

FREYA &amp; JAKOB

## REASSURANCE

Freya throws chopped onion down into the oil and a sizzling fills the room. –So yeah, she says, –his girlfriend apparently met someone else down in Florida.

Jakob at the counter, his back to her, dicing long strips of red bell pepper. –Oh yeah? he says. He remembers New Year's Eve, remembers sitting on the couch and turning to her after the ball fell only to get treated to the sight of her kissing Fletcher. He has carried this image with him for a month now and not said anything of it.

–And apparently there had been this thing going on between them for a long time, where she like wanted him to leave Chicago, and come like *be with her* down there, and he kept saying *I will I will* but *just give me six more months*. Apparently this has been going on like this for *years*. She's been down there the whole time *I've* known him.

She pushes the softening onions with a wooden spoon. –So finally she got some leverage, I guess. She met somebody else and she was like *come down now or I'm gonna leave you*. And apparently he's going to go.

–Really? Jakob says. –Here. He passes the cutting board over to her and she tilts it, tumbling the diced pepper into the pan.

–Thanks, she says. –Yeah, she says. –He's leaving in, like, two weeks. He gave his notice and everything. She picks her glass of wine up off the stool and takes a sip from it, puts on a contemplative look for a second. –I think his girlfriend must have already slept with the guy, she says. –I mean, I don't know for sure, but Don looked pretty shaken up. He just looked like he needed to get the fuck down there *as soon as possible*.

Jakob imagines what it would be like, to learn that Freya had slept with Fletcher. He can feel his face glaze.

—So, yeah, Mark— the owner —is pretty pissed, Freya says. —But from my perspective things look pretty cool. I mean, I figure I'm the assistant manager, Don quits— that should mean I get to be the manager. Which would be *great*. I'd finally get to run the store the way I want. And I'd get a raise.

—You think it'll happen? Jakob says.

—It should, Freya says. —But I don't know. When Mark was in he was mainly trying to get Don not to quit. And, fuck, sure, for all I know the bastard might change his mind. And even if he does quit, there's no guarantee that Mark will make me the new manager.

—But you've been there the longest, haven't you?

—Yeah, yeah, Freya says. —I've been there the longest, I know how everything in the store runs, the other people there like me—it's smart to make me the new manager, but if Mark always did what was smart he would have fired Don and made me the manager a long time ago. She smiles grimly. —I don't know. Mark and I have never really gotten along too well; it's totally possible that he'd hire on someone new as the manager and keep me as the assistant. Which would fucking suck. It helps, though, that Don's leaving so suddenly: less time to look for a replacement, no time to train one. So I don't know. I think I have a pretty good shot.

—It would be cool if you got it, Jakob says, flatly.

—Yeah, Freya says. She notices that something's weird about his voice; he sounds slightly absent. Disconnected. She turns to look at him. He's staring down into his wineglass.

—Is everything all right? she asks. —You seem a little bit, I don't know, *off* tonight.

—Yeah, I guess, Jakob says.

—You guess?

—I need to talk to you about something, he says.

She turns back to the pan and begins prodding the vegetables around some more. The air in the kitchen is growing steamy, fragrant. —What's that? she asks, although she has a feeling.

—On New Year's Eve, he says. —I saw you kissing Fletcher.

—Yeah, she says. —I know.

—And I guess, he says, —I guess I just wanted to know why you would do that.

—Jakob, listen, she says. —I understand that it might have hurt you and I'm sorry. But it didn't mean anything. I was just *playing around*.

Mostly Jakob trusts Freya, and believes her, and so he knows, more or less, that what she is saying here is true, and he knows that one kiss between old friends at a New Year's Eve party really doesn't matter, and he knows that things will ultimately be easier if he chooses to *play it cool* here. He has been telling himself that for a month: *play it cool, let it slide, laugh it off*.

But it hurt him, to see Freya kissing Fletcher, and the part of him that was hurt is a part full of childish need, which cannot manage the complex trick of trust, which does not believe enough in her love to remember that it persists even outside of moments of demonstration, outside of acts of reassurance and attention. It is this part that was hurt, and it is this part that is about to take the floor, demanding to be comforted, although nothing can comfort it. He looks at the ice cubes in his wineglass, then up at her.

—Playing around? he says. —Playing *around*?