

## Chapter 3: Jude's Silent Struggles

Chapter 3 began with Willem still feeling the lingering cold from outside, the dampness clinging to his skin and the residual tension of their rooftop struggle sitting heavy in his chest. The contrast between the freezing night and the warmth of the apartment was striking, yet it wasn't enough to erase what had just happened. As Jude worked on the window with quiet determination, Willem found himself studying him—the furrowed brow, the precise movements, the way he shut out everything else to focus on the task at hand.

It amazed him, as it always did, how Jude endured things most people would crumble under, moving through life with an unshakable composure, never asking for sympathy or understanding. His hands, despite the cold, moved deftly, his focus unwavering, and Willem realized that this ability—to keep going, to push through pain as if it were merely an inconvenience—was something Jude had mastered out of necessity. Willem often wondered how much of it was learned, how much was simply survival, and how much was sheer force of will.

The soft click of the latch giving way was almost imperceptible over the muffled sounds of laughter and conversation drifting from inside. They climbed through the window awkwardly, shaking off the cold as they entered the lively warmth of the party, their abrupt shift in environment almost surreal. Around them, people drank and talked, completely unaware of what had just transpired on the rooftop, the contrast between their reality and Jude's silent struggle almost too stark to comprehend.

Jude's transition from near exhaustion to perfect host was seamless, a switch flipped as he adjusted his posture, his expression slipping effortlessly into something welcoming, composed. Willem watched him closely, noting the way he moved through the room, greeting guests, engaging in easy conversation, hiding every trace of the ordeal they had just endured. It was remarkable, but also deeply unsettling, the way he carried himself as if nothing had happened, as if he wasn't still shivering slightly from the cold, as if he hadn't just pulled them both out of a precarious situation with a quiet competence that belied his exhaustion.

The room was full of people who adored Jude, yet Willem couldn't shake the feeling that he was utterly alone. He had spent years watching Jude keep everyone at arm's length, offering just enough of himself to be loved but never enough to be truly known. Willem had always accepted it as part of who Jude was, but now, seeing him laugh and joke while the weight of his private struggles pressed invisibly on his shoulders, he felt a familiar pang of helplessness settle deep inside him.

As the evening stretched on, Willem felt himself fading into the background, retreating into his thoughts while the conversations and laughter around him became nothing more than white noise. He wanted to tell someone what had happened, to pull them aside and say, 'Look at him, really look at him, and see what I see', but he knew it would be pointless. Jude was too good at keeping his pain hidden, too practiced in making sure no one ever saw the cracks beneath the surface.

It was an unspoken agreement between them, this delicate balance of knowing when to press and when to step back. Jude didn't need rescuing—not in the way most people thought—but he did need someone who saw him, someone who wouldn't let him disappear into his own silence. And Willem had made peace with the fact that his role in Jude's life would always be just that—the person who saw him, who stayed, even when Jude insisted he didn't need anyone.

The night carried on, the energy of the party never faltering, but Willem remained painfully aware of the undercurrent of exhaustion that Jude carried with him. He wondered if anyone else noticed how Jude's smiles never quite reached his eyes, how his laughter was perfectly timed but never entirely natural. Probably not. Jude had spent too many years perfecting the art of making himself appear fine, and most people were all too willing to believe it.

But Willem wasn't most people, and he never would be. He saw the shadows Jude carried, the moments where his expression would go distant for just a fraction of a second before he pulled himself back into the present. He saw the weight Jude bore, the battles he fought in silence, and the quiet, relentless strength that kept him going even when no one else noticed.

By the time the party began to wind down, Jude's energy was visibly fading, though he still kept up appearances, still made sure everyone felt welcome, still ensured that the evening had been a success. Willem lingered in the doorway, watching him, wondering how much longer he could keep doing this—pretending, enduring, convincing the world that he was fine when he so clearly wasn't.

At the end of the night, as the last of the guests departed and the apartment finally settled into stillness, Willem stayed behind. He didn't say anything, didn't push, didn't ask questions he knew Jude wouldn't answer. He simply sat beside him in the quiet, offering the only thing he knew Jude would accept—his presence, his understanding, his unwavering willingness to stay.