

Chapter 1: Jude and Friendship

Chapter 1 begins by introducing four close friends—JB, Jude, Willem, and Malcolm—whose bond has remained strong since their college years at Hood. Even though fifteen years have passed since they graduated, their connection has endured, shaped by both shared experiences and individual growth. Despite the differences in their personal and professional lives, they continue to find comfort in each other's presence, holding onto the familiarity that has defined their friendship for years.

Their evening together takes on a nostalgic tone when JB announces that Edie, a former member of their extended college circle, will be visiting. Edie, who has been living in Hong Kong while transitioning into a new career as a vegan consultant, becomes a focal point of conversation. A humorous misunderstanding arises when the group mistakenly believes she is undergoing a gender transition, leading to an amusing yet insightful moment that highlights both their close-knit dynamic and the occasional gaps in their understanding of one another.

The anticipation of Edie's arrival serves as a moment for reflection, prompting each of them to assess how much has changed since their university days. While they have all pursued different paths—Willem achieving recognition as an actor, Malcolm struggling with feelings of being overlooked, JB remaining deeply connected to their past, and Jude dealing with his own personal battles—they still find themselves bound by the deep familiarity of their friendship. Their interactions reveal an underlying tension between the comfort of their shared history and the ways in which their lives have diverged.

As preparations for Edie's welcome party unfold, the gathering becomes more than just a social event—it serves as a backdrop for each character to examine their own place in the world. For Willem, in particular, the evening triggers an intense period of introspection. Despite the glamour and success of his acting career, he wrestles with feelings of dissatisfaction, questioning whether he has truly found meaning in his work or if he is merely performing a role in both his professional and personal life.

Beyond his career, Willem is also preoccupied with Jude, whose enigmatic past and ongoing suffering remain a mystery even to those closest to him. Jude's struggles with self-harm and his unwillingness to share his pain create an emotional barrier that even Willem, despite his deep care for him, cannot seem to break through. This silent battle underscores a key tension in their friendship—how can someone truly offer support when the person in need refuses to accept it?

The party itself is filled with conversations and interactions that reflect the complexities of their relationships. There are moments of laughter, nostalgia, and connection, but beneath the surface, there is also a quiet undercurrent of unresolved emotions. Jude's presence, while physically there, often feels distant, as if he is only partially engaged in the world around him. Willem, who has always been attuned to Jude's moods, finds himself growing increasingly concerned, though he struggles to articulate exactly what it is that unsettles him.

As the night winds down, Willem accompanies Jude back to his apartment, their walk through the city filled with a heavy silence. Willem's thoughts drift between memories of their younger years and the stark reality of their present lives. He contemplates the weight of friendship, the unspoken responsibilities that come with truly caring for someone, and the difficulty of bridging the gap between love and understanding.

Jude, for his part, remains guarded, unwilling to reveal the depth of his struggles. Willem is left wondering if he will ever fully grasp the extent of what Jude has endured, or if some parts of his friend will always remain hidden. This moment of quiet contemplation encapsulates a central theme of the story—the longing for connection, the barriers we place between ourselves and others, and the complexities of supporting someone

who keeps their pain locked away.

This chapter serves as an emotional foundation for the novel, exploring themes of friendship, identity, and the search for meaning amid personal and professional struggles. Through the lives of these four men, the narrative delves into the push and pull of nostalgia and growth, highlighting the delicate balance between holding onto the past and embracing the future. As they navigate their intertwined paths, the central question remains—how do we truly stand by the people we love when they refuse to let us in?