

Pursuit

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Meena didn't normally have visitors to her off-campus apartment. She didn't have many guests over, and when she did they had always been invited there beforehand. Which was why the knock on her door at seven on a Sunday was a complete surprise.

She opened the door slightly at first, then the rest of the way when she realized who it was. Jaime, a girl Meena had known since two years ago in their sophomore year, was standing outside her door and looking as though she'd been invited. Her makeup was precise as ever, the winged eyeliner looking crisp and perfect even though Meena guessed she'd been wearing it all day.

"Hi?" Meena said, making no attempt to hide the real question she wanted to ask.

"I know, what am I doing here, right? Look, can I stay with you for a little while? I know you have that spare room."

That was... not at all close to anything Meena had been expecting. It was no secret that Jaime and her current roommate Rose didn't get along, but they'd already spent half a year living together and Jaime had made it known that she wasn't about to be the first to break in their mutual rivalry. "Is this about Rose?" she asked anyway, still unable to wrap her mind around Jaime's presence.

Jaime scrunched up her face and shook her head. "No way, it's not about her at all," she made a disgusted noise and shook her head again. "Can I like, come inside? It's sort of cold out here."

Meena moved aside and let her in, closing the door behind her. Jaime had a backpack that looked stuffed full, and Meena stared at it with the sinking feeling that this unexpected arrival was going to take up more of her time than she had to spare. She'd been working on homework, actually focused and working on it instead of having half of her attention stuck on the latest Netflix show she'd been marathoning. Jaime's arrival was sure to take away that focus, and Meena sighed, wondering how she could possibly make this encounter go by more quickly.

It looked like Jaime was more comfortable with the situation than Meena was; she'd already shed her winter coat and draped it over the arm of Meena's couch before sitting down and sprawling out on it. She was wearing a pair of white jeans and a tight-fitting back tank top underneath a sky blue sweatshirt. Meena's gaze lingered on the hot pink bra strap that ran over Jaime's shoulder, only snapping away when Jaime spoke again.

"I just need some space from Chase for a little while."

"Oh," Meena said, as though that statement explained everything, which it did not, in the slightest. Chase was Jaime's boyfriend, and the reason she and Jaime had even met in the first place. Chase and Meena had been lab partners in the biology class they'd both taken to fill one of their science gen-ed requirements, and rather than just tolerating each other they'd hit it off pretty well. Jaime was part of his circle of friends then, but the two of them hadn't started dating until the summer after junior year. Meena was friends with both of them now, but Chase would always be the one she'd known first.

"He's been kind of clingy lately, so I think it'd be good if we didn't see each other for a little while."

“Okay,” Meena said, sitting down on the couch next to her friend. “But... couldn’t you just... tell him that?”

Jaime raised a perfectly filled-in eyebrow, the perfection of her brow making the slight judgement all the more harsh. “You don’t think that would hurt his feelings? Like, really bad?”

And—okay. That was true. Chase would probably feel badly if Jaime said something so blunt to him. But, still. “Don’t you think he’ll be more upset to know that you’re avoiding him?”

Again Jaime gave her a look that said she was *clearly* not thinking this situation through fully. “Are *you* going to tell him I’m avoiding him?” Meena opened her mouth to answer, but Jaime cut her off. “Don’t, okay? I don’t want him to know I’m here. If he asks just say... I don’t know, that you’ve seen me around campus or something. Make something up.” She waved her hand. “I just don’t want to talk to him, and it’s better to beg forgiveness than ask permission with that kid. Besides, if I start not responding to his texts he’s going to come to my dorm and Rose would *so* tell him if I was around, so I’m crashing here. Just for a week.”

Meena grit her teeth at the decision that Jaime apparently already made without any input from her. It was like Jaime was some kind of vampire—letting her into the house had clearly been a mistake. “Did you two fight or something?” she asked, feeling less patient with Jaime’s situation than she originally had.

Jaime shrugged, looking away to pick at the blue polish on her nails.

“There are better ways of dealing with—“

“I know, okay. I’m being a baby and avoiding my problems. I *know*.” She sighed and flung herself back against the couch in a gesture that was over-dramatic even for Jaime. Her eyes

drifted shut for a few deep breaths and when they opened again Meena was caught up in their blueness. “You’ll let me stay, right?”

Well, shit. Jaime said it innocently enough, but the question and the look that accompanied it made Meena shift uncomfortably in her seat, feeling too-warm under Jaime’s unwavering gaze. Did she know? She had to know. Meena hadn’t told anyone, but she’d sort-of flirted with Jaime before she and Chase started dating and although Meena thought she’d been subtle enough about it, apparently Jaime had seen it for exactly what it was. Jaime was manipulating her, that much was obvious, but Meena found that the words, ‘*No way*’ were no longer in her vocabulary.

She was so going to regret this.

It was a Monday, and Mondays meant lunch with Chase. Meena had considered skipping out on him, but if she started avoiding him all week too he’d probably be crushed.

“Hey!” he said, greeting her with his usual cheeriness. It didn’t seem like he and Jaime had gotten into a huge fight. He was usually pretty honest about his feelings when he was with Meena, and he’d confided in her the other handful of times he’d fought with Jaime during his nearly five month long relationship with her. If something big had happened between them Meena was sure he wouldn’t be smiling right now.

“Hey,” she said. Together they made their way to the dining hall, filling the short walk with idle chatter that Meena feared each step of the way would turn into a discussion of Jaime. At the dining hall they chose a table and split up to get their food. Meena decided on a simple salad, and was already sitting down at their selected table when Chase returned.

He sat down with his plate containing a cheeseburger and a pile of fries, blowing blonde strands of hair out of his face. Meena pulled the elastic hair tie from her wrist and offered it to him without thinking. Her own hair was short enough that she had no need for them, but she'd had long hair all her life up until Jaime had convinced her to try a shorter haircut and old habits died hard—that and Chase was always making a show of keeping his hair out of his face.

“Jaime still says I need a haircut,” Chase said, invoking that dreaded name. The mention was innocent enough, though, and Meena played around with her salad, trying to pierce a crouton with her fork in an effort to seem casual. Chase raked his fingers through his hair for a second before pulling it back into a short little ponytail. The front strands still brushed against his cheeks, but he tucked them behind his ears. “I think it makes me look charming,” he said.

“Yeah,” Meena agreed, “out of all the college kids too cheap to get a haircut, you definitely win the award for most dashing.”

“Rude,” he said, smiling anyway without denying the statement. He took a bite of his burger and Meena ate her salad in silence. After a few moments Chase put his food down and picked up his phone, frowning at whatever he saw, or didn't see, on the screen. Meena braced herself, and sure enough Chase asked the question she'd been waiting for since the start of their conversation. “Speaking of Jaime. Have you seen her around? I didn't see her all weekend.”

“No,” Meena said, trying to dismiss that line of questioning as quickly as possible without seeming too obvious about it. That wasn't what Jaime had told her to say, but she wasn't interested in coming up with a complex lie to cover for her.

Chase took a few more bites, taking on a look of concentration. “It's weird. She didn't respond to my texts either.”

“Jaime gets like that sometimes.” It was what she would’ve said even if she hadn’t known Jaime’s actual plan, and Chase shrugged.

“I guess so. If you see her tell her I miss her, ok?”

Meena felt bad that her first reaction to the request was to think of how clingy it sounded because it *wasn't*. That was Jaime talking. There wasn’t anything wrong with Chase wanting some form of contact with his girlfriend. “I will,” she said, wondering what she’d say to Jaime to convince her to go home and give up on whatever little break she thought she was on.

Chase nodded and they finished their food as they talked about their classes and the people in them they disliked. Chase was never short on stories about the pretentious tools who populated his architecture classes, and for her part Meena could always summon a story about some sexist asshole in her computer science classes.

The meeting ended with both of them heading off to their separate classes, waving their goodbyes. There had been no further mention of Jaime.

That afternoon Meena came home to find Jaime lying back on her couch, her knees bent to support the book she had resting on them. The sight of her was somewhat jarring; Meena wasn’t used to sharing the place since her sister had moved out to stay with her boyfriend. Her irritation at having an uninvited guest in the house, even if that guest was Jaime, emboldened her.

“Chase said he missed you today,” she said.

“What did you tell him?” Her voice was sharp.

“That I hadn’t seen you.”

Jaime huffed in response. She folded down the corner of the page she was on in her book and stood up, disappearing into the spare room that she'd commandeered for her own.

Meena watched as she walked away, caught between pressing the issue and letting it go. Beyond her anger on Chase's behalf, Meena couldn't help but consider her feelings for Jaime. There was *no way* it could work, but there was a 'what if' in the back of her mind that wouldn't go away. As long as that possibility existed, no matter how remote, Meena wouldn't, *couldn't* do anything to jeopardize it.

With a sigh of frustration at her own tangled feelings, Meena headed into her own room instead.

The next two days passed with Jaime keeping to herself and Meena letting her. Meena hadn't seen Chase since the lunch they'd shared, but that was typical for them during the week. Less so now that Jaime wasn't there to occupy his free time, but it was a relief not to have to see him and pretend that she had no idea what was going on with his girlfriend.

It wasn't until Thursday that Jaime knocked on the door to her room and asked to come inside.

Reluctantly Meena let her, and Jaime stood in her doorway wearing a baggy pair of sweatpants and what looked like the same black tank top she'd been wearing on the first night of her stay at Meena's. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun, and Meena would be lying if she tried to say the look wasn't cute.

“I was thinking. Do you want to watch a movie together? I know you have homework, but maybe just a couple episodes of some TV show would be fun? I feel like we haven’t been on such great terms lately.”

That was a bit of an understatement; since her lunch with Chase and the subsequent conversation she’d had with Jaime, Meena had been feeling somewhat unsympathetic to whatever she thought she was doing. But here was *Jaime* wanting to watch a movie with *her*. The only TV in the house was the one in Meena’s bedroom; they would have to sit together on her bed. Meena could say no, but that ‘what if’ held her back.

“Okay,” Meena agreed, “What do you want to watch?”

The discussion lasted a short time as they looked through movies that were streaming on Netflix before they both decided on some mindless action movie starring some ridiculously hot actor. Meena set everything up to play on her TV, and Jaime fell forward onto Meena’s bed, causing the frame to shake and squeak. She then rolled over until she was on her back, lifting her legs up and resting them on the headboard. “Comfy,” she said, smiling at Meena and putting her arms up so that her hands pillowed her head.

Meena looked down at her, staring at the dark brown waves of her hair that were spread across the bed. If she tried to lie down next to her she’d probably pull Jaime’s hair accidentally. “Sit like a normal person, please,” she said, causing Jaime to pout slightly.

Ignoring the fluttering in her chest, Meena sat down while Jaime righted herself so that she was properly oriented on the bed. The movie started and the two of them got comfortable, settling down until Jaime’s outstretched legs were draped just slightly across hers. Meena

wondered if there might not be another reason why Jaime had come to stay with her, that knot of emotion sending her tentative ‘what if’ veering into the dangerous territory that was a ‘maybe.’

On Friday Meena was settled into the living room couch where she’d decided to sit following Jaime’s movie peace offering, rather than stay inside her room and do homework there. She’d expected Jaime to be a worse roommate than she actually was; it’d been nice to find that she never left dirty dishes in the sink for long, and she seemed to be keeping the spare room pretty neat. She’d even cooked dinner for the two of them that night; granted it’d been pasta and not all that much effort, but Meena appreciated the gesture.

For the first time Meena found herself giving serious consideration to Jaime as a girlfriend. She’d originally assumed that in her relationships Jaime was a high-maintenance kind of girl—someone who wanted to be taken care of. Chase was good at that, so it made sense.

Meena didn’t do high-maintenance; her last girlfriend, Aria, had been like that, and Meena decided to call it quits on her when Aria yelled at her for not coming to say at her house in Pennsylvania every other week during the summer. The four-and-a-half hour drive between Meena’s home in Massachusetts and there was a killer, as was awkwardly sleeping in the guest room of Aria’s parents’ house and all the well-intentioned commentary she’d had to endure about *how it would be the same if you were a boy! —Not that there’s a problem with you being a girl!*

Aria had refused to come visit *her* for a change, and that had officially been the end of that.

Thankfully the whole thing had happened away from school and she'd only had to suffer through a few rounds of nosey text messages from her friends. Jaime had been one of the perpetrators: she'd asked a lot of questions about Aria, and then told Meena that she should find someone to rebound with. For a little bit Meena thought that maybe *Jaime* could be her rebound—not serious girlfriend material, but a fun end-of-summer fling. She'd sent her some playful texts that could've been interpreted as friendly banter just as easily as flirtation in order to get a feel for what Jaime was thinking. But those messages were met with only neutral responses, and just two weeks after that she'd gotten a text from Chase relaying the good news that the two of them were now dating.

The memory of Aria and the similarities she'd seen between the two was part of what had kept her interest in Jaime from developing past the 'she's hot and I'd definitely like to kiss her' phase. She needed a girlfriend who didn't have to spend every waking hour by her side, and Jaime had always struck her as that kind of person

Looking over at Jaime now, leaning against the opposite arm of the couch and intent on her book, Meena realized her assumptions had been incorrect. Jaime needed space too—that was why she was here, in Meena's house. And Meena wasn't clingy either, the way Jaime apparently thought Chase was.

Meena wanted to say something, but she had no idea what. How was anyone supposed to start that kind of conversation? 'I think you and I are might be more compatible as a couple than you and Chase are?' Definitely not.

Jaime shifted on the couch and Meena went back to staring at her laptop as the other girl stood and headed into the bathroom. Jaime's phone buzzed with a notification a moment later

and Meena stared at it. The phone buzzed again, and this time Meena leaned over curiously, only to find that it was Chase's name at the top of the messages. Jaime had a password on her phone, but when Meena picked it up she could see the messages as they appeared on the unlock screen.

jay please

just say something okay?

Donny and Alex said they talked to you yesterday but this whole not responding thing is freaking me out

I'll leave you alone if you want but just tell me you're okay

It made Meena's stomach churn to see Chase so worried, but more than that the weight of guilt pressed down on her; how could she forget about *Chase* in all of this? Even if Jaime was staying with her because she was *interested* in some way, there was no way Meena could ever feel good about breaking up Chase's relationship.

Jaime entered the room once again, and rather than feeling guilty for reading her messages Meena glared at her. "You need to respond to Chase," she said, not asking.

The other girl stared at her phone in Meena's hands and did an admirable job of not running over to snatch it out of her grasp. Instead she closed the gap between them and took it away. Meena watched her unlock it and followed her eyes as they darted back and forth from line to line, reading each new message.

"He thinks something bad might be going on with you."

Still staring at her phone, Jaime said, "So?"

“Jaime!” Meena said, shocked by her attitude. “No, no way, you can’t stay here anymore if you’re not going to talk to him. At least text him back!”

“This isn’t how I wanted this to work,” Jaime said, dropping her arm to her side before sitting down again and drawing the hood of her sweatshirt up over her head. “I was supposed to not think about him this week! But I can’t even go five days without the guy flipping out!” She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her forehead on them, sighing from within the depths of her hoodie.

Meena wasn’t sure what was worse: that Jaime seemed to care *so little* about Chase, or that here she was, playing part to this whole scheme. She was going to tell Chase the truth if Jaime didn’t. She should’ve done that from the beginning, but Jaime had dangled some thread of hope in front of her and

The small thought at the back of her mind that had begun to bother her since Jaime’s initial confession that first night and had only grown larger since then came spilling out before Meena could censor herself. “Maybe you don’t actually want to be in a relationship with Chase? Have you considered that?” It came out more biting than Meena meant, but she didn’t take it back.

The room was silent for a moment. Then, without lifting her head up, Jaime spoke in a muffled voice. “You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

Meena’s first response was to go cold, feeling like the floor had fallen out beneath her. It was exactly what she’d been thinking about only minutes before, what she’d stopped herself from saying, and Meena panicked at the feeling of having been caught.

When Meena felt as though she could put her feet down and touch solid ground, she saw that the accusation wasn’t even accurate.

“Not anymore,” she said. “Not if this is what you’re like with the people you love.”

Jaime lifted her head just enough for Meena to see her eyes over the crest of her knees. Her makeup was running from the silent tears that tracked their way down her face. “When did I tell you that?”

“Tell me *what*? That you don’t—”

“That I love him. When did I say that.”

“You didn’t.” Meena hesitated, watching as Jaime lifted her head higher. “I just figured... I thought, you’ve been dating for a few months, and Chase is Chase. He’s always being cute.” She blinked in realization. “You... haven’t said you love each other?”

Jaime groaned, covering her face with her hands. “I’m a fucked up person,” she said. “God, Meena, I’m sorry. This whole thing is so stupid.” She dragged the back of her hand over her eyes, drying her tears at the same time as she smeared her makeup further, lines of black running to the sides of her face. “I thought if I left without saying anything that he would realize how much he missed me. And then he said he did, but he seemed worried too, and I thought maybe I could make him say it if I scared him...” She glanced at her hand and noticed the black marks on it. She wiped at her face again, this time in an effort to fix her makeup. It was sort of a fruitless endeavor since she’d already ruined it past correcting, but her efforts did pay off slightly in that the streaks weren’t so obviously from crying.

With a sigh Jaime said, “I’ve just been waiting for him to say it for so long, it became this huge thing in my head. But, you’re right. I’ll text him now. God, he’s gonna be so pissed at me. I’ll be lucky if he still wants to be with me after this stupid stunt.”

Meena didn't say anything, but she quietly agreed. Whatever she'd thought she felt for Jaime in the past couple days was gone now, and with some relief Meena found that she was glad. She didn't need to be tangled up in Jaime's manipulations, or getting involved with her best friend's girlfriend like this.

Jaime typed something on her phone and the two of them sat in silence, waiting for Chase's inevitable response. It came within the minute, and Jaime responded back almost immediately. There was another, shorter pause, and then Jaime spoke.

"I have to go," she said, staring at her phone as she got to her feet. She darted into the spare room and grabbed her backpack before stopping in front of Meena. "Thank you for letting me stay here." The words sounded sincere and Meena nodded. She'd have to explain herself to Chase, she knew; their friendship meant much more to her than the relationship she had with Jaime.

But Meena nodded anyway, not quite able to say the 'You're welcome,' or, 'No problem' or any such variations on the words this kind of situation typically called for.

Jaime left without another word and the front door clicked behind her, leaving Meena alone—blissfully alone—in the house once more.