

Chapter One

Milan was the first person Feyi had fucked since the accident.

They hooked up in a bathroom at a Memorial Day house party, with Feyi's glass of prosecco spilling into the sink and Milan's large hands sliding behind her thighs as he lifted her onto the bathroom counter. Speckled tiles stretched around them, washed bloody in the light of the red bulb someone had screwed into the ceiling, and a linen shower curtain hung around the bathtub, thick with monstera leaves. Feyi threw her head back, his mouth at her throat, and her long pink braids dripped over the faucet, the tips dragging against the draining bubbles of her drink.

"Tell me if you need to slow down," Milan said, his voice all tangled up, busy with want. "I know we just met or whatever."

He said it as if it could matter, or as if it was a reason to stop instead of a reason to go even faster. Feyi had first seen him back on the rooftop, when the party was in full force around them. She'd liked the way his eyes followed her as she walked, how tall he was, how broad. Her best friend, Joy, had leaned in, linking her arm with Feyi's.

"Whoo, check out those thighs!" she'd whispered. "He thick as *fuck*. I'ma need him to turn around so I can see that ass."

Feyi had rolled her eyes. "So glad you don't have a dick," she said. "You'd be a fucking menace."

“I’d be *particularly* interested in his ass if I had a dick,” Joy replied.

“I take that back. You’re already a menace.” Feyi snuck another look at the thighs in question. “Besides, you can just use a strap, you know.”

“Nah, it’s not the same. I wanna feel him *squeeze* around me.” Joy had flexed her fingers into a fist to illustrate the grip, and Feyi stifled a laugh, her braids sweeping across her collarbone. Milan glanced in their direction, catching Feyi’s eye and smiling at her from across the roof.

Feyi had already decided who she wanted to be that night, so she stared right back at him, unabashed, drinking in his terra-cotta skin and dark copper beard. When he nodded to his boys and started walking toward her, Joy squealed and vanished, leaving the two of them alone. Feyi wanted to cut through any potential small talk—just slice it away neatly—so she touched the buttons of Milan’s shirt as soon as he was close enough.

“You’re hot,” she’d said, before he could even open his mouth. “Are you seeing anyone?”

A flicker of surprise had crossed his face, but Milan recovered quickly. “Nah,” he replied, tipping his head to one side as he held her eyes. “You?”

For a moment, there was the scream of tires and the mad chime of broken glass, the soft petals of white lilies, and a clod of dirt breaking apart in Feyi’s hand, but she brushed it all aside like smoke.

“Single,” she’d said in return, stepping right into his personal space. He smelled of rain and bergamot. “And—how do they say it?—ready to mingle.”

It would have been a corny line if she wasn't so beautiful, and Feyi knew it—knew how to part her lips in their full wine red, how to look up at him from under thick black lashes, how to inject a lifetime of suggestion into her voice. It was all a game, a simple formula, and there was nothing wrong with using these cards she'd been dealt. Besides, if she looked closely enough at the whole thing, none of it really mattered. He was a different kind of beautiful, and that was enough.

Although she and Joy had been drinking since brunch, Feyi wasn't drunk yet, just tipsy enough to choose him, to dive back into the deep end with his body. From the way this terra-cotta stranger had placed his hand on her lower back, welcoming her against him, he seemed to be on board with her plan. Joy was somewhere by the bar, surely restraining her glee at seeing Feyi make such a blatant move.

"I'm Milan," the stranger had said, his wide and delicious mouth curving into an amused smile.

Do we really need names? Feyi had thought, but she smiled back anyway, her hand splayed against his chest, his heart galloping steadily beneath her palm. "I'm Feyi."

Milan had glanced around the roof. "Wanna get out of here?"

Nice. He was playing along perfectly, no hesitation, no coyness.

"Not too far. I came with my girl."

He'd nodded and looked back at her. They were close enough for his breath to brush against her skin, for her to see the dark flecks in his brown eyes as he took in her face, his gaze lingering on her mouth. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped, low and rough. "Downstairs?"

Feyi had raised an eyebrow, hiding how his lust was like a match igniting hers. He *wanted* her, badly enough to ask only the important questions. “You’re solution-oriented. I like that.”

Milan took her hand, and they left the rooftop, squeezing past people on the stairs, then ducking around a corner as he led her into the bathroom. Feyi watched the muscles in his back move under his shirt as he closed and locked the door, then tracked the caution in his eyes as he turned back to her.

“So . . .,” he said, giving her space, not assuming.

It was sweet. It was so unnecessary. Feyi did not need to think about this. She put her drink down on the counter and pulled her blouse off over her head, her pink braids getting briefly caught in the black cotton, leaving her breasts covered in nothing but a thin bralette, small gold rings pressing through the sheer mesh.

The stranger—*Milan*—inhaled sharply, the want in his eyes going aflame. “You’re fucking beautiful,” he growled, still holding himself back. “Your skin, it just . . . drinks up the light.”

Feyi smiled and said nothing. Instead, she stepped up to him, pulling his face down to hers, his mouth down to hers, his willing and ready tongue down to hers. He seized her greedily, his hands digging into her flesh, his hips pressing an iron length against her stomach. Feyi felt like a monster and a traitor, but it was fine, it had to happen.

It was precisely what she had come here for.

• • •

The accident had been five years ago, which felt like both forever and yesterday to Feyi. She'd been living up in Cambridge, near her parents' house, but she couldn't handle the roads afterward, couldn't handle driving or the way her mother's eyes were weighted with pain and pity every time they saw each other. So Feyi had moved down to New York, because if she was a monster, then so was the city, glorious and bright and everlasting, eating up time and hearts and lives as if they were nothing. She wanted to be consumed by the relentless volume of a place so much louder than she was, a place where her past and her pain could drown in the noise. Here, Feyi could keep her name and her unruined face, yet become someone else, someone starting over, someone who wasn't haunted. No one in New York cared about the vintage of the sadness tucked behind her eyes and in the small corners of her smiles. She didn't have to drive, and she could cry on the train and no one would look, no one would care, because she didn't matter, and it was, honestly, such a relief to stop mattering.

Feyi moved into a brownstone apartment with Joy, her best friend from college, and paid for it with the life insurance money, trying to ignore how ghoulish that felt. Everyone said it's what he would've wanted, but she was fairly sure he would have wanted to live. Most people didn't get what they wanted. Feyi didn't want the money, but she needed it, that obscene check, and maybe she even needed the accompanying guilt. It was a punishment that felt necessary, like balance. He was dead, and what was she doing? Being alive, making art. How frivolous.

She and Joy lived on a green and sunny block, around the corner from Baba Yusuf's botanica and the Trini shop that

sold doubles at inconsistent hours. They smoked joints on their fire escape, and Joy convinced Feyi to dye her hair pink. “You’re in Brooklyn now,” she’d said. “Try a different look. It’s not a big deal.”

There was something in the air that first summer that made Feyi play along. She rented out a studio on the next block and made her work there. Grotesque as it was, nothing she painted or stitched together could bruise her the way her own life had. Feyi began to hope that her past could fade, thinning out like an old song, turning her sadness into just a vague layer under her skin. All that would be left was its residue, giving her a certain spicy and inexplicable melancholy that some men could smell. It made them want to save her. Feyi knew it was already too late for all that, so she dipped and ducked away from their hands, their hungry mouths. She liked the city as an entity better; it didn’t care who you were or what your damage was, it ate everyone up indiscriminately.

Once the full summer heat hit in a wave of wet air, Feyi felt like she was being seduced into being a stranger, and she found that she wanted nothing more. She and Joy rented a car and drove down to Riis Beach, lying out topless in the sun under layers of coffee and coconut oil until their skin darkened into deep brown and gold. Joy shaved her head on a whim and tattooed a black dot on each lower eyelid. Feyi pierced her nipples and braided her bubblegum hair down to the small of her back. They turned off the news and ordered edibles instead, redecorated their apartment with plants instead, started making pizzas on Saturdays instead. There was nothing to stop them from being whatever they wanted.

“Do you think we’re having a quarter-life crisis?” Joy had asked once, while rolling up a joint in their living room.

“First of all, we’re a few years too old for that,” Feyi had replied. “Second, I think we’re just figuring out how to survive a world on fire . . . that it’s okay to be alive.”

Joy had looked over with a soft smile. “I’m proud of you,” she said. “I know it isn’t easy for you to say that.”

She wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t easy for Feyi to do a lot of things, but now, with Milan kissing her against a bathroom mirror, Feyi found that it didn’t quite catch in her chest the way she thought it would. She was a monster and a traitor, but only if someone else was alive, and he wasn’t. She had to remind herself that he wasn’t. Feyi still felt wrong, yes, but in an unfamiliar way, which made sense because she had become a stranger and it takes time to turn into someone new. If she let go and existed only here and now, without a past, it was actually easy. It was fun, in fact.

“I’m serious,” Milan gasped, seizing air in between their desperate kisses, his palms hot against her thighs. “We can stop at any point. Tell me.”

Bass thumped through the walls, and Feyi unbuttoned his jeans, sliding her hand inside. Milan had small diamonds in his ears, and his breath was ragged as he looked down at her.

“Don’t stop,” she murmured into his mouth, and Milan hissed in a sharp breath as her fingers wrapped around him and pulled him out.

“Are you sure?” he asked, and Feyi tried not to roll her eyes.

“Such a gentleman,” she mocked, keeping her tone gentle, then she kissed him again, slipping her tongue between his teeth as she tightened her grip. God, he had *girth*.

Milan made a torn and rough sound, then shoved her skirt up to her waist, his hands eating her skin. Feyi heard a rip, and she laughed in delight as he tore off her lace thong. Milan tossed the delicate scraps aside and slid his fingers inside her.

“Let me make that up to you,” he said, and curled them forward.

Feyi cried out then, her back arching, and he laughed into her mouth, still hard and pulsing in her hand. She had forgotten what this felt like—the frenzy, the way lust could almost hold a shape within her, something big and loud and so very demanding. It felt rushed, dangerous, exactly how she wanted it, too quick to think, too fast, too hard, too wet to remember anything or anyone. She pushed away his hand and pulled the tip of him closer. Reckless.

“Hold up,” he said. “I have a—”

Feyi wrapped her legs around his hips. “It’s fine.”

Reckless.

“But—”

“Shh. Here.” She brushed him against her slick self and Milan swore in the back of his throat as his common sense slid away.

“Oh, you’re *bad*,” he whispered, pushing into her slowly, committed to their mistake. It was something she was beginning to like about him, the way he made decisions, abandoning uncertainty once the choice was done.

Her mind spun off as he stretched his way in, floating away on sharp pleasure. Feyi bit down on his shoulder as he sank into her and whimpered as he started to pull back out, tortuously slow. Fuck, it had been so long, how had she even made it this far? No wonder Joy kept telling her to get laid.

“Faster,” she gasped, and Milan chuckled.

“Ask nicely.”

“Oh, you fucking bastard.”

He pulled all the way out and Feyi’s breath hitched, the ache suddenly roaring and furious. “Ask nicely,” he said, his smile wicked. “And I’ll give you everything you want.”

She needed him not to stop. He didn’t understand. There were so many things she was keeping at bay. “Please,” she said, giving in. “Please fuck me.”

Milan’s smile left immediately, and something shadowed took its place, but he gave Feyi what she wanted, slipping back in and burying himself deep with one hard stroke. He slid his arms under her knees, lifting her legs and splaying her open, then pushed even deeper. Sound blossomed from Feyi’s throat as he reached up to twist one of her nipple rings.

“Like this?” he asked, watching her cry out, not breaking his gaze.

Feyi put a hand to his neck, circling it lightly, barely touching his skin. It was almost perfect.

“*Harder,*” she ordered, her voice fracturing, and Milan obliged, his hands bruising her, her skirt bunched up with her waistbeads, his jeans caught around his ankles. They both still had their shoes on. Feyi’s heels were trembling in the air over his shoulders, and she didn’t care how loud she was being, if anyone could hear them above the bass and through the door—because there it was, that blessed blinding white space, that searing nothingness even as she was alive, so clearly alive and in his arms, strangers coming undone, and she was coming around him, begging him not to stop, and Milan kept going, his own voice twisting into low and

uncontrolled sounds. When he gasped a warning and made to pull away, Feyi grabbed his hips, keeping him deep inside her and putting her lips by his ear. Men were easy, there were some keys you could use that unlocked them like a quick password.

“Come inside me, baby,” she whispered, her voice a silken filthy plea, making it sound like she was begging, desperate for him, and in some ways, she was. Since they were already mad and reckless and human, Milan cursed, his face contorting, his sense lost, and obliged her once more, pushing as deep as he could, growling against the glass and tile and her, their skin slippery with sweat and half of each other. Feyi felt another orgasm wash over her, and she welcomed it in all its illicit carelessness. She didn’t call out his name—in that moment she didn’t quite remember what it was anyway—but when he kissed her again, she kissed him back, and then they stayed still for a minute, their foreheads pressed against each other’s, trying to catch their breath as the air settled around them.

“Sorry,” Milan managed to say. “I usually don’t . . . do that.” He straightened up and pulled out of her, turning to grab some tissues and zip himself up as Feyi wriggled off the counter and tugged her skirt down.

“It’s fine,” she said, picking up her blouse.

“I got carried away. I shouldn’t have.” Milan handed her a wad of tissues and didn’t smile. “I always use a condom, usually.”

Sure. Feyi didn’t believe him for a second; it had been way too easy to convince him not to bother. “I’m on birth control,” she said, since they were playing this game. “I wouldn’t have . . . you know. If I wasn’t.”

Relief flashed across his face. “Oh, okay. Cool.”

They stood for a moment staring at each other, then Feyi pushed her braids back. “I should probably take a piss,” she said, enjoying how blunt the words were.

“Oh! Of course.” Milan turned toward the door, then paused and turned back. “Actually . . . can I get your number?”

Feyi raised an eyebrow. “It was that good, huh?”

Milan laughed. “I’m just saying. I wanted to take you out, soon as I saw you up on the roof.”

“And you still want to?”

He frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Feyi shrugged. “No reason.” She held out her hand for his phone and typed in her number. “Shoot me a text, I guess.”

Milan leaned in to kiss her cheek, his lips soft as a wing. “I’ll call you,” he said before closing the bathroom door behind him as he left. The music from the party leaked through in a quick slice of sound, then quietened out again.

Feyi pulled her skirt back up and sat down on the toilet, listening as her pee hit the water, a smile half playing across her face. What the fuck had just happened? She wiped away his come and groaned. Joy was going to kill her for fucking him raw, but Feyi didn’t know if she could explain it. There was just no way she could’ve watched him come in his hand or on her skirt or against her thigh, that arcing white. She couldn’t bear to see it, not yet, not like this. It would have tipped the stranger thing too far to the other side, something sordid and used, something ugly and frantic. It felt better to be close, pressed against each other, intimate. As if they meant something. As if this was beautiful. She had just needed it not

to stop, because if she was lost in Milan and his skin, if there was nothing except his momentum in and against her, hard and fast, driving out everything else, then there would be no ghosts.

There would be no memory of a fine-boned man with almond eyes and braided locs, no memory of how slow and gentle he liked to move inside her, how his voice sounded when he whispered how much he loved her. Feyi shook her head and flushed the toilet, picking up her ruined thong from the floor and tossing it in the trash. She stepped into the hallway and bumped straight into Joy, all purple sequins and long legs.

“There you are! Where did you run off to? You ready to head out? They started doing lines on the roof and you know I don’t fuck around with that shit.”

Feyi grimaced. “Yeah, let’s go home. Call an Uber?”

“Already did, it’s like seven minutes out.” Joy looked over Feyi’s shoulder at the reddened bathroom. “Wait, were you in there the whole time? With *him*?”

Feyi smiled. “I mean. You *did* want me to get laid.”

“*My bitch!*” Joy threw her arms around Feyi and squeezed her tightly. “Oh, you smell of sex; I’m so proud of you!”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get out of here.” They wound through the rest of the party and out of the house, pushing through the front doors and spilling out onto the stoop.

Joy stopped and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, passing one over. “Did you tell him . . . you know . . .”

Feyi flipped open her lighter and leaned over, the flame flowering in her hands. “Did I tell him what?”

“That he’s the first since the accident?”

Feyi cut her a look. “Did I tell him that I haven’t fucked anyone in the last five years?” She took a drag, then tipped her head back and blew a plume of smoke out into the air. “Of course not. Fuck I look like?”

Joy raised her hands. “I was just wondering.”

“Mm-hmm.” Feyi looked out at the dark street and sighed. Time to come clean. “You’re gonna be mad, though.”

Joy stabbed a finger in her direction. “See, I *knew* this was too good to be true. What the fuck did you do? And if it’s nasty, say it quick, before the car gets here.”

Feyi groaned. This was going to suck. “Okay, so what had happened was . . .”

“Uh-huh.”

“We kinda sorta . . . didn’t use a condom.”

Joy choked on her cigarette smoke. “You *what*?”

Feyi gave a weak smile. “Heat of the moment?”

Her best friend clenched her jaw. “Tell me he pulled out. Please, Feyi, tell me he pulled out, *at least*.”

Well, fuck. “I have an IUD in, remember? It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Not that big of a— Bitch, have you lost your mind? You let him hit it raw *and* you let him nut in you?”

Feyi looked down and scuffed at the floor with her toe. “I know, I know.”

“*Clearly* you don’t.”

“Hey, it was my first time since, you know. Cut me some fucking slack.”

She recognized the look on Joy’s face—her best friend was fighting between being sympathetic and cursing her all the way out.

“You know what?” Joy took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I am going to pop by the bodega because you are killing me with this shit. Stay right here, and if you see a white Hyundai, make him wait.”

“Aw, it’s like that? You’re just gonna dead it?”

“Oh, I’m not deading a goddamn thing. You and I are going to have a long conversation after we get home, once I stop feeling the urge to push you down some stairs, bitch.” Joy reached in her purse, hunting for some cash as she grumbled under her breath. “How you gon’ fuck up a perfectly good night by letting a nigga you just fucking met hit it raw?”

Feyi shrugged. “I take it you’re not buying my ‘heat of the moment’ defense?”

Joy cut her a look, and Feyi hid a smile. It was hard to play contrite when she really felt magnificent, when just thinking back to the bathroom was sending little aftershocks through her. Feyi sat on the stoop as Joy started walking away, then called out after her. “Hey, babe, can you get me some gum while you’re in there?”

Joy held up a middle finger without looking back. “Nope!”

The streetlights reflected violet off the sequins of her dress until Joy ducked into the store, and suddenly, Feyi was alone, except for the faint music from the house and the soreness of her inner thighs.

It didn’t feel that bad, to be on the other side of it. She took a deep breath and stared up at the sky, leaning back to rest her elbows on the steps. There were no stars, just a blurred moon hanging over the brownstones. Feyi could feel her pulse between her legs, a rhythmic reminder of the stranger with diamonds in his ears and bergamot on his neck. For a

treacherous second, she wanted to tell Jonah about it, to hear his smooth laugh again. He'd ask her if she'd had fun. Feyi pressed her elbows against the brownstone steps to drive the thought away, hard enough to hurt. It was the start of summer, she was alive, and she was so fucking close to becoming what she wanted—someone who had moved on, someone who had a life that wasn't dressed in black, someone who Milan had held like he was dissolving into her, like she was real flesh under his hungry hands, under a raging red light bulb. Someone who trapped pleasure in a small bathroom and pulled it out of herself, a roiling sweaty mess of alive on a bathroom counter. If she could do tonight, she could do anything—the rest of a life, for example.

“You got this,” Feyi whispered to herself, her voice catching, her cigarette dying and gray between her fingers. “You can do this.”

The music filtered down from the party, and there was no one to say anything back to her. Feyi stubbed the cigarette out and waited for their car to get there.