fly this Fourth of July.

Next to his bunk, the red numbers on the old Sony alarm clock glowed 5:47. He'd found a sticker on the bottom: *Made in Japan MFCD 1979*. The thing was twice his age.

Mike hollered again, an extended cockle doodle doo.

That's it. I am going to strangle the fucker. He picked up his phone to ask google: "how many firecrackers does it take to dismember a chicken?"

It was all pointless really, and time to rise and shine. He threw off the covers and swung his legs onto the floor. His bare feet met the cold linoleum.



The room where he was staying was small, dark, and smelled industrial from the fertilizer and diesel oil. It was a walled-off space at the back of a large warehouse. But it was his. No roommates, no bunkmates. Nobody. Just him and the hum of a mini-fridge and the rattle of an ancient window AC. He grabbed a couple of chorizo tamales from the fridge, stood at the counter and munched them down. Next, a shower. He grabbed his towel, put on

sandals and a robe, and headed around to the front of the old building. There was a single door to a tiny bathroom and shower.

Once inside, he wedged a forty-pound bag of sand against the door—the lock was busted—and there was no way he could handle having someone walk in on him. The hot water heater was broken so he got ready for the cold spray. He jumped in and out of the stream: suds up, and rinse, repeat, and out.

Back in his room, he tied his damp, dark hair back into a ponytail though some of it fell around his face. He pulled on his stiff overalls and a loose, old gray long-sleeved shirt. Isabella had given him a floppy sun hat with an enormous brim. He looked like a scarecrow clown. Perfect, all set.

This Tuesday morning, the sky was getting light, brightening at the edges with desert oranges and reds. The big white greenhouse thermometer already read seventy-nine degrees. It would be one hundred 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 get some breakfast?"

"The last two tamales."

"Okay, Rose is making more today." She scanned the yard. "Okay, what's the plan today? Can you finish up the Agaves?"

"Sure."

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

"Got it."

"And where's your water? Drink a lot all day, okay? I don't want either of you passing out."

"Yes, yes, I'll hydrate. Gotta keep my lovely complexion. And I got my morning ice bath."

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

"Don't bother. I want to be low maintenance—so you'll keep me around."

"Sure, Mr. Low Maintenance, let's get busy. A lot going on this week." she teased, spraying a little water near his boots. "And anyway, we keep you around as our diversity hire."

"Oh, I know! I check all the boxes, right?" 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 them and brought them back. "You know, what am I going to do when there's no one calling me such terms of endearment? Sweetheart, honey, dear? And homemade tamales. Maybe you and Rose should just adopt me?"

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

"Maybe. It depends."

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

Ty headed to the potting stand and got set up for the rest of the Agaves. In an hour, the place would feel like a baking sheet. At least he was in the shade for a little while.



Chapter 2

A Honda Civic beeped in front. Maya hopped out, leaned in to give her girlfriend a kiss, and breezed through the side gate and over to the counter. She tossed her bag down and hit the switch for the ancient desktop and monitor.

"Good morning, people."

Isabella looked up from her papers. "Happy Tuesday."

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

"Line was too long." Maya replied.

Ty looked at her and then at Isabella. "Oh no, boss, we're in trouble. Maya without her triple latte is... like a day without sunshine, or Charlie without his crack."

Isabella nodded. "Sure, I'll make a fresh pot."

"I don't know. That may not be enough. She might need an IV, or rehab."

Maya narrowed her eyes on Ty, her best vulture glare. "Starting early today, are we?" She peered at his wet hair. "Nice time in the shower? How are those goosebumps?"

"It was brisk. I like it."

Maya shook her head. "Weird. This kid's weird. Isabella would fix the water heater if you asked her." She watched the monitor and POS come to life.

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

"Ready?" Isabella asked. The big clock showed 7:00.

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

"Runt?" Ty repeated, "I know a word that rhymes with... Oh, never mind."

He grabbed the keys and jogged over to big gate. He unlocked the chain and pushed the backstop aside so the suspended gate could slide open. The metal rollers screeched, echoing against the morning traffic.

From behind the fence, he dragged an A-frame sign, "Bella Adobe Garden Center", up to the edge of the county road.

A half an hour went by, and Maya had another tray of seedlings ready. She brought them over to Ty as he continued with the re-potting.



A pearly white Range Rover pulled in, ignoring the parking spots and stopping right in the main entrance. A woman in glitz and bright blue yoga pants spilled out, sunglasses perched on her head, big hair, with arms waving, shouting into her phone. Her lips looked like angry pillows.

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

The woman ended her call and spotted Ty. She called to him, needlessly insistent: "Excuse me! Can you help me, please?"

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

"Sure."

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

"And what's your name?"

She was actually asking *what are you?*

"It's Ty."

"Okay, Ty..." She still couldn't figure it out. "I need three of those Ocotillos. The big blue ones. And four bags of the good garden soil. Not the generic stuff, okay? Can you load them in the back? Right away, but be careful. Put some plastic down first. I can't have dirt in my car. I just had it detailed."

"We don't use plastic," Ty said. "I can get you a tarp and you can 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. He shrugged and went for the loading cart.

He got everything loaded and secured. The moment the hatch clicked shut, she was back in the car, music blasting as she peeled away.

"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 gravel. Maya was with another customer—an older Mexican woman in a sun hat—chatting away in rapid Spanish.

"Is Miguel coming in?" Ty asked Isabella.

"He'll be here Thursday and Friday. We have those saplings and a wedding delivery. Also, by then, the mulch should be here. About ten pallets, so eat your Wheaties."

"Got it." Ty flexed a skinny arm. "Mr. Muscles can handle it! I'm gonna get ripped, right?"

"Doubtful, sweetheart." Isabella placed a consoling hand on his shoulder.

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.

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