

An
**UGLY
LOVE**

SOME DUCKLINGS NEVER BECOME SWANS...



MAYA ALDEN

Amazon Bestselling Author of "The Wrong Wife"



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Also by Maya Alden

About the Author



Playlist

The Ugly Duckling by Hans Christian Andersen has inspired countless artists and features transformation, identity, acceptance, and personal growth themes. Here's a playlist that reminds us of the journey of *The Ugly Duckling*, from feeling out of place and seeking acceptance, to embracing one's true self and celebrating individuality.

- *Beautiful*, Christina Aguilera
- *Breakaway*, Kelly Clarkson
- *Born This Way*, Lady Gaga
- *Fight Song*, Rachel Platten
- *Brave*, Sara Bareilles
- *Unwritten*, Natasha Bedingfield
- *Shake It Off*, Taylor Swift

- *Bitch*, Meredith Brooks
- *Firework*, Katy Perry, Firework
- *F**kin' Perfect*, P!nk
- *Blackbird*, The Beatles
- *True Colors*, Cyndi Lauper
- *Girl on Fire*, Alicia Keys
- *Just Fine*, Mary J. Blige

Listen to this playlist on Spotify!

“Oh, how thankful I am for being so ugly; even a dog will not bite me.”

The Ugly Duckling, Hans Christian Andersen

“Ugly ducklings don’t turn into swans and glide off down the lake. Whether your sunglasses are on or off, you only see the world you make.”

Bonnie Raitt

“The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing.”

Janis Ian



Prologue

Seraphina Vine

Once upon a time, there was a princess called Hansa Raj who just didn't fit in, not in her family or in the small wine-country town of Everwood.

Overshadowed by her radiant sister Naina, an ex-supermodel turned media empress, Hansa harbors dreams, as fragrant and deep as a Pinot Noir, of crafting her signature wine with an Indian touch, paying homage to her heritage.

When she meets the Wine Prince, Orion Callahan, it's love at first sight for Hansa. Orion doesn't even notice her. Most people don't, and Hansa doesn't seek attention because she has an ugly secret. Hansa has dyslexia, which makes her everyday life a struggle that she bears in silence because she's afraid that if people find out, they'll realize that she is as dumb as she is plain.

Can you blame her when her own family thinks she's less intelligent, less pretty...just less than her sister, her cousins, and everyone else they compare her to?

Orion, who unsuccessfully tried to woo the brilliant Naina in high school, has now risen as a prominent winemaker, and Naina is finally giving him the time of day. But as he gets to know Naina, he also learns more about Hansa, who is now managing his wine-tasting room at Callahan Vineyards. Instead of falling in love with Naina, whom he's always wanted, he finds that he's instead, albeit reluctantly, captivated by the unexpected strength and genuine passion of Hansa, the duckling that no one notices.

Against the backdrop of frost-kissed vineyards and with just a little magic, Orion learns that some ducklings are perfect as they are, and Hansa discovers that she doesn't need to become a swan to be loved.

I am Seraphina Vine, and I am the fairy godmother of Everwood. I bring lost souls and broken hearts together. Now, I wave my magic wand and bring you the story of an ugly duckling and a prince blinded by surface beauty. Because sometimes love is ugly.



Chapter 1

Hansa

“I ‘m going on a date with Orion; don’t wait up,” my sister Naina said in a sing-song manner.

My mother watched as Naina left, wearing a black mini dress with knee-high boots and a cashmere coat. She was five-foot-ten and a size zero. She used to be a supermodel and now works for BBC America as their head of fashion programming. She lived in San Francisco, but lately she had been coming to Everwood more frequently. Because now she was showering a man with attention, the same man who had captured *my* heart and was currently handling my paychecks: the esteemed “wine prince” of Everwood, Orion Callahan.

“He’s a nice boy, but he’s not Indian, Karan,” my mother lamented to my father.

I looked at my watch. I’d been here for fifty-three minutes now, which I hoped was enough time for them to be satisfied with my visit.

“Rina, the Callahans are good people. Look at Atlas. He’s made something out of Callahan Vineyards. And Orion, I read in the *Wine Spectator* magazine, is up for a global winemaker award. What do you think about Orion, *Choti*?” my father asked.

I hated that they continued to call me *Choti*. It meant *little* in Hindi. It was a pet name that would stay with me even though I was twenty-four and didn’t want it.

“Ah...he’s nice.”

He was my boss. I worked *for* him, not *with* him. Every day. This Christmas, after working part-time at the Callahan tasting room for three months, Orion promoted me to full-time tasting room employee. I was so relieved when he did that because I was worried I’d fail and then my parents and my sister would be right about me being a bona fide loser.

My parents ran the dental practice in Everwood, so they knew everyone in our small town and their dental hygiene habits. They’d wanted both of their daughters to become doctors, but when Naina started modeling at sixteen and shot to fame by eighteen, they accepted that was an acceptable profession. Especially since she’d continued to be a top student, Naina completed her undergraduate degree in business at San Francisco State, followed that with an MBA at Stanford, which further met with their approval. Obviously, she was straight A’s all the way.

I was everything Naina was not.

I was short—only five-four. I was not a size zero but a size six...fine, sometimes a size eight, depending on the brand. I wasn't *fat*. I just had Indian hips, which looked great on Kim K but not so much on me.

Baby's got back! I heard that a lot while I was in high school.

My hair was not straight and silky like Naina's; *oh no*, mine was curly and frizzy. Naina was fair. In Indian terms, that meant she had light skin like my parents. Not that they'd pass for white or anything, just lighter Indian skin. Mine was what they politely called a wheatish complexion in Indian matrimony ads. To be blunt, I was considered to be dark and, therefore, less desirable in Indian circles.

Stay out of the sun, Hansa. You're so dark, and you don't need to get any darker.

I looked nothing like my parents or my sister. I was told I resembled an aunt on my father's side, who died a spinster as her parents had not secured an arranged match because she was not pretty.

That was mostly the okay and the bad, but the really ugly insult upon injury was that I had dyslexia. My parents and my sister were math whizzes, while I barely passed exams. I sucked at standardized tests, so my SAT scores were almost indecent.

I didn't know I had dyslexia for the longest time because, even though my teachers apparently had told my parents to get me tested, they refused and told me I just needed to work

harder. And I did. I worked *very* hard at school. Yet my grades refused to budge. By the time a teacher took pity on me and told me I had dyslexia and gave me the tools to help myself, it was too late. I was already branded the dunce of the family and the slow one at school.

Getting into Cal Poly SLO for my undergraduate degree in enology was akin to scaling a mountain on crutches. Graduating had been like climbing that same mountain but blindfolded. I loved everything about wine and wanted to become a winemaker. It had been eye-opening to go to university. Thankfully, since the California state senate had voted to allow winemaking students below the legal age to drink wine samples, I got to taste and understand wine long before people my age normally did.

“You want to become a winemaker because Orion is one,” my best friend in the world, Grant Ortega, said.

Grant and I had become friends in elementary school. He was gay, liked to wear dresses, and didn’t quite fit into our then-conservative school. I was quiet, dark, and one of the few Indians in school—the classic backbencher barely getting C’s. Two misfits got together and became inseparable.

My parents disapproved of my friendship with a *boy*, but once they learned Grant was gay, they were okay with it.

Grant was right about my love for wine being borne out of my crush on Orion.

Eight years ago, I fell hard for Orion after I first saw him. At sixteen, I had daringly snuck into a wine tasting he was

hosting for Pinot for Planned Parenthood. Unaware that I was five years underage, he engaged me in a conversation about wine. His descriptions of the aroma, the palate, and the flavors were so captivating that I found myself falling for him utterly and irrevocably.

I started learning all I could about wine and got my undergraduate degree in enology and viticulture.

My parents went ape shit. I mean, they lost it.

But I was adamant. They refused to pay for my school, so I worked part-time since I was seventeen, which, along with some loans, helped me graduate. Taking care of myself at a young age gave me independence, though it had not changed my parents' attitude towards me.

They thought I was living a lesser life, the kind those who were not good enough led. They criticized the fact that I lived in an apartment that I shared with others and looked down on the studio I managed to rent after Orion promoted me to full-time at the tasting room.

I couldn't be prouder or happier. I had my very own place! Finally!

I'd been worried that Orion would not hire me, but my guardian angel...fairy godmother, whatever you want to call her, Seraphina Vine, the owner of the wine bar Whispering Vines, helped make it happen. She'd put me in front of Orion, and he'd found my wine knowledge acceptable. Atlas, Orion's older brother, had told me I'd become indispensable in three months. Orion was still testing me, uncertain about my skills,

and I suspected he didn't like me very much; he thought, as my family did, that I was slow.

To get around my dyslexia, I buckled down every night with my studies. I dug into tasting notes and got good at spotting labels by sight—way quicker than having to read every wine's name and year. This hack was a lifesaver, especially when Orion sprung those surprise quizzes on me.

And yet, he was quick to point out everything I did wrong as soon as possible. It was part of who he was, which was a perfectionist. It was no wonder Callahan wines were being touted as some of the best Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays coming out of Santa Barbara wine country.

“Well, he must be nice,” my mother chimed, “if he's given you a job. Try not to mess this up.”

I looked at my hands and rose from the couch I was sitting on. “I better get home.”

“You don't want to have dinner?” my father asked.

I shook my head. “I've got plans.”

“A date?” my father teased.

“Please, Karan, have you ever seen her ever go on a date?” my mother interjected. “Remember Naina's birthday party this weekend? Okay?”

How could I forget? Naina never celebrated her birthdays here in Everwood, but now that she and Orion were an item, she had asked my parents to throw her a party. She'd gone to

high school here, had been prom queen, and was incredibly popular, so she had a lot of friends locally.

“You’re managing the bar at the party,” my mother continued. “Can you pick up some Callahan wine? Use your employee discount. Naina said she wanted red and white and some champagne to toast.”

That meant a case of wine; even with the employee discount, this would cost me. I wish I had the courage to ask my mother to pay for it. They could afford it. I couldn’t. But I didn’t. Because if I did, she’d immediately latch on to how I didn’t have enough money, and that was because I didn’t work hard enough.

The thing was, I couldn’t work any harder. All my life, I’d been working relentlessly, making little progress. Now I knew more about my condition and understood that dyslexics often had trouble with not just reading but social situations, keeping track of dates, and other things. Knowing didn’t make me feel less stupid.

“Sure, Mama.”

“Have a good evening, *Choti*.” My father walked me out. Once we were out of my mother’s earshot, he asked, “Are you doing okay?”

“Yes, Papa.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “You’re not messing up at work, are you? You know if they kick you out of your job at Callahan, it’ll look terrible on the family.”

“I’m not messing up, Papa. Atlas said I’m indispensable,” I said defensively.

“Atlas is so polite,” he sighed. “Just don’t let us down. You have a job; granted, it’s a low-level job, but you at least have one. I worried for the longest time you wouldn’t get a job anywhere with your stupid degree.”

In wine country? I had an education in winemaking, and we lived in wine country; I should be able to find something, I’d thought.

“Do you need your mother’s car?” he asked when he saw me unlock my bicycle.

My mother sometimes lent me her car, but every time I took her car, I had to listen to lectures about how I was a loser who couldn’t even afford a car. But when you had student loans *and* an entry-level job, it wasn’t easy to conjure up a car, insurance, and gas money. So, I stopped asking and bicycled the thirty minutes to Callahan Vineyards from downtown Everwood, where my studio apartment was.

It worked out well. I had a second job at Whispering Vines, the wine bar on Main Street, which was conveniently near my apartment. This was beneficial as I mostly worked closing shifts, making the short commute home quite helpful. *And* bicycling was good for my weight goals because I always needed to lose at least ten pounds.

“I’m good, Papa.” I got on my bicycle.

“Get home safe.”

As I rode home from my parents' place, I felt like I always did, exhausted and like a disaster. I didn't know if my mother and father realized how they constantly belittled me. If I protested, they'd say, "We're only trying to help you, *Choti*, stop being so defensive," or "If you were successful, you wouldn't have to be so defensive about your life choices."

Telling them I didn't choose to have dyslexia would get me absolutely nowhere, as they still didn't accept it as an *actual* diagnosis, just an excuse for Hansa to fail at *life*.

I sometimes wondered if I should move away from Everwood to maybe Northern California wine country or Oregon. I could work there and get some distance from my parents. Now that I had a job at Callahan Vineyards, I could put that on my resume and be able to find a job in a place where people didn't know me. I'd miss Seraphina, of course. She'd given me a job at her wine bar and taught me so much more about wine than I'd even learned at Cal Poly.

In addition, I *should* move away before Naina and Orion become serious. I didn't know if I could handle seeing them together as a couple. Then they'd touch each other in front of me. Kiss each other. And I'd know they were having sex. All of that would be too much for me. Leaving Everwood would be a clean break, but seeing my sister with Orion would break me repeatedly.

Why was Naina even interested in him? I thought pitifully. In high school, I knew he'd tried to date her; she'd told me how he used to make moves she rejected. She was used to

dating wealthy dudes. Orion was not that. He was a farmer at the end of it. But now he's become a *famous* winemaker with a profile in top wine magazines, and he'd magically become worthy of her. And now she was showering him with the Naina brand of charm, which made putty out of self-possessed men.

Orion didn't stand a chance against Naina, just as I hadn't stood a chance against her with him.



Chapter 2

Orion

“**H**ow was your date with Naina?” Liesel, my sister-in-law, asked me as she prowled in my wine cellar, where I spent a good chunk of my time in the winter.

Liesel had married my brother Atlas a few months ago, and he’d *finally* gotten his head out of his ass and admitted he was in love with her. That temporariness about his marriage, which he’d been clinging to like summer days in October, was bullshit because he was madly and irrevocably in love with his wife.

Liesel and I had become friends over time, and now she seemed to think she had a VIP pass to meddle in my personal life. Liesel was so tiny that Atlas once dubbed her *waif-like*, but her size didn’t fool me. This lady’s as tough as they come, battling rheumatoid arthritis like a champ and being an award-winning painter. And if that wasn’t enough, she worked at Whispering Vines and regularly helped at the Callahan Vineyard tasting room in the Funk Zone and the vineyard when needed.

Atlas and Liesel had made their home in the main house in the vineyard, the home we grew up in.

Ariel, our sister, who'd left New York where she worked at the ACLU as an immigration lawyer, had been living with them but now had moved to an apartment in downtown Everwood as she worked on figuring out who she wanted to be when she grew up.

I had a small cottage on the vineyard, which was used many years ago during harvest to house the temporary workers who helped us pick grapes. Over the years, the cottage had developed into a solid home for me. The location was ideal—not too close to the main house, so I didn't keep bumping into family or the Callahan Vineyards office, where Atlas, as the CEO, managed our family vineyard and where I attended dreaded meetings. Yet, it wasn't so far that I had to complain about the commute.

In January, there wasn't much to do in the vineyard, so I spent my time in the wine cellar, getting bottles ready to go into the Callahan tasting rooms in the vineyard and the Funk Zone of Santa Barbara, the homes of our wine club members, restaurants, and wine boutiques around the country.

With two back-to-back vintages hurt by fires and an April frost that destroyed buds, Callahan Vineyards struggled like many other small to medium-sized vineyards in the Santa Barbara wine country. Things were starting to look up, and I was excited to get past the financial wringer the company was going through.

“The date was fine,” I told Liesel as I tasted our 2022 Pinot Noir and took notes. Afterward, I’d run tests in my small laboratory to determine acidity and sugar content.

“Where did you go?”

I sighed. “Liesel, my personal life is—”

“I know you took her to Bouchon,” she interrupted. “I found out through Seraphina, who found out from her friend Aubrey, who works there. According to the grapevine, pun intended, it was a cozy dinner, and there was some hot and heavy...you know.”

Fucking small towns! Everyone knew everyone’s business and gossiped about it like it was an Olympic sport.

“There was no hot and heavy,” I barked. We barely kissed. I think she wrapped an arm around my waist as we walked. “And how is this your business?”

She flopped on a chair. “Are you *really* into Naina?”

The thing I loved about Liesel, and didn’t love at all, was that she stood her ground and was impossible to intimidate. *And* she also knew that I adored her, so I would not hurt her feelings by kicking her out of my cellar, which I was *very* tempted to do.

I pushed a tasting glass with a splash of wine toward her. “What do you think about the tannins on this one? I used a hundred percent stem.”

Liesel was the daughter of a winemaker and had married into a wine family. She knew how to taste. She swirled the

wine expertly, sniffing at it before taking a small sip. She savored it for a moment, allowing the silence to stretch out as I waited impatiently for her to drop the subject of my personal life.

Finally, she spoke. “The tannins are bold and edgy, but in a good way. They grab you, but then mellow out on the finish. I like it.” She set the glass down and locked eyes with me. “But you’re deflecting.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. “It was just a date, Liesel. Can you please get off my fucking back?”

Liesel leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. “I don’t like her.”

I glared at her, which she ignored. “You don’t know her.”

“And you do?”

“Yes. We were in the same class in high school, and after she left, we stayed in touch. We’ve been friends forever.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Friends? Are you sure?”

Maybe ‘friends’ was an exaggeration. We’d been acquaintances who sometimes texted one another.

“For the love of everything holy, Liesel,” I snapped. “Yes, I’m sure.”

She leaned back. “You’ve always had a crush on her, right?”

“I’m thirty years old, darling. We don’t do crushes at this age.”

“Oh...is that a snipe at me being twenty-four?” She wasn’t offended and had a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“I like her,” I said honestly. “I like how she looks and carries herself. I like that she’s successful and smart.”

“And what about how she treats Hansa?” Liesel wanted to know.

I pretended I didn’t know what she was talking about. “They’re sisters. Their dynamic is their own fucking business.”

Liesel sighed as if she realized she wasn’t getting anywhere with me. “Naina has been spending a lot of time in Everwood since the holidays. Are you guys getting serious?”

I chuckled, using a pipette to draw wine from a barrel. “Serious? As in exclusive? Maybe. She’s always been nice to me...and now she’s being *extra* nice to me.”

“Have you had sex with her?”

I gaped at Liesel. “*That* is none of your business.”

She waved a hand as if she didn’t care how I felt. She was about to say something when Atlas came into the cellar. He went straight to his wife and kissed her softly on her mouth. I loved seeing them together. I loved that my brother, who’d spent most of his life raising my sister and me and managing Callahan Vineyards, had found someone to share his life and dreams with. Someone *perfect* for him. Where he brooded, Liesel made everything lighter and brighter. She was sunshine

and a balm for all of us. We'd fallen in love with Liesel as much as she'd fallen in love with us.

"Your wife is moonlighting as a therapist and sticking her nose where it doesn't belong," I tattled to him.

Atlas grinned. He picked up the wine Liesel was tasting and did a tasting himself. He contemplated the wine and shrugged. "Those tannins need some time to smooth out."

"Yep," I agreed.

"And I'm assuming my wife is conveying her dislike of you dating Naina Raj?" Atlas tapped a finger on Liesel's nose. "Angel, I told you to stay the fuck out of it."

"And I didn't listen," she replied easily.

"Give it a chance," I countered. "Maybe it'll be like this Pinot Noir. It starts a bit raw and surprising, but ends up being one of the best things you've ever drunk."

I poured our 2020 Pinot Noir vintage into a tasting glass for her.

She picked up the glass of Pinot Noir, examining its color against the light. "It's such a beautiful color." She took a sip and moaned. "Wow! This is so...fabulous."

Atlas tasted the wine as well and nodded appreciatively. "Ready for bottling?"

"I think so."

Atlas folded his arms, and I knew a lecture was coming my way. That was his *I'm-now-in-father-mode* stance. "Hansa

didn't look well this morning. Is she okay?"

I felt the irritation from this morning flare in my belly. "She keeps screwing up. I'm regretting giving her a job. She filed everything wrong, *and* then she serves the Syrah to a guest and calls it a Pinot Noir while she's reading the fucking label. I don't know where her head is at."

I'd hired Hansa because Seraphina had pushed me to, *and* I'd seen a passion for wine in her, which was rare. *But* she wasn't the top vintage in the cellar...more table wine than reserve. Where Naina was competent and confident, Hansa was...well, a little slow, which was the most charitable way of describing it, and unsure of herself.

"She's learning, O," Atlas defended Hansa as always. He had a soft spot for her, and so did I. *But* soft spot or not, I couldn't have someone working at my flagship tasting room who didn't seem to know how to operate the fucking point of sale system properly.

I ran a hand through my hair. "I don't know...I'm giving her until March. I will have to let her go if she doesn't step up in the next couple of months. Right now, I have to check and recheck everything she does. I have to go through the tasting notes with her again and fucking again. Once she tastes the wine...she's good, but...anyway. I'm trying here, Atlas."

"I know you are." His eyes flashed something, and I shrugged it off.

Yeah, so sometimes I could be a real ass when it came to Hansa. She stretched my patience with her inability to get

things done quickly. She was hardworking, and I had to give her that, but I felt she stumbled when things had to be done fast. Just the other day, I asked her to create tasting cards for the new wines we'd stocked in the bar, and it took her two days to get it done. I could've done it in no time.

But what *really* annoyed me about her was that I found myself attracted to her. Yeah, Orion Callahan was ready to slum it with some plain Jane type.

Liesel looked at Atlas and then at me.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing. Just have some patience,” she said mysteriously.



The day had been long, and the weight of making sure the right bottles were leaving the vineyard was bearing down on my shoulders. As the winemaker, every detail reflected upon me, every note in every barrel, was my responsibility. The tasting room was the face of it all—the gateway for the world to sip and savor the fruits of our labor.

I needed everyone who worked for me to be as exact as I was. Working in a tasting room wasn't like performing brain surgery, but it was a role that demanded precision and a flair for detail, both of which seemed to slip through Hansa's fingers like overripe grapes.

I went up from the cellar and found Hansa still in the tasting room, though I'd hoped she'd be gone an hour after closing.

At least I wasn't paying her by the hour anymore. Damn! I'd hired her full-time, and it wasn't working out.

Her silhouette was framed by the racks of bottled poetry we had meticulously crafted.

I stepped inside, the aroma of oak and earth greeting me, but my mind was focused on the reports spread across the bar—misfiled, some incomplete, a stark contrast to the organized elegance of our wines. My frustration, which fermented throughout the day, found its outlet.

“Hansa,” I started, my voice taut as a vine under the summer sun, “this is the third time this week that the inventory numbers haven't added up. And these event orders are all over the place. What the fuck is going on with you?”

She looked up to face me, her eyes a mix of determination and a flicker of hurt...which I ignored. I could see her fingers gently tremble like leaves in a breeze as she aligned the wine glasses with a precision I wished she applied to her paperwork.

“I'm so sorry, Orion,” she responded, her voice steady in stark contrast to her hands. “I'll go through them again. It'll be sorted. I promise.”

But promises were as fragile as the glasses she handled with such care. I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to fend off the headache brewing behind my eyes.

“Hansa, I don't have time to go through everything you do, and once spring hits, I'll have even less time.”

She gathered the papers, her fingers brushing against the columns of figures as if she could tame them through her touch. “I’ll take care of it. By tomorrow, it’ll be as perfect as the oh-nine Pinot,” she tried to assure me with a tremulous smile.

I just shook my head and went into one of the offices adjoining the tasting room that the staff used for paperwork. I slammed the door shut, feeling like an ass. She was a kid, and I’d hired her, so it was on me if she wasn’t working out.

Then fire her. But I couldn’t. Seraphina adored Hansa. Liesel and Atlas would have my ass if I got rid of her. There was just one thing left to do. I’d have to do her job as well as mine. Fuck!

Also, why did she keep wearing the same outfit again and again? Those paints were glued to her curvy body—which I shouldn’t even have noticed, but I did. Oh, I certainly did.

There was a knock on my door, and when I barked, “*Come in,*” Hansa opened the door. She smiled uneasily. That was one thing about her. No matter how frustrated I got with her, no matter what I said or how I behaved, she always smiled and tried to keep the peace. I’d never seen her snap at anyone or lose her temper. She was like a fucking docile doormat who didn’t care who wiped their crap on her. *Fuck!* That was an uncharitable thought, I thought, my temper bubbling.

“I’m really sorry, Orion. I promise everything will be fixed up by tomorrow morning. I’ll work on it all night and...”

“I don’t get it, Hansa. It shouldn’t require you to work all night. Just leave it. It’ll take me a couple of hours, but I’ll at least know then that it’s done right.”

She looked like I hit her, but it lasted a short moment, after which her eyes were clear again. “Please give me a chance to make it right.” Her voice was soft yet unwavering.

“Fine. Ah...look, I’m giving you until March to show me you can work here without me looking over your shoulder. If you don’t pull it together, I won’t have a choice but to let you go.”

I was expecting her to look sad, even devastated, but instead, she looked like someone who was expecting exactly what I’d said and had been prepared for it. Like a fighter who’d put on body armor.

“Orion, I am so sorry that I’m such a disappointment. I’m so grateful to you for giving me a chance. I promise I won’t let you down. I’ll do everything I can to earn your trust.”

I nodded. “You can go now,” I snapped, partly because she unnerved me with her strength and calm, which I didn’t have at her age...*fuck*, I didn’t even have it now, and I was six years her senior.

I collapsed on my chair after she left. What was wrong with me? Why did this poor girl rub me the wrong way? I was always brusque with my staff, but this was a little over the top, even for me.

My phone pinged, and I smiled for the first time that day.

Naina: *I had a great time last night. I was wondering if you have time to meet for a drink tonight. I leave for San Francisco tomorrow.*

Naina lived in San Francisco, but since Christmas this year, we've sort of started to—

I couldn't call it dating—see each other. We'd been out a few times, and it had been pretty casual.

Liesel was right about one thing: Naina and I hadn't had sex. Usually, I didn't wait this long. I'd meet a woman, we'd feel an attraction, and we'd sleep together. End of story. What was even more surprising was that Naina was an old crush finally being realized, yet something was holding me back.

Naina had modeled when she was sixteen, and by twenty, she'd graced the cover of Vogue. We'd stayed in casual contact through the years. Whenever I was in San Francisco, we would meet up. This past Christmas, things changed during a visit to the Callahan Christmas Bazaar. We shared our first kiss, but unfortunately, the spark simply wasn't there for me. My attraction had dimmed, which was likely why I hadn't moved our relationship to a physical level despite her hints of amenability.

I texted her to come to the tasting room. Maybe we could go back to my cottage, I thought. Perhaps we could spend the night together.

She was stunning, a former famous model, and now the head of BBC America's fashion desk. While walking runways for top designers, she'd earned a business degree from Cal and

an MBA from Stanford. Naina was smart, sexy, and fun—the total package. So, why hadn't I sealed the deal? What was holding me back?



Chapter 3

Hansa

I commandeered one of the empty offices on the first floor of Callahan Vineyard. I had deserved the dressing down from Orion. I knew I'd been messing up despite trying so hard not to. I barely slept. I stayed up to focus, learn, and remember. I used all the tricks in my arsenal. I read tasting notes aloud. I took pictures to identify bottles. If I had enough time, I could get most things right, but when Orion sprang things at me...that was a nightmare.

He simply said to write a few tasting notes to share with the customers. Easy enough for him to say. It took me all night. This not sleeping through the night was hard. I had to pretend I was bright as a button every morning. The one time I'd looked tired, Orion had railed into me for being *hungover*. Apparently, he'd heard from someone who'd heard from someone else that I'd been on a date at Whispering Vines.

It hadn't been a date. I'd met up with a classmate from SLO who was visiting Santa Barbara. I was always afraid to meet with people for a meal in a strange place because I needed to

prepare myself to read the menu, so I didn't look stupid when I ordered. When he agreed we could meet at Whispering Vines, I was relieved. It had been a pleasant evening, and it felt so good to say I was working in a tasting room. But I had to work on inventory at night to make up for lost time. Hence, I'd had to use a shit ton of concealer around my eyes, and I was mainlining coffee.

I sat in the office, surrounded by the ghosts of my mistakes—papers scattered like fallen leaves, each one a proof of how my dyslexia was ruining my life.

The numbers swam before my eyes. I took a deep breath, willing my mind to settle, to see through the storm of letters and digits that twisted and turned, refusing to stay still. Each document was a battle, and each corrected entry was a minor victory in a war I knew I was destined to fight forever.

I should've never asked Seraphina to help me get a job with Orion. He used to ignore me, which was exceedingly better than how he looked at me now, like I was a screw-up.

Pressure built within me, a tension not just to correct these errors but to work to gain the respect I sought from Orion, which seemed as distant as the stars outside my window. Fear was a constant shadow, whispering in my ear that one mistake too many could sever the fragile thread of my employment and any hope of being seen as worthy in Orion's eyes. It was unfair, really, since I'd always, always wanted him.

Now, it seemed my sister was the one who would have him. I couldn't compete, of course. Naina's natural charm in

conversation and with people was as alien to me as the ease with which others read. I couldn't blame Orion for being drawn to her instead of me.

What surprised me was that he even caught Naina's attention. But ever since he graced the cover of *Wine Spectator* magazine, his appeal had skyrocketed. He was no longer just a random winemaker; he was a rising star in the world of wine. And, of course, it didn't hurt that he was handsome as sin.

From the first day I saw him, Orion loomed large, like a figure from a myth, tall and commanding. His hair was the very shade of blonde you'd find in ancient tapestries, strands of gold spun by the sun itself, and it fell just right, always seeming effortlessly tousled. Yeah, compare that to my frizzy, curly hair.

He dressed casually, a winemaker's choice of comfort over formality. He wore denim like a second skin, *insert panty-dropping hot flash here*, and buttoned downs he rolled at the sleeves, as if ready for work at any moment, showing off the strength in his arms, veins like a vine's tendrils visible beneath.

But it was his face that drew me to him. Etched with the ease of handsome men, it bore a smile that could ferment the sourest grapes into the most delicious wine. And his eyes, a clear sky blue, reflected a horizon I could never reach—open, free, with a depth that held stories untold, laughter unreleased, and a warmth that I longed to bask in.

To watch him was to witness ease in motion; he moved with a purpose, a natural flow, as if the earth beneath his feet welcomed each step. I would pause, papers in hand, caught by the simple act of him inspecting a barrel or jotting down notes, his focus as intense as the summer heat on our ripest clusters of grapes.

Oh yes, I was madly in love.

I shuffled the papers, aligning them with a care I wished could be mirrored in the numbers they contained. This was more than just a job; it was my chance to prove that I was more than my dyslexia, more than the dark, ugly girl in the background. I wanted to be seen as Hansa, the woman who could conquer the tasting room and charm the nuances from each bottle of wine despite the chaos of letters in her mind.

The weight of numbers and letters lifted slightly as I stepped away from the desk, allowing myself the small mercy of a break. I was about to enter the tasting room when I heard *them*. And then I saw them.

Orion and Naina were standing close, their laughter mingling with the clink of glasses. They were in that early stage of courtship that I'd watched from a distance but never experienced by design. But it looked like my time was up.

I winced when I saw his hand lightly touch the small of her back, her head tilted back, with silky straight hair catching the light like the glint of a polished wine glass.

I tucked myself behind the doorframe, watching them enviously, knowing I'd never have this with him.

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re so beautiful.”

Naina’s eyes danced with laughter. “You’re not so bad yourself.” She lifted herself to him, and I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to see them kiss.

But I knew that if this continued, they’d end up together, and I’d have to see them like this at the dinner table in my parents’ place and watch them fall in love right here in the vineyard where I worked.

“Orion,” my sister whispered. “I’m...falling for you.”

“Are you now?” I watched as his hands went to her waist, and he pulled her close to him. “That, Naina, is entirely mutual.”

“I hate having to go back to San Francisco.”

“I don’t like it much either. Do you have to go?”

“Yes. I have a meeting with the head of BBC America—and...well, it’s looking like I’m up for a promotion.”

“You’re amazing. Do you know that?” Orion’s voice carried, his words not meant for my ears, but like errant grapevines, they reached me all the same. “You’re nothing like your...” He let his words trail away, but I heard what had been left unsaid. *Nothing like your sister.* I’d heard variations of that particular statement my whole life.

The laughter that followed from Naina, light and carefree, held no defense for me. No sisterly protection was offered, only the complicit silence of agreement. My role, it seemed,

was relegated to that of a shadow, a thought left unfinished, a comparison drawn where I came up lacking.

“How is it going with Hansa?” she asked, and my heart stilled.

“It’s...going,” he said noncommittally, breaking my heart. I wish he’d say *she works really hard, and I think she has great potential.*

“I don’t know why you hired her...though my parents are relieved you did.”

Orion sighed. “I may have to let her go if she doesn’t...get more focused.”

“Then you have to let her go,” Naina said clearly and coolly. *No, hey, she’s my sister, and you want to see me naked, so be nice to her.* “My parents will be disappointed, but to be honest, we’re all expecting it. She’s never *applied* herself. We’re hoping that my parents can arrange a marriage for her. Because as things stand...we’re worried she won’t be able to support herself.”

I wanted to scream. I’d been working since I turned seventeen and had paid my way through school. I was supporting myself just fine.

“Arranged marriage? How archaic.”

“Not really. Quite common in Indian circles.” She looked at her watch then. “It’s late...”

“And you have to leave early for San Francisco,” he finished.

She nodded and stretched lazily. I wish I had a tenth of her grace and beauty.

“Maybe I can go later,” she offered.

Please, please, please don't ask her to spend the night.

“I have some early meetings with Atlas as well,” he said to my relief.

Naina linked her hands around his neck. “Come see me in San Francisco.”

“I might just do that.”

I pulled back; their interaction was too much for me. I retreated to the cold solace of the office, and the hard truth of my solitude. There, in the numbers that swirled and danced before me, I sought refuge, immersing myself in the task at hand with a fervor born from the need to forget, distract, and survive.

With a resolve that steadied my shaking hands, I began *again*. Each figure I entered, double-checked and triple-checked, was an act of defiance against what my family thought of me, what Orion did. I worked through the night to prove my worth to Orion and maybe myself.

By the break of dawn, the numbers were allies instead of adversaries. I'd lived to see another day. Now, I might get a few hours of sleep in the office, shower at Liesel's place, where I had a change of clothes, and be back in the tasting room by nine, bright and early.

Liesel knew about my dyslexia and that I sometimes had to work late. She'd offered her guestroom, but I didn't want Atlas to know about my *condition*. I was embarrassed and worried about Atlas's response. He'd feel about me like my parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins did. I had a big Indian family of overachievers where I was the loser. I didn't need that from the wine community in Everwood, who were finally giving me a chance, a sense of belonging.

I slept that night in the office and then trudged to the main house to shower. I had to dial the water down to *freeze your nuts off* cold to wake up and feel refreshed.

"Atlas will not care," Liesel insisted as she placed a pancake before me. "Eat. You need the sugar to keep you going. I wish you'd just sleep here and not in some uncomfortable office."

I looked at the pancake nervously. I stayed as far away as I could from high-calorie foods.

Eat carefully, Hansa. If you ate more like Naina, you wouldn't be overweight.

"Don't make me force-feed you," Liesel warned.

I gave in because I loved fluffy pancakes with syrup. "Orion thinks I'm stupid. Maybe I should just work full-time at Whispering Vines."

"Then you can't afford your own place," Liesel reminded me. She sat down next to me. "You deserve to work in a tasting room. You deserve to become a winemaker. You deserve good things, Hansa."

I sighed and leaned my head on Liesel's shoulder. "Orion told me that if I don't improve by March, he'll fire me."

"Fire you? Like hell."

I laughed. Even though we'd met recently, we'd become close, and I could always count on Liesel being on my side. "I wouldn't blame him. I've been screwing up."

"Stop it." Liesel pushed away from me so she could look me in the eye. "You make me angry when you talk like this. You work harder than anyone I know. If Orion knew about—"

"No," I said emphatically. "I understand you believe he'll be understanding, but I assure you, telling him this will only make him fire me sooner. If he continues to see it as mere incompetence, there's still a chance I can change his mind."

Liesel kissed my forehead. "I believe in you. You can overcome anything, even your *condition*."

Liesel had rheumatoid arthritis and lived with constant pain—and despite it, she lived a full and happy life. *She* was one of the strongest people I knew.

"Thanks, Liesel."

"How about you come to Whispering Vines today after you finish at the tasting room? My treat."

Liesel worked at Whispering Vines on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. She'd started doing it to get away from her studio for a bit and learn more about wine since she was married into a winemaking family.

“Sounds good. I...it’s Naina’s birthday this weekend, you know. They want me to tend the bar...” I trailed away. My parents had invited Orion, Ariel, Atlas, and Liesel to Naina’s party, probably at her behest, since how could she have a party without her beloved Orion? *Insert gagging sound.*

“Why?”

I shrugged. “It’s what I always do.”

“But if you tend the bar, how will you party?”

“I...I always do stuff for my parents’ parties. I cook...and set the table, and all that. It’s what I’ve always done.”

Liesel curled her nose. “I don’t like how your family treats you.”

I wanted to get defensive and say, *Don’t you dare say anything mean about my family*, but the truth was, Liesel felt more like a sister to me than Naina ever did. She wasn’t wrong about how my family treated me. And I let them because I was still hoping that someday they’d see me *and* accept me the way I am.

Yeah, and a White Zinfandel will win “Best Wine of the Year” at the Central Coast Winery Competition!



Chapter 4

Orion

I loved my job. I loved everything about it, even the difficult days when the weather didn't cooperate, when I had to deal with fungus attacking the vines, when the days were long, and when the fear of losing our vineyard was real.

I started my day early, even in the winter when I didn't need to. The first tendrils of dawn had barely woven their silvery light through the skeletal vines when I stepped out of my cabin onto the frost-kissed earth of Callahan Vineyards. January's chill clung to me like morning sea fog, and my breath painted misty clouds in the still air.

The day began as always, with a walk among the rows of slumbering vines. I let my fingers brush against the rough bark, feeling the dormant life pulsing beneath. There was peace in this silence, a sacred communion between the winemaker and his charges in their winter rest.

My boots left crisp imprints on the grass as I returned to the winery. The work within the wine cellar was a different ritual, one of monitoring and patience. The barrels, rows upon rows

of them, held the potential of the coming year's toils—the wines that would tell their stories.

I saw Hansa walk to the main house. I wanted to call out to her to ask what she was doing here so early, but guilt made me stop. I knew why she was up so early. I'd given her the fucking third degree for messing up the inventory filing, and she probably had gotten here early to get it done.

Fuck! She was a sweet girl. She was different from Naina and had a quiet grace about her. She was pretty in her way and different from Naina—with her curly hair and bright doe-brown eyes. Naina was nearly five-foot-ten, while Hansa was five-foot-three or four, at the most. She dressed differently than Naina, and I wondered if that had more to do with her budget than style.

Naina dressed in designer jeans, tight dresses, and boots in the winter, and she looked damn fine in them. Hansa wore Levi's with boots, not designer, with colorful blouses that complimented her brown skin. She was darker than Naina and wore no makeup, which made her look younger than her twenty-four years.

She and Liesel had become close, and she often went for breakfast at the main house. I walked to the tasting room and saw her lone bicycle locked in the parking lot. I knew she didn't have a car, though she borrowed her mother's from time to time. I'd asked her why she didn't buy a car, and she'd said she liked to bicycle.

"I can afford to lose some weight," she joked.

I didn't think she needed to lose weight, but as her boss, I did not talk about the appearance of those who worked for me, especially those who looked at me like I was the best thing since the monks discovered Côte d'Or in Burgundy.

Atlas had told me that Hansa didn't have much money, and he suspected she didn't have a car because she couldn't afford one. She'd put herself through university because her parents didn't support her choices. It irritated me that I hadn't defended Hansa when Naina commented about being afraid that Hansa couldn't support herself. If she could put herself through school, wasn't she already taking care of herself? And an arranged marriage? Who the fuck did that anymore? Like Hansa was a burden and needed to be offloaded. Burden to whom?

Hansa had left a note saying she'd taken care of all the inventory filing and then some. I checked her work with the primary goal of finding mistakes—and felt like an ass when I found a small one, which generally I wouldn't notice and wouldn't care about. She'd done good work, but then it was her fucking job, wasn't it?

I was usually gentle, kind, and patient with people who worked for me, but I kept losing my temper with Hansa. I didn't know why she bothered me as much as she did. But there was something about her quiet persistence that made me want to push harder, which was perverse, and I needed to tamp that shit down.

I went down to the cellar and began my ritual of the day.

I pulled samples from select barrels, the rich aroma of aging wine rose to greet me. Each taste was a whisper of the future—notes of fruit, earth, and time blending on my palate. I jotted down observations on my tablet.

A half-hour later, Hansa came down to the cellar and smiled as soon as she saw me. But she stayed at the cellar's entrance, unsure if she could invade my space, even though she was probably down here to get bottles for the tasting room.

Guilt perforated my heart. She was always so happy to see me, and I usually snarled at her because I was sure she was either fucking something up or going to. It wasn't like she was *that* bad. She wasn't. She was competent in many ways, especially with our guests. We had more sign-ups for the wine club than ever before. And yet, I felt this need to be an asshole with her.

“Good morning.” I waved at her to come closer, indicating I wasn't busy. “Thank you for cleaning up the mess you made with the inventory files.”

Her face fell instantly, and I heard what I'd just said. Instead of saying thank you, I'd given her the worst left-handed compliment ever.

“Did I make any new mistakes? I tried to—”

“No,” I interrupted her. “You did good work. Thank you, Hansa.”

She beamed at me like I'd given her an award.

“You want to taste some wine with me? I’m looking at the 2021 vintage today.”

I knew she wanted to become a winemaker, and she looked at me like I had just hung the fucking moon. I was an asshole to her, and she was always so fucking solicitous that it made me want to kick my own ass.

“This one has fifty percent stem,” I told her as she smelled and tasted the wine, spitting it in the spittoon.

“It’s got a lot of black pepper,” she said excitedly. “I love it. It needs some time to smooth out the tannins in the bottle, but...once it opens up, it’s ready to go. The hint of raspberry followed with pepper and...clove, and some cardamom, just a touch...it’s just magic.”

She possessed a uniquely intriguing palate that captivated me. Traditionally, the wine world has been dominated by European sensibilities, catering to tastes that revolve around familiar notes such as raspberry, strawberry, blackberry, and the distinctive minerality of wet stone—all flavors familiar to Western preferences. However, Hansa brought a refreshing perspective with her Indian heritage, identifying subtle flavors that were truly exhilarating from my standpoint as a winemaker.

We tasted a few more wines, and then she reluctantly looked at her phone to see the time. “Time to get the tasting room ready. Thank you for this.” She waved her hand at the wine barrels.

I merely nodded in acknowledgment.

I watched her go upstairs and felt a lightness that I knew was attributable to her. Her joy in wine uplifted me. I should focus more on these positive things about Hansa instead of getting irritated whenever she makes a mistake.

By mid-morning, the winery came to life with the sounds of my team arriving. The rhythm of work was familiar: cleaning tanks, checking bonds, and planning for the year ahead.

I had my daily meeting with Louis Sincini, our cellar manager, who'd been with Callahan Vineyard since my father was the winemaker. He'd forgotten more about wine than I'd ever learned.

A tall man with a full head of silver hair, Louis was a quiet man who ran the Callahan cellar flawlessly.

"I think we're ready to bottle the 2021 vintage," I told him, giving him the list of barrels I'd already tested and tasted.

"I'll get it processed." Louis went through my printout. "You'll send this by email?"

"Yes."

"Did you know Hansa sometimes sleeps in one of the empty offices here?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Yeah," he murmured. "Saw her last night. She works too damn hard, Orion. You've got to talk to her. She can't work all night and then start early in the morning."

"How often does she do this?"

He shrugged. “A few times a week?”

“Every week?”

Louis nodded. “I’m worried about that kid. She wants you not to regret hiring her. I feel she’s driving herself too hard.”

And I wasn’t helping by kicking at her either.

“And I think she sometimes sleeps here, so she doesn’t have to bicycle forty-five minutes in the morning.”

I hadn’t put two and two together. Of course, it was a long bicycle ride from downtown Everwood, where she lived. Fuck me!

“Maybe we can give her one of the Callahan Vineyard trucks, so she doesn’t have to bicycle,” I suggested.

“And maybe give her a key to one of the cottages. If she’s working late, maybe she can crash there,” Louis added.

The cottages were for temporary workers and sat empty. They were bare-bones-basic but could be made livable without much hassle.

I nodded, feeling a heaviness in my heart. I had to go easy on Hansa. And once again, I remembered how I’d spoken to her sister about her. I didn’t enjoy doing it, but Naina made it easy to go off on Hansa because she agreed with me. But why did she? If someone had talked about Ariel or Atlas the way I had about Hansa, I’d have ripped them a new one.

I went upstairs to Atlas’s office for lunch. Esai, Atlas’s assistant, ordered sandwiches, salads, and soups for the office.

It was simple but delicious, which was not a surprise as the food was catered by Whispering Vines.

“How’s it going?” Atlas asked.

“Good. The 2021 vintage is going to be special,” I told him.

Atlas nodded. “So, we’ll be ready for the Harvest Festival.”

“For sure.” I set my sandwich down. “Hey, did you know Hansa sometimes sleeps in the office?”

Atlas sighed. “Yeah. She comes over to the house and showers in the guest bathroom. She pretends she needs the shower because she bicycled. Liesel has given me strict orders not to question Hansa and pretend I don’t know.”

“I was thinking maybe we can give her one of the trucks and a key to one of the cottages.”

“Really? I thought you wanted to fire her.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Naina came by last night and...I didn’t like how I talked about Hansa with her. I’m usually not like this, but it’s like with Hansa...I lose my patience and all but bark at her.”

“You do more than bark at her; you’re sometimes downright brutal, O,” Atlas corrected me. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. She pushes my buttons. I think I’m pissed Seraphina pushed me into hiring her, and...she screws up, Atlas.”

“We all screw up, Orion. The important thing is how she fixes things.”

Yeah, and she did that with grace and hard fucking work.

“Right, well, I’m going back down to play with my wine.”

“Orion, why are you so fucking hard on her?” Atlas demanded.

I sighed. “You know why.”

“Because we can all see she’s got a crush on you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, and I don’t want her to get any ideas. I don’t need that kind of hassle.”

“And you’re into her sister, anyway.”

Atlas seemed angry, but I didn’t want to probe his thoughts about how I managed my life. It was my fucking business and had nothing to do with him.

“Yeah, I am. You have a problem with that?”

Atlas raised his hands in a peace offering, but the knowing smirk on his face belied his actions.



After lunch, I worked on the blends. I envisioned marketing these new wines under a distinct name and lower price point while still carrying the prestige of the Callahan Vineyard label.

We mostly grew Pinot Noir for red wine at Callahan Vineyards, but a few years ago, I’d grafted in some Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre and was experimenting with combining the varietals in the style of the St. Emilion GSM blends.

As the wine's delicate fragrance filled the air, blending the bold Syrah spice, rich Mourvèdre blackberry, and intense Grenache florals, I grew excited about the potential of these blends. Crafting the interplay of flavors and aromas was an intricate challenge, a daring departure from our reputation as pure Pinot Noir and Chardonnay winemakers. Our only previous blends were for sparkling wines, traditional Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay mixes made with the Méthode Champenoise, the time-honored Champagne technique.

The flavor profiles started coming together with each sample, swirl, and sip, telling a new, familiar, yet excitingly fresh story. The potential of these blends would be rooted in the merging of tradition and innovation.

On impulse, I texted Hansa. I wanted to make amends and knew she was eager to learn how to make wine.

Me: *Want to help birth a new blend? I have one coming together now.*

Her response was quick.

Hansa: *Be right there!*

I set my phone down immediately, regretting sending the impulsive message. This was my time to experiment, and did I need Hansa with her million questions down here with me? I felt guilty for how I treated her and, more importantly, for throwing her under the bus with Naina. But was it my burden to carry? Hansa was Naina's sister; for me, she was merely an employee, yet I felt the heaviness of knowing I'd done something wrong.

I uncorked a barrel of Merlot as Hansa arrived, excitement igniting her eyes, and I let some of my reluctance go. She might fuck up the records and have trouble getting things done at the speed I wanted, but her passion for wine was genuine.

“Thanks so much for this,” she gushed. “Liesel is in the tasting room. She said she’d hold the fort while I was here.”

Guilt layered upon guilt. She was so excited that she summoned Liesel to ensure the tasting room was manned, which I hadn’t even thought of. I had to go easy on this kid.

We started methodically, the Mourvèdre swirling first with Syrah in our glasses, then slowly adding the Grenache.

“What do you think about the structure here?” I asked, gesturing toward the glass in her hand.

Hansa held the glass up to the light, her gaze contemplative. “The Mourvèdre’s gamey flavor is there, but it might overshadow the Syrah’s subtlety,” she mused.

“Then let’s add some grenache to this,” I suggested.

As I added the Grenache, she continued, “You know blends are like the harmony in a classical Indian raga. The Mourvèdre can be the drone, the Syrah the melody floating above, and the Grenache bringing it all together.”

Hansa was born and raised in the United States like her sister but brought up her heritage more often than Naina did. In fact, except for knowing about her Indian origin, I’d never think of Naina as anything but all-American.

I chuckled, reluctantly impressed with her thinking. “I’ve never thought of wine in terms of music. But it makes sense, each element in concert with the others.”

Hansa’s eyes twinkled with pleasure. “Exactly. Wine, like music, can transport you. It can take you places. For me, it’s always been a journey back home.” She gestured at the bottles. “Each spice in our cupboard tells a story. And maybe we can tell a story with this blend, too.”

“You think of India as home?”

She shrugged. “Not India, the country per se. Emotionally, so much of me is and will always be Indian. I’ll always love watching a Bollywood movie. I get excited about Indian weddings and festivals. But I’m also American. I guess I’m a blend.”

We nosed the wines again, the earthy fragrances mingling in the air between us.

“Give me a taste profile,” I ordered softly when she sipped the new blend.

She thought about it and then closed her eyes. As she seemed to savor the wine, I could see what she’d look like when she orgasmed. What the fuck? I was not attracted to Hansa. I was into her sister, for God’s sake.

“Ripe cherry...it’s also got this earthy minerality...then there is a complex interplay of savory herbs, citrus, and dark chocolate.” She opened her eyes as if she had been to another world, “And, you’ll find me strange, but I detect subtle notes

of cardamom...and some lychee alongside the plum. It's got a graceful mouthfeel."

"Your reference to cardamom and lychee?" I asked, genuinely intrigued.

She withdrew immediately. "I know. It sounds silly."

"No," I immediately said. "Wine is intensely subjective."

She licked her lips then, and I noticed her plump Cabernet Sauvignon lips, not for the first time.

"Well, Miss Subjective, why don't you put a blend together, and let's see if it has legs?" I ordered, my tone harsher than I'd intended, but she was doing something to me I didn't like.

She's a kid! She's as old as Liesel, who's married to Atlas, who's six years your senior, so she's not a kid, Orion; she's a fully grown woman with lush lips and a body made for fucking sin.

"We don't have all day," I barked at her, feeling discombobulated by my thoughts.

Hansa was called the DUFF Raj sister. *The Designated Ugly Fat Friend*. She was not fat *or* ugly, but when compared to Naina...well, there was no comparison. And yet, something about how she worked with wine made my cock stir.

It'd been a while since I'd gotten laid. Naina and I had been pseudo-dating since before Thanksgiving, so...maybe that was it. I just needed to decant my remains, and then I'd stop looking at every woman as a potential bed partner.

Hansa didn't notice that I was lusting after her because she was like a candy store kid as she poured another measure of Syrah into the blending beaker.

Naina's hands were smooth and painted pink the last time I saw her. Hansa wore no nail paint, and her skin was rougher—probably because she worked with her hands. She hauled boxes of wine and served wine and food at the Callahan tasting room and Whispering Vines. She wasn't delicate like Naina...she was...robust like someone you could enjoy rough sex—. In the name of the terroir, I needed to get my filthy mind off of my almost-date's baby fucking sister.

Hansa had a crush on me. Everyone, including me, could see that.

I wish she didn't because it complicated matters. I didn't want to give her any ideas about us. Is that why I was so hard on her? Because she had a crush on me? Or was it because I was attracted to her? I could never be with a girl like Hansa. It wasn't just about how she looked but also about her intellectual compatibility.

Hansa, I knew, had barely graduated from Cal Poly SLO. I knew many people there, including professors, and they all agreed that Hansa had a passion for wine but may not be able to have a successful career because her grades were always just under the wire. She'd had trouble finding a job and had finally found one with Seraphina, who'd openly manipulated me into hiring Hansa.

When I asked for a reference, one of her professors told me, “It’s almost like her brain can’t move as fast as she wants it to and definitely not as fast as I’d have liked it to. She’ll always be average or below. If I were you, I’d not hire someone like her to manage a tasting room—maybe only work there seasonally.”

Hansa interrupted my thoughts with an earnestness that made me feel like an ass for thinking so uncharitably about her. “My *Nani*, my grandmother, always said that cooking is an art that plays with all the senses, and winemaking is the same, don’t you think?”

When I didn’t respond to her comment because I had nothing to say past the frustration I felt whenever she was around, she gently swirled the beaker. “Here, take a sip. It reminds me of walking through a market in Kerala, and the air was tinged with the essence of spices being ground.”

I did as she suggested. First, I inhaled the aroma, which was subtle, but since I’d never been to a market in Kerala, it didn’t evoke any such feeling in me. Then I tasted the wine, letting the liquid roll over my tongue. And there it was—a complexity that spoke of distant lands and vibrant culture, a subtle alchemy of the familiar and the exotic.

“Too much Mourvèdre...the leather has all but eaten up the fruit,” I muttered because I didn’t want to encourage her; then she’d be here all the time asking to work with me. Us being close like this would only give her ideas that would never become reality. And I didn’t want her this close to me either—

because I might lay my hands on her, and that was a clusterfuck no one needed.

“Oh,” her voice lost all its vibrancy. “I can try again.”

I shook my head. “Lesson’s over, Hansa,” I tried not to snap at her. “I’m sure Liesel wants you to do your job and not ask her to do it for you.”

Her face fell.

Why was it that everything that came out of my mouth when she was around was somehow putting her down?

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said uncomfortably.

She smiled then, that smile she kept on her sleeve to pull out whenever she wanted to hide whatever it was she was feeling, and she was probably feeling like shit because I’d gone out of my way to make her feel that way.

“You’re right; Liesel needs to finish a painting for her agent. Thanks so much for doing this with me, Orion. It’s...it’s amazing to blend. If... you were to give me a chance again, I promise I’ll do better.”

My throat was clogged with emotion. “You did fine, Hansa.” I tried to erase my hard words. But fuck me, I couldn’t, could I? I’d already said the things I shouldn’t, and now I had to bear that look of undeserved gratitude in her eyes.

As she left, I said, “Ah...Louis mentioned that you sometimes stay the night here.”

She turned to face me, shock, fear, and apology written on her face. I raised my hand. “It’s fine, Hansa, but you don’t have to sleep in a meeting room. Just get a key for one of the harvest cottages. It’s not much, but there’s a bed and a bathroom.”

Her slight smile made me feel like an asshole, and what she said after made me feel like a fucking puss-filled pimple on an asshole. “Really? That’s so generous of you. Thanks, Orion.”

“Talk to Esai.”

Esai was Atlas’s EA and managed many things, including the cottages we used for seasonal workers.

I closed my eyes as her footsteps faded.

Once, a woman had asked me what my type was, and I’d said, not stupid. Not that Hansa was that...but fuck me, she wasn’t the kind of woman I’d date or even have a one-night stand with. She was quiet, mousy, short, dull, not the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, and...she needed to stop looking at me with those big, bright eyes of hers like I hung the fucking moon because I fucking didn’t.



Chapter 5

Hansa

“I don’t understand why he’s so angry with me,” I remarked as I wiped the wine glasses, standing next to Liesel at the bar counter in Whispering Vines.

“His behavior with you is disconcerting because Orion is *usually* gentle.” Liesel critically looked at the wine in her glass and then sniffed it.

“Not with me. He’s snapping, commanding, ordering... sometimes...and you can’t tell anyone, Liesel, especially Atlas.” I glared at her, and she sighed but nodded. “He’s demeaning. He puts me down, and it’s a bit too familiar, like he’s learning to treat me like my family does through Naina.”

Liesel’s eyes darkened. “No way.” She held up a hand when I was about to speak. “He doesn’t get to treat you poorly. I’m going to rip him a new one.”

I sighed. “These things...they never go the way you think they will. I’ve tried to talk to my parents, my sister, my uncles, my cousins, my aunts...and freaking everyone and their

mother. No one seems to understand how hard it is to be *different* than everyone else in my family. They're all fair-skinned with long, straight hair, and I'm the darkie with curly hair. They are all doctors, executives, and professors, and... here I am, dyslexic little Hansa."

"You are *not* dyslexic; you *have* dyslexia." Seraphina Vine, my fairy godmother, guardian angel, employer, and owner of Whispering Vines, floated into the bar through the kitchen. *Float* was the quintessential word to encapsulate Seraphina's ethereal glide. With her raven hair elegantly ribboned by strands of silver, she moved with a poise that seemed to defy gravity. Her eyes, a rare tint of amethyst, mirrored the deep hues of a purple Cabernet Sauvignon, adding to the enigma of her presence.

She hugged me, and then Liesel. I loved Seraphina. She was the first person in my life to look at me and say, "Ah, you're special." She made me feel seen and like I mattered.

"What do you think of the wine?" she asked Liesel, who was sipping a new Shiraz that Seraphina was thinking of stocking in the wine bar. I loved this about working for her. We did tastings together to determine what was right for Whispering Vines.

Liesel pondered the Shiraz, rolling the liquid around in her glass before answering. "It has character, just like Hansa here," she said, her words laced with a smile. "It's complex, a little spicy, and defies expectations."

I laughed and poured myself a taste of the Penfolds Shiraz Kalimna Bin 28, 2021. I breathed in through the nose and closed my eyes. Seraphina had told me that if one of your senses is weakened, the others can strengthen. I had trouble reading and organizing, but maybe my nose and palate could identify aromas and taste profiles that most people couldn't.

I opened my eyes. Seraphina waited with a broad, knowing smile.

“Sweet and savory notes. And this will sound weird, but I get a lot of umami, dark soy sauce, five-spice...and... toasted ajwain seeds.” I took another sniff, loving the wine.

Seraphina had advised me that wine can taste or smell however I felt it did, and she always asked me to think of spices, unusual in traditional tasting notes, from my Indian heritage.

Seraphina put her hand on mine before I could taste the wine. “Stop saying this ‘will sound weird.’ Why should it? This is how you taste the wine.”

I nodded sheepishly. It was hard to have the confidence to just blurt out wine-tasting notes that weren't the norm and weren't how the rest of the winemakers described wine.

I tasted the wine and let go without fear. Orion wasn't here to cut me down. I was among friends. “Black forest cake, crème anglaise...mocha and espresso. The oak is completely absorbed...the hints are there, but the fruit shines. It's got a long finish. Beautiful and balanced. How much is this wine for?”

I grinned when I looked at the price point in the point-of-sale system. “That’s not as expensive as Penfolds at all. Are you going to serve this by the glass?”

Seraphina nodded. “Yep. I think we need to brighten the days since January is long and cold this year. They predict a snowstorm or two on the horizon.”

I hated the snow. If you think bicycling in winter is hard, try bicycling in winter when there is snow and ice! I really needed to buy a car, but I prioritized having my own place. Small it might be, but it was mine, and I loved it. I’d never lived alone in my whole life, and finally, to be able to do it was a victory for me.

“Orion loves snow in January, as you can imagine.” Liesel walked up to the blackboard and began writing the wines by the glass for the day with chalk.

Seraphina sat on a bar stool. “Hansa, why does a winemaker love snow in January?”

She was always helping me to get ready for whatever questions Orion may have for me the next day at work. I’d confided in her that it took so much effort to read everything he expected me to in one night that I wasn’t getting much sleep. So, I gave her the material Orion gave me at the end of each day as part of my training to become a wine expert, and she made sure to help me prepare myself.

“A winemaker loves snow in January,” I said, my voice echoing slightly in the quiet space of the wine bar, “because it promises a period of dormancy for the vines. It’s nature’s way

of telling the vineyard to rest, to gather strength for the coming season.”

Liesel’s chalk screeched on the blackboard, a familiar soundtrack to our study sessions before *Whispering Vines* opened.

“The snow acts like a blanket and insulates the ground, protecting the roots from freezing temperatures, and we all *love* the meltwater.” I leaned on the bar counter, resting on my elbows.

Seraphina nodded, a slight smile playing on her lips. “Exactly. And what does that mean for the grapes?”

I paused, considering the lifecycle I had come to know so well, one that mirrored my periods of growth and retreat. “It means that when spring comes, the vines will awaken from their slumber, hydrated and ready to produce grapes that are robust and full of flavor, and become the best Pinot Noir wine in the world.”

Liesel turned around, dusting her hands off, her eyes bright with pride. “Wow! I learn from you every day, you know that?”

A blush warmed my cheeks at the praise. The words didn’t come easy; they never had. But with every lesson and nugget of knowledge that Seraphina shared, I felt I wasn’t just a girl struggling to read the labels; I had some potential.

Seraphina’s next question pulled me back. “And what of the risks? What does Orion have to be wary of with snow?”

I knew this part, too—the shadow that loomed over every winter’s charm. “The risk of frost,” I replied. “If the snow melts and temperatures plunge again, it can freeze the sap within the vines, causing damage. The weight of the snow can also break the branches.” I paused and, in my best impression of Orion, added, “A winemaker has to balance his love for the snow with vigilance; always be prepared to *protect* the vineyard.”

Seraphina and Liesel clapped.

“That’s both for the impression and the wine lesson,” Liesel murmured. She looked at her wristwatch and winked at me. “Whenever Orion gives you a hard time, know that you’ve got people rooting for you, snow or shine.”

I wondered if I was like a vineyard under a blanket of snow, simply waiting and preparing to bloom. I just needed a chance.

As Liesel went to open the doors of Whispering Vines, Seraphina pierced me with her amethyst gaze. “You can’t control Orion or your family’s behavior; all you can control is your reaction to it. Don’t let him or anyone else beat you down.”

“I’m trying.”

“Being different from your family is your strength, not your weakness. You are unique, like this Shiraz, like each of us.”

I nodded, trying to believe her words. “Orion sees me as a cluster of failures. He threatened to let me go in March if I didn’t improve my work.”

Seraphina harrumphed. “That’s his prerogative. I’ve been talking to Micah Andersen and—”

“You know the Callahans hate them.” Andersen Wineries was way bigger than Callahan and had been trying to buy the vineyard from Atlas. In fact, Liesel’s father had written in his will that he’d sell his percentage of Callahan Vineyards to Andersen if Atlas didn’t marry Liesel. Thankfully, although Liesel and Atlas started out in an *Indian-arranged-marriage* style, they’d genuinely fallen in love. Liesel was a bright ray of light who had thawed Atlas, one of my champions.

“To hell with what the Callahans think. Micah will hire you...anyone will. And remember, your worth isn’t contingent on Orion’s or anyone else’s approval.”

Easier said than done!

Liesel returned to the bar after opening and setting out the outdoor furniture and heating lamps.

“If Orion can’t see the remarkable person you are, then it’s his loss. His *monumental fucking* loss.”

Seraphina poured a little taste of the Shiraz for each one of us. She raised her glass — “To our imperfections that make us interesting.”

Liesel clinked her glass with Seraphina’s. “To differences that make us as unique as snowflakes.”

I raised my glass. “To possibilities.”

Yeah, so the euphoria of the tasting and the support lasted until eight thirty in the evening when, after Liesel and

Seraphina left, as it was my turn to close the bar, Orion walked in with Naina.

“Hey, *Choti*,” my sister called out.

I’d told her several times to stop calling me that. I didn’t want to constantly be reminded that I was little. My name was Hansa!

Orion nodded at me. “Hey.”

Game face on, Hansa!

They’d been on a date *again*. Why was she here so much? Didn’t she have a place in San Francisco? Why couldn’t they both go there so I didn’t have to watch them together?

Orion looked a lot like his brother, Atlas. They were both six-foot-two or -three, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and the whole All-American pretty boy package. Except that Orion was rugged...his skin was not as supple. He spent time in the sun. His hands were rough. He was a farmer. He didn’t dress like Atlas, who looked like he was born to wear a suit, while Orion looked like it suffocated him. He was a jeans-and-a-shirt kind of guy. If it was a formal occasion, he went with a dress shirt instead of a T-shirt, and when it got cold, he put on a chambray shirt, which was a total cliché and *totally* worked on him.

And then there was his smell. He smelled like a sexy, seductive Pinot Noir—lots of raspberries and strawberries combined with some vanilla and a bunch of tertiary flavors from aging, the most prominent being forest floor and musk.

Yeah, I was pretty far gone on the guy who was on a date with my sister right now.

My sister, who used to be a supermodel and, while she was walking runways, got an MBA, and is now a media executive. That sister. You can compete with that shit because I was all out.

“Hey, Naina, Orion.”

There were just enough people at Whispering Vine that I wouldn't have to stand behind the bar, as Naina had chosen to sit there instead of getting a table and putting me out of my misery. *Saali!* I used the one curse word in Hindi more than others. It translated to sister-in-law but had a little bit of *slutty bitch* sprinkled over it.

“We just had the most amazing dinner at Loquita.”

That was a cute Spanish restaurant in Santa Barbara that I'd love to go to, and I would as soon as I could afford it.

“Orion knows all the best restaurants in the area,” she chirped, touching his arm.

My stomach tightened. *It's just a crush, Hansa. People get over crushes. Remember the time you had a crush on your math teacher? You got over that, didn't you?*

“What do you both feel like?” I slid the by-the-glass menu toward them.

Naina pushed it back. “I feel like a red. Why don't you give me a taste of a few?”

I looked at Orion. “And you?”

He lazily pulled the menu towards him and stared at it for a long moment. “The Penfolds are new.”

I nodded, relieved. We’d just tasted it, so the notes were fresh in my mind. People with dyslexia had trouble parsing through the data files in their brains. It took us longer to remember things or make associations. At work, this frustrated Orion, who’d bark, “A response sometime today would be nice, Hansa.”

“Give me a taste of that.” He ordered and pushed the menu away.

He was borderline rude to me. According to her, Liesel had mentioned it more than once because Orion was a sweetheart. Well, I neither got the sweet nor the heart. I got a bossy boss man with the handle of a wine punch shoved up his ass.

I poured him a taste of the Penfolds, and while he swirled and sniffed, I placed three glasses in front of Naina.

I pulled out three bottles of wine and poured the first one. “This is a Syrah, Grenache, and Carignan blend from Languedoc-Roussillon. It’s a 2020 vintage.”

Naina took a sniff and a sip. We’d grown up in wine country; we all knew how to taste wine even though we were Indian, and our parents would’ve preferred we never drank alcohol and had arranged marriages with some nice boy they found for us in India.

She screwed up her nose. “It tastes weird.”

I poured a splash for myself. I'd opened the wine an hour ago, and it had tasted fine. I was relieved after I tasted it. It was not corked and definitely not vinegar.

"Maybe it's not to your taste," I suggested and poured a second wine. "This is also from France, a Cabernet-Franc from the Loire Valley."

Naina tasted it and shrugged. "What do you think, Orion?"

Orion took her glass and sniffed. "What vintage?"

"2019." I felt I needed to stand at attention and salute him when I answered.

"Loire struggled with April frosts that year and lost a lot of grape yield," Orion murmured more to himself than Naina or me. I wanted to be just like him and talk about wine, vines, and vintages with authority. Talk about canopy control and yield per hectare, as he did. I wanted to make red wine blends that bring the old and new worlds together.

"Pour me the last one," Naina demanded.

"This is a Trousseau from Jura. It's a 2018 vintage. I love this wine. It's a 100% Trousseau, aged in neutral barrels for eighteen months." I poured a taste for Orion as well.

He nodded at me, and I assumed that was his way of saying *thank you*. Maybe with others, he actually said the words. *Amazing!*

"It's earthy at first, and then velvety plum hits. It's medium-bodied." I got excited as Orion tasted the wine. "Can you taste the star anise?"

Orion looked at me as if annoyed with my exuberance.
“What else do you taste?”

Oh boy, he was testing me again.

“Ah...earthy and bitter profiles...almost like turmeric...but the primary flavor of plum is—”

“Oh, *Choti*, look at you pretending to be a wine sommelier,” Naina cut in. “What should I get, Orion?”

Oh, for god’s sake, Naina, you tasted the wine; you decide what you should get instead of ass-kissing the winemaker.

Orion smiled gently at her, and his face transformed. He’d never smiled at me like that. I didn’t know what I’d done to irritate him, but he seemed a little extra gruff and grumpy with me.

“Try this.” He gave her his glass with the Penfolds Shiraz.

Naina set the glass on the counter. “Wow! Now that’s a good wine. Why didn’t you give me a taste of that?”

Serenity now, Hansa!

“Hansa, darlin’, can I get a refill?” Carter, who managed a tasting room in Los Olivos, held up his glass.

I quickly poured the Penfolds for Naina and excused myself.

“You know this is not a beer joint where we do refills,” I informed Carter.

He grinned. “Yeah! I’m just trying to keep it a little more down to earth in Snob Wine Country.”

I laughed and filled his glass with the bubbles he'd been drinking while he read a book. He came by often just for the quiet and to drink wine that wasn't all Santa Barbara all the time, as he put it.

I took care of the other patrons, studiously avoiding the bar. However, I couldn't avoid listening to how much fun *they* were having. Orion was a charmer, telling some wine award story (*show off*) while Naina giggled.

You're thirty years old, woman; stop giggling.

Orion and Naina left a half hour before closing. I watched them outside. Orion put his hands on *my sister's* hips, pulled her close, and *kissed* her.

I needed to move on, I told myself for the billionth time. I needed to lose my virginity to *someone* and enjoy myself. Have sex. Have fun.

Yeah right! That was not my taste profile.

I watched them get into Naina's Mercedes and wondered where they were headed. They were probably having sex like most normal adults did when they dated. Why did I think they were not? Wishful thinking. I was *hoping* they were not. I shook my head to remove the image of Orion with my sister and wiped the counter harder.

Feeling out of sorts, I texted my friend Grant: *Where in the world are you?*

Grant worked as an event planner for a biotech company in San Francisco and traveled around the world, setting up events

and tearing them down.

He replied immediately: *München*.

I sighed. He was in another time zone where the sun had risen and was getting ready to start his day.

Grant: *All good?*

Me: *No. Not good. I just saw Orion kissing my sister.*

Grant: *Baby, they're probably doing more than kissing. You know that, right?*

Me: *I hate this. I hate it so much.*

Grant: *Because if he's having sex with Naina, you don't have a chance with him?*

Me: *Yeah. Forever, ever, no chance.*

Me: *Do you think I'm pathetic?*

My phone rang, and I answered, stepping outside in the cool air. "I'm fine. I know you're busy," I told Grant.

"You're so far from fine," he said gruffly. "I'm so sorry. But the way he's treating you, Hansa, you should kick his ass, not drool all over him."

I sighed. "So, you do think I'm pathetic."

"Not like that," he replied sincerely. "You're a nice person, Hansa. You deserve a nice person to care for you. I think you need to let your crush on Orion go."

"And it's not like there was ever a chance of us being together...whether he, you know, did the *thing* with my sister

or not,” I accepted.

“I say, let your lovely curly hair down and find someone to have carnal relations with ASAP.”

“Sure, I’ll pick someone up right away. I don’t even know how to do that.”

“You just need to pay attention when someone hits on you,” Grant said for the millionth time. “You just don’t notice.”

“Because no one is *ever* hitting on me.”

“Yes, they are. Keep your eyes open. I have a feeling for these things, and I have a feeling you’re gonna meet a *hunka, hunka, burnin’ love* real soon.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Trust me on this one.”

We ended the call right after because Grant had to get to the conference center, where he managed a booth for this life sciences company.

I went through the motions, and as I finished locking up, my phone beeped with a text from Seraphina: *Thank you, darling, for closing up tonight. I so appreciate how well you take care of our guests and the wine.*

It was like she knew I needed a boost and gave it to me. As Liesel said, ‘*snow or shine*, I had people in my corner.’ I could count them on one hand, but they were my people, and I was grateful for them.



Chapter 6

Orion

I didn't invite Naina into my cottage.

She was disappointed, but I wasn't ready to have sex with her. She was gorgeous, built like a supermodel with legs up to her armpits, and she probably knew how to drive a man crazy in bed...and yet, I couldn't have sex with her. I had drunk too much wine or needed my head examined.

I walked into my cottage, which I never locked. I didn't need to; in fact, I didn't have a fucking key for the house. I'd lost it many years ago; in any case, this was Everwood; no one locked their doors.

I had chosen to establish my home deep within the vineyard, away from the main house. Originally, this place was a simple cottage designed to accommodate harvest workers. However, the moment I laid eyes on it, with its proximity to the vineyard's prime spots and breathtaking views, I was sure it was meant for me. Over time, I transformed this humble space into a personal haven that genuinely reflected my essence. One of the two bedrooms was repurposed into a study, featuring a

wall of windows that offered a constantly evolving vista of the vineyard's beauty.

A wall of glass spanned across both sides of the cottage, offering 360-degree views, allowing the outside in, blurring the lines between my dwelling and the rows of vines that seemed to stretch endlessly. The glass wall filled my space with natural light and connected me to the cycles of nature; the foggy mornings, the warm afternoons, and the crimson hues of dusk all played out before me like a private show.

The cottage's design was modern and minimalist, allowing the beauty of the outdoors to take center stage. My furniture was sparse and functional, never cluttering the open, airy feel of the rooms. Living here amidst the serenity of the vineyards was a daily pleasure, a peaceful retreat that suited the introvert in me who got his energy from within.

I poured myself a glass of Pinot Noir and went out to my porch. The cottage was private, with no one looking in and nothing but vines to look out at. I sat on a comfortable armchair, the only piece of outdoor furniture I had. Liesel had asked me if I wanted more, and I'd told her I liked how my home was suited for me and only me. Maybe someday, when I'd found someone I wanted to spend more than a night or two with, I'd make some changes. But at thirty, settling down was not even on my radar...not until...now?

No, not with Naina, though. She was beautiful, no doubt, but there was an edge to her that was not beautiful...in fact, it was ugly. I'd seen it *only* when Hansa was around, and since I

treated Hansa as if I were her drill sergeant at a reform school for delinquents, I couldn't entirely blame Naina, could I?

Yeah, yeah! I was fucking aware of how I treated her. This wasn't who I was, yet every time Hansa was around, it sparked something within me. Most everyone who'd seen her with me could deduce she had a crush on me and pitied her as if they were saying, "*Oh, honey, he's way out of your league.*"

I drained my wine glass. When did I become such a snob? I was *actually* thinking that I was out of someone's league. I'd never been this guy. I was a fucking farmer who loved his vines *and* his wine.

I went back inside my house and got ready for bed. I tended to go to sleep early in the evening like most farmers in the world because I woke up early, even during the bleak dormant months of January and February, when the vineyard outside lay resting under a blanket of frost. This was my time for introspection and craftsmanship, when the bustle of harvest felt like a distant memory, and the promise of spring was a mere whisper in the cold air.

The earthy aroma of oak barrels and the sharp tang of fermenting grapes surrounded me in the cellar. My calloused hands, toughened from fieldwork, were now engaged in the delicate task of racking wine. I carefully moved wine from one barrel to another, separating it from the sediments and refining the liquid to its purest form.

Tasting sessions were methodical and frequent. I'd draw samples from various barrels, letting the young wine dance

across my palate, discerning its potential, its subtleties, its need for more time to mature, or perhaps a different course of aging. These quiet months were when I laid the foundation for the vintage's work, adjusting and forecasting, ensuring that each varietal was on its path to perfection.

The wine cellar was my haven, and the barrels were my companions. I recorded notes, adjusted temperatures, and controlled humidity, always with the precision of a caretaker tending to his charges. It was a dance of patience and knowledge, a ritual of creation that I performed year after year, shaping the character of wines that would, in time, encapsulate the essence of the land they came from.

I took a shower before I went to bed, and as I settled in, a message from Naina flashed on my phone.

Naina: *I had a great time tonight.*

I thought I did as well, but when she was waiting for me to ask her to spend the night, I'd told her goodnight and given her a peck on the cheek. A peck on the fucking cheek, and that was right after I'd kissed the living daylights out of her right outside Whispering Vines.

The kiss had been...average...if I was honest, below average. There were no fireworks, not even a sparkler. I'd pined for Naina throughout high school, and now that I had her, I wasn't sure I wanted her.

I replied to her message to be polite.

Orion: *Me too. Sleep well.*

I fell asleep, conflicted about how I felt about Naina and, more importantly, about myself. I didn't like who I became around Hansa.

She was such a ball of cheerful, positive energy that it sometimes grated on my nerves.

Keep your pompoms away, for fucks sake. No matter what I threw at her, Hansa took it on the chin with grace, smiling all the way, which perversely made me throw more at her.

She wasn't my best employee. Not by a long shot. She fucked up a lot. Worked slowly. *But* she was my most hardworking employee. She was also my best employee when talking wine with customers. She charmed them with her knowledge of the wine but also with how she was genuinely interested in them.

Then there were her plump Cab Sauv-like lips. I had to stop myself from staring, especially when I caught myself watching her nibble on them while searching for bottles in the cellar based on her inventory list to take upstairs to the tasting room.

"Hi, Orion," she brightly said when she saw me.

I stalked toward her and pulled her into me. "Your lips are..." I couldn't help myself. I wanted to taste her, see if she matched a good Bordeaux. I groaned against her mouth as she let me in. Our tongues dueled, and I knew this was the best kiss of my life.

"Orion," she whispered, her hand on my cheek.

I let my hands roam her body—that luscious ass. The round breasts enticed me with their shape. I pulled the T-shirt off her and stared at the dark lacy bra where her nipples, dark brown and pouting, tempted me. I bent to take one tight bud in my mouth and suckled. God, everything about this woman responded to me.

She moaned.

“Yeah?” I looked up at her, her eyes glassy with arousal. “You want me, Little Swan?”

Little Swan?

My hands went down her stomach and unbuttoned her jeans. Her head leaned back against a wine rack. I found her wet. *God, she was so wet.* I pushed her jeans down her dusky brown thighs. I was mesmerized by how soft her skin was and how sweet her arousal smelled.

I couldn't wait. Just couldn't. My Levi's were pushed down my ankles when I drove into her. The feeling was fucking exquisite.

Hansa opened her mouth and began to squeak. I paused, looking into her eyes. Was I hurting her? She squeaked again. Louder.

I jolted awake as my phone's alarm blared noisily.

Fuck! I closed my eyes, not wanting that wet dream to end before we found our release.

I was having a sex dream about Hansa? What the fuck?

Sleep drained away faster than wine through a decanter's neck. I sat up, my dick standing up like a pike. I could feel the precum on my boxers.

What the fuck kind of dream was that? I had sex on the brain. I had not been laid in a while, and my body had been expecting pussy last night, and my mind had won over my body. If I'd ignored that lackluster kiss, I could be waking up to the gorgeous Naina. Instead, I had the taste of Cab Sauv in my mouth and a raging hard-on that I needed to forget because there was no way I was coming thinking about Hansa fucking Raj.



“That’s a beautiful name, *cher*.”

My ears pricked when I heard my friend Elias Occitan’s voice coming from the tasting room. Eli was the sous chef at our friend Storm’s Michelin-starred restaurant, *It’s A Fairytale*, in San Francisco.

“Eli?” I walked into the tasting room and saw my friend grinning at the woman who’d just dirtied my dreams.

“Hey, O.” Eli hugged me.

We’d known each other for years, and he’d been instrumental in bringing Callahan wines to the attention of top Californian restaurateurs. Although our medium-sized vineyard mainly relied on corporate gifts, our wine club, and visitors to our tasting rooms for sales, being featured on the

wine lists of Michelin-starred restaurants significantly enhanced our brand recognition and boosted sales.

“I didn’t know you were coming today.”

I knew that he’d be coming around. Eli was planning to open a restaurant in Santa Barbara wine country, and we’d offered the Callahan vineyards as a location. We had the space sitting empty, and with Eli’s name recognition, we could make Everwood and Callahan Vineyards a culinary destination.

“My meeting with Atlas moved up,” he told me, and then he turned to Hansa, who was pouring a wine tasting for Eli.

“You want to come down to the cellar? I have a few things I want you to check out.”

It was only a dream! And dreams meant nothing—just neurons firing off while we slept.

“I’m here enjoyin’ a wine tasting with the delightful Hansa,” he informed me. “Let me finish this, and then you and I can have lunch?”

“You know what, I’ll join you for this tasting.” I stood next to Eli, facing Hansa.

I caught the look of panic in her eyes, as I knew I would. When I first hired her, I sat through every tasting she did and gave her notes on how she could improve. I wasn’t polite about it because I was annoyed that Seraphina had all but thrust Hansa at me. Now? Now I just had my head up my ass and, for some reason, was letting my asshole control my life.

Eli narrowed his gaze at me and then turned to Hansa. “*Cher*, I love how you think about wine. There is so much more to a flavor profile than European fruits and spices. You’re right; this twenty-two Pinot does indeed have saffron notes.”

Hansa flushed, and something unsettling went through me.

“Dawlin’ if you ever want a job as a floor Somm, come find me,” Elias continued, raising the glass of Pinot he was tasting.

“Thanks, Eli.” She looked so happy that it tugged at me. She was never like this with me.

But why should she be? You make her life miserable while Eli is complimenting her. He was because he didn’t have to work with her. Floor Somm? That was ambitious.

“I think it’s so exciting that we’ll have a French restaurant right by the tasting room,” Hansa gushed.

“Have you ever eaten at *It’s A Fairytale*?” Eli asked as she set me up for a wine tasting with the tasting menu and two glasses of wine, one for whites and one for reds.

She laughed. “Right! Like I could afford that. I was a poor student, and now...well, now I’m *just* poor. Someday...I’ll try all the Michelin-starred restaurants in California.”

“And how do you plan on affording that?” I snapped. “I think minimum-wage jobs don’t get you there.”

“Hey.” Eli looked at me in surprise. “*Cher*, if we were in San Francisco, I’d take you to *It’s A Fairytale*.”

I didn't like the way he was looking at her. Not at all. I didn't like how she kept blushing. This is how she looked in my dream, flushed with arousal. My body reacted to that memory, and I cleared my throat.

I marked the wines I wanted to taste on the tasting menu and slid it to her. All were new to the list, but I'd sent tasting notes to the team the evening before. We were doing the staff tasting the following day, and I wanted everyone to be prepared. We did tastings once a week for the entire staff—because you had to understand what you created and sold. She should be able to handle it; if she wasn't, that was more proof that she wasn't Callahan Vineyard employee material.

She looked at my list, took a deep breath, and settled her face in a smile as she pulled the bottles from the shelf and placed them on the counter.

“Chef Occitan, do you have a name for the restaurant?” she asked cheerfully. She talked to everyone like this. Even me. That showed her strength of character and my weakness.

“I've been thinkin', and so have my investors. You got some thoughts, *cher*?”

Eli was from New Orleans and was a through-and-through Cajun with Haitian ancestry. He'd been on several of the most good-looking chefs' lists. He wasn't as tall as me, about six feet or five-eleven at best. His eyes were cat green, striking against his brown skin. His hair was curly and fell around his shoulders. He should get a fucking haircut.

He was a handsome son of a bitch, and considering how Hansa was looking at him, he'd turned up the charm meter as well. *Asshole!*

She stood for a moment, holding the 2010 Pinot Noir Library wine close, and bit her bottom lip. Fuck me! I was getting turned on by Hansa Raj. The *ugly* Raj. I was losing my mind.

“How about...The Creole Canvas...or Vineyard Voodoo.”

Not bad, I thought. “Are you pouring me wine, or are you flirting with a guest here?” Almost immediately, I saw her eyes lose their brightness.

Stop being a dick, Orion. Give her a break.

Eli waved a hand. “Stay the fuck out of it, Callahan. I like Vineyard Voodoo...we're doing a little bit of Cajun, a little bit of French, and a whole lot of Californian.”

Hansa didn't lose a step. She opened the wine and poured a small splash for herself. She made sure the wine wasn't corked or had any other impurities, and then poured a glass for me.

“Chef, would you like to try? This is Red Flame, our 2010 Pinot Noir.” She held up the bottle, and Eli nodded.

Hansa finished pouring him a taste and grinned. “No, I have it. Cajun Enchantment...or Mythos of the Bayou.”

Eli raised an eyebrow. “I like them both.” He pulled out his phone and typed. “Sending it to my partners.”

“Tell me about this wine,” I ordered. *Enough playing*. The tasting room would open in fifteen minutes, and Hansa needed to be prepared to talk about these new wines. It had nothing to do with me not liking Eli flirting with her.

She cleared her throat. “I...I haven’t read through the notes yet.”

“I sent them out to everyone yesterday, Hansa.”

“I know. I got home late from Whispering Vines and—”

“You don’t need any notes, *cher*; just taste the wine, and you’ll know the notes,” Eli encouraged, which pissed me off because I should be doing that, not him.

She swirled the wine first to oxygenate it, allowing it to express itself more fully. She sniffed the wine, closing her eyes.

“Ah...the bouquet is red berries and cherries...but also some wild strawberries, and there is a touch of eucalyptus.” She looked at me to get some reassurance that she was on the right track, but I didn’t give it to her. Maybe Eli could hold her fucking hand through it, I thought, annoyed.

She then tasted the wine and smiled. That’s how she looked in my dream when I drove into her, her lips glistening and—

“Raspberries, but there is a surprising note of pomegranate, the delicate warmth of cinnamon, and a touch of cardamom. The tannins are...was this stemmed?”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“You describe wine beautifully.” Eli looked at her with delight and desire in his eyes.

“I’d say fifty percent stem,” she went on, more confident than I’d ever seen her. “The mouthfeel is silky, and the finish is long. The tannins have softened into a velvety caress... it’s...got some clove at the end and...maybe some cinnamon bark.”

Hansa had described the 2021 Red Flame Pinot Noir, where we sourced grapes from Presqu’ile vineyard, in a way that went beyond the tasting notes that stuck to the old-fashioned French way of looking at wine with a European palette. The monks who grew Pinot Noir would never have described the wine’s bouquet with cardamom.

“Dawlin’ as soon as we get that restaurant set up, I want you to come work for me,” Eli announced, holding his hand out to Hansa. She flushed again and shook his hand, but he did that thing he liked to do when he was going all out to seduce—he turned her hand and kissed it. “You have a gem here, Orion; I’m stealing her away.”

“Feel free,” I remarked, rage sizzling through me that she so easily had forgotten how I had taken a chance on her, and she was now ready to start a job with Eli, whose restaurant didn’t fucking exist. “Maybe she won’t be as much of a disaster with you as she’s here.”

Three guests walked into the tasting room then. “We can finish my tasting later. You better get to them,” I instructed Hansa.

She was pale now, all that blush gone, as she left us to attend to our guests.

“You hankerin’ for a shoe up your ass, *cher*?” Eli put a hand on my shoulder. “Why’re you treatin’ her like that?”

“Like what?” I went on the offensive. “I hired her as a favor to Seraphina. She fucks up inventory and can’t get anything fucking done quickly. You want her; you can fucking have her.”

”*Va te faire foutre!*” I knew enough French to know that my friend just asked me to go fuck myself. He shook his head. “I’ve never seen you behave this way with *anyone*. You should try to understand why you’re being a grade A *enfoiré*.”

I took a deep breath.

“Lunch?”

Eli nodded. We’d been friends for a long time. A little tiff wouldn’t interfere in our relationship, which is why he’d said what he had to me.

“Let’s go to Main Street. I’ll get the car keys.”



Chapter 7

Hansa

I have a date! A freaking honest-to-god date with the delicious Chef Elias Occitan.

He'd had lunch with Orion and then returned to the tasting room when he asked me to dinner. And on a Friday night like I was a normal person who went on dates on Friday evenings with hot men...*oh, all the time*. It was a kick just to get a date, but with someone who looked like Elias?

That night, I opened my closet and groaned. Nothing here was *good* enough for a date with a hot chef. I dressed simply because that was all I could afford. I had some dressy Indian outfits because I had to wear them when you were forced to attend as many Indian functions as I had to with my parents. My parents had bought some, and I'd bought some—they hung in the corner of my tiny closet, all shiny and silky.

I had a black dress with a jacket. I bought it on sale at Marshall's, so I had something to wear for job interviews. I had a few sundresses that were half decent, but it was January and not exactly white-eyelet cotton weather. For work, I wore

black pants with a white dress shirt, as required by Orion. He was the only one who wasn't in uniform in the tasting room, sticking to jeans.

I loved the black pants, which I'd bought online on sale. They were "yoga" dress pants. They held the stomach in *and* were comfortable while looking dressy. But I couldn't wear those for a date. Besides that, I had jeans, shorts, and T-shirts.

I called Liesel.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"In the studio."

"I have a date and need help," I blurted out.

"Awesome! Who with?"

"Elias Occitan."

"Ooohh, baby. He is so fine!!"

I laughed. "I have nothing to wear, and this is not a girl who has a closet full of clothes saying she has nothing to wear; I have nothing to wear. I'd go shopping, but I can't until next week when I get my paycheck and—"

"I'll take you shopping," Liesel interrupted.

I knew she made some serious moolah selling her paintings; if you looked at her art, you'd see that she should.

"I can't do that," I whispered. "I wanted to see if you had something I could borrow."

Liesel was my age, around twenty-four. She was around five-foot-three or -four, nearly my height. She was a size 0 or

something seriously skinny.

“Though I think nothing will fit,” I continued.

“Here is what we’ll do,” Liesel said confidently. “You tell Chef Sexy to pick you up from Callahans’. *And* you come here right after work so I can get you ready for your *hot* date.”

“You sure you have something that can fit me?”

“Yeah.”

“But—”

“Just come over.”

I could hardly contain myself during the workday. I’d stayed up most of the night going through the reading material Orion had given me for the new wines on the tasting menu. But it was worth it because I passed all his tests with flying colors. And even though he’d been his usual snarky self, I’d not been fazed one bit. I was going on a date with Chef Elias Occitan... nothing could dampen my mood.

After my shift, I went straight to Liesel’s studio, where she pensively looked at a canvas she was working on. Orion’s older sister Ariel was with her.

“I like the play of orange and green,” Ariel remarked. “And...there is such joy in this painting. Your previous work had pathos, but now—”

“I’m happy,” Liesel chuckled, “and it shows.”

“It’s beautiful.” I came to stand next to Ariel. She saw me and immediately hugged me.

“How are you, gorgeous? I heard you have a special date tonight.”

I nodded; the smile on my face was so wide that my jaws hurt.

“Let’s go to the house because I have some clothes for you,” Ariel told me.

Ariel was a size or so smaller than me, but we were the same height, and her boobs were probably my size. Depending upon the style, I *might* fit into something of hers.



“I can’t wear that,” I protested as I stood in Liesel and Atlas’s bedroom, feeling utterly out of my element.

The date with Elias was exciting, but the thought of dressing up for the upscale venue we were heading to had me in knots. This wasn’t who I was. I didn’t go on dates. I’d kissed a few boys here and there and made out some, but no one had been much interested in an overweight darkie who objectively was not the sharpest pencil in the box.

The guys who were interested were only interested in *one* thing. And the one time in university when I’d decided to hell with it—he’d gone off prematurely; I hadn’t gone off at all, and we didn’t get to insert tab A into tab B. It was a hellish experience where he blamed me first for being too hot (hence the premature ejaculation), then being too frigid (for not having an orgasm), and un-sexy (because he couldn’t get it up again). Yeah, so you can imagine why I didn’t try it again.

“Why can’t you wear this?” Ariel demanded as she held up a plum-colored Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress.

It would look great on Ariel, for sure. She was a Callahan! Which meant she was gorgeous. She had blue eyes and a *perfectly* symmetrical face. Her hair fell in perfect blonde waves around her face and shoulders, not a fucking frizz in sight. Her face was flawless...mine had acne scars that required a pot of concealer to hide.

“Try it on,” Liesel ordered.

Ariel rifled through the clothes she’d hung in Liesel’s walk-in closet, her hands skimming over fabrics like a maestro conducting an orchestra. “And this one, too,” she declared, pulling out a dress that seemed to capture the essence of Ariel—New York chic with just enough spice. It was an emerald, green silk maxi dress with a mauve, red, peach, and green floral print held up by crisscrossed spaghetti straps.

My eyes bugged out. “I’ll look like a sausage in this...a sausage with its tits falling out.”

“Sausages don’t have tits! Go try it on.” Ariel began to unbutton my white dress shirt. “You don’t know how great you look, so let the experts dress you.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting you undressed,” Ariel replied nonchalantly.

I grabbed the shirt close to my chest. My lingerie, okay, my underwear was plain and functional and bought at Target.

“You’ve got nothing I haven’t seen before,” she muttered as she peeled my shirt off, showing my flesh-colored bra.

“Wow,” Liesel whistled. “Look at those sexy tits.”

I flushed. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously sexy,” Ariel added. “Now, the pants, and don’t make us take them off. It’ll only embarrass you.”

I bent to remove my yoga/dress pants and grimaced. These women were *skinny*. Liesel looked like a fairy princess, while Ariel had one of those toned stomachs that she showed off in midriff-revealing outfits. I had to hide *everything*, especially the muffin top and the thick Indian thighs.

“I...ah...” I pointed to the backpack I’d left by Liesel’s bedroom door. “I brought some Spanx with me.”

“Why?” Ariel wondered and shoved my arms into the DVF dress.

“What do you mean, why? Are you both blind?” I pointed to my belly.

Liesel peered to see where I was pointing. “What am I missing?”

“My potbelly.” I glowered at her.

“You’re nuts.” Ariel tied the dress and then pushed me so I could see myself in the floor-length mirror. I gasped.

“*Arrey yaar*, this is...wow!”

My Indian came through when I was flustered or excited; right now, I was both. The dress fell beautifully over my body,

hiding all the dodgy bits. I didn't even need Spanx to hold it all in because the wrap dress cleverly molded my body without making me look like I was seven months pregnant.

"See," Ariel said smugly. "And what does *arrey yaar* mean?"

"Something between oh friend and are you kidding me," I explained, unable to look away.

"Boots or booties?" Liesel wondered.

"Booties for sure because when she walks, the dress will show all that sexy leg," Ariel commented.

Sexy leg? I didn't have any *sexy leg*. Naina had that...miles of it.

Liesel sighed when she saw my bewildered look. "I know your family has always made you feel like you're not pretty like your sister. But we're here to tell you that you are gorgeous. People come in all shapes and sizes, and you are one hell of a package."

"Alright, let's try the next one." Ariel held up another dress.

I let Ariel reluctantly unwrap the DVF dress. She then removed my bra, and I hid my boobs with my arms. "What exactly are you doing?"

"You can't wear this with a bra." She held up two skin-colored cups. "Stick them on."

"I'm a 33 D cup, Ariel. These will give me no support."

“Do as you’re told, Hansa, or I’ll get some boob squeeze action,” Ariel ordered.

“You’re such a bully. Just like your brother.”

“Atlas is not a bully,” Liesel grinned.

“She’s talking about Orion,” Ariel supplied. “And he’s not a bully, he’s a moron when he’s around you. And I wish he’d figure out why.”

I was so surprised by what she revealed that I stuck the bra onto my boobs and let the emerald-green silk dress fall into place over me. It was stunning, covering me in deliciousness from neck to knee.

If the DVF wrap dress was OMG, this dress was—. “I can’t wear this,” I immediately said.

“Why? You look hot as fuck,” Ariel demanded.

“I...this is not who I am.”

I looked like something out of a Bollywood movie — something sleek and sexy. I didn’t look fat in it; I looked... nice. I still looked like me, but better. Tears pricked my eyes. I’d never felt like this before. Not in the Indian clothes my mother forced upon me, or the clothes I could afford to buy. Nothing had looked this good on me.

“Hey.” Ariel pulled me around so she could see me. “I’m so sorry. I...didn’t mean to bully. I just—”

“Thank you for making me look nice. I’ve never looked like this before,” I whispered.

Ariel kissed my forehead. “You’re a knockout, Hansa. I wish you’d start to see and believe it.”

“But I look nothing like Naina...she’s the...pretty one.”

Liesel put an arm around me. “You’re two different women who look beautiful. Why would you want to look the same as someone else?”

“I have the perfect bolero to go with this dress.” Ariel rummaged through Liesel’s closet. “And—”

“Holy fuck,” a voice exclaimed.

I squealed when I saw Atlas at the doorstep of his bedroom.

“Can’t you knock?” Liesel admonished.

Atlas was staring at me. “And miss a sight like this? Fuck no. Hansa, you look gorgeous. Hot date?”

“She has a date with Eli,” Ariel announced proudly.

Atlas grinned. “Ah, that’s why he asked me to get him a reservation at Caruso’s.”

I gasped. Caruso’s was a one-star Michelin restaurant in Montecito. I’d seen pictures of the oceanfront restaurant, sure. It was a restaurant I wanted to go to but couldn’t afford.

“He said since he can’t take you to *It’s A Fairytale* in San Francisco, he wanted...hey?” Atlas walked into the room when he saw the despair on my face. “What did I say?” He turned to Liesel.

She shrugged. “She doesn’t think she deserves Caruso’s.”

“I can’t afford a place like that,” I breathed.

“Eli is picking up the tab, honey, if there is a tab. He’d never expect you to pay when he chooses the restaurant.”

I took a deep breath. “All of this is very confusing.”

“What is?” Atlas asked, his blue eyes intent on mine.

“I don’t...you know what, I’ll text Eli and cancel and...”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Ariel interrupted. “Atlas, get out. You’ve ruined all the progress we made.”

Atlas touched my cheeks and brushed his lips against mine softly, gently. “You’re wonderful, Hansa, with or without this lovely dress. And Eli is lucky to have a date with you.”

He turned, gave his wife a quick kiss, and left.

“Wow,” I sniffled. “Can I be your sister wife, Liesel?”

Liesel laughed. “*Please*, my husband is *okay*, but Eli is *hot*.”

“Super-hot,” Ariel agreed.

“Have you...ah....” I looked at Ariel, and she shook her head.

“Eli? He’s like a brother to me.” Ariel then picked up a pair of pumps. “Since you don’t have to navigate any difficult terrain, here are some fuck-me shoes. Booties won’t go with this dress.”

They fixed me up with everything.

A beautiful cashmere coat to ward off the January chill. Makeup that was so subtle that it seemed like I wasn’t wearing any. My eyes were bigger. My lips poutier. Wow! I looked... good. Really, really good.

Liesel handed me a clutch. “This matches the shoes.”

It was a black clutch. Ariel stuck the lipstick she’d put on me and a small roll-on Gucci Flora perfume bottle inside it.

Liesel looked at her watch. “We even have enough time to open a bottle of bubbly. Eli will be here in fifteen or so minutes. You ready, hot stuff?”

I smiled wide. Yeah, I was ready. I was so fucking ready.



Chapter 8

Orion

Atlas poured me a glass of wine as I sprawled in the living room that Liesel had made enormously cozy with a new couch, the fireplace lit, and cushions up the wazoo.

This had been the house we grew up in, but after our parents died, it had lost some of *that* homey feeling. Liesel had changed that. This was a home again, and it was a ritual to come by after work for a glass of wine here or in Liesel's studio.

"You staying for dinner?" Atlas asked.

I shook my head. "Naina and I have reservations at Finch & Fork. It's her birthday tomorrow, so we're celebrating today."

"Ah, the birthday party is tomorrow," Atlas nodded.

"You coming for her party?"

"A Raj party? Hell yeah! Good food, excellent wine, and lots of Bollywood music and dancing! Can't wait."

"I saw Ariel's car outside," I mentioned.

“She’s upstairs helping Hansa dress up.”

Atlas sat down on a comfortable armchair, also a Liesel addition. It was the perfect chair to have a drink in with a book and spend the day facing the glass wall that brought the vineyard into their home.

“Dress up? For what?” I enquired.

“For her date.” Atlas’s phone beeped, and he looked at it.

“What date?” I demanded.

Atlas typed something on his phone.

“Atlas, what date?” I insisted.

Atlas looked up at me, amused. “Eli is taking her to Caruso’s. Apparently, she’s never been to a Michelin-star restaurant. It’s one hell of a first date. You’ve got to give the guy credit; he’s fucking smooth.”

I felt a slow rumble of something start in my chest. “Date? Eli doesn’t date. He screws around.”

Atlas laughed. “I think you remember a *very* young Elias Occitan. He’s nothing like that now. He was in a three-year relationship until they broke up a few months ago.”

“Oh yeah, the one who married his friend?” I drank some wine. “Eli has shit taste in women, that’s for certain.”

I heard a gasp behind me and turned to see two angry and one devastated woman looking at me. I wanted to say something, but my tongue seemed frozen. She’d dressed up.

Damn her. She was dressing up for a Michelin-star restaurant with the as-handsome-as-his-food-is-hot Chef Occitan. How the hell were other men supposed to compete with that?

She still looked like Hansa but...elevated. It wasn't transformational or anything, but like everything was enhanced. She wore a dress that was molded to her curvy body. Her brown eyes looked enormous and glistened...with *tears?*

"Orion, what the fuck is wrong with you?" Ariel demanded as she strode to stand before me, fists on hips.

"What?" I asked, distracted.

"Come on, Hansa, let's get you a glass of wine, and we'll sit outside and leave the Callahan men to trash-talk women." This came from Liesel, whose voice had none of her signature laughter.

"Eli, has shit taste in women?" Ariel questioned.

"I was talking about his ex, the one who married his best friend after he knocked her up," I defended myself.

Ariel shook her head. She waited until the porch door closed, and we were just siblings. "It's hard enough for her to grow up with a family where they keep telling her she's the *ugly* one. I expected you to behave better."

"What the fuck is wrong with my behavior?" I asked nonchalantly.

“What’s wrong?” Ariel scoffed. “You think we haven’t noticed how you treat her? You demean her at work.”

“Demean? Don’t use words you can’t fucking substantiate,” I snapped. “I’m teaching her to be a better fucking employee. You don’t work with her, so you don’t know how much she fucks up and—”

“Stop, Orion,” Atlas interrupted me coolly. “You’re hard on her, and you know it. We all can see it.”

I took a deep breath, finished my wine, and set the empty glass on the coffee table. “I have a date, so I’m going to leave you all to be the cheerleading squad for Hansa Raj. And before you get all bent out of shape, I just want you to know that she will probably not be working for me in a couple of months.”

“Why?” Atlas demanded.

“Because I’ll have to fire her,” I ground out. “She’s not suited to run a tasting room, which is what I need her to do in a couple of months. If it’s not the inventory screw-ups, it’s getting the tasting notes messed up...or bringing out the wrong bottles. *And* everything takes forever. I told her she’s out if I don’t see any improvement by March.”

Ariel put a hand to her heart, and I felt small when I saw her shock. “She’s the most hardworking woman I know, and this is how you talk to and about her?”

Atlas rose then. “I’m the CEO of Callahan Vineyards, and you’re not firing her. If you don’t want her in the tasting rooms, fine. I’ll find her another job. I’m not losing a good

employee because you're...I don't even know what you are, Orion. Get this sorted, yeah? I know you were worried she had a crush on you, but she's now going out with Eli, so you don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Crush on you? She *may* have had one," Ariel interjected, "but not anymore. No crush can last the Orion brand of humiliation."

Both my siblings strode out to the porch, and I sighed. I wish I could tell them they were wrong, but they weren't. I had to do better with Hansa. Maybe I could find her another job...in the cellar? Louis would hire her. Everyone she worked with liked her...except me.

I closed my eyes and immediately saw her pouty lips, which I'd kissed in a dream. I snapped my eyes open. *Fucking hell!* Damn, Seraphina, for making me hire her in the first place.

I opened the front door to step out when Eli got out of his red electric BMW. Fucker. Trying to impress Hansa with his fancy fucking car.

"Hey, Orion."

"You be careful with her," I muttered.

"Who corked your wine, dude? And how is *she* any of your business? Aren't you dating her sister?" Eli grinned.

"What the fuck do you know about that?"

"I had dinner with Seraphina last night, and she gave me all the deets."

“I’m not *dating* Naina. We’re friends.” *What?* I’d been dying to date Naina since I was eighteen, and now that I had my chance with her, *I was friend-zoning her?*”

Eli shrugged. “We have reservations at Caruso’s, so we better get going. You have a nice evening, O.”

I watched him enter the house and felt a heaviness inside me. Eli wasn’t good for Hansa. She needed...someone else. Someone who wasn’t a player. She was naïve in many ways, and I didn’t want her to get hurt.

No. You want to be the only one to hurt her.

That epiphany rocked my world, so I did what I usually did with epiphanies: I stuck it deep inside and ignored it.



Chapter 9

Hansa

I didn't feel stupid wearing a fancy dress because Eli had shown up in charcoal dress pants and a rust-colored cashmere sweater (I touched it, so I knew) that looked fantastic on him.

Conversation with Eli was easy. He was genuinely interested and profoundly interesting, which made me less shy.

“We don't have a lot of Indian winemakers,” Eli mentioned when I told him about my dream of becoming a winemaker someday. “There's Rajat Parr and a few others. But yeah, we need a lot more diversity in winemaking and wine-tasting. In a restaurant, you still need to have the top regions—but this is why I like Seraphina. She takes chances, introduces people to new varietals, wines fermented in amphora...”

“I love her orange wines,” I gushed. “Have you tried the one she has from Hungary?”

“Broba? Oh yeah. They do some great skin contact.”

We talked about wine the whole way to Caruso's, and Eli didn't once make me feel stupid or slow.

I was excited to have my first Michelin-star meal.

I knew that Naina went all the time—and, as winemakers, so had the Callahans. My friend Grant had been to a few in Europe with his parents. My parents were not Michelin-star people. They preferred Indian food over everything else, and if they had to deviate, they'd go *all the way* to Mexican or Italian and, on occasion, Indo-Chinese food, but that was it.

At home, my mother *only* cooked Indian food. I'd grown up with Indian food, and even though my palate had expanded because I was curious about cuisine, Indian food was still where my roots were. I got my share of exciting food at Whispering Vines because our chef Milo was French, and he loved to *fuse his cuisine*, as he liked to say. But it's not easy to explore restaurants on a tight budget.

I *could* cook, but my apartment was so small that it wasn't a pleasant experience beyond heating something or making the basics like grilled cheese and coffee. When I'd shared an apartment—the kitchen was a battle zone for a couple of the women, so I steered clear of it.

A valet opened my door, and I felt like a princess as I stepped out in my borrowed silk dress and sexy fuck-me pumps. My lips were painted a rose pink, and Ariel had done some highlighting work that made my face look more slender than it deserved to.

Eli held out his arm, and I slid my hand onto it. “Thank you so much for this. It’s my first time.”

First time on a date. First time at a Michelin-star restaurant. First time wearing a designer outfit.

He patted my hand. “It’s my pleasure.”

We walked into the restaurant. The soft glow of amber lighting and the gentle hum of conversation enveloped us. Caruso’s was an elegant tapestry of modernity and classic charm. Polished wood played nicely alongside contemporary art on the walls. The tables, dressed in pristine white, were spaced generously apart, ensuring an intimate experience.

“Welcome to Caruso’s,” the maître d’ said as we walked up to the counter to let him know we were there. He narrowed his eyes at Eli. “I don’t have a reservation for you, Occitan.”

“You have one for Atlas. If I knew you were here, I wouldn’t have asked him for a favor and asked you instead.”

The maître d’, who was the same age as Eli, around his early thirties, laughed. “Heard you’re thinking of opening a place in Santa Barbara...should I read into the fact that Atlas made this reservation for you.”

Eli grinned. “Jacob, meet Hansa Raj, future winemaker extraordinaire and current Callahan Vineyard tasting room goddess.”

They made some small talk before we were led to our table, which offered a splendid view of the restaurant’s intricate

interior. The service was impeccable; well, it did have a Michelin star.

The menu was a celebration of modern Italian cuisine, boasting dishes that were both innovative and deeply rooted in tradition.

“Any food restrictions?” One of the servers who poured our champagne asked.

Eli looked at me, and I shook my head. I didn’t grow up vegetarian, but my parents were strictly chicken and lamb-only eaters, while I loved all meat, well, *all* food.

“How do you feel about the chef’s menu?” Eli asked.

I smiled uneasily. “It’s very expensive, Eli, and—”

“I don’t want you to worry about that. This is a place I’ve been wanting to try for forever, so you’re doing me a favor by keeping me company. I hate to eat alone.”

What a smooth talker! As if someone who looked like him had to ever eat by himself.

As the evening unfolded, I realized that Eli was *smooth* and genuine. He was witty, and his conversation sparkled with humor and intelligence. He was so unassuming and inclusive that I didn’t feel out of place, not like a milkmaid playing princess like I should.

“Wait for the risotto,” Eli told me, his eyes lighting up. “It’s their signature dish.”

He was right! The creamy and perfectly al dente risotto was a symphony of flavors.

“Are you a New Orleans native?” I asked him.

He nodded. “*Oui, ma chérie*. Born and raised in the bayou. I started my career in the Quarter at Little Antoine’s.”

I’d never been to New Orleans, so my eyes grew as I listened to his stories.

“I can beat almost anyone in crayfish peeling,” he showed off.

“Undeniably an important skill for a chef,” I agreed.

He laughed. “After N’awlins, I went to Paris. Worked with Jean-Georges—and a few other chefs. Came back to the States and went to San Francisco. When Storm was looking for a sous chef for *It’s A Fairytale*, I jumped at it.”

“But now you want your own place?”

He nodded. “It’s my dream, and now I’ve got enough of a profile in the culinary world to get investors to fund my dream.”

“If you go with one of the names I suggested, I need that mentioned during your Michelin-star acceptance speech.”

Eli’s stories were captivating, each one more intriguing than the last. He spoke of his travels, passions, and dreams with such enthusiasm that it was impossible not to be drawn in and share my own.

Eli was everything one could ask for in a date—attentive, engaging, and genuinely fun. And yet, as the dessert arrived—a decadent chocolate torte—I felt a pang of something undefinable. Amidst the laughter and the shared glances, a truth whispered in my heart. Eli was fantastic, but there was no spark, no flutter in my heart that I had so desperately hoped to feel.

Why couldn't I be attracted to this wonderful man? Why did the stupid heart want what it wants? And why did mine want Orion? I could have a healthy relationship with someone like Eli, who would not make me conscious of my dyslexia. Someone who listened to my dreams. Someone who wasn't hellbent on grinding me down.

Oh my god! That's what Orion was doing. Granted, I made many more mistakes than most other employees of his, and I frustrated him, but there was almost cruelty in how he sometimes talked to me and put me down. He didn't do that before...well, we had little interaction before I started working for him, around the same time he and Naina started to spend more time together. He treated me like Naina did, the way my family did. He was learning from them, I realized. I had to move on from Orion. That was the only sensible thing to do.

"Best meal of my life," I exclaimed as we drove back to Everwood.

Eli was staying at the Grape Escapes Inn on Main Street, close to my apartment, as he was working on a move from San Francisco.

“Mine too,” Eli remarked. “And it was a pleasure to spend the evening with you. May I ask a personal question?”

I swallowed and squeaked out a “Yes.”

“Obviously, we are not going to happen—”

“Why?” I demanded, interrupting him, insulted. “Because I’m not pretty? Is that it? And maybe *I* don’t find you attractive.”

“That’s the problem, *cher*. You *don’t* find me attractive, not when you have eyes only for Orion.”

I licked my lips. “What?” I stuttered out.

He flashed me a smile as he drove. “It’s pretty obvious, *sugah*.”

“To everyone?” Panic was skittering over my nerves.

“Yeah,” he didn’t hesitate to say that. He put a hand on mine that had become a fist on my lap.

“Does he know?”

“For sure.”

“Is that why Orion is so...difficult with me?”

Eli sighed. “I can’t answer for him, dawlin’. But I’m game if you ever want to try it with me.”

“You find me attractive?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Fuck yeah! What’s not to find attractive? You know your wine. You’re gorgeous to look at. Your eyes can probably light

up a small town, and they shine so brightly. Come on, Hansa, you know how you look.”

I gaped at him. “Are you making fun of me?”

Eli did a double-take. “No. Fuck no. Why would you think that?”

“Did Orion tell you to do this? Did someone else?”

My heart was pounding. This was going to be so humiliating, a lot worse, when all-time mean girl Roberta sent me a Valentine’s Card in middle school, pretending it was from Mike Salzinski. I thought it was from Mike. Yeah, so it was the way these things go. I tried to thank him for the card, followed by the inevitable public humiliation and a vow to never believe anything nice anyone said to me.

Now, it seemed to be happening again.

Eli pulled over by Whispering Vines and parked the car. The lights were still on at the bar, which would be open for another few hours. He made me face him by holding my chin.

“I think you’re fucking hot,” he declared.

All the fight left me. “Please don’t say such things. People don’t say these things to me.”

“You’re fucking hot, Hansa. Now you say it.”

“Say what?” I asked helplessly.

“Say, I’m hot.”

Yeah, I was hot, so hot that I was sweating, heated up with embarrassment and the fear of the upcoming humiliation.

“Say it, *cher*.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. You take me to a nice place, and I’m thanking you by....” I didn’t know what to say. I was ashamed of myself for being so mean to me.

He bent his head and laid his lips on me.

It was a gentle, warm kiss. Feather light. Damn it! Still no spark.

“Stop listening to those voices inside your head, *cher*. You’re an absolute delight.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “And I know it doesn’t look like it, but so does Orion, which is why he’s so hard on you.”

I sighed. “Oh, this is that old story of how he likes you; that’s why he’s mean to you?”

“He doesn’t like that he’s attracted to you. So, he behaves like an asshole,” Eli explained. “And fuck no, he has no right to do that, and you shouldn’t put up with it. Next time he says something to put you down, ask him to go fuck himself.”

“How do you know all this? You just got here.”

He winked at me. “A fairy godmother may have updated me about what’s happening in Everwood.”

I looked through the window of Whispering Vines to see Seraphina float around the bar. “Did she ask you to take me out?”

He groaned. “No! I took you out because I wanted to spend time with you. Seraphina has nothing to do with it. Did she tell me about you? Yes. But my asking you out, that’s all me. She’s my godmother, for *fucking* real, not the way you all talk about here at Everwood.”

I smiled. “And how do we talk about her in Everwood?”

“I’ve heard all the angel, fairy, witch, demon, demi-god stories. I’d like to go out with you again. Maybe you’ll get over Orion, and I can have a chance?”

I cleared my throat. “I’m not committed to him or anything.”

He laughed. “No, you’re not, but, *sugah*, when I’m with a woman, I want her to only want me.”

I sighed. “I’m not the kind of woman men want to...you know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

I licked my lips. “Men don’t want to have sex with me.

“Which men?” Eli demanded. “*Sugah*, if it’s sex you want, we can make that happen.” He winked at me.

“You want to have sex with me?” I was barely able to squeeze those improbable words out of me. He’d say, *of course not, sugah, I’m just kidding.*

“*Absolument, cher.*”

I should have sex with Eli, I thought. Yeah. It was time to let that good ol’ virginity go. I’d never have a chance like this to

initiate my sex life with someone who looked like Eli. Why couldn't we have some spark? Some chemistry? It was so unfair.

"How about a nightcap at Whispering Vines?" he suggested.

"That would be nice."

He leaned and whispered in my ear as we walked to the bar. "By the way, that dress you're wearing is *caliente*, baby."

"It's Ariel's."

"I think you should keep it for yourself."

I looked at the dress. My breasts weren't precisely spilling out of the bodice, but the girls were trussed up nicely.

"It's the boobs, right?" I asked sardonically, lightening the mood.

"Yeah. You have great tits."

I put my hand on his when he reached out to open the door of Whispering Vines. "Would you...have sex with me?"

He looked at me with amusement, but before he could answer, I heard the voice that made my heartbeat wild.

"You guys gonna go on inside or spend the night at the door whispering sweet nothings while it's freezing out here?" Orion demanded.



Chapter 10

Orion

Did she just ask fucking Elias Occitan if he'd have sex with her?

I don't fucking think so.

But why? What she does is her business and not yours.

I had an interminable evening with Naina. I realized midway that I was attracted to the *idea* of her versus the woman who was eye-splittingly gorgeous and *tedious*. She didn't have Hansa's warmth, her genuine affection for people, or her ability to put people at ease. She also didn't know her wine or any wine.

"I don't understand why it takes so long to get a glass of wine," Naina complained once we'd ordered our drinks at the restaurant.

"I know they're short-staffed. Everyone is these days," I soothed. I worked in the hospitality industry, and I had nothing but patience when it came to service.

She snorted.

Not looking so pretty when you do that, babe!

“It’s just laziness,” she countered. “People are in two camps, lazy or hardworking. And depending upon which camp you fall in, you either succeed or become a server at some restaurant in Santa Barbara.”

“That’s a bit harsh and an unfair generalization, Naina,” I protested. These people were my friends. Santa Barbara’s wine and food industry was a small community. We knew each other.

She didn’t complain about the food per se, but it was how she looked when she tasted something for the first time. It reminded me of the Diwali party at the Raj residence. Hansa had served sparkling wine, and Naina insisted it was flat when it wasn’t. I’d thought nothing of it then, but now...this was who Naina was, always nitpicking and finding fault with everything.

“Since your profile in *Wine Spectator Magazine*, Callahan must be doing great business,” she said as we ate.

“It’s fine.”

“You must leverage these opportunities, Orion, and grow your business. Maybe I should talk to Atlas.”

Please fucking do and bitch to him about what’s wrong with how he runs the vineyard, and he’ll rip you a nice new one by drowning you in politeness. “Sure.”

Naina had two modes: one where she complained and another where she talked about her successes. Consequently,

she always had the best advice to offer.

“How’s Hansa doing?” she asked after dessert, which she hadn’t eaten.

“Good.” Naina was getting on my nerves now, and I wanted out. *Fuck!* I said yes to her party the following day and would, but that was it. I couldn’t spend time with this woman now that I’d gotten to know her better. In the beginning, when we were getting to know each other, I was fascinated with her modeling days stories and how she was such a superstar at BBC America. But after only a few dates, I realized this was all she was. She lacked curiosity and humility, which made her unable to learn new things or approach life with an open mind.

If she lived in Everwood, we’d have reached this place a long time ago, but since she lived in San Francisco, we’d not seen each other regularly—but, since Christmas, she’d spent more time with me. And that had been enough to break this camel’s back.

“Hansa is one of those people, you know. Those who don’t work hard. She’s always been that way. And you know my parents, they’re hardworking and—”

“Hansa is hands down the most hardworking employee I have. Added to that, she’s bright and—”

Naina laughed then. “Bright? She’s not here, Orion; you don’t have to give me the cheerleading squad pitch like Liesel and Atlas.”

I felt my temper climb. “As I was saying, Hansa is bright and knows her wine.”

Naina raised a hand in a peace offering. “Fine, she’s bright.” She put her hand on mine. “I wanted to ask you something.”

I resisted the urge to pull my hand away. “Okay.”

“Most guys I date want to have sex. You...I don’t know what’s going on, but we’ve been on more than three dates, and I’d very much like to spend the night with you.”

I sighed inwardly; here she goes again, only looking at things from her perspective.

It was her birthday in a few hours, and I didn’t want to dump her ass on the day she turned thirty; that would make me a bigger asshole than I already was.

“I don’t like rushing into things.” *That sounded pretty believable, right?*

She giggled, and the sound was like nails on a chalkboard. The saying, *familiarity breeds contempt*, was fucking spot on. But not with Hansa. It was the opposite with her. The more I got to know her, the more I liked her. I liked Hansa? Then why was I such a dick to her?

I knew the answer to that. If I admitted I was attracted to Hansa, I’d lose my chance with Naina—and just the other day, I didn’t have sex with Naina because that would end any possibility with Hansa. Santa Barbara wine country had about half a million people, and I had to find two women related to one another to get tangled up with.

Good going, Orion.

“But it’s my birthday,” she said on a sulky pout that probably had gotten her anything she wanted from men.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Naina.”

I was not going to end up in bed with a woman because she was turning thirty. I was honest when I said I liked to take my time. I was a farmer and believed in nurturing things, plants, people, and relationships. I didn’t jump into bed with any available woman. I was discerning and careful about who I had sex with. And, always, I wanted to like and enjoy the woman both in and out of bed—well, the fact was: if you didn’t enjoy a woman out of bed, you didn’t in bed either. Sex didn’t happen between the legs; it happened between the ears.

“Why?” she asked, confident about her appeal, as she should be.

But it was a confidence borne out of being spoilt. She’d been called beautiful her whole life. She started modeling when she was sixteen, hit the runways in Paris when she was eighteen, and the covers of magazines by the time she was twenty. Sure, she’d worked hard—but becoming a celebrity that early in her life had twisted something inside her and made her feel entitled.

“I’m not ready,” I simply said.

She laughed then. “It might be the first time a man has told me *he’s* not ready. I thought men were *always* ready.” Her words were a caress that would probably have heated my

blood a month ago, but now, my penis just lay there, not interested in the woman in front of me. Chemistry was undefinable *and* potent. It was like wine—the terroir, the varietal, the vintage—all needed to come together to find the best way to work with the grapes to make the best wine possible. Winemaking was part science, part art, and part nature.

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m not like other men.” *Yeah, sure. What a load of bull!*

“I know.” She smiled at me, and I felt like a complete ass. “How about a nightcap at Whispering Vines?”

I wanted to say *hell no, I have an early meeting*, but I relented. It was her birthday in a few hours, and I didn’t want to be a big jerk.

She’d driven us because she preferred to drive her Mercedes rather than get into my truck. What the fuck was that about? I was a farmer; what the fuck else would I have?

I walked up to the bar while Naina took a call. And that’s when I heard Hansa ask Eli if he’d have *sex* with her.

She looked like I kicked her puppy when she turned around to see I’d heard her, and honestly, I did want to kick someone...her date. Eli had a smug look on his face like he was saying, *yeah, man, what will you do about it? Kick my ass? Why don’t you try, cher!*

I sat at the bar and waited for Naina while Eli and Hansa took a table.

“Well, why do you look like you had some nasty frost in April?” Seraphina asked. She looked just as self-satisfied as Eli did.

“I’ll have the Margaux you have by the glass, thanks.” While she poured me the wine, my anger continued to bloom. “Did you ask Eli to take *her* out?”

Seraphina gave her most disingenuous, innocent look. “*Moi?*”

“You did, didn’t you? He took her to fucking Caruso’s.”

She grinned. “He may be my godson, Orion, but I wouldn’t ask him to take someone out on a date, *and*, more importantly, he’d ask me to go kiss an alligator. He’d wanted to go to Caruso’s anyway...you know he wants to explore the competition. He met Hansa, and he likes her. I don’t blame him. What’s not to like? It’s a tax-deductible dinner, Orion.”

“He’s a player.” I took a sip of the wine and tasted nothing. I was too annoyed to taste the excellent 2017 Margaux.

“No, he’s not. He’s a sweetheart and a little heartbroken. I think they’ll be good for each other.”

Seraphina’s amethyst eyes were bright with mischief. She *always* knew how I felt, *all* the fucking *ways*!

“Ah, you may want to pipe down on Hansa because her sister...your date, I presume, just walked in.”

I turned to see Naina smiling until she saw Hansa, and then she gaped momentarily. *Ah, hell!*

“Go,” Seraphina instructed. “She had a nice night, and I don’t want it ruined by that bitch.”

Excellent. One of my favorite people in the world had just called the woman I was planning to dump as soon as she turned thirty a bitch. The universe was giving me all kinds of signs.

”*Choti?*” Naina walked straight to the table where Hansa and Eli were.

Hansa’s chin quivered, and I felt a surge of resentment towards both Naina and me. *Fuck me!* Naina was, as usual, going to attempt to undermine Hansa’s self-esteem. It was clear to me and anyone with eyes that Hansa detested the nickname her family used for her.

“Hey.” I walked up to Naina. “Naina, have you met my friend, Elias Occitan?”

Naina’s eyebrows rose. “You are the chef at *It’s A Fairytale.*”

He didn’t get up but didn’t ignore the hand she held out. He shook it, but I could see he felt about Naina like his godmother did. It appeared everyone had seen through Naina faster than I had.

“Sous chef,” he corrected lazily.

She nodded and looked at Hansa as if waiting for her sister’s explanation about what she was doing here with a famous chef.

“Naina is Hansa’s sister,” I offered helpfully.

Hansa stiffened. Why hadn't I seen how she responded to her sister before? *Because you were too busy admiring Naina's legs, asshole.*

"Do you mind if we join you?" Naina asked.

Eli was about to say something to assent or dissent when Naina took a seat without asking her date, me, or the people she was barging into if that was okay. *Yeah, not so beautiful after all!*

I sat across from her and set my glass down.

"I absolutely love *It's A Fairytale*. I live in San Francisco," Naina informed Eli.

He nodded. "Cool. We went to Caruso's tonight." He took Hansa's hand in his like they were long-lost lovers. He could be doing that to protect Hansa from Naina's obvious cattiness, *or* he wanted them to become lovers. I'd heard her being interested in having sex with him.

"Caruso's?" Naina tittered. "Is that why you're all dressed up, *Choti*?" Eli looked at me, and I nodded, silently saying, *yeah, this is the clusterfuck you think it is.*

"Hansa, you look lovely." I picked up my glass as a toast. "What did you think of Caruso's?"

She looked at me with such suspicion that it broke my heart. I deserved it, though.

"It was nice," she said softly, her entire demeanor one of wanting to disappear.

Seraphina came right then to take our orders. “Hansa, I have an excellent Cab Franc that I know you’ll love.”

Hansa’s voice was tiny when she said, “Thanks.”

“I’ll take the same.” Eli pushed his menu away.

“Ah....” Naina looked through the menu. “How’s the sparkling wine?”

“Which one?” Seraphina had no patience for people she didn’t like, and she didn’t bother to hide that she didn’t like Naina.

“Any of them...you don’t have any champagne?”

“Not by the glass,” Seraphina wore her most-pleasant expression. “Would you like a bottle?”

I raised both hands. “I’ve got a meeting with Louis in the cellar at seven. And Naina, you have to drive. I don’t think it’s a bottle kind of evening.”

She shrugged. “I’ll leave my car here.”

“You are my ride, Naina,” I muttered.

She waved a hand. “We’ll find a way. I’d like the bottle of Ruinart.” Naina pushed the menu away.

“Naina, it’s late. Do you really want to open a two-hundred-dollar bottle of wine?” I tried again.

“I can afford it, Orion.” I shrugged. “I’m fine with the Margaux, Seraphina. Thank you.”

Naina’s eyes watered. “You won’t get the sparkling wine to toast? It’s my birthday, Orion.”

Ah, fuck. I nodded at Seraphina, who now looked worn and annoyed.

“We all should toast Naina,” Hansa interjected. “She turns thirty tomorrow.”

Naina preened. How had I not noticed that she *always* needed to be the center of attention? Naina was six years Hansa’s senior, yet I felt Hansa was more mature.

“How come you both are here together?” Naina asked. “You can’t be on a date.”

She didn’t like that Hansa had snagged herself someone like Eli. I didn’t like it either, but for entirely different reasons than Naina.

Seraphina poured a taste of the champagne for Naina, who absently nodded. Seraphina filled her glass. She looked at me pointedly as she did the same for me, her subtext explicit: *Make sure my girl doesn’t get hurt.*

We toasted to Naina’s birthday, and she beamed.

“We are definitely on a date.” Eli laid it on thick by stroking Hansa’s hand and looking into her eyes. She blushed. *Son of a bitch! She was into him.* Of course, she was. He was nice to her, and he looked like a fucking movie star.

Naina didn’t like hearing that. “Where do you live?”

Eli continued to hold Hansa’s hand while she sat frozen. My heart went out to her. Atlas and Ariel were right. Everyone beat her down, and I’d joined that league. So, she had a crush

on me, and I found her attractive. It wasn't the end of the world, nor any reason to treat Hansa the way I had.

“Officially, San Francisco, but I'm moving to Everwood. I'm working on opening a restaurant in Callahan Vineyards.”

Her eyes brightened. “That's so exciting. You never told me, Orion.”

Like I told her everything all the time. *Christ! I was an idiot to have gone out with this annoying woman.*

“Yeah.” Eli finally let go of Hansa's hand and drank some wine. “And I'm working on convincing Hansa to become my floor Somm.”

Hansa's eyes went wild.

“Fuck no,” I barked. “You aren't stealing my assistant wine tasting room manager.”

Eli grinned. “I'll pay her better and treat her...better. What do you say, Hansa?”

She looked at me and then Eli, unsure if this was a genuine offer or if Eli was merely joking.

“You want to hire my little sister?” Naina laughed harshly, making fun of Hansa with her tone.

Eli's eyes flashed anger. “Yeah, I do. She's got a fabulous palate and is very knowledgeable about wine.”

Naina made a face. “Is this your way of getting into my sister's pants?”

”*Putain de merde!*” Eli murmured.

Fucking shit was right!

“Naina, maybe it’s time to leave.” I rose.

She looked at me, all fluttering eyelids and innocence. “Oh, come on, Orion. Why is everyone being such a prude? I’m sure *Choti* is desperate to have sex. She’s probably the only 24-year-old virgin in Santa Barbara County.”

“Naina, time to go.” I was ready to haul her out of her chair and drag her out of Whispering Vines—the hell with the two-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne.

When Naina had blurted out how Hansa was a virgin, the devastation on Hansa’s face broke my heart.

“Oh, come on, Orion. It’s all in fun. *Choti* knows that.”

Hansa looked like she wanted the earth to swallow her.

I grabbed Naina’s arm and walked out to her car. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demanded.

“What?”

“She’s your sister, Naina. How could you do that to her?”

“Do what?” she asked. “She’s a virgin. So what? And she’s out on a date with a hunky man. I was just helping her get laid.”

I was about to tell her she was full of shit when she looked at her phone. “Oh, it’s midnight. Wish me a happy birthday, Orion.”

She slid her hands around my neck.

I put my hands on her waist to hold her hips away from me.
“Happy birthday.”

She closed her eyes and raised her mouth. I kissed her cheek and set her away from me. On Sunday, I’d tell her it’s over. After her fucking birthday party that I now wished I’d turned the invitation down for.



Chapter 11

Hansa

My mother's kitchen was always the heart of any celebration, its pulse beating to the rhythm of sizzling spices and the clatter of pots and pans. On the day of Naina's birthday, it transformed into a bustling hub of activity, a symphony of culinary preparation where I always played second fiddle to my mother's commanding presence.

I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to spend the day following Rina's meticulous instructions: chopping, stirring, and garnishing, a silent accomplice in orchestrating the perfect party for my sister.

Right now, I hated Naina.

After Orion and she left Whispering Vines last night, I ran out of the bar, ignoring Eli's calls. And what did I see? Orion kissing Naina by her Mercedes. How nice for them! How could he want to be with her after she humiliated me? Tears pricked the back of my eyes, easily disguised by the onion chopping.

“I’m so glad she wanted a party here,” my mother gushed. “She didn’t for so many years.”

Yeah, because she thinks we’re all so boring!

“But now she’s here all the time.” My mother beamed. “I know, I know, he’s not Indian, but I’m warming up to the idea of Orion as my son-in-law. He’s such a good boy. And so handsome. He is not as rich as some of the others Naina has dated, but his family owns a vineyard. That’s something. No one in our family is married into a wine family.”

Oh yes, so handsome and so ideally suited for Naina. Two nasty people were going to get together to be a nastier couple.

I felt bitter. I felt betrayed by both Naina and Orion. How could he have kissed her after what she’d said? And she’d done it to embarrass me in front of Eli. I finally had a date with someone, and she’d wanted to spoil it. Why? She dated all the time—and had gone out with movie stars and billionaires. Why couldn’t she let me have one date?

And where the hell was she? And why wasn’t she here slaving in the kitchen instead of me? Mama would never throw a party for me. My last birthday had been just Grant and me because my parents had gone to India. But maybe it had been a good birthday because they weren’t around, insisting I have dinner at their place while they spent the entire meal telling me how to *apply* myself so I’d be less of a loser.

When I was younger, I wondered if I was a stepchild or that maybe I’d been adopted. I’d desperately wanted an answer as

to why I was so different and didn't fit in with my near or extended family.

“What are you wearing tonight?” Mama asked me as I fried samosas.

“Ah...a dress.” I'd brought along my black dress, the one I wore for interviews.

My mother thought about it. “Will you be comfortable in a dress while you serve wine and take care of the bar?”

“I think so.”

I added a new samosa into the sizzling oil and then removed the one that had turned golden brown and put it on a paper napkin for the oil to soak.

I heard my mother sigh, closed my eyes, and waited. She didn't disappoint me and went straight for the jugular. “Do you look nice in the dress?”

I looked up at her in surprise. “I guess.” Like I could ever look *nice* in anything in Mama's eyes.

“It's an important party. Lots of Naina's friends are coming—you know...so, it wouldn't look good if Naina's sister is looking...” She let her words trail away and waved a hand at me.

Looking like what, Mama? I wanted to ask, but I didn't. I was too afraid to hear what she'd say.

I looked down at the long skirt I wore with a peasant blouse. I had sneakers on for comfort. I hadn't dressed to look nice. I

never did that. Why fight a losing battle? But last night, I'd felt beautiful...until Naina had made sure I didn't.

"Maybe I can wear black pants with a white button-down, so Naina's friends think I'm staff," I suggested sarcastically.

"That's not a bad idea," Mama replied, missing my sarcasm.

"Mama, you know I'm not staff?"

My mother nodded. "Of course, Hansa."

"I'm helping you, but I'm not the help," I bit out.

Mama's eyes flashed with anger. "Show some respect in how you talk to me, Hansa. You know, I have two daughters. One who cares about our reputation, and then there is you. Wear what you want and embarrass us. I don't expect better."

She stormed out. After that, I continued to make samosas alone. Great, she insulted me and then felt insulted because I dared to protest—and then she left me to cook on my own.

I was relieved when Himanshu, the cook at Everwood's only Indian restaurant, Curry House, joined me in the kitchen. He was going to set up a station outside to make fresh *rotis* and *naans* for the guests.

"How are things?" Himanshu hugged me. He'd come to the US from India twenty years ago when he was eighteen but continued to hold on to his accent.

I'd known him for most of my life as he'd been on and off cooking for parties at my parents' place.

“How come you’re not making the samosas?” I asked as I fried the last batch of the conical savory appetizers.

“I offered, but Rina said she wanted you to make them because no one makes samosas like you.”

She’d never tell me my samosas were good. God forbid she complimented me. It would just make my head swell.

But I mused she wanted me to cook to save money. I knew my mother, and she pinched her pennies like a good Indian.

He picked up a samosa and bit into it. “And she’s right. You’re a great cook.”

I’d have basked in the praise if I weren’t feeling so down. I loved to cook, and the sad thing about my studio was how small the kitchen was. I had more space in my parents’ kitchen, but then I had to put up with them.

My mother showed up a couple of hours later while I put baking pans of *dum-style biriyani* in the oven so they’d be ready in a couple of hours.

“Did you make the raita?” My mother pretended she hadn’t stormed out a while back and behaved like I was the help.

“It’s in the fridge.”

“And the *salaan*?”

I lifted a lid off of a pot, and my mother sniffed the *mirchi ka salaan*, a chili and peanut curry that would accompany the Hyderabadi biryani alongside *raita*, a yogurt chutney.

My mother nodded. “The chickpeas are done, and Himanshu will make puris to go with them.” She looked around the kitchen. “You make such a mess when you cook.” She looked at her watch. “I don’t have time to help you clean. I have a hair appointment.”

Yeah, but for that, you’d be here cleaning up with me! And elephants will fly!

“Don’t worry about it, Mama. I got this.”

As the evening drew near, the kitchen’s warmth and the spices’ heady scents couldn’t stave off the creeping sense of inadequacy I always felt when I was with my family.

I changed into my black dress in the room that used to be mine but now had been transformed into a guest room. Naina’s room had been left as is. My parents reasoned that since I lived in Everwood, I could go to my place to sleep, but Naina lived in San Francisco and needed a bedroom here. It was a reasonable explanation—but I knew my mother had concocted it to make herself feel better about preferring Naina to me.

It’s Naina’s last runway. You understand why we can’t be here for your graduation?

Naina’s doing a shoot in Paris. Can you house-sit while we’re gone? You have school, so we know you can’t come with us.

So on and so forth. They always had a good reason for why I was excluded—but now, after twenty-four years, I didn’t

even listen to their made-up explanations, knowing in my heart that they didn't include me because they didn't like me.

I went out to the covered and heated patio where the bar was. My parents had built the patio to extend the living and dining space because they entertained a lot.

As a child, it had been easy to stay invisible, and as a grown-up, I'd learned how to remain stoic and not respond to the *aunties* throwing their left-handed compliments and right-handed comments at me.

Since I went to SLO, my role at home had changed again. I'd gone from being an embarrassment of a daughter to a bartender, a position that kept me busy and mostly invisible, though it was a vantage point from which I could observe the festivities without being an active participant.

The crowd slowly started to surge, and all the beautiful people ate the finger food and drank the wine, milling around the bar tables that were set up for eating. It was not a sit-down dinner but a buffet-style affair.

I stiffened when I saw Eli and Ariel. He came up to me and smiled. He even leaned and brushed his lips against my cheek. I took a step back. My parents were here. My family was here. What would they think? *Oh my god!*

Ariel hugged me. "Eli offered to help you at the bar."

"My parents will—"

"Be fine," Ariel cut in.

"Come on, Hansa, I'm a great bartender," Eli cajoled.

I thought about it briefly and then threw caution to the wind.
“Come to my side of the bar then, Chef.”

True to his word, he was a charming companion and an able bartender—even if we were only pouring wine and hard liquor, not making cocktails.

“These are many people for a birthday party,” Eli remarked.

“Some family, some friends...it’s not *that* big, just fifty or so people.”

“That’s a lot of people for a party.”

I nodded. “Not for an Indian event. We’re, after all, the most populous country in the world.”

I watched as Naina’s friends from San Francisco and Everwood buzzed around her, drawn to her luminous energy like moths to a flame. Naina, radiant and effervescent, was the sun around which everyone else orbited.

Orion was with her. She held onto his arm, calling him her *boyfriend*.

I guess it’s official now!

“You ran away last night,” Eli said when there was a lull at the bar.

I closed my eyes as humiliation washed over me. “I—”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” Eli insisted.

“It’s just that I’m twenty-four years old and...come on, it *is* embarrassing.”

Eli shrugged. “What is? That you haven’t had sex? It’s not. You’re probably more discerning than most people I know, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

I sighed. “It’s not by design, Eli. It’s by default.”

“Bullshit,” he retorted. “You’re a gorgeous woman—I can’t imagine you are short of suitors.”

I’d have disabused him of that notion, but Atlas and Liesel joined us.

“The food is amazing,” Liesel enthused. “Himanshu said you made the samosas? They’re the best I’ve ever eaten.”

“And good work on pairing the wine with food. It’s never easy to do it well with spicy food,” Atlas smiled.

One of the aunties, wearing a silk sari Gujarati-style, came up to the bar. “Hansa, make me a rum and coke, *na*.”

“Of course, Auntie.”

Sarla Auntie was my father’s sister’s husband’s cousin...or something just as distant. But she was also a family friend and was invited to all my parents’ parties and hers.

“Who catered the food?” she asked conspiratorially.

“Ah...we cooked ourselves, auntie.” I put the rum and coke in front of her.

“Your mother is such an amazing cook. Is there anything Rina can’t do?” Sarla exclaimed. “And how are things with you, Hansa? I hear you’re working at a bar. Comes handy for your parent’s party, *na*.”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“Actually, I have it on good authority that Hansa made most of the meal,” a voice said from behind Sarla.

How did he even know? Probably Liesel, I thought. I’d bitched to her when my mother had sent the menu over a few days ago with my responsibilities marked against each food item.

Sarla didn’t bat an eyelid and grinned. “That explains it. I tasted Hansa’s heavy hand in the chole, too salty.”

“Her mother made that,” Orion retorted, a tight smile on his face.

I wanted someone to pinch me. Was Orion defending me in front of strangers? Or at all? Eli looked amused, his arms folded as he leaned against a pillar, enjoying the show.

“Orion,” Sarla Auntie spoke condescendingly, “you should be with your girlfriend, not hovering here at the bar.”

“I’m *not* Naina’s boyfriend,” he said in a clipped voice.

Sarla’s eyes widened. Great, Orion had just fed the Indian Auntie Gossip Network.

Did you hear that? Rina says he’s her boyfriend, but Orion says he’s not. It’s just like Rina to make things up.

And my mother would hear about it and would go off on me. Because somehow, this would be my fault.

“Best samosas I’ve ever eaten.” Orion’s blue eyes were not dripping with disdain as they often did. “Eli, what the fuck are

you doing here?”

Orion then set his white wine glass down and pointed at the Callahan chardonnay I'd chosen for the party. I poured the white wine for him.

“I'm keeping Hansa company,” Eli explained.

“Since you're taking care of the bar,” Orion held his hand out to me, “How about a dance?”

I stared at his hand like it was on fire.

“Orion, I want you to meet someone.” Naina put a hand on his arm. So much for dancing with me! It was probably a pity dance because of what Naina did yesterday. On the other hand, he did tell Sarla Auntie that he was not Naina's boyfriend.

Orion took Naina's hand off his arm. “I'm sorry, darling, but the dance floor beckons.”

Naina groaned. “We can dance later. The Barrons are big wine aficionados. They own the Barron hotel chain.” She even fluttered her eyelashes as she spoke. “And they want to meet my winemaker boyfriend.”

Orion licked his lips, and I saw how Atlas grinned as if waiting for something amusing to happen. “Two things: one, I'm not your boyfriend, Naina. Please don't call me that, especially around your family. It makes me uncomfortable. And second, I know Henry Barrons well. Clover, his daughter, is one of Ariel's close friends.”

Naina gaped and swallowed, looking around to assess who'd heard her getting her ass handed to her by Orion. Now,

I wasn't a petty person, and this *was* my sister, but I couldn't help feeling smug and maybe slightly vindicated.

"I think we should have this conversation in private, don't you?" Naina's voice was on the edge of trembling.

"Sure. But first, I'm going to dance with my assistant tasting room manager." He didn't wait for me to react; he grabbed my hand and led me to the dance floor as *Chaleya*, a recent Bollywood hit, started playing.

"Orion, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? You've got to put your hands on my shoulder." When I didn't react, he did it for me and slipped his hands around my waist.

"Are you here with me to make it clear to Naina you're not her boyfriend?" I asked as the thought struck me. I couldn't fathom why else he'd dance with me.

"No, I'm dancing with you because I want to."

I looked around and met Seraphina's gaze. "Did Seraphina ask you to?" I know she'd done that once at her Halloween party. When I found out, I'd been humiliated.

"No, and...I'd never do something because someone asked me."

I didn't respond; I just swayed to the music, keeping as much distance as possible between our bodies.

"And...I want to apologize for last night."

"What exactly are you apologizing for?"

I wanted to lean my head on his chest and breathe in that clean scent of his. The one that made my head swim from a distance. But now his body was close to me, and his lips brushed my ear when he spoke. I wished I'd tied my hair in a ponytail so I could have better felt his breath against my skin...*god, Hansa, you're such a pathetic wimp. All he has to do is touch you, and you're ready to go on your knees for him.*

"I..." he looked at me for a long moment as if finding his words and then continued, "I wanted to let you know that you don't have to feel embarrassed about what Naina said last night."

Right. *Please* bring it up again and again.

"Eli said something similar," I muttered.

Orion stilled for a moment and then expertly moved me around the dance floor. I wasn't much of a dancer, but he was good and could lead someone like me with two left feet.

"You should be careful with Eli. He's a player. I love him as a friend, Hansa, but he likes to fuck 'em and leave 'em. He's way out of your league."

I felt everything inside me shrivel.

"You tell me I don't need to be embarrassed, and then you embarrass me by telling me I'm not in Eli's league?" I pulled away from him, bumping into an uncle.

"Hansa, *beti*, how are you?" he said.

"I'm fine, Rohan Uncle."

“Are you trying to steal your sister’s man,” Rohan’s wife, Pammi Auntie, teased maliciously.

“What?” Orion muttered, shocked at the direct hit.

Welcome to an Indian family, buddy. This was mild jabbing; it could get *much* worse.

“Nothing, nothing,” Pammi Auntie said with a nervous laugh.

I took that as an opportunity to peel myself away from Orion. I could feel a headache coming. I put a hand on my forehead and walked off the dance floor.

Orion was nice to me.

Eli thought I was attractive.

My parents treated me worse than they did the hired help.

My sister had told the two most handsome and desirable men in California (or maybe the world) that I was a desperate virgin.

This was all too fucking much.



Chapter 12

Orion

Naina pulled me aside before I could follow Hansa, who ran from the dance floor. She took me to what I assumed was her bedroom in her parents' place. It suited her. Elegant and made up to look like something out of an interior design magazine. Even the pictures of her family she had on a wall seemed fake, put there to show how much Naina cared about them.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

I took a deep breath and spoke calmly and softly. I didn't want to hurt her. “You announcing to your family that I'm your boyfriend is not okay, Naina. We never discussed it, and we're not there.” *And now we won't be.*

She shook her head as if in despair. “We've been dating, Orion. *And* I've fallen in love with you. I know the same is true on your side. I can see it in how you look at me.”

Had I been leading her on? There was that one kiss a week ago. But I didn't ask her to stay the night, so I was free and

clear, right? Fuck me! This is why I didn't do relationships. Fuck buddies didn't do all this boyfriend-girlfriend drama.

“Naina, we've been on a handful of dates, and you're introducing me to your family...the whole fucking extended one as if we're in a relationship, which we're not.”

I felt manipulated by Naina into *becoming* her boyfriend. I stuck my hands in my slacks, feeling defensive.

“Fine! Whatever. But hitting on my sister? What's that? Are you trying to make me jealous?”

“Not everything is about you,” I kept my voice level, even though irritation pounded through me.

“Are you into my sister?” Her hands went to her hips.

When I didn't reply, she rolled her eyes. “Stupid question. Why would you be into my sister? She's fat, short, and...like you said, not so bright. So, the only reason you were dancing with her was—”

“Because I wanted to,” I breathed out. “And it's unattractive to say such nasty things about your sister.”

The beast within me yearned to unleash its fury, venting the frustration of realizing how often I had crossed the line from kindness to cruelty with Hansa. I had shifted from valuing inner beauty to obsessing over external appearances. Was this who I had become? I didn't want to be this man.

Naina shook her head. “Since high school, you've been following me around like a puppy waiting for scraps.”

I blinked at her words. Wow! This was the *real* Naina, wasn't it?

“Finally, you make something of yourself, and you're worthy of my attention and treat me like this?” Her voice carried a tone of disbelief as if she couldn't fathom the idea of any man not being interested in her.

“How am I treating you, Naina?” I asked softly.

I was interrupted by a loud knock on the door, and Rina Raj stepped in. “It's time to cut the cake. There is plenty of time *after* for being alone. Now, let's go.”

Talk about not being able to read a room. Did she think we were having a quickie?

Naina smiled her everyday model smile. “Give us a minute, Mama.”

Her mother left, and she looked at me with her dark brown, impeccable made-up eyes. Her lips were a pouty red. She wore a cream-colored silk slip dress that clung to her like a second skin and strappy shoes. Her hair fell around her shoulders perfectly. She was ready to grace the cover of a fashion magazine. I was absolutely *not* interested in her.

“Can we go downstairs and do this?” she asked, her eyes moist. “It's my birthday, and you're embarrassing me.”

Like you embarrassed your sister last night? I wanted to ask. But knew that if I did that to Naina, I was no better than her.

“Please, can we go cut the cake?” she pleaded.

My anger faded, giving way to my resolve to become a better person.

“And no dancing with my sister. The Indian community is... well, it’s not done,” she demanded. I gave her an inch, and she wanted a mile. But it *was* her birthday, and I’d probably led her on, though the puppy remark evened us out. I had *not* followed her around like a fucking puppy dog.

“Fine.” I held my hand out toward the door. “Let’s cut the cake.”



As the melodic chorus of *Happy Birthday* filled the room, I stood among the mix of Indian and American guests, a forced smile plastered on my face. The room was aglow with a harmony of cultures, the air thick with the scent of exotic spices mingling with the familiar aroma of vanilla and frosting.

The Callahans celebrated birthdays, but it was just us. We kept it small. Intimate. We didn’t invite everyone and their mother, not that anything was wrong with that. It just wasn’t our scene.

The cake, a lavish confection adorned with intricate icing and edible flowers, sat like a crowned jewel on the table. It was a fitting showpiece for Naina, who stood beside it, basking in the glow of attention and adoration. She was the quintessential center of attention, her smile as radiant as the candles flickered atop the cake.

The crowd encircling us was a vibrant tapestry of faces, proof of the Raj family's vast social circle. Their voices rose and fell in a symphony of celebration, singing the birthday song with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some clapped, others swayed, and a few just smiled awkwardly. Singing *happy birthday* to a thirty-year-old was...well, uncomfortable.

I scanned the room, my gaze seeking out Hansa, who stood on the fringes like she'd been relegated there. She was a stark contrast to her sister—quieter, more reserved... kinder, and sweeter, and so fucking humble and curious. She was interested in others—she wanted to learn about you.

Yeah, so it was time to pull my head out of my ass and treat this woman with kindness *and* respect. I may be attracted to her, but now that it was over with Naina, I didn't have to feel guilty about it. It was a crush! Just like the one Hansa had on me before I'd killed any chance of it blossoming into something more. My remorse was as thick as the fucking icing on Naina's cake.

As the song reached its crescendo, Naina blew out the candles, her eyes sparkling triumphantly. Applause erupted around us; the sound was hollow in my ears. Despite our earlier conversation, Naina seemed unfazed. Her demeanor was as flawless as the makeup that brightened her face.

She cut a slice of cake and held it to me, challenge in her eyes like this was a fucking wedding. Instead, I turned her hand so she was feeding herself.

“Happy birthday,” I said loudly and heard a lot of *awws and oohs, and he’s so sweet.*

After cutting the first slice, Naina looked around. “Mama, will you cut the cake to serve guests.”

Rina Raj waved to Hansa, who stood by the kitchen door. Hansa’s hair was now in a messy bun, a change from its earlier cascade over her shoulders. She had swapped elegance for comfort, donning a sweatshirt over her ill-fitting black dress and sporting sneakers. It seemed she had opted for a ‘comfort over style’ approach. As someone who always preferred comfort, I empathized, feeling my dress shirt’s collar constricting my neck. Naina had buttoned it up when she greeted me, questioning why I hadn’t worn a tie.

Because I’m at a birthday party and not a fucking corporate meeting.

I saw Eli walk up to Hansa and put an arm around her. He bent his head to whisper something, and I saw his lips brushing against her forehead. I felt something clench inside me. I tamped the jealousy down. She deserved a nice guy taking care of her. With a family like this and a boss like me, she earned all the nice guys in the world.

“Hansa,” Rina made her way to her younger daughter and smiled at Eli. “Chef, I just need to take my daughter away.”

Hansa was put on cake-cutting and serving duty. Her movements were graceful and unassuming. There was a genuineness to her that the grandeur of the party couldn’t overshadow—a sincerity that resonated with me more than I

had cared to admit. What was that saying about recognizing yourself in someone else? Hansa was a lot like me. She was reserved, an introvert who got her energy from within. *And* she had a passion for wine—for a winemaker, that was the best partner.

Whoa! Down boy! You just dumped her sister...well, almost left her sister; you can't go about hitting on Hansa right after, even in your head. Stop being a jerk when it comes to Hansa, will you?

As the guests converged around the cake, eager for a slice, I felt an inexplicable sense of detachment. The laughter, the chatter, and the clinking of cutlery seemed to happen at a distance, a play in which I was merely an actor reciting my lines.

Eli joined Hansa, and I stepped out of the Raj's house into their garden. It had been a long time since I smoked a cigarette, but right now, I ached for one. I needed to release some of the tension inside me. I started smoking when I was eighteen as a way to get away from a situation, take a break, and calm my nerves. I quit seven years ago because smoking interfered with wine tasting, and nothing was more important to me than my wine.

“Hey.” Seraphina came up to me with a plate and fork in hand. “Want a bite?”

I shook my head.

“You seem...discombobulated.”

She ate some cake and watched me. Seraphina was family and, like my siblings, knew about my problems with anger and how hard I had to work to control the beast within.

“Yes,” I admitted. “And I am angry...mostly with myself. I just realized what you were all trying to tell me about how I treat Hansa.”

Seraphina smiled with understanding. “And how did you come upon this nugget of wisdom?”

“I found how Naina, and her parents treat Hansa appalling...and it was obvious I wasn’t doing better than them.”

“Naina is beautiful, and you probably would love to hit that, but she’s fake. I can’t see how you can’t see that.”

For years now, the most important criteria for me when I dated had been how a woman appeared. I wanted good looking. I wanted them to be smart and have the ability to engage me intellectually and physically. I had a few fuck buddies like that, and it worked. When I dated, usually for a few months here and there, it was women who I found interesting both in and out of bed. Naina...was an anomaly. It was just that her beauty was so blinding that it had been hard to look away.

“As you so eloquently put it, I didn’t hit that.”

She frowned. “What? We all thought you kept her around because she gave good head or something.”

I chuckled. She looked like a dark-haired fairy, sophisticated and elegant, but those who knew her well knew that Seraphina had a tongue on her. “We never got there. I realized once we spent time together that I didn’t want her. I didn’t like her.”

“Then why are you letting her pretend you’re her boyfriend?”

“I’ve told her to stop. It’s her birthday. I think it would be crass to dump her today.” I ran a hand through my hair. “This is why dating is a no-no for me. Every time I try, there is so much drama.”

“Because you’re dating women for all the wrong reasons.”

“And what reasons do you think they are?”

“You date beautiful and successful women.”

I shrugged. “And?”

“But a third criterion is even more important to you, darling. They also have to be nice. They have to be kind and genuine. Naina is ambitious, beautiful, smart, and really successful, but is she genuine? Is she authentic? Is she kind?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied honestly. “I haven’t spent enough time with her, but the time I have spent, I can say that she’s engaging and brilliant, beautiful, and smart. *And* very sexy.”

“But?”

I put an arm around Seraphina and stared into the darkness, seeing the mountains far away with their snow caps like

beacons on this moonlit night. “But she’s almost playacting being this person she thinks she’s supposed to be, and the façade of beauty falls off when she lets whatever is seething inside her out. And she gets on my nerves.”

“Thank God! Because if you’d both ended up together for real, I’d have to do an intervention.”

“Or use your magic wand to curse her,” I suggested.

Everwood had always had rumors about Seraphina being a witch and a fairy and what you have. And she did everything she could to perpetuate that.

“That would be a waste of a curse on someone shallow and clueless. I don’t think she’s truly mean, but she’s entitled, and who knows, someday she’ll realize that who she has become is not attractive.”

I didn’t think Naina was capable of that kind of self-reflection. “I’m going to sneak out now. Can you make excuses for me?”

She nodded. “I’ll say there was an emergency in the cellar.”

I kissed her lightly on her cheek and went to find my truck.



Chapter 13

Hansa

He fed her cake. Well, good for both of them, I thought as I shoved dishes into the dishwasher. This was the third wash cycle.

It was around one in the morning, and only now was the kitchen starting to look less like a war zone, where pots and pans had battled with biriyani and samosas.

Eli had gone home at my insistence, as had Ariel and Liesel. Seraphina had not listened to me and helped me clean up until I also kicked her out. Why were my friends there for me, but my family wasn't?

I'd been blending into the background my whole life, my presence as noticeable as a shadow at dusk. As with many others, I poured drinks at this party and offered polite smiles, the familiar cloak of invisibility settling comfortably around my shoulders. Each interaction with a guest and forced conversation reminded me of the role I had been cast in this family drama—the meek, unremarkable Hansa.

But this time, Eli had stood behind the bar with me. Atlas, Liesel, and Ariel had hung out with me, keeping me company so I wasn't alone.

And then, the weirdest of all the weird things in the world, Orion had danced with me. He'd done that once before at Seraphina's Halloween party. It had been a pity dance. I knew it, he knew it, and god knows Seraphina knew it because she made it happen.

But he was dating Naina. My mother was planning the wedding.

We'll have to have a ceremony here and in Delhi.

While they both danced during the evening and spent time together...jealousy gnawed at me. Even though I'd always known I'd never have a chance with a man like Orion, *never ever*, I still been able to dream about it. But with him as my *brother-in-law*, I couldn't even dream about him, could I?

I'd thought he looked so good today as I stood next to the utterly handsome Eli at the bar. Eli was patient with me, and I think we were becoming friends. He flirted outrageously but never with ill will—it was just his way.

Cher, he's such a charmer, Eli is!

My movements were robotic as I cleaned the counters. Naina was still out there with some friends, drinking, eating, gossiping. My parents were with the straggling Indian guests, their laughter coming through. Bollywood music was playing;

it was not dance music but old Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar songs.

My favorite started to play, and I hummed with it. *Yeh kahan aa gaye hum tere sath chalte chalte. Where is this that we have come, walking together for so long?* The song was from an old Bollywood classic where star-crossed lovers have an affair but return to their respective spouses in the end. In the early eighties in India, the movie had been a scandal, according to my mother.

I stopped as the lyrics, the ones I knew by heart, washed over me. My loneliness and I often talk—how would it be if you were here, what would you say, and how would you laugh? Talk about *sappy Desi* drama. I had grown up on a steady diet of Bollywood movies, and now, my life looked like one of them.

My mother walked into the kitchen then. “The Mishras finally left.” She looked around the kitchen; ever the perfectionist, she quickly pointed out that there were still glasses in the living room.

“I know, Mama. I’m waiting for Naina’s friends to leave so I can bring them in.” When had I become the fucking servant of this family? The answer was, sadly, *always*.

“Well, as long as you don’t leave them out there.”

“Yes, Mama,” I replied, my voice a mere whisper lost in the expanse of the kitchen. The words were an automatic response, a capitulation to the role I had been assigned.

”*Beta*, I need to talk to you about something.” My mother settled on a stool at the kitchen island.

I set the washcloth on the counter and looked at her. She had used her serious voice.

“Now, you’re young, and I get that, but flirting with your sister’s boyfriend is just pathetic and reflects poorly on the whole family.”

My ears burnt with humiliation, and my heart hammered.

“I...wasn’t flirting with—”

“Look, we all know you have a crush on him, and it’s cute, really, but he and Naina are serious. You understand?”

“I know, Mama,” I snapped.

“Don’t use that tone with me,” she said tightly. “You need to know your limitations. Men like Orion, they’re not for you. And that Eli person, he’s hanging around for just one thing. You know that, right?”

I couldn’t believe my mother was saying these things to me. “What would that one thing be?” I breathed.

“You *know*,” she attacked. “Don’t pretend to be all innocent. It will work with others, but not here. I’m your mother; I know you.”

No, Mama, you don’t. You’ve never even tried to get to know me.

“Mama, if my limitations, as you put it, don’t warrant a man like Orion, how would they attract someone like Eli?”

“Because he just wants to have sex with you. Orion is a nice boy.”

I felt hysteria bubble through me. *Nice?* Did they not know how Orion had a steady stream of women he fucked? I’d seen him with them in Everwood. It was a small town; the gossip machine was constantly churning out information. How could they not know?

“Being a loose woman, Hansa, looks bad on the family. Like I said, you’re young, and you want to explore—”

“Please, stop,” I interrupted in desperation. My mother was slut shaming me for dancing with a man and being friends with another. I, who’d never had sex, never even kissed someone with passion—me, who’d never been happy.

Naina and my father came into the kitchen laughing. My father deposited a few wine glasses on the counter next to the sink.

“Finally, all the guests have left,” my father announced and flopped beside my mother. “You always throw a great party, Rina.”

I did most of the cooking; I wanted to scream. And the cleaning. And taking care of the guests. I threw this stupid party. I ordered the cake. I picked up the wine and paid for it myself. I did it all.

Naina sat down across from my parents. “Hansa, there are a few more glasses outside.”

I stared at the empty wine glasses on the counter and the family of three ordering me about. Enough was enough. I removed the towel I'd used as an apron and put it on the kitchen counter.

“It was your birthday party, Naina; you should clean up yourself.”

All three pairs of eyes looked at me in shock. *Oh yeah, this is the new me*, I wanted to tell them, the one who was tired of being ground down. The day had been emotional, and I was on my last leg, which made me throw caution to the wind. The hell with it!

“You always clean up after parties,” Naina said airily. “Mama, did you talk to her?”

My mother nodded. “She understands. Right, *beta*?”

I laughed harshly. “Yeah, I understand just fine. I'm leaving. And I'm not coming back. Oh, and Mama, you owe me five hundred dollars for the wine. Please Venmo me, or Daddy has my bank account information. I should charge you for making me work at the party, but let's call it a birthday gift for Naina.”

I walked out of the kitchen and went to find my backpack that I'd left in the front closet. I heard footsteps behind me but didn't turn because tears threatened to fall down my face.

I stepped out into the cold with my bicycle key in hand.

“Hansa.” My father's warm hand on my shoulder stilled me.

I turned to face him. *Fine, take your best shot, old man; it's the last one you get to take.*

“Are you okay, *beta*?”

I felt a wave of nausea run through me. “What do you think?”

“You seem upset.”

“Really?” My voice cracked not with tears but anger. “How would you feel if your family treated you like a servant? Cook, clean, and serve, but...don’t think you’re part of the family.”

“You’re being dramatic,” my father snapped, and I could see he regretted coming to me. Usually, I’d have let him pretend that he’d made me feel better and done his job as the family’s good guy, but not today.

“Then that’s what I’m being,” I replied coolly. “I’m done with all of you. I kept thinking that if I did everything you all wanted me to do, you’d learn to love me and appreciate me, but I see now that’s never going to happen. I’m the ugly daughter. The stupid one. I get it, Daddy. I’m now also going to be the *dead-to-you* daughter.”

“How dare you talk to me—”

“Because I’m not interested in being a part of your family anymore; that’s why I dare. Have a nice life.”

As I bicycled home, tears streaming down my face, I felt light in my heart. I’d left behind my family, and it shouldn’t feel like a relief, but it did—and also heartbreak because I’d finally admitted to myself that I hadn’t *just* lost my family because how could you lose something you never had?



Chapter 14

Orion

Naina dumped me. I let her. It seemed important to her that she be the dumper and me the dumpee. I was okay with it.

She came by to the tasting room before she drove to San Francisco. Since Hansa was in the main room doing tastings, I took Naina to one of the meeting rooms on the first floor, where she told me that my behavior at her birthday party was *unacceptable*.

The Callahan Vineyard offices were in a two-story building close to the main house. The tasting room took over the ground floor and led into the cellar below. We'd built the office and extended the cellar a few years ago when Callahan wines started to do well—we'd won some awards and were being carried in Michelin-starred restaurants. We'd also opened a tasting room in the Funk Zone that Liesel and Atlas took care of over the weekends, which was a relief because I didn't have enough staff to man two tasting rooms—but we had to keep both open because the traffic we got at Funk Zone

was important for our business and those who came to the vineyard expected a tasting room. On weekends, both tasting rooms were packed to the gills.

When the hoards arrived in the summer, we hired temporary workers to help with tastings, usually enology students or those who worked in the wine industry and wanted more experience.

As Naina spoke, I looked around at the views of the vines from the meeting room and felt a surge of pride for our family's achievements.

“Orion,” Naina snapped.

Once I turned my attention back to her, she laid into me. “It’s appalling how you treated me yesterday. My family, my parents, were all humiliated that you went around telling everyone that you were not my boyfriend. This is not how I expect to be treated in a relationship.”

Then we have no problem because we’re not in a relationship, sweet cakes.

“I understand.” I stuck my hands in my jeans and leaned back against a wall, wondering if I’d have enough time to go down to the wine cellar to check on a barrel with Louis before making it to my next meeting.

“If you want us to be together, and I know you do, Orion, you have to do better.” She wore a sleek black wool dress with high boots. Her hair was as always camera-ready as was her

makeup. Wide designer sunglasses were perched on her head, and she looked very much like the supermodel she'd been.

"I don't think I can do better, Naina," I said impassively.

Shock registered on her face. I don't think Naina had ever been rejected. Her whole life had been one of acceptance and glory. What was shocking was that, despite how clear I'd been yesterday, she harbored the idea that I'd want to work on this relationship that was a complete shitshow of incompatibility.

"What does that mean?"

I wasn't even irritated with her anymore. I just didn't care enough to deal with Naina. I was good and tired of her drama. Her beauty was not worth this hassle.

"It means I don't think we're suited, Naina."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "You didn't think that when you had your hands all over me the other day?"

I grinned then. I couldn't help myself. "Naina, we kissed. You're not some inexperienced ingenue..., *like your sister*, "and you know as well as me that a kiss is just a fucking kiss."

Knowledge flashed through her eyes. "You were hot and heavy for me. I could feel you."

Her heart was *not* broken, but her ego was hurt, hence the anger and not grief. I'd never had my heart broken by a woman; the only time I'd felt grief was when I lost my parents. That had been bone-deep sadness that I still could feel on certain occasions.

“I just don’t think we’re—”

“To hell with you, Orion,” she bit out. “I wanted to give you a chance since you’ve been panting around me for years, but it looks like someone low class like you can’t handle someone like me.”

Low class? Did we still say things like this?

“Probably true,” I agreed with her, to her annoyance. “Lose my number. We’re done.” She stalked out, and I watched her leave with a smile. Thank the fuck god this was over.

I took my time going to the tasting room and regretted my slowness because I saw Naina and Hansa out on the patio, Naina’s face vicious as she looked down at her cowering sister.

Protectiveness that I only felt for Atlas, Ariel, and Liesel sprang inside me, and I ignored the guests who were waiting for their next tasting and went to the patio.

“You think he wants to fuck you? *Please*. You think he wants you after he’s been with me?” Naina said.

“Naina, I don’t care who he wants to fuck.” Hansa’s voice trembled on the edges, but she was holding firm. “I have to go back to work. Drive safe.”

Naina grabbed Hansa’s arm, and I saw her wince. I realized it was not the first time her big sister bullied her. I put my hand on Naina’s and removed her hold on her sister.

“This is a workplace, Naina. If you wish to have a personal conversation with your sister, do it on your own time and space.” Turning to Hansa, who was visibly trembling, I spoke

softly to reassure her that my frustration wasn't directed at her. "Hansa, could you please head inside and manage the tasting?" Hansa nodded and quickly retreated, leaving Naina and me by ourselves.

"Now get the fuck off my property," I bit out.

I should've expected the slap, but I didn't, so I managed to grab her hand only when she went for round two.

"You son of a bitch."

Our guests in the tasting room were getting quite the show.

"Leave now and don't come back," I spoke softly. Then, I turned around and locked the patio door from the inside.

The quiet in the tasting room was only broken by sips of wine and the tinkling of wine glasses. "The tasting is twenty-five dollars a person, but the show was free. We do this every Monday," I joked.

I waited until it was closing time for the tasting room to approach Hansa. Her back was to me as she methodically cleaned up the bar area.

"You okay?" I asked.

She turned, her soft brown eyes meeting mine. There was a depth of pain in them; a silent story of struggle and resilience echoed in the space between us. "Yes," she whispered, her voice barely audible. It was a blatant lie, her façade as thin as the skin of a Pinot Noir grape.

“How do you feel about a tasting in the cellar? Work on some blends?” The words were out before I could consider them, but the moment they hung in the air, I saw a flash of fear cross her face. It was a brief, unguarded moment that spoke volumes about our last blending session when I’d laid into her, not appreciating her palate and how she described and experienced wine. Eli was right. Hansa would make an excellent Somm. I should talk to her about it.

Her hesitation at my offer was palpable, a tangible thing that filled the space between us. But then, with a resolve that seemed to gather around her like a cloak, she nodded. “Okay,” she said, her voice firmer this time.

As we moved towards the cellar, I reevaluated the woman beside me. How had I missed this strength of character? This quiet determination that seemed to fuel her? In pursuing perfection in my craft, had I overlooked the human element, the very essence that gave the wine its character?

Descending into the cellar with Hansa that evening, I was keenly aware of the lingering tension between us that had persisted for months. With its cool, musty aroma and rows of oak barrels, the cellar felt like a world apart, a place where perhaps we could start anew.

We went to my lab and set up for blending. I felt I was getting close to what I wanted from the Châteauneuf-de-Pape-style Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre blend I was trying to craft.

“Before we start, I want to say something.”

Hansa looked at me expectantly, waiting for...*fuck me*...me to say something to hurt her.

“I’m sorry for how I’ve been treating you,” I said sincerely.

She stared at me like I had struck her. I felt like complete shit for making her feel that way!

“How have you been treating me?” she asked cautiously.

“Poorly. Atlas, Ariel, Liesel...they all told me I was being too hard on you, and I was. I wish I could go back and behave better, but I can’t. All I can do is apologize and commit to doing better in the future.”

Her eyes clouded with confusion and hurt.

“I know I’m slow...I’ve always been slow. It takes me a long time to get things done, and I make mistakes...have made mistakes. You don’t have to apologize,” she said quietly. My heart ached at her words.

“I truly have to. And I’m not dating your sister, just in case you wondered why she was lashing out at you,” I clarified gently.

Hansa shrugged; her body language still closed off. “Who you date is your business...and who I see is mine.”

“I’m sorry about what I said regarding Eli. He’s a friend, and, as you correctly pointed out, it’s none of my concern,” I said. “Truce, Hansa?”

I held my hand out, and she only waited a second before shaking it. The contact filled me with relief. “You don’t have

to forgive or forget, but I genuinely want us to be friends if you're open to it.”

“I'll settle for employer and employee,” she replied quietly. Her words tore at me intensely.

I was taken aback by her refusal to be friends, having assumed she would agree—this assumption stemmed from my perception of her as compliant and pliable. She had always been the one quietly enduring mistreatment from me and others, leading me to misjudge her. Now, I realized my mistake: she possessed more backbone than most, with a graceful manner in handling herself and those around her.

“Let's get this blending experiment started,” I said in an effort to move forward. I waved a hand at the wines awaiting us.

Hansa's transformation was remarkable as we began to sample the Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre for the blend I envisioned. She went from quiet and reserved to excited faster than a Porsche 911 Turbo went from zero to sixty.

Her passion echoed vibrantly in the cellar, warm and genuine. I found myself delighted by the encounter. We spent a few enjoyable hours there, time getting away from us. The experience gave me hope that we could rebuild our damaged working relationship. “The Mourvèdre might bring a nice spicy note to the blend.” Her eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

“I was thinking the same. It needs that kick, doesn't it?”

Her passion echoed in the cellar, warm and genuine. “Exactly! And maybe a bit of the Grenache from the 2021 batch. It has those bright fruit flavors that could really lift up the blend.”

Pouring samples from the beakers, we discussed the characteristics of each wine. Hansa’s knowledge was evident in every word. She may not have read through *my* tasting notes, but she understood wine just fine.

“There’s something about blending,” she swirled the wine in her glass, “like creating harmony from individual melodies.”

We spent a few hours in the cellar, time getting away from us.

“How did you know you wanted to be a winemaker?” Hansa asked as we drank a 2020 vintage Pinot Noir, the blending exercise behind us.

“I don’t know. It’s a family business, so I guess I always knew I would work in wine. Atlas took care of the business, and I’d thought Ariel would be the winemaker; she has an excellent palate. But she wanted to work for the ACLU. I grew up with wine and spent my childhood in the vines.”

Hansa filled my glass and then picked up her own. “Eight years ago, when you were doing a tasting on the main street for the Pinot for Planned Parenthood event, I snuck in. I—”

“Fuck me! You were sixteen?”

She smiled sheepishly. “The way you talked about the wines and how terroir and vintage affect the nose and the palette. I

was hooked. In many ways, working here with you is a dream come true.”

I was stunned by her humility. I’d treated her terribly, and she still looked up to me as someone to learn from. Well, I would not let her down anymore or ever.

“I’m honored,” I said sincerely.



Chapter 15

Hansa

The month following Naina's birthday turned out to be incredible. Working alongside Orion, I gained a wealth of knowledge. We were on the brink of finalizing a blend to present to select distributors and restaurateurs at an exclusive vineyard event. After blending, the wine would need to age for at least eight to ten months before we could proceed with bottling.

Descending into the cellar with Orion that evening, I was keenly aware of the lingering tension between us that had persisted for months, but now it looked like we could start anew.

Once we'd settled on it, scaling up a blend proved more difficult than I anticipated. Creating a blend was art and science, requiring meticulous record-keeping. Orion had always been precise, but we knew our attention to detail needed to be even more rigorous for this endeavor.

We documented every nuance of that initial small-batch blend, the exact grape percentages, vineyard sources, and

barrel aging durations. I realized firsthand the importance of understanding those details as the blueprint for our creation.

My dyslexia meant I needed extra time to pore over everything after closing the tasting room and preparing for the next day's work with Orion. He remained patient, though I kept waiting for his irritation to show. We persisted through the challenges and focused on refining our blend rather than personal sensitivities. The final product would rely on objective analysis, not sentimentality.

Scaling up became a significant challenge once we had the blend figured out. "It's like cooking," I exclaimed when Orion explained the process. "A small amount of salt in a little pot has a different impact than the same amount in a big one."

"Perfect analogy," Orion had complimented me.

The taste tests were where I saw a new side of Orion. He valued my opinion, genuinely seeking my input. The first time he adjusted the blend based on my suggestion, I saw a respect in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

Ensuring consistency with each batch was a task we tackled together. We spent days blending different barrels, trying to achieve that perfect harmony we had in our initial batch. It was intricate work, requiring patience and a lot of trial and error. But in these moments, laughing over a misstep or celebrating a small victory, I felt a spark that I had smothered.

Quality control was critical, and Orion was a master at it. He taught me how to look for the balance in acidity, the right alcohol content, and how to assess the tannin structure.

“You’re killing yourself,” Liesel admonished when I showed up for a shower and breakfast straight from the cottage where I’d started to spend a few nights every week, especially the nights when I didn’t have to work at Whispering Vines.

We were getting ready for a big event at the tasting room with distributors and restaurateurs from around California coming for an exclusive tasting. We were going to crack open vintage wines and offer a sneak peek at the GSM Orion, and I were working on. This meant that I had to remember *all* the tasting notes to identify the bottles without stumbling over the vintage because a 2011 and a 2013 vintage are in similar bottles with similar labels, and the only thing different is that instead of a one, there is a three—a nightmare situation for someone with dyslexia.

“He looks at me like I’m...you know, worthy, and I don’t want to lose that. Is that pathetic of me?”

Liesel kissed my forehead. “Not at all. You respect him as a winemaker and want his respect in return. I get it.”

Atlas came into the kitchen then and kissed his wife soundly on her mouth. *Oh god!* They were so sappy and sweet.

“Good morning, Angel. When did you wake up?” Atlas was the suit-tie version of Orion. He was slighter and taller, but Orion had more muscle, probably because he was a farmer and Atlas sat behind a desk. They both had the same piercing blue eyes that became bluer depending on the sky and what they wore.

She shrugged. “I spent the night at the studio...something was itching to come out.”

“Good morning, Hansa. Am I correct to assume you stayed the night in the cottage?” Atlas sat beside me and picked up the coffee Liesel had placed for him.

“I...it’s okay, right? Orion said that—”

“It’s fine,” Atlas cut in, looked at Liesel, who nodded and then turned to me. “We were wondering if you want to stay in the cottage full-time. You can always borrow a vehicle from any of us or the vineyard to drive to Whispering Vines, *and* you can save money on rent.”

I gaped at him, holding my spoon of yogurt. “What?”

“Orion suggested it. You work late, and...there’s ice on the roads when you bicycle.”

My mind had stopped processing at *Orion and suggested it*.

“Ah...”

“We don’t need these cottages until harvest time, and I know they’re pretty basic, but Orion was thinking we could fix up the one you’re staying in...add a proper kitchen, elevate the bathroom game, add some better furniture.”

My eyes filled with tears. Since I’d left home when I was seventeen...hell, even before that, I’d always taken care of myself. It was the price I’d had to pay for being different from everyone in my family and pursuing a career they disapproved of.

But this past year, something had changed. I wasn't alone anymore. Seraphina had given me a job and had helped me get this one at Callahan Vineyards. Liesel and Ariel had become close friends. And now Atlas and Orion were offering me a place to stay, rent-free?

"Why?" I whispered as tears rolled down my cheeks, unbidden.

Atlas's lips tightened, and he put his arm around me, pulling me into a side hug. "Oh, sweetheart, don't cry."

I began to sob, the stress of the past month taking hold. Since Naina's birthday, I was tightly coiled—my parents had texted with threats that I'd be disowned if I didn't come back and apologize. I didn't bother replying to them. How would I know the difference? Would they treat me worse? Finally, when their abuse over text messages and voicemail became intolerable, I blocked their numbers. Naina had left some rude voicemails as well. I blocked her number, too.

Even though my family treated me the way they did, they were important to me. Now, I felt like an orphan.

Atlas stroked my hair, and I felt Liesel's hand on my shoulder.

"Shh, sweetheart," Atlas whispered, brushing his lips on my hair. "You don't have to stay in the cottage if you don't want to. I know it's not the nicest place. Please don't cry."

I looked up at him and laughed through my tears. "It's bigger than my studio, Atlas. And it has a view of the

vineyard. Are you sure you don't want me to pay rent?"

"We don't take rent from family," Atlas said. "Now, I have a meeting, so I have to go."

"And the tears make him uncomfortable as fuck," Liesel added.

Atlas grimaced. "Truer words have not been said."

"We can help you move," Liesel offered after Atlas made his escape. "You're on a month-to-month lease, right?"

I nodded. I'd made the decision driven by the fear of being unable to pay rent and trapped in an unaffordable long-term lease.

"Orion can bring his truck, and we can...hey, what's bothering you about this?"

"I'm not used to people being so nice to me," I finally admitted.

"People suck," Liesel agreed. "I was alone for so many years until I met Dr. Rao and Navya, and then...Atlas."

Navya Rao was Liesel's doctor's daughter and best friend. She lived in San Francisco and was a brand manager for a high-end luxury clothing brand. She visited often enough that we'd all become friends as we were all around the same age, except Ariel, who was a few years older.

"It's a shock, isn't it, to find out you're not alone and you don't have to do *everything* yourself?" Liesel finished.

"Yeah."

“Get used to it,” Liesel advised. “I can tell you from experience that it’s an awesome place to be.”



The tasting room was usually busy. When there weren’t guests, there was so much to do that I couldn’t find the time to talk to Orion, who was, according to Louis, camped in the cellar, getting the new blend ready for the private tasting we were doing in a week.

The last guest left at almost six in the evening, and I closed the tasting room. I felt nervous about going to the cellar without an explicit invitation. I *never* did that, but I took a chance. The old Orion, who used to snap at me, seemed to have disappeared. And even though I constantly seemed to wait for the other shoe to drop, a part of me had begun to believe that Orion and I were working well together.

He looked up from his laptop when he heard me come downstairs. He was at the long table in the cellar tasting area.

“Hey, sweetheart, all done for the day?”

Now, Atlas called everyone sweetheart. It was his thing. Orion didn’t, so...this was either a slip or...? The thing was that my lady bits went *hallelujah* whenever Orion said it.

“Yes.”

He beckoned me to come and sit next to him, which I did. “I came up several times, but it was always busy.”

Was this really happening? Were Orion and I becoming friends? Like people who just talked to one another with affection. Well, *this* Orion wasn't helping my crush, not at all. If I'd been crushing on him for years now, I was dangerously close to falling in love.

"Thank you."

He lifted an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Atlas mentioned the cottage thing you talked about..." My words faltered, overwhelmed by the rush of emotion that surged each time I thought about the Callahans' offer: a place to stay near work and a car for my trips to Whispering Vines. My heart leaped at their generosity, something my own family never extended. Atlas's words echoed, "*We don't take rent from family.*" They considered me one of their own.

His eyes sparkled with pleasure. "We need to fix up your cabin. I was thinking we could start after the wine-tasting event."

"My cabin?"

He put a hand on mine, and I shivered, feeling his touch run through me like a livewire. I was a fucking idiot that's what I was. He was being nice to me, and I wanted to get into his pants.

"Yes, Hansa, *your* cabin. I just need to get your kitchen going. We'll get a dishwasher in and fix up the cabinets. I want you to have space to cook. Maybe you can make me some samosas."

He retracted his hand, and I swallowed.

“Any time.” *I’ll make samosas for you every day if you want. Sheesh, Hansa, samosa should never, ever be a metaphor for...sexual stuff.*

“I want to show you something.”

I nodded, feeling dumbfounded.

He turned his laptop so I could look at the screen, and my heart stuttered. The words were blurring into one another, and I had to focus to read them. It was a photo of a wine label. I recognized Callahan Vineyards and the logo. And...I narrowed my eyes and mouthed each word silently.

It said *Swan’s Symphony*.

I looked at him, and he smiled. “You’ve been a big part of making this wine happen from the start, so I wanted your name to be part of our new wine label. You helped choose the bottle, the cork...I...hey, sweetheart.”

Tears started to roll down my cheeks. He was naming the wine after me. These Callahans were making me a complete crybaby. He groaned softly and wiped the tears with his fingers. “No. Don’t cry, baby.”

He’d never called me baby before, and the tingling lady bits went amok.

“But...are you sure you want to do this?”

Orion grinned, and for a second, I thought he’d kiss me, brush his lips against mine, but then he cleared his throat and

sat back, his fingers leaving my face. “This label is not just our first blend; it’s part of our future. I want to cater to a market that can’t afford a \$200 bottle of our 2020 Pinot Noir. With this blend, we can afford to lower our price and reach people who don’t want to drink the most expensive fancy vintage but just want to drink some good wine.”

I touched the label on the computer.

“You want to read the tasting notes?” he offered.

Fuck me! Usually, I’d increase the font size and change the face to Comic Sans, which was the easiest for me to read. But I could do that in privacy, not in front of people.

“Ah...can you email it to me?” I made a production of a yawn.

He was immediately contrite, and I felt like an ass for faking it. I was *not* tired. I was, in fact, awake and aroused.

“Have you had dinner? Liesel is cooking goulash with dumplings. How about we take some of Hansa’s Symphony for a tasting?”

“Swan’s Symphony, you mean.”

His eyes flickered like he was surprised he’d said Hansa instead of Swan. Sure, Hansa meant swan in Sanskrit, but was he calling this blend mine?

“Same difference. Come on, let’s take some to taste and get some dinner.”

“Will you...ah, email the tasting notes to me?” *So, I can pour over them all night to make sure I don't make an ass of myself the next day.*

“Sure,” Orion beamed.



Chapter 16

Orion

She was staying the night at the cabin. I saw the lights on my way to mine. The cabins, built for the seasonal workers who breathed life into the vineyards during the harvest, were as barebones as they came.

The structure stood solitary, its wooden exterior weathered by the elements, bearing testimony to many seasons' past. The slightly ajar door creaked as I pushed it open, revealing a room that was the very definition of simplicity.

"Hansa?" I called out.

Inside, the cabin was sparsely furnished. This was one of the *bigger* ones. It had a small kitchen and living space. Against the opposite wall was a compact table accompanied by a single chair. The table bore the marks of use, its surface scratched and stained, reminiscent of countless meals and conversations that had transpired over it. On it, I noticed a few of Hansa's belongings: a book, a notebook, and a hair tie.

The room had one small window framed with simple curtains, providing a view of the sprawling vineyard outside. The sight was a reminder of the cabin's purpose, a functional space for those who tended to the vines. The cabin was modest, an unspoken acknowledgment that it was not a place of luxury but of rest and retreat for those who spent their days working the land. The air inside held a faint scent of earth and wood, grounding and unpretentious.

I heard her in the bedroom.

"Hansa?" I called out as I walked toward the bedroom, where I knew from experience there was a full-size bunk bed, its frame made of sturdy, unadorned wood. The mattress would be thin but functional, covered with plain, clean bedding. Beside the bed was a small nightstand, upon which sat a lamp—its light a necessity rather than decoration. We'd need to get her a new bed, a bigger one—a more comfortable one. Maybe get some ceiling lighting as well.

We'd extend the kitchen and make it more useful for her if she was going to *live* here. The bathroom was bare. I could add some cabinets, so she'd have storage.

I was about to knock on the door when I heard her voice. "Alright, Hansa, you can do this."

Was she talking to herself?

"Appear... Apper... Appearance. The wine pre... pres... presents a deep ru... ruby co... color, with a hint of pur... purple at the rim, indi... indicating both youth and... vi... vitality."

I froze on the spot.

“Okay. Let’s now say it without reading it. Ruby with a hint of purple.”

I heard some clicks, probably her laptop.

She did the same thing again and again until she memorized one fucking sentence. Then she moved to the bouquet.

It had taken her fifteen minutes to get through the first two sentences of the tasting notes. I quietly left her cabin feeling like a complete fucking lowlife.

I went straight back to the main house. Liesel and Atlas were out on the porch as was a ritual.

“I think we should save the money and go another time, is all I’m saying.” Liesel was sitting on Atlas’s lap, and on any other day, I’d leave before I saw something I could not unsee.

“Angel, we’re going to Tuscany, and that’s that. Do you know my wife has all kinds of money?”

They saw me, and I could see Liesel’s first instinct was to scramble off her husband’s lap, but Atlas held her tight. I liked seeing them together.

“Hey, we opened a nice Pommard after you guys left.” Atlas waved at the bottle on the table.

I sat across from them, poured myself a glass of Burgundy, and inhaled the mineral punchiness of a Pommard wine. I took a sip and smiled. It was perfection.

“Liesel, I don’t fucking know how to ask this,” I finally said.

She looked concerned, and Atlas let her sit up. “What? Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yes. This is not about me,” I assured her. I looked at Atlas and then his wife. “Does Hansa have dyslexia?”

Atlas’s eyes snapped to his wife, who looked guilty as hell.

“She does, doesn’t she? That’s why she stumbles over inventory numbers and files; can’t...*fucking hell*, Liesel, why didn’t you tell me?” I was angry that I’d been hounding a woman struggling daily. Instead of supporting and helping her, I’d thought she was *slow* and *lazy*.

“It wasn’t my place.” She took my hands in hers from across the coffee table. “Hey, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. And you know it’s not. Who else knows?”

“Her family. Seraphina and me. That’s it. I didn’t even tell Atlas. She’s terrified people will find out and confirm their misconceptions about her.”

Self-loathing was a punch to the gut. “So, her family pretends she’s lazy, not someone who’s overcoming dyslexia?”

I knew about the condition because a friend at university had dyslexia. Watching them navigate the challenges of reading and writing opened my eyes to the struggles faced by those with learning differences. Despite their intelligence and creativity, they often grappled with tasks others took for granted, like skimming a textbook or writing an essay. They

described it as a constant jumble of letters and words, a puzzle that needed untangling every time they sat down to read. This experience instilled in me a deep sense of empathy and an understanding of the importance of patience and support in communication. Seeing their determination and the unique strategies they employed to overcome these challenges was inspiring and a powerful reminder of the diverse ways in which we all process and understand information.

I'd shown no compassion for Hansa. Granted, I didn't know, but I'd been a downright dick, no better than her fucked up family.

"Her family are all assholes." Liesel sat back next to Atlas. His arm came around her, pulling her close.

"So, now that you know, don't go about treating her with pity," Atlas warned me. "That'll probably hurt her more than you being an asshole."

I was so busy telling myself that I needed to keep Hansa at a distance because of her silly, obvious crush on me—that I'd gone overboard. But that wasn't the only reason, was it? No. I found her attractive despite myself. And it embarrassed me to find someone as *slow* as Hansa attractive. I'd been one shallow son of a bitch. Well, as they say, twenty-twenty hindsight. Now that I was looking back, I could see things more clearly.

"How do I make this up to her?" I felt helpless.

"You already are," Liesel told me. "She was very touched about the cabin. *And* she's ecstatic about the blend. You named it after her."

“Yeah.”

Atlas gave me a firm look that told me he understood my turmoil. “Start by giving her the respect she deserves. She’s brilliant with wine, Orion. You’ve seen that in her work and how she understands wine. Treat her like the professional she is.”

I nodded, absorbing his words. It was true. Hansa had an uncanny knack for wine, a sense of it that went beyond what could be learned from books or lectures. “I’ve been a complete asshole, haven’t I?”

Liesel leaned forward and squeezed my hands gently. “It’s not just about the wine or the cabin. It’s about seeing her, really seeing her for who she is, beyond the dyslexia.”

The thought resonated deeply with me. I had to change my approach, not just in how I interacted with Hansa, but in how I saw her. She wasn’t just someone struggling with dyslexia; she was a talented, passionate individual who happened to have dyslexia.

“And,” Liesel continued, “Just be there for her. Be someone she can trust and rely on. She hasn’t had too many of those.”

As they spoke, I realized my feelings for Hansa were more complex than I’d allowed myself to admit.

I rose. “I need to apologize to her. Properly. And thank her for her patience, contribution to the blend, and being...her.”

“That’s a start,” Atlas nodded in approval.

As I left them, my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts. I had much to make up for and was determined to do it right. Hansa deserved that and so much more. It wasn't just about correcting my behavior; it was about acknowledging and appreciating the incredible person she was.

The lights were still on in Hansa's cabin as I took the same path I'd taken a half hour ago. No fucking way was I going to let her spend half the night reading through the tasting notes. I'd read them to her. I'd help her. Sure, it'd embarrass her, I knew, but she'd have to deal with it.

I knocked on the door and opened it, thinking she was still in her bedroom, but she was lying on the couch this time. Her eyes closed as she listened to something on her headphones.

She made a pretty picture, her hair loose, her T-shirt tight across her bra-less breasts, her yoga pants hugging her hips. I'd seen her outside her *work* uniform of black pants and white shirt—and I knew what she looked like, but this woman with her eyes closed, fuck me, she was beautiful, especially now that I knew who she was underneath her skin.

I knocked hard, and her eyes flashed up; she immediately sat up and looked down at what she was wearing, alarm in her eyes. She wrapped her arms over her sexy breasts.

“Hi,” I breathed, not liking the horror in her eyes at being caught in repose.

“Ah...did I forget something at the tasting room? Did I do something wrong?”

Oh, but it *killed* me that this was her reaction to seeing me. I'd made her feel this way. Yeah, so this would take some work to fix.

"May I come in?"

She nodded, and then, as I closed the door behind me, she yanked the blanket on the side of the couch and wrapped it around herself like a shawl.

I sat down next to her on the couch. I didn't know how to start this conversation. I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I didn't want to fuck up any more than I already had.

I faced her and smiled, hoping that would clear the worry from her eyes. "First, I am so fucking sorry for being the worst boss you've probably ever had or will have."

She blinked. "Ah...no. You're an awesome boss, Orion. You gave me my first shot at blending wine and named the new label after *me*. I can't tell you what an honor that is."

I felt shame. I was like her family—slapping her for her mistakes so hard that when I showed any kindness, it seemed like the best thing since monks planted wine grapes in California.

"No. I was horrible to you. I made you feel bad about every mistake you made. I was unkind. I was an asshole."

She flinched and then took a deep breath. "Why?"

"Why was I an asshole?"

She nodded.

Well, here was the tricky part. To tell her was to expose my weaknesses and maybe hurt her. But we couldn't have a genuine friendship if we didn't have honesty.

“This is not going to be easy for you to hear, and it isn't easy for me to say. Okay? But I want you to listen to me all the way through. Will you do that for me?”

Her head bobbed, and I had to curb the desire to kiss her lips that were just the right shade of a good, aged burgundy. She didn't wear makeup. Her skin was soft and inviting.

“I didn't want you to get any ideas about me. I....” Fuck, this was horrible. I had to tell her I didn't find her attractive... *then*.

“Because my crush on you was obvious?” she asked softly, her face blank.

I couldn't stop hurting this woman, and it was starting to tear me apart. “Yeah,” I whispered.

She nodded. “I know. I really should've been more careful. I didn't realize I was so obvious. Everyone knew. I didn't mean to be—”

“Are you apologizing to me?” I had this unbearable need to wrap my arms around her, tell her she didn't deserve what I did, what her parents and Naina did and continue to do.

She smiled uneasily. “I...it was just a crush. *I'm over it*. I swear.”

I put a hand on her cheek because I wanted to touch her. “Well, that's too bad, sweetheart, because...,” take the plunge,

asshole, she deserves it, “I liked it. I like you.”

She gaped at me and then jerked her face away from my hand.

“Orion, it’s okay. I know.”

“What do you know?” I asked, not sure if I was going to like her answer.

She swallowed. “I know that I’m not pretty. I’m short with a curly mop of hair that looks more like a metal Scotch-Brite, good for cleaning ovens, not some sexy pillow fantasy.”

I touched her hair then and slid my fingers through her springy curls. They framed her face beautifully. Her moonbeam face. So much light came from within her, strength, courage, kindness, acceptance, and fuck me, affection.

“I love your hair.”

She closed her eyes and pulled away. “Please.”

I raised both my hands to show her I wouldn’t touch her.

“I don’t want you to spend your nights not sleeping and working on memorizing tasting notes. That’s what you’re listening to, aren’t you? Over and over again?”

She looked shocked.

“Yeah, I came by earlier and figured it out. I’m a jackass to ___”

“What did you figure out?” Panic bloomed on her face, and she sprang up from the couch, the blanket sliding to the floor.

She looked like a small animal ready to take flight.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back to the couch. “I know you have dyslexia. And—”

“No, I don’t,” she bit out. “I am not as smart as others, so I must study harder. You said it. I am slow. I work slowly, so I have to work harder. That’s all.”

“You’re smart, creative, and fucking awesome with wine. Don’t you dare say you’re slow or whatever else you’ve been told to think about yourself? The fault is mine, not yours. Instead of supporting you, I pulled you down, and I know you think nothing of it because your own family does it all the time, but I don’t want to be like your family. I know I *am* a better person. You’re full of courage, and a light shines inside you.”

She wouldn’t have been more surprised if I told her I was into White Zinfandel.

“From now on, I’ll read the tasting notes to you. Hell, we’ll make them together, so you know what’s what.”

“No. We can’t do that. You don’t know how slowly I type and—”

“We’ll work at your pace. It’s *not* slow, it’s *different*. And we’ll make tasting notes while you taste the wine, so you don’t have to memorize as much—you can just drink the wine and describe it.”

We both remembered the time she’d done that, and I’d snapped at her for deviating from the tasting notes script I’d

given to the staff.

“That was asshole Orion. You don’t have to listen to him. You can ask him to go fuck himself.”

Her shoulders hunched in defeat, and I couldn’t stand it any longer. I hauled her onto my lap and hugged her. “Hansa, I’m so fucking sorry. I promise I’ll do better, and you’ll never have to doubt me again.” I leaned my forehead against hers.

My arms were around her, but she was stiff as a board. She wasn’t snuggling in or even holding me. She was still as a statue.

I nuzzled my lips against her cheek. “I think you’re beautiful and—”

“Stop,” she interrupted me. I raised my eyes to hers and saw pain shifting in them. “Why are you saying these things? Is it because you’re feeling sorry for the little ugly dyslexic duckling?”

I jerked my hips up so she could feel me, hard and ready against her ass. “That’s not a pity boner, darling; that’s me wanting the hell out of you.”

“What? Why?” she asked, perplexed.

“Because you’re fucking sexy. You’re sitting here with your nipples hard against that T-shirt, and your ass is...and then there are your lips.”

“My lips?” she breathed, her body softening against mine.

I took her hands and looped them around my neck. “They look like aged Pinot Noir. And when you lick them and bite them, they look like a deep Cab Sauv.”

She cleared her throat. “Ah...Orion...you don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?” I asked as I looked at her lips, wanting a taste, a bite.

“Make me feel better about myself.”

I shook my head. “Little Swan, I’m not trying to make you feel better about yourself, baby.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m trying to get into your pants.”

She chuckled at that, and I liked the sound very much. “Why?”

“Fuck, Hansa, because I think you’re sexy.” I squeezed her hips.

“I’m fat,” she mumbled.

“Who the fuck says? You’re on your feet twenty-four-seven. You bicycle everywhere. You’re fucking lean. You have curves, but that’s your body type, and I like it very much.” To prove my point, I ran my hand down her spine to cup her ass.

“Orion, I...I can’t wrap my head around this.”

I smiled. “Imagine how I feel?”

“You were seeing my sister a minute ago. I can’t...”

“I never had sex with her.”

She looked at me in disbelief. “No?”

I shook my head.

“She...she insinuated that you had and.... Why? Did she not want to?”

I grinned. “She did. But...,” this one was easy to admit because it was true because I’d known in my heart before I knew it in my head, “If I had sex with her, I would lose any chance with you.”

She pushed herself off of me, and I let her. She picked up the fallen blanket and wrapped it around herself.

“Were you serious about reading the tasting notes out to me?”

“Yes.”

“Can we do that now?”

“Can we do it at my place or, if you’re uncomfortable with that, we can go to the tasting room? This cabin needs some TLC before it becomes less shed and more home.”

She laughed. “It’s almost as nice as my studio.”

Which made me want to move her out of that fucking studio right away. “Where do you want to go?”

She seemed shy and worried her lower lip with her teeth. *Ah*, she wanted to see my place but was afraid it would be stepping over the line even though I’d offered. It looked like

I'd cracked the Hansa code, and I could understand her better if I paid attention.

“My place then. Come on, get some shoes on and a coat.”



Chapter 17

Hansa

“**H**e keeps kissing me but...hasn't...you know, gone further,” I confessed to Seraphina and Liesel a week after Orion and my brief encounter in my cabin.

“I say, wear some sexy lingerie and demand he make love to you,” Seraphina suggested. “That’s the approach I’ve used, and it works.”

Liesel and I gaped at Seraphina. Neither of us could imagine this elegant woman having sex.

She laughed at our discomfort. “For god’s sake, I’m a flesh and blood woman, and I have needs.”

“No, no, no.” Liesel put her hands on her ears. “I can’t hear this. No sex talk from you, Seraphina.”

“Why the hell not? I’ll let you know I’ve had a string of lovers and one fiancée. *And* I may not advertise my companions, but I sleep alone by choice, not because my black book is light on names.”

“Liesel’s right. You and sex...it’s weird. It’s like my parents talking about sex.”

“Your parents are uptight and, in all honesty, need to get laid to loosen up a little,” Seraphina remarked. “Hansa, own your sexuality and seduce him.”

“Easy for you to say, Miss *I’ve Had Thousands of Men!*”

Liesel cocked her head. “Did you just make a *Blazing Saddles* reference?”

“You got it?” Most people hardly got my movie references, which were not from the current century.

“I love *Blazing Saddles*,” Liesel confessed. “*Telegram for Mongo!*”

Seraphina held up her hand and made it shake. “*But I shoot with this hand.*”

“So, what you’re saying is I just need to ask Orion if he wants *to loosen his bullets, while I slip into something a little more...comfortable?*” I tried my best to mimic Madeline Kahn as I adjusted the wine bottles on the rack behind the bar, so they all faced forward.

”*I would,*” Seraphina encouraged.

“I don’t have the courage,” I admitted.

The fact was that I did not have the courage to do *anything* with Orion. Even though he’d made it plain as my fat ass that we were *together*, he kissed me hello in the tasting room *in front* of other people.

Most days, he walked me back to the cabin. He took me to dinner at Liesel and Atlas's place. He read things out loud to me and changed the font on his phone and computer to be dyslexia-friendly.

He did all that...but didn't ask me to spend the night with him. The kisses were lovely...but they weren't, you know, *let me stick my tongue down your throat, baby*, type of kisses. They were sweet. Nothing wrong with sweet, but I wanted a little dirty. I couldn't ask. I wanted to. But I couldn't.

"What would make you have the courage?" Seraphina wondered.

"If I had Naina's body?" I offered.

Liesel and Seraphina both sighed. "You say the most triggering shit, Hansa," Liesel complained.

"But it's true. Look at me and look at her."

"We are looking," Seraphina bore down into my eyes with her amethyst ones flashing annoyance, "but have you? Look at yourself."

I slumped. "I'm fat, Seraphina. Naina has a flat stomach. Look at my stomach?"

"It looks like a woman's stomach to me." Seraphina waved her hand. "And your stomach has a curve, but it's *not* fat. You're in shape, girl, can't you see that?"

"And my hair? Have you seen how it frizzes?"

“I would love some of your curls,” Liesel said longingly. “I feel my hair is too mousy. Don’t you think?”

“Hell, no,” I cried. “You have wonderful and beautiful...” I paused when she raised an eyebrow and gave me a smug look, “And I see your point.”

I heard the door of the bar ding and was about to tell whoever was coming in that we wouldn’t open for another half hour when Ariel stormed in.

“Hey?” we all added a question to the greeting because her eyes were spitting mad.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

She sat down at the counter, all but shaking with rage. “I need a drink.”

Need, not want!

I quickly poured her a Chardonnay, which I knew she liked. “I’m not drinking alone,” she muttered.

I poured three more glasses, and we all raised our glasses.

“To fucking fucked up men,” Ariel toasted.

“No shit,” I said.

“Amen,” Liesel said.

“To Tej Nair?” Seraphina guessed.

I was familiar with Tej Nair. In a community as tight-knit as Santa Barbara’s wine country, Indians tended to know each other. He was a corporate lawyer, a named partner in a San Luis Obispo firm. We learned this because his mother, Nair

Auntie, had proudly mentioned his partnership at some Indian event a few months back. Almost immediately after her boast, another auntie had quipped with a hint of snide, “Has the divorce come through?”

Tej had an arranged marriage with the Indian sweetheart of Southern California, Anjali Menon. She was an entertainment lawyer; he was a corporate lawyer; it was a match made in Indian auntie heaven. After seven years of marriage and no kids, they were getting divorced. It was one of the most talked about divorces in the Indian community. If one went by the Indian Auntie Gossip Network, either Tej had cheated on Anjali, or she’d cheated on him. *Anjali could not have children, and hence, Tej* divorced her. They were married for seven years without any *good news*, as they referred to pregnancies in Hindi movies. It was one or the other because Indian marriages didn’t dissolve simply due to petty things like incompatibility or inability to fall in love. This was an arranged marriage, and like all good, arranged marriages, its goal was to do right by the family, not to be happy.

In addition, they seemed to be fighting over money, according to the Indian Auntie Gossip Network.

“What happened? Did Tej do something?” Liesel asked, immediately concerned.

“It’s not Tej, it’s Atlas. He invited Tej for the special tasting next week. His clients are coming, so Atlas said, *hey, Tej, why don’t you mosey your ass down here to torture my only sister.*” She downed her wine like a shot. I refilled her glass. If she got

soused, it was fine. Her apartment was within walking distance.

“And?” I asked, realizing I was missing the big picture.

Ariel sighed. “Tej and I used to date.”

“Say what?” I gasped. “Tej Nair? Son of Dr. Charu Nair dated a white girl?”

Ariel’s lips turned into a smile. “Yeah. We kept it on the down low...just like he wanted to. We were together for *three* years. Anyway, I haven’t seen him in eight years, and now I must miss the tasting I’ve been helping to organize.”

Ariel had left her job at the ACLU in New York while figuring out what to do with her life; she’d taken over event management for Callahan Vineyards as Atlas still hadn’t replaced Daphne, the VP of Marketing.

“I don’t see why you have to miss it,” I said coolly. “Don’t let *him* think you have a problem with him being there. Fuck him! He got married, *and* there’s trouble in paradise.”

Ariel stared at me. “Trouble?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t have the deets, but there’s divorce talk.”

“How do you know this?” Liesel wondered. “Atlas mentioned it, but it’s all...on the down low.”

“Like most things with Tej are,” Ariel quipped.

“Nothing escapes the IAGN,” I told them.

“What is the IAGN?” Ariel wanted to know.

“The Indian Auntie Gossip Network.”

That cheered Ariel up, and she burst out laughing. “Oh, that was one thing I hated about dating Tej. The secrecy. He was all about the aunties not finding out. But then his mother did and...well, anyway. Maybe he won’t even notice me.”

“Darling, you get noticed everywhere you go.” Seraphina drank some wine.

“Maybe he’s forgotten what it was like when we were together.”

”*And* you’re fucking memorable,” she added, patting Ariel’s shoulder.

Ariel shrugged. “I don’t know. I...I just need to stop thinking about him and do something else. I need a distraction.”

“Oh, we got an epic one for you. And now that we have only thirty minutes before opening time, we need your guidance, Ariel.” Liesel leaned over the bar, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Hansa needs to get Orion to do the horizontal mambo with her. Any thoughts on how to seduce him?”

Ariel groaned. “He’s my brother, Liesel. *Eww*. You’re probably better equipped to talk about seducing Callahan men. And why do you need to seduce him? Every time I see you together, he’s got *hungry eyes* on you.”

Immediately, the four of us launched into song. *One look at you, and I can’t disguise. I’ve got hungry eyes.*

I loved spending time with these women. We were all different. Seraphina was the oldest at...well, who the hell knew how old she was, probably eight hundred without a single wrinkle. Ariel was thirty-three and cool. Liesel and I were the same age but different in personality and looks. She looked like a fairy princess, and I...well, perfect if we were casting Princess Fiona *after* she stopped being Cameron Diaz. And, yet, we were friends. I'd learned to trust these women and tell them my deepest, darkest secrets—those that could hurt me. I felt safe with them. This was a big deal for someone who'd never felt safe except with my friend Grant.

I was looking forward to introducing him to my *new* friends. He knew Seraphina, of course, and knew of the Callahan family, but he'd never *met* them. When I told him about Orion and me, he insisted that he'd have to check us out as a couple when he was here next. He would be here in a month, and I wanted to ask him to have dinner with Orion and me.

I'd been afraid to ask Orion, still wary that he would lose his temper with me again or get annoyed that I thought we had more of a relationship than we did.

"Baby, I'd love to meet your friend," he'd told me gently when I finally broached the subject.

"Really?"

"You were worried about asking me?"

I nodded.

“That was asshole Orion, remember? We don’t listen to him anymore.”

He’d kissed me on my nose and gone back to his work while I stood rooted to the ground, not sure how the gorgeous prince I was falling in love with (*oh, yeah, we were beyond a crush now*) had even noticed me. But he had, and something was happening between us. Something gloriously unique. And I couldn’t wait to find out where we would end up, walking these winding roads together.



Chapter 18

Orion

“F uck no! I’m not going to discuss my sex life with my sisters.” I banged my hand on the dining table where we’d been having a pleasant meal *until* Liesel and Ariel had asked me why I wasn’t doing the *horizontal mambo* with Hansa. Liesel used the weirdest fucking terminology.

Hansa was working at Whispering Vine this evening, and I dropped her off, so I had an excuse to pick her up at the end of her shift. Sure, I could lend her my truck, but then I missed our conversations while driving. The workday was so busy that we barely found time to be together, and by closing time, she looked exhausted and wanted to prepare for the next day.

I don’t know how I thought this woman was slow...she did something *all the time*, moving, moving, moving, until she gave me a fucking headache.

So, yeah, I wanted to have sex with Hansa, but she looked so tired every evening that all I wanted to do was put her to bed and make sure she got enough sleep. Did I want to get into bed with her every night? Yeah, I did. And if this were anyone

else, I would have. But I knew now, thanks to Naina, that Hansa was inexperienced, and what kind of asshole would suggest to his girlfriend who was working two jobs and putting in fourteen-hour days, if he could get a blowjob at the end of it?

Girlfriend? Ah, fuck! So, maybe in my head, I was a little further ahead of where Hansa probably was. She looked surprised every time I dropped a kiss on her lips or her forehead or touched her. She didn't kiss me back. She looked like a fucking frightened doe waiting for something terrible to happen.

I was not hiding that we were a couple at work. The staff knew, and I'd gotten many approving glances.

"She thinks you're not interested," Liesel told me as she speared some asparagus.

Liesel had made salmon with asparagus and rice. She was a damn good cook, and I loved the fact that I could come to the main house and get a home-cooked meal every evening, no questions asked, but I didn't need a side of sexual advice.

"Angel, you can't get involved in this," Atlas warned, amused.

"You mean like he didn't get involved with us?" she asked with mock innocence.

I sighed. "Fine. Lay it on me."

"She's afraid you think she's fat." This was from Ariel.

“And that she doesn’t measure up to Naina,” Liesel supplied.

“And she’s too afraid to tell you she’d like to have sex.” Ariel again.

“She’s inexperienced, and her family has told her she isn’t worthy, so she’s suspicious every time you come near her” — Liesel waved her fork at me — “And can you blame her? I’m so glad she cut them off.”

I knew it wasn’t easy for Hansa to not talk to her parents and sister, even if she said how great it was to not have them tell her what a screw-up she was. Hansa was all about family. So, when she ignored her parents’ summons (because fuck if they could bend enough to invite her over and try to make up with her) or didn’t even listen to the voicemails left by Naina because she was scared of how much that would hurt her, I knew it wasn’t really what she wanted to do. But she also couldn’t go back to the toxicity that her family had been drowning her in.

“What is she suspicious about?” I asked.

“That you pity her because you know about her dyslexia,” Liesel said, and then, when she saw the hurt in my eyes, patted my hand, “Don’t blame her for that. Please.”

“I got no one to blame but myself.”

I felt muddled about how to proceed. I said as much to Atlas after Liesel and Ariel went to Whispering Vines. They offered

to pick up Hansa, and Liesel looked pointedly at her husband, the subtext: “*Fix this, will ya?*”

We sat on the closed porch as we did so many evenings with a glass of wine.

“You know the big house was always *home*, but since Liesel...it’s *really* home like it was when Mom and Dad were alive,” I told Atlas as I raised my glass in a toast.

He grinned. “She’s astonishing, isn’t she? I still can’t believe I have her. I wake up every morning and feel like screaming thank you to the universe. I mean, don’t get me wrong, there are days I want to wring her pretty fucking neck and—”

“No, you don’t,” I whispered. “Even when she pisses you off, she doesn’t.”

“True,” Atlas agreed. He stretched his long legs and set them on the coffee table. “I have a question for you. Why are you interested in Hansa?”

“Why?”

Atlas nodded. “Why? How?”

I contemplated his question as I drank wine. It was an excellent Shiraz that Hansa had picked up for us from Whispering Vines.

“I find her attractive...let me explain,” I held up my hand when Atlas was about to say something. “I’ve always gone for the lookers. That was important to me and that they were smart...in the sense they were doing well in school or having a

great career. I haven't *really* dated, though. Just had a few weeks here and there of monogamous fun, and that was it."

Atlas waited as I pulled my thoughts together. It wasn't difficult to do because I'd been doing plenty of self-reflection for the past few weeks.

"I didn't like that I was attracted to Hansa. She didn't fit the mold of the kind of woman I saw myself with. I know that's terribly shallow, but I think I've been shallow for a long time."

"Maybe because you didn't want to get in too deep," Atlas suggested. "I know the feeling."

I shrugged; there was truth in that, but also in the fact that I'd had a woman in mind who I'd end up with, and she was gorgeous and successful. But now I'd refined what it meant to me to be beautiful and successful.

When I looked at Hansa, I saw a strong woman who'd done what she wanted to do with her life despite the pressure her family and her dyslexia had put on her. I saw a woman whose eyes sparkled with curiosity. I saw a woman whose heart was so big it accepted those who'd maltreated her, me included. How could I not find her beautiful?

"I know I'm confusing her," I confessed. "I want her confused because if she would think with a straight mind, let's face it, she'd kick my ass."

Atlas smiled. "Hansa is not someone who'd ever do that to *anyone*."

No, she wasn't. And not because she was cowed down; it was because her heart was big and had so much room for forgiveness and second chances.

"I like her, Atlas...a lot. I think she's sexy. Fun. Interesting. She's as much into wine as I am. I love that she lets me take care of her, accepts my half-assed apologies, and allows me to make amends. She's not holding it over me as so many others would. *But* that doesn't mean she isn't scared that the asshole, who was pushing her away because he didn't have the balls to understand himself, will come back. And I hate myself for it."

"Remember what Dad used to say? We all fuck up, but it's how you un-fuck it that matters."

I grinned. Yeah, Dad didn't care much about keeping it PG when it came to language at home. Mom tried, but her heart was not in it.

"They'd love Hansa, wouldn't they?" I fucking missed my parents. Even after so many years, there was a hole in my heart.

"Yeah." Atlas's words were choked as well.

We'd recovered from losing our parents, Atlas had made sure of that, but that didn't mean they weren't in our hearts, and we didn't think of them every fucking day.

"I've got to resolve this thing with Hansa."

"Yeah, because they start work on the restaurant in a few weeks when the weather starts to warm up, and you know Eli. He'll steal your woman *and* your liquor."

“Fucking Cajun Pirate!”



That night, I asked Hansa to come to my place after she finished her shift at Whispering Vines. She still hadn't officially moved into her cabin because I was still working on making it habitable.

Maybe I shouldn't, I mused; instead, I should ask her to live with me. *Whoa! Live with you? Orion, buddy, how much wine have you drunk?*

I raided Liesel's kitchen and brought home supplies. Candles, some scented and some not. Hansa loved to take a bath, and my bathroom had a bathtub that looked straight into the vineyard. As seduction plans went, this was true and tried. You set some candles. You add a Callahan blanc de blanc sparkling wine in an ice bucket. You made sure you had condoms.

We may or may not have sex, but I wanted us to take our intimacy up a notch so that she'd stop wondering whether I wanted her. And saying it with candles and bubbly was classier than saying, “I've got a boner that won't quit.”



Chapter 19

Hansa

His door was almost always unlocked, so I knocked once to be polite and opened it.

“Orion?” I called out when I didn’t see him.

I heard the strings of Debussy filtering through the house. I may love Bollywood music, but Orion knew I was also into the classics like him. I smiled as the gentle notes of *Clair de Lune* surged.

“Orion?” I tried again when I saw the light in his bedroom. I followed it, wondering if it was okay to go in.

“Hey, baby,” he called out from his bathroom. I stepped in to find a six-foot-two naked man in an enormous bathtub. Candles were everywhere. Two flutes of champagne sat at the edge of the tub.

My eyes went wide. God, he was handsome. Why did he want me? No one wanted me. Why did he?

“Take your clothes off, darling, and join me.” He held his hand out, and my throat clogged. It was too bright in this

bathroom. Too...open. I wasn't going to get naked in front of him.

“I...ah...you know, you look busy, so I'll go to my place and—”

“Get in, Hansa,” he ordered, but he wore a smile. “Please.”

I was *not* getting naked. No, no.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he came out of the tub, and I watched his dripping body. Muscled. Toned. Wow! And he was...well, he had an erection.

He came to me and bent to kiss my lips. I closed my eyes.

“You smell of...sandalwood,” he whispered. “Lift your arms, darling.”

“I...Orion....” My heart was ready to leap out of my chest.

He pulled up my Whispering Vines t-shirt over my head. He stared at me in my black bra and...my round stomach. I wanted to—.

“You're so beautiful.” His wet finger traced a path down my throat to the tops of my breasts.

His hands were busy at my back, and I panicked when he took my bra off. His blue eyes were stormy as he stared at my bare breasts. I'd always been embarrassed by my nipples. They were dark and big...not like the delicate rose-tipped ones you saw on porn stars.

“Baby,” he sounded breathless, and his mouth latched onto one nipple.

“Oh, god,” I moaned, my hands automatically in his wet hair.

He lifted his head after he dropped a kiss on the nipple he’d coaxed into hardening, and now his blue eyes were almost black. “I had to taste. Don’t be shy, baby.”

I swallowed, frozen to the spot.

He lifted my chin and smiled at me. “Say something.”

I licked my lips, and his mouth brushed against mine. “I’ve never done this.”

“Neither have I,” he whispered.

I scoffed. “Really?”

He grinned. “I’ve never waited this long. Never wanted to take it this slow. Never wanted to cherish.”

Okay, so Orion Callahan was a smooth fucking operator. *Coast to coast, LA to Chicago....*

How was I supposed to keep my head when he said such things?

His hands went to my pants, pulling them down along with my panties. I closed my eyes, embarrassed. This was the first man who was seeing me naked, completely naked. I should’ve done this with a few others before him, men who were not so good-looking and...unattainable, to get used to being naked.

I opened my eyes to find him on his knees, staring at my.... I cleared my throat. “Orion?”

“I know you’re embarrassed, but god, you’re so fucking beautiful.”

He sounded like he meant it, but how could he?

He rose then. “No fucking way am I going down on you before we’ve properly kissed.”

Right! Well, yeah. How could he?

Go down on me?

Oh my god! This was actual sex. This wasn’t a Hindi movie from the eighties where they cut scene and showed two flowers touching each other.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” he asked, his hands on my shoulder.

“Nothing.”

“Hansa?”

“This is ridiculous. We’re both naked, and this is nuts.”

He smiled and rubbed his lips on mine. “Come on, baby, give me a kiss.”

What the fuck did that mean? Open-mouthed? Tongue? Peck on the pecker? *Stop thinking, Hansa.* You keep thinking, and you’re going to have an anxiety attack.

Speaking of peckers, I looked down at his and touched the wet tip. He groaned softly. I wrapped my hands around him, and his hips moved. *Wow!* I did that.

“Baby, I’m going to come in your hands like a fucking teenager, and I’d very much like to kiss you before that

happens.”

I pulled my hand away and then reconsidered. “Really?”

He pulled me against him, skin to skin. My thighs shifted automatically, like they knew what to do, and made room for him. He thrust against me.

His eyes were amused when he finally...finally...finally kissed me.

It was a slow kiss. He tasted of pepper, spice, and red fruit. The shiraz, I thought, and of green apples probably from the sparkling blanc de blanc. His tongue moved against mine, and it was—*insert deep sigh*—magical. I know that made me sound *like a virgin who was kissed for the very first time*.

The hell with it. I was a virgin, but I’d kissed before, maybe not like this X-rated version, but I had.

My hands wound around his neck, stroking his hair as I, Hansa Raj, deepened the kiss. I had little experience, but I’d listened to a shit ton of steamy audiobooks. When you have dyslexia, your Audible membership is a lifeline.

He lifted his head, and my mouth sought him out. He nibbled softly. “I’m getting cold, baby. How about we get into the bathtub?”

I’d listened to a lot of books where couples had steamy bathtub sex. I had only *one* problem with it. Who cleaned up the bathtub after? I mean all those bodily fluids. *Stop overthinking this, Hansa*. Get into the bathtub. Look sexy doing it, and don’t flash your fat ass and.... He picked me up

in his arms, my hand slung around his neck. I was going to say I'm too fat when he stopped me, "Don't you fucking dare say you're heavy, or I'm going to dunk you."

I hung on to him. "Say what?" I asked innocently.

He let me slide into the bathtub and then joined me. He held out a glass of wine, which I took as I leaned against him.

"What's the occasion?" I asked.

"My sisters told me during dinner that you're worried I don't want you."

My eyes flickered with unease. Was he doing this because they said something? Was that why he'd gone to the trouble with the wine and candles, and not because—

"Stop it!"

"Stop what?"

"I can see it on your face," he remonstrated. "I want to make love to you. I've wanted to for the past four weeks, but you're always so tired that I instead tried to make sure you got enough sleep."

"I kept waiting for you to sleep with me, not just the sex thing, but sleep," I confessed.

"I didn't want to take advantage."

"Oh, please do take advantage. I'm so ready to be taken advantage of."

He smiled at me and held up his glass, so I'd clink with his. "To taking advantage."

I sipped my wine. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Do you...ah...I don’t know how to ask this without sounding like an insecure twit.”

“First things first. If I ever hear you call yourself ugly, a twit, or something else derogatory, I’m going to lose my shit.”

I felt tears prick the back of my eyes. “Why?”

“Why? Because I think the world of you. I know I fucked up. But have I not shown you how much I care, how much you mean to me this past month?”

I set my glass down on the edge of the tub. “It’s hard for me to believe.”

“You didn’t have a problem when Eli said these things to you.”

I smirked. “I think he was doing it to make you jealous.”

“Yeah, tell me somethin’ I don’t know. I was livid. I realized then that I didn’t want you to be with him. I wanted you with me. But by then, I’d made things so fucking murky between us that I wasn’t sure how to fix it. And, honey, making me jealous was a side benefit for Eli. He meant what he said, as I do now.”

In the past month, he always answered me honestly, even when the truth would hurt me or make him look bad.

“Do you find me more attractive than Naina?” As soon as the words were out, I hated myself for saying them.

He shifted to be close to me. He helped me to sit on his lap. I could feel him hard between my thighs.

“I was never aroused with her.” He kissed my lips. “I kissed her *once*. And knew there was nothing there. Naina is beautiful. No doubt about it. But I have learned since that genuine beauty comes from within.”

He deepened the kiss, and I indulged myself. Maybe sooner than later, he’d realize he was slumming it with me and let go; until then, I’d enjoy myself. I’d love this man with all I had.

Yeah. How pathetic was it that I’d fallen in love with Orion? My crush had bloomed the minute he’d been kind and gentle. I was so pitiful.

“No, baby, no,” he whispered, brushing his lips all over my face and dropping kisses. “Stop doubting yourself. Stop doubting me. I’m falling in love with you, and I’ve *never* said this to another woman.”

I pulled away, and tears that were threatening rolled down my cheeks. “You don’t have to say these things to have sex with me. We can have it without all the smooth-talking, okay? It’s cruel—”

“Please, listen to me,” he pleaded as he took my hand and put it on his heart. “I’m falling in love with a wonderful woman who shares my passion for wine. Who’s helped me put a blend together that has always been my dream. Who’s so strong and brave that she fights daily to win against her challenges. I’d never lie about how I feel, Hansa. Please believe me.”

Oh, I wanted to. It was so tempting. But I had a lifetime of proof that people said things to get things, and once they got them, they ignored you.

“You make the best samosas, beta, so please make them for the party?”

“You know all about wine, so you should take care of the bar.”

“Naina is busy. Can you help to clean up? Also, you know where everything goes in our kitchen.”

“I’m not your parents. I’m not your sister,” he said as if he could read my mind, and maybe he could. “I know it will take some time for you to trust me. I get it. Let’s enjoy this bathtub, some wine, and...that’s all.”

I looked forlornly at him. He didn’t want to have sex? I was going to die a bloody virgin.

He laughed at the look on my face. “Yes, I want you. But I don’t want you to think that what we do is because I’m feeling sorry or making amends or whatever other scenario you’ve got cooking in your head. Do I want to fuck that gorgeous body of yours? Absolutely. Is that all I want? Not even close.”

I shifted so I was straddling his lap, my breasts pushed against his chest, my lips brushing against his. “Show me.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded. “I’m not falling in love with you, Orion. I’m all the way in. So, if you’re playing with me, this is gonna hurt me a lot. But I think it’ll be worth it.”

His face turned to stone. “Is that what you think of me? That I’d play with you?”

“I—”

“Fuck, Hansa. I’d never hurt you intentionally. I don’t know how to convince you of this.”

I hugged him close. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He stroked my back, pulling me close. “Don’t be sorry. We’ll work on this together.”

My legs wrapped around him. “Show me how much you want me.”



Chapter 20

Orion

Okay, so she was way braver than me. It took courage to ask me to show her. I wanted to. I was just scared shitless that I'd show her how a man prematurely ejaculates. And that would be a terrible way to introduce a woman to her first sexual experience.

I emptied my glass of wine, and she watched me curiously.

“Ah...are you okay?”

I sighed. “I'm scared that I'm going to blow it.”

“Blow what?”

“My...” *Wad!* “I haven't had sex in a while, and I want you too much and...stop staring at me.”

She looked up from my erection. “I've never ever had sex, so you could suck big time, and I wouldn't know.”

My eyes narrowed. “Is that your way of making me feel better?”

“Is it working?”

I grinned. *She was a package!* I adored her more every day.

I pulled her closer and felt her shiver. “How much experience do you have?”

“I’m not telling you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Hansa, I’m pretty sure you know how to make yourself come.”

She went red. “It’s personal.”

“Honey, you’re sitting on my lap, and my dick is almost inside you; I think we’re past personal here.”

“How do you...ah...how do you...you know?”

“No, I don’t know.” I hid my amusement. I’d never been with a woman who was so skittish and so sensuous.

“Orion,” she almost whined.

I smiled. “I stroke myself.”

She looked down and put her hand on me.

“Before you put your hot hands on me, it’s your turn to tell me how you do what you do.”

“I listen to porn. Soft porn. I listen to a book and...I have a vibrator...well, it’s a clitoral stimulator, and...why are you smiling?”

“You listen to porn? What kind?”

“I’m not telling you.”

I nodded. “Alright, my saucy wench, let’s get you to a bed.”

I helped her out and wrapped her in a towel. I tried to lead her to my bedroom, but she hesitated. “You go. I’ll be there.”

“Hansa?”

“I have Indian skin, and it gets dry. I need to put something on me, or within seconds, you’ll see my scales emerge.”

“Why don’t I do that for you?”

Her eyes widened. “You would?”

“How about a massage?”

She cheered up immediately. Massage was a win with my little swan. Noted.

I dried her, touching her as I went. Every time I went anywhere close to her pussy, she flinched. Her pubic hair was dark and soft, curly. I very much wanted to taste her, but she wasn’t ready. This would require patience.

“On the bed,” I ordered, and as she moved, I slapped that nice tight ass of hers.

She turned to look at me. “Do you like that?”

“Like your ass? Yeah.” I put my hands on her as I cupped her ass cheeks. “They’re tight and firm. And drive me nuts when you wear those pants.”

“You don’t think it’s too big?”

“Perfect.”

She lay on her back, one thigh crossed over the other; her hands were itching to hide her breasts, but she stayed brave.

“Stay here. Don’t move,” I instructed.

I went into my bathroom, bypassed the body moisturizer I used on the counter, and looked for the massage oil I knew was tucked away somewhere. I wasn’t sure when I got it or who left it behind, but I was glad it was there. I opened the bottle and inhaled the rose scent.

I came back to find she’d covered herself with a comforter.

“Did I not tell you to stay still?”

“I was cold.”

“Really?”

She lowered her lashes and pushed the comforter off her body. “It’s just weird lying here naked.”

Her dark skin contrasted against my white duvet in the most erotic way. I felt my cock swell. I needed to calm the sucker down, or I would get *ahead* of myself and *her*.

“I wish you could see how you look,” I murmured as I set the oil on the bedside table. I pulled the duvet down to her waist and kissed a puckered nipple.

She gasped. I watched her face as I took her nipple into my mouth and sucked softly. She moaned.

“What do you like? What I am doing, or you watching me do it?”

“Both.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

As if starved, I let myself taste her breasts hungrily. Her hands found their way to my head, and I loved how she held

me tighter, moving her body so she could rub against me.

“Orion.”

“Yes, baby.”

Her eyes were glassy.

“You want to come?”

Her lips opened, but no words came out. “Are you wet?” I asked.

I could see the dirty talk made her shy, which was why I couldn't resist pushing her. “If you don't tell me, I'll have to find out myself.”

I slid my hands between her thighs and felt her moist heat. Fuck! I slid a finger into her and hissed at how tight she was.

“Oh, baby.”

Her hips shimmied, and I pulled my hand away, loving the whine of protest she released. She was *tight*, and I didn't want to hurt her, so I poured some oil into my hands and rubbed them over her thighs first, and used the lubrication to massage her pussy. She whimpered, her eyes closed. I stopped moving my hand.

She opened her eyes.

“You keep them open so I can see how you feel, or I stop. Okay?”

She bit her lower lip. “Okay.”

“Good girl.”

She smiled.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s what all the alpha male heroes say in the smutty romance books.”

I grinned. “What else do they say and do?” I pushed a finger inside her and watched in delight as she lost her train of thought.

I found her clitoris as I stroked in and out of her, my thumb pressed against the nub. Her breathing was becoming rapid, and I slid two fingers inside her. Her lips opened, and I wondered how it would feel to slide in between those vintage red wine-colored lips to see her make me come with her mouth.

I had to stop thinking about coming because I would blow my load before she orgasmed, and that would be unacceptable.

Her thighs started to shake as I aroused *and* soothed. Her eyes kept fluttering close. And then, on a gasp of shock, I felt her release. Fuck me! No woman should look this good as she came. I wanted to slide inside her, feel the ripples of her orgasm on my cock.

“Wow,” she whimpered as she came down from her high.

I took my fingers and licked them, tasting her. That aroused her more, and I smiled. Oh, yes, the sex between us was going to be as good as the GSM blend we were making: sweet, spicy, and earthy.

“On your stomach, darling. Let’s get your scales moisturized,” I teased.

She turned, relaxed, not trying to hide her body from me. Now I knew a little something more about my little swan. Just make sure she had a good orgasm, and she would become loose and lazy, and fucking sensual.

I poured oil on the hollow of her back and rubbed it into her silky skin. I wasn’t sure why she thought her skin was dry because it was supple and gorgeous. Almost golden in the dim light of the candles that I’d moved from the bathroom to the bedroom.

“Orion,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Do you think you could make me come again?”

I grinned. “I’m going to try my best.”

She fell asleep on her stomach before I could *try my best*. I was frustrated, physically, but emotionally, I felt like I’d just won a Decanter World Wine award. I’d relaxed her, and she’d fallen asleep naked, not caring that I was looking at her beautiful ass, wondering if it was too big. It was a victory. It also meant that I had to rub one off—but making Hansa come was better than a lot of the sex I’d had in my life.

Yeah, I was head over heels.

I slid into bed after turning off the candles and pulled her against me. She murmured in her sleep and cuddled into me. I

tucked her head on my shoulder and nuzzled her hair. Sandalwood and now rose from the massage oil.

Her legs tangled with mine, silky, firm, smooth. Yeah, I was getting hard again. And she thought I didn't want her?

“Orion,” she whispered.

“Yes, baby.”

“Can we do this again?”

“Yeah.”

“And next time, we can make sure you're taken care of as well.” Her hand cupped my balls and then took my semi-hard and quickly going to full-on-hard dick in her hand.

“You're a cruel, cruel woman, Hansa Raj.” I kissed her shoulder.

She giggled, and I smiled, a warm feeling running through my chest, one that I'd not felt ever before when I held a woman who'd left me with a hard-on that could hammer nails into wine barrels. I was in love with Hansa Raj, and it was the best thing ever.



Chapter 21

Hansa

“Hansa, honey, I need you to calm down,” Orion said patiently as I walked around the tasting room, making sure everything was ready for the next day.

Ariel had just left after walking the staff through how we’d manage our exclusive guests for the wine-tasting event we put together for the wine elite in California.

We’d start with a tour of the wine-making facilities and the cellar, where we’d begin the wine tasting. We’d open some of the exclusive vintages. Then, we’d come to the wine-tasting room, where Eli would serve a light lunch. This was a way to introduce Callahan Vineyards and the new restaurant that would open in the fall, *Mythos of the Bayou*. Yeah, he’d chosen a name I’d suggested, and if I weren’t so fucking nervous, I’d be proud.

We would serve wine paired with the New Orleans-California fusion buffet lunch. And it would be a tasting in its own right from our library and current wine-list wines.

Two of the Funk Zone wine-tasting room staff would join us for the event, but I would have to manage the bulk of it.

“What if I pick the wrong bottle, Orion?” I was so scared I’d screw it up.

“So what?” He sat down on a bar stool.

“Orion, just a few months ago, you’d bite my head off for that.”

“That would be Asshole Orion, not Boyfriend Orion.”

All the air left my lungs. “What?” I croaked.

“You struggling with the boyfriend part of that statement?”

I nodded. He kept surprising me. First, he gave me an orgasm and didn’t seem to mind that I fell asleep. Fell asleep for the love of everything holy! After mooning over this man for eight years, I fell asleep while he was naked, hard, and ready next to me. I’d have worried about it, but I was too busy having a nervous breakdown about the upcoming tasting.

“Are you my boyfriend?”

“I fucking hope so, darling. Especially after you left me high and dry last night.”

He was teasing me, but I felt my face heat up. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“You were relaxed, and it was a compliment.” He meant it. He *actually* meant it. How was this my life? How was this even happening? Maybe I hit my head some time ago, and I was in a coma and dreaming this whole thing up. That seemed

more probable than Orion Fucking Callahan calling himself my boyfriend.

“We can’t try tonight,” I said uncomfortably.

“We do this at your pace. There’s no rush.”

I sighed. “No. I want to. I really, really want to. I’ve been waiting forever. *But* my cramps started this morning, and that’s probably why I fell asleep last night. I get tired when I...you know?”

He looked amused. “Are you telling me you started your period?”

Raised in an Indian household, I remembered my late grandmother, who never met a dumb traditional custom she didn’t want to follow. She’d proposed setting aside a “special” room for menstruating family members, a practice from her earlier days in India. My mother would have none of it. In her youth, she’d experienced similar traditions where menstruating girls were called impure and isolated in a separate room, barred from touching anything. So, we grew up not talking about menstruation. I never imagined I would be talking about it with Orion.

“Yes. That’s what I’m telling you.”

“You feeling okay?”

“Yes. I took painkillers.”

“And that helps?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Ariel used to have the worst period pains with migraines. Later, we found out she had endometriosis. She had surgery and all that, so she’s better now.”

I didn’t know that. And I felt a pang of sisterhood for Ariel. Periods were tough enough without endometriosis, which I knew could be extremely painful.

“Can we go through the tasting notes again?” I desperately didn’t want to talk about my tampon situation with him.

“Yes, but before we do that. Honey, I don’t care if you’re having a period. It’s your first time, so we’ll be mindful of that, but in the future....”

“Can you imagine the mess it would make?” I was horrified.

He laughed and held his hand out. “Come here.”

I took a few steps to him and put my hand on his.

“I don’t care about the mess. And I hear that orgasms during a period—”

“*Please* stop talking,” I pleaded. “This is so uncomfortable.”

He pulled me toward him so I would sit on his lap. He held me close and dropped a kiss on my lips. “We won’t do anything that ever makes you uncomfortable. But I need you to clarify for yourself the difference between being embarrassed and being uncomfortable.”

I leaned into him and felt something I’d never felt: a sense of safety of finally having someone on *my* team because Orion was.

“I’m embarrassed.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“You’re very cocky.”

He nuzzled my hair, and I sat up, almost banging into his chin. “I want a straight answer to something.”

“I won’t lie to you.”

I nodded. “Do you think my hair is wiry and not—”

“Your hair is soft and curly and sexy as fuck. I know you called it a Scotch-Brite scrubber once, and I never want to hear you say nonsense like that again.”

I looped my hands around his neck. “I feel like I’m in a dream.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “I never thought I’d meet someone who had my passion for wine, who thought working on blends and tasting wine was fun and didn’t mind how tedious it is to be a winemaker. I love how much you care about what we do at Callahan Vineyards. I’m in awe of you.”

He was so sincere that I almost believed him, but a part of me held back. He’d get over me, and then what would I do?

He sighed, able to read me. “I’m not going anywhere. Not even tonight when you have a period. Come stay with me.”

I nodded.

“I know you’ll say it’s too early, and maybe it is. But how do you feel about living with me while we fix your cabin?”

Every time I felt I had my bearings around him, he pulled the rug out from under my feet. “Live with you?” I was glad I didn’t stutter because it was a close thing.

“Yeah. You’re at my place most of the time, and now that I’ve convinced you to start sleeping with me, I don’t see the problem.”

I stood up and put some distance between us. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“My parents will go apeshit.”

Orion burst out laughing.

“What?”

“Who cares what your parents think? What do you think?”

I folded my arms to hold myself together, keep the joy of him wanting me and the fear of how much this would hurt when he dumped me from erupting out of me.

“And what will I do when this is over?”

Laughter vanished like *that* from his eyes. “I’m in love with you. I’m not planning to go anywhere. Are you planning to dump me?”

“I haven’t even had sex with you, so no, not until we at least do that.”

The smile came back. “But once you use me for sex, you’ll dump me?”

“Are you joking, or are you serious? Because if you’re serious, that’s fucking insulting.”

The problem with dyslexia wasn’t just that I couldn’t read easily; it also made it difficult to communicate, express my thoughts, and arrange my feelings in a way that I could explain myself. Being nervous didn’t help either.

“I was joking. But, Orion, you hated me a second ago.”

“Hansa, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to admit my attraction to you. But I’m a better person now. I promise I won’t regress into Asshole Orion. Can’t you forgive me?”

“This is not about you,” I cried out. “This is about me. No one loves me. Not once did they get to know me. My parents don’t like me, Orion. What happens when we live together? Spend all our time together?”

He came to me then and folded me into his arms, making me hug him back. “Baby, I know you. I know you, and I love you. I’m not them.”

I was so tired. Always so tired.

“And I am dropping this next request now, so you have time to consider it. I want you to stop working at Whispering Vines.”

That was a shocker. “What?” I pulled away to see his face.

“You work seven days a week. You work here Monday through Friday. On Saturdays, you work at Whispering Vines all day, and then you have closing shifts on Sundays and Thursdays. You don’t take a day off.”

“You think I want to work seven days a week? Do you think I want to shop at fucking Target? You goddamn snob!”

“I want to spend time with my girlfriend, and I can’t do that if she’s always working.”

Anger flashed through me. “Of all the selfish fucking things to say. I work all the time because I have a student loan. I had to pay my way. My parents said if I didn’t study what they wanted me to, they wouldn’t pay. Do you think I want to bicycle? Hell no. I wanted to buy a car and move into a better place than my studio, but I can’t afford it.”

“Move in with me. No rent.”

My eyes narrowed. “Oh, and pay you by what? Having sex with you?”

He grinned. “Sounds good to me.” He leaned his forehead against mine when he saw I was about to spit flames. “I love you. I want to make your life easier. I want us to spend time together. I’d like to see you not fall asleep every night exhausted.”

He loves me? For how long? Is it now or for another few months or what?

I rose and stood in front of him. “Orion, when we’re over, I’ll still need to pay rent and fund my life.”

“*Enough is enough.* You keep saying we’ll be over when we’ve barely started. Get it through your head: I’m not going anywhere. Get used to it, and if you doubt me again, I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” I challenged him.

He approached me and kissed me, his mouth fusing with mine. “You drive me nuts.”

He slammed his hips against mine. He was aroused. Our little argument had aroused him. But then it had done the same for me, despite being on my period.

His hands roamed my body, sliding under my shirt and cupping my breasts. He pulled down my shirt and a bra cup. I waited as he watched my stiff nipples, and then, groaning, he began to suckle me. It was the most exquisite feeling: the wetness, the pressure, the bite of his teeth.

My hips rocked against his on their own accord. Now that I knew what an orgasm *really* felt like without the help of porn and a battery-operated device, I wanted to feel it again and again. I wanted to hear Orion groan as he touched me, telling me how beautiful he found me even though I couldn’t believe him.

His hands moved, dipping under the band of my pants, and cupping my ass as he ground against me.

“Fuck, Hansa.” He raised his head to look at me, his eyes aroused, wild. “I want you so damn much. Give me the fucking time of day, will you?”

I pulled his mouth back to mine. I loved how he tasted, how we tasted, how good this felt—safe and erotic, comforting and arousing.

His hands went between my thighs, and I stilled.

“Hansa, you think a little bit of blood is going to—”

“No way. No, no. no. No.”

“You’re a bit of a prude, aren’t you?” He moved his hand away from the danger zone.

“Not a bit, but a whole hell of a lot of a prude.”

He didn’t push it but cupped my ass. “Okay. Then say yes to moving in with me.”

I glared at him. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“Oh yes.”

“I’m afraid to believe.”

“I know. But you’re going to have to risk your heart, baby, because I’m fucking risking mine. Can’t you see that you can hurt me too?”

I’d not thought about that. I’d seen it in his eyes every time I pushed him away, raised a barrier. Maybe he did love me, or at least believed he did. It was too much of a dream come true for practical, sensible Hansa to accept.

“I love you,” I whispered, wanting to soothe.

He smiled. “You’ll move in with me?”

“Until the cabin gets fixed?”

“Sure,” he said carelessly.

“You have no intention of fixing the cabin, do you?”

He brushed his lips against mine. “I love your lips. Did I tell you they’re the color of vintage burgundy? And yes, I intend to fix up the cabin; I’m just not going to kill myself doing it.

Spring's almost here, baby, and I will be busy six ways to Sunday."

I knew that, so I took a deep breath and took the plunge. "I'll move in with you."

He had the most self-satisfied smile on his face. "And you'll let me make love to you when you have your period."

"Hard no to that."

He chuckled. "I'll eventually convince you. You know what they say?"

"What do they say?"

"Once you have Orion, you can't go back."

"Oh god! You're so full of yourself."

"Wait until you're full of me."

"*Eww!* That's cheesy."

He hugged me then and whispered in my hair, "Thanks, baby. Thanks for trusting me. I promise I'll not let you down. I promise I'll never let you regret this."

And just like that, Hansa Raj began to not just date but to live with her boyfriend, Orion Callahan, the man she'd been crushing on for eight years. Dreams did come true!

Right before they turned into nightmares, the voice that never let me be happy for long, that belonged to my inner critic and sounded so much like my mother, whispered loudly.



Chapter 22

Orion

“**Y**ou know, O, you don’t have to watch her like a hawk,” Ariel whispered after our exclusive guests had moved to the tasting room.

Atlas and his leadership team were spread out across the room, talking to the wine movers and shakers—and they pulled me in whenever someone wanted more details or to meet the winemaker. I should have been focused on the business. Instead, my attention was unabashedly and without remorse on Hansa.

She didn’t sleep the night before because she kept going through the photos of the wines to make sure she wouldn’t slip up and get the vintage wrong. I stayed up with her, feeling helpless. This was *her* process. This is how she’d passed exams, studied for interviews, and prepared every day for working at the tasting room because I was a jackass to her.

We are all afraid of making mistakes, but Hansa was more afraid than most—because when she made a mistake, it wasn’t because she wasn’t prepared or hadn’t worked hard; it was

because she hadn't prepared *more* and worked *harder* to overcome her dyslexia.

We had our first *big* argument as a couple in the morning before work. She wanted to get going with coffee, and I insisted on a proper breakfast with an omelet and fresh bread I'd picked up from the main house. Liesel kept her kitchen stocked so I could, in turn, keep mine well supplied.

"I don't have time."

"Sit your cute little ass down and eat something."

It was a beautiful day in early March. Budding was promising to break through after a long winter, and I was hoping it would remain cold so we could escape losing buds to unforeseen April frost, which had fucked up a vintage or two for us in Santa Barbara.

"Eat," I ordered as I watched the early morning sun cast a fiery glow over the rows of vines. My vines. My life.

"You need to stop ordering me about. Okay." There was heat in her voice but also fear. It crushed me to hear it. She was worried about how she'd do at the tasting. After all the work we'd done together, her insecurities still loomed large over her.

"If you don't eat, you can't do the tasting," I said calmly.

"What?"

"Yeah. I'm your boss, and I say if you don't eat" — she threw a piece of bread at me, which I caught — "you can't do the tasting."

She called me a few names, and after her tirade, I simply said, “Eat or no work today.”

She ate grudgingly. No one had taken care of Hansa, and I knew she got flustered whenever I did. I hoped there would come a time when she expected to be taken care of and not be surprised by it.

When we arrived at the tasting room, Ariel was already there. It seemed unlikely she would return to her law career, and Atlas and I had even considered offering her a role at Callahan Vineyards. However, we recognized she wasn't ready to make such a big decision. Ariel was grappling with her experiences in New York, which had compelled her to return home. Although I hoped she would open up, I knew she would do so in her own time. Ariel had always been introspective and guarded about her feelings.

Ariel had been close to our mother, and her loss had hit her harder than us. When she lost Tej, she'd told me it had crippled her.

We hadn't even known that Tej and Ariel were dating; we only found out after the relationship had ended, and that was because Tej came looking for Ariel. Apparently, she'd sent him a “Dear John” letter and left California. We didn't know what had happened there either, but considering Tej would be at Callahan's today, I hoped it wouldn't be too difficult for Ariel.

“I like watching her,” I told Ariel. I did. How the mighty had fallen! And I had zero recriminations. Falling in love with

someone who returned that love a hundred-fold was awesome!

“How is she doing?” Ariel asked.

“Great. She got a couple of vintages wrong, and I know she’s going to beat herself up about it. I can’t fucking stand it when she’s hard on herself.”

Ariel pursed her lips. “This thing between you two is serious.”

“Yeah.”

“Like get married and have babies, serious?”

I smiled at the thought. “Yeah. I convinced her to move in with me. Why are you staring at me like that?”

Ariel smiled and then hugged me. “I’m so happy for you. I’m so glad you dumped that bitch of a sister of hers. Oh, Liesel, Seraphina, and I’ve been wishing, hoping, and wishing, and I’m thrilled.”

I folded my arms around her and pulled back. “Is wishing and hoping all you’ve been doing to manipulate me into having a relationship with Hansa?”

Ariel’s face fell. “No, Orion. Don’t think that; we’d never...” I winked at her, “fuck you.”

“If you did manipulate me, thank you. Seraphina has been giving me hints, and you know she’s as subtle as an over-oaked warm-country Chardonnay.”

“How does Hansa feel about you?”

“Scared,” I said tersely and waved to Atlas, who gestured me to join him. Standing beside him was Martin Reeves, a well-known figure in the wine distribution industry, whose sharp gaze was known to miss nothing. “Got to go work for a living.”

I walked up to Atlas and shook hands with Martin. “Orion, this place has grown since I last visited. Impressive,” Martin commented.

“Thanks, Martin. What do you think of the wine coming out this year?” I wanted to ask him about the GSM as well. If Martin gave *Swan’s Symphony* even a mere nod, it would move bottles when we were ready, in eight to ten months, after we barreled the wine.

“Callahan Pinots are my favorite; you know that. Don’t worry; I’ve already asked my buyer to put orders for many of the vintages. “

This was a relief!

This event was designed to sell wines before they were on the market. We weren’t a domain in Bourgogne, so we couldn’t sell wine that sat in barrels as many of the big winemakers there did, but our goal was to sell most of our future inventory as early as possible. The advantage of having someone like Martin Reeves in our corner was that he’d make sure our wine got prominence in his sales and marketing efforts.

“And the GSM?”

I held my breath.

Martin considered my question. “I’d like another taste. Do you think your tasting manager will have time to take me down to the cellar?”

“Absolutely.”

I went to Hansa, who knew how our winemaking process was handmade and how we used as little machinery as possible to not damage the grapes.

“Orion treats them like precious stones,” she said when I slid beside her. I brushed my mouth against her ear and saw her flush at the intimacy. I was thoroughly enjoying the way she responded to me. It was a new and fresh relationship, but the comfort and ease of something that was meant to be had always been there.

“Martin Reeves would like you to walk him through the GSM in the cellar.”

“Me?” she squeaked. “You should do it. I’m busy.”

“Excuse us.” I waved a hand at Louis. “Our cellar manager will take care of you. I need to steal Hansa away for a moment.”

I put an arm around her waist and led her to the stairs that took us down to the cellar.

“Orion, that man scares the bejesus out of me,” she confessed. “If I mess up with him, it’ll hurt our sales for the coming year.”

“You’re talking about *our* wine with him, baby; there’s nothing to be afraid about. You know this wine. You helped make it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You did the work, I just—”

I slapped her ass as we descended into the cellar. I slapped it hard.

“Whoa!” She turned to face me, shocked.

“I told you I won’t listen to you put yourself down. And if you do that, I can assure you that I’ll be happy to turn those tight ass cheeks of yours a nice Merlot red.”

“Seriously?” she muttered, shaking her head.

“Seriously,” I chuckled.

As we reached the last stair, the cool air, tinged with the scent of oak and aging wine, inundated our senses, as it always did. No matter how often I worked here, I was always in awe of what we created: the magic of transforming a grape into something that could last for years, change, and tell its own story.

“Why don’t you set up? I’ll get Martin.”

“You’ll be here with me, right?”

”*Always*. But only because I love to watch you work and not because you need me.”

She arranged the tasting in the cellar, where we had a redwood table with comfortable chairs for tastings. This was also where Hansa and I spent much of our time working. We

liked it here in the cellar where it was quiet. And I'd had some prurient fantasies of taking her on that redwood table as I tasted champagne... I shook the thought away before my raging erection became apparent. We seriously needed to fuck, and soon, because right now, everything she did and didn't do turned me on, making me want to look for a surface to lay her out on.

Hansa's hand shook slightly as she picked up the GSM from a bottle without a label. We'd put the name of the wine and the label on the neatly printed tasting notes for each wine we served. Ariel had made a booklet for everyone to take back with them with QR codes and product codes to make it easy for them to order.

"This wine is seventy percent Grenache, twenty-one percent Syrah, and nine percent Mourvèdre," Hansa told Martin as she filled his, hers, and my glass with a tasting pour.

He nodded, reading through the tasting notes.

"As you can see, it's ruby red with a hint of purple on the rim. On the nose, you'll get ripe blackberries and plums from the Grenache, notes of black pepper, clove, and anise from the Syrah, and tobacco from the Mourvèdre."

Martin smelled the wine. "Why this percentage split?"

I waited for Hansa to answer the question because this was her wine as much as mine—we'd made it together. She looked uncomfortable, and a part of me wanted to wrap her in my arms and take her fears away, but that wasn't what she needed. She was afraid of making a mistake, and she needed to know

that it didn't matter and that she had all the answers to all the questions because she fucking made this wine.

“Orion and I wanted this GSM to have a balance between the burst of fruit from the Grenache and the pepper and clove from the Syrah; we worked on the right percentages because we wanted to use the Mourvèdre to round the wine out, and it does that with its firm tannins and a subtle earthiness, almost like turmeric root—it's what gives it its long finish. And while this wine is ready to drink in a couple of years, it will still be viable ten years from now when the fruit will subside, and the tertiary flavors enhance.”

Martin nodded. “It's a juicy wine.” He considered the taste and looked at me. “This is a very good wine with a lot of potential. Reminds me a little of a 2020 Chateau Rayas I recently had.”

I couldn't believe he just said that. Was he mocking me? Fuck no. Martin was dead serious. When it came to the Châteauneuf-du-Pape AOC, Chateau Rayas was the best of the best and made a 100% Grenache wine that retailed for more than a thousand dollars minimum.

“It has some of the same complexity,” Hansa spoke excitedly.

When the fuck had she tasted a Chateau Rayas?

“I met the Chateau Rayas winemaker many years ago, and he said that they replace their dead vines every five years and that mix of ages gives their wine its complexity. Orion used forty-year-old and seventy-year-old vines to graft the

Grenache and Syrah onto—and the Mourvèdre is from Tesoro vineyard and is about twenty or so years old. I think that’s why this GSM has such depth.”

And she thought she wasn’t too smart! Her knowledge of and passion for wine was intoxicating.

Martin smiled as he tasted the wine again.

“We are planning to have some of the blend in thirty percent new oak for eight months and some for twelve,” Hansa concluded, and I could feel her relief that it was over.

Martin nodded. “When are you planning to put it out on the market?”

Hansa looked at me, and I was happy to take over. “Next summer or at the latest in the fall.”

“How many cases are we talking here?”

“If we see potential, I’m thinking about starting with 10,000 for next year and ramping up to 50,000 in the following years.”

“Are you growing that much?”

“I’ve identified vineyards in Washington and Santa Rita to source grapes from.”

Martin nodded some more. He picked up the tasting notes. “I’ll buy the first 10,000 cases.” That was going to be *all* of the wine we were barreling now.

Okay, so there are things you hope will happen. Like a Callahan wine will win a DWWA, or Thomas Keller will

include us in the French Laundry Wine list, or Martin Fucking Reeves will order 10,000 cases of a Callahan Vineyard GSM on fucking faith that it would live up to its potential.

“Holy fuck,” Hansa said and then slapped a hand on her mouth.

I grinned. “Holy fuck is right.”

Martin winked at Hansa. “I’ve always thought we can make a GSM as good in California as they do in France, and this might be close. Swan’s Symphony. I like the name.”

“Hansa means swan in Sanskrit,” I explained. “She made this wine.”

“Oh—” Hansa was about to speak when I cut in, “She’s one of our newest winemakers.”

Martin stretched his hand out, and Hansa shook it. “I look forward to seeing your work, Hansa. And I like how you describe wine beyond the old-world ways. Maybe your wine will do the same; take us out of the old and into the new.”

I deposited Martin back with Atlas and returned to the cellar.

“Holy, amaze balls,” Hansa screamed, throwing her arms around me. “Can you believe that?”

I hugged her close. “No. I can’t. Martin Fucking Reeves just bought our entire first production of Swan’s Symphony.”

“I thought people would be interested, but no one would want to buy it before we barreled the wine. But he saw the

potential. Did you see how he saw it?" She jumped up and down, holding on to me. She kissed my mouth, and I pulled her close, deepening the kiss.

We were both breathing deeply when I pulled back.

"You sold the wine," I complimented.

"I think the wine sold itself."

I kissed her mouth. "You were amazing. You *are* amazing."

"Orion?"

"Yes, baby."

"Did I really do good?"

"Yes."

She snuggled into me. "For the first time in a very long time, I don't feel like a failure. And it's thanks to you."

I tilted her chin so she would look at me. "You've never been a failure, Hansa. Ever. You've always been a smart, good, and lovely woman who I'm very lucky to have in my life."

Her eyes clouded. She put a hand on my cheek. "It's very hard for me to believe you."

"I know. And I have a solution."

She tilted her head. "You do?"

"Yeah. I just have to tell you again and again and again how wonderful you are until you believe it."



Chapter 23

Hansa

“Who’s that gorgeous specimen of manhood?” Liesel whistled softly as she stood with me at the bar to watch the wine elite milling around in the tasting room and the vineyard at the end of what had turned out to be an immensely successful day for Callahan Vineyards.

I turned to look at who she was drooling over. “*That* is Tej Nair.”

Liesel made a humming sound. “Seraphina,” she called out as she floated by.

Seraphina always looked like something from a fantasy comic book, with her amethyst eyes, dark hair, and cheekbones sharp enough to cut through glass. Her elegant burgundy dress clung to her like a second skin, flowing down her body with an almost ethereal grace. It was adorned with delicate embroidery that shimmered in the light, casting an aura of mystique around her—it should look incongruous at an afternoon wine tasting, but Seraphina always looked like she was dressed for the occasion.

“Tell us more about that one,” Liesel urged.

Seraphina leaned against the bar as we stood on the other side.

The hunk in question was an inch or two shorter than Atlas, so about six or six-one. He was in a suit that you wanted to rip off of him because, man, the dude was jacked. He wore some stubble like it was there on purpose. He had an angular nose, thick lips, and diamond studs winking in both ears. Yeah, Tej Nair was hot! As an Indian, I’d heard of the most desirable available Indian man in the Santa Barbara *Desi* community—of course, I had, but I’d never seen him so up close. I tried to avoid many of the Indian events unless my parents insisted, and I’d obviously been missing out.

“What are we staring at?” Orion came up to us.

Liesel and I leaned on our elbows, watching the Indian, who looked tastier than a lamb kebab, talking to...who cared who he was talking to!

“We’re ogling Ariel’s ex,” I told him.

“Ogling?” Orion’s clipped tone made me turn to look at him.

“Yeah. Look at him,” Liesel remarked. “Who wouldn’t ogle.”

“True,” Seraphina agreed.

“I don’t know if Atlas appreciates you ogling men,” Orion warned Liesel.

She shrugged. “He’s fine with it. When we go out to a restaurant, we make a list; if he or I were to die, who we’d shag first list.”

Now, we all turned to look at Liesel. “Never thought my brother was that...ah...progressive,” Orion murmured.

“It’s how I agreed not to have nude models in the studio.”

“You don’t paint nudes,” Seraphina said.

“I know that, and you know that, and my agent knows that, but Atlas is easy to manipulate,” Liesel grinned.

“And I thought you were a nice girl.” I raised my hand and connected with Liesel’s for a high five.

“I’ve known Tej for years,” Seraphina said in her Snow Queen tone. “He’s a big fan of Bordeaux and has a special place in his heart for Pauillac.”

“I heard from the Indian Auntie Gossip Network that he’s getting divorced because someone cheated on someone. Any truth to any of that?” I enquired.

Tej laughed then, and the three of us women sighed.

Orion hauled me to him and kissed me on my mouth. He took his time, and when he pushed me back against the bar, it took me a moment to find my bearings.

“I like how he makes a point,” Liesel mused, watching Orion walk away.

“Hmm?” I murmured, my lips feeling bruised and my lady bits screaming *you, go, girl!*

“Tej asked for the divorce,” Seraphina filled us in conspiratorially. “The missus is fighting it and using said Indian Auntie Gossip Network to pressure Tej into taking her back. He moved out of their featured in *Better Homes & Gardens* Montecito house and is now staying in his boat in Santa Barbara Harbor.”

“Why did he want a divorce?” I asked. “Anjali Menon is successful, and all get out sexy.”

“What does she do for a living?” Liesel asked as we watched Tej walk.

“Nice ass,” I murmured.

“Anjali is an entertainment lawyer. She reps a lot of big Hollywood bigwigs,” Seraphina told us. “I think he’s divorcing her because she’s a rabid bitch.”

We’d been so busy gawking at Tej that we didn’t notice Ariel, who joined our little objectifying-men party.

“Who’s a rabid bitch?” she asked.

“Your ex’s soon-to-be ex-wife.” Seraphina put an arm around Ariel. “You’ve outdone yourself. You should give up lawyering and take over marketing at Callahan Vineyards. Daphne is gone, and I’m sure Atlas would love to have you work with the family.”

Ariel shifted on her feet like she didn’t care that her ex was now single.

“It’s been brewing for a while,” Seraphina murmured.

“His parents won’t be happy,” Ariel said, deliberately avoiding looking at Tej. I noticed a tightness in her that was unfamiliar. She was usually composed and confident, making it evident that seeing Tej was difficult.

“I don’t think he cares what his parents think,” Seraphina paused for effect and finished, “*anymore.*”

Ariel took a deep breath. “Excuse me, I need to check on... something.” She left us, and I would have followed, but Seraphina shook her head.

“What happened between them?” I asked.

“That’s her story to tell, my dear. Speaking of stories, are you and Orion becoming *good* friends?”

I laughed. “Yeah, real good friends.”

“Friends who fuck friends?” Liesel wondered.

“Not yet,” I blurted out.

“You haven’t had sex?” Liesel groaned. “Hansa, you’ve been sleeping at his place for days. What do you guys do all night?”

“Sleep?”

“That poor man probably has the bluest balls in Santa Barbara County.” Seraphina laughed. “You take all the time you need, Hansa. Not everyone wants to jump their man as you wanted to, Liesel.”

“Hey, I didn’t have a normal teenage life with dates and stuff. I was dealing with rheumatoid freaking arthritis,” Liesel

said in her defense and smiled when she saw Atlas walk up to them. “And look at him; who wouldn’t want to jump him?”

“Hey, Angel.” Atlas leaned over the counter to kiss his wife.

“Hey, Atlas, your wife says you both have a system where she’s allowed to lust over other men,” I teased.

Atlas nodded. “Sure. Who are you lusting over, baby?”

“Lusting sounds so judgmental. Let’s say we’ve been *admiring* Tej.”

“Ariel was *not* admiring him, though,” Seraphina added.

Atlas groaned. “Christ! It’s been a thing. He’s like, where’s Ariel, all relaxed and chill like the past is right where it belongs. And she’s like, please don’t let him near me because *I’m still recovering from heartbreak.*”

“Ouch.” I felt for Ariel. “So, he’s over her, and she’s not?”

“Something like that,” Atlas confirmed.

Seraphina looked at us and smiled. “Looks, my darlings, as the cliché goes, can be deceptive. Now, I’m going to go see my godson.”

She walked to where Eli held the fort, talking up *Mythos of the Bayou*.

I looked around the tasting room, alive with sounds and laughter, with the clinks of wine glasses and the rhythms of wine being poured into glasses and decanters. I’d made this happen along with Ariel and Orion. I’d never been part of

something so special before. No one had ever trusted me to be responsible for such a big part of such an important event.

My eyes tracked Orion, who was talking to a petite woman. As if sensing me, he turned to me and waved a hand, asking me to join him.

He introduced me to Chloe Tan, a renowned food critic. “This has been an amazing event,” she told me. “And Orion tells me you’ve been instrumental in making it happen. I love how you paired the wine with Chef Occitan’s food. I think it was remarkably interesting to serve your off-dry Riesling with the shrimp *étouffée*.”

Though Callahan Vineyards was exclusively known for their Pinot Noir and Chardonnays, Orion had been experimenting with other varietals like the Swan’s Symphony. Last year, he’d tried his hand at Riesling and produced an excellent, refreshing, off-dry wine with flavors of apricot, white peach, lychee nut, Granny Smith apple, and lemon cream. Since the *étouffée* was spicy, I felt it would pair well with a sweeter wine—and the Riesling was perfect.

It had been so perfect that we’d already sold the fifty or so cases that were left from the last vintage.

“Thanks. We wanted the Cajun flavors to come through, and the Riesling’s white peach and lychee nut flavors are the perfect foil for the Creole spices.”

“The Riesling is a departure from what you do at Callahan,” she remarked. “It looks like you want to enter the mid-price market.”

Orion smiled. “That’s the goal. It’s hard to do with the Pinot Noir because of the cost of the varietal, but I’ve seen what Fess Parker has been doing with Riesling and wanted to see how we can make a go at it.”

“Riesling and GSM! Very adventurous. Martin Reeves mentioned he was particularly impressed with your GSM’s distinct flavor profile,” Chloe continued. “I think you’re helping Callahan Vineyards grow most elegantly without losing your roots. So, if I were to write something about the Riesling and GSM, would you be selling these non-Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines under the Swan’s Symphony label?”

“Yes.” Orion looked at me with his soft eyes. “We named the label after Hansa.”

“A winemaker *and* a sommelier,” Chloe said admiringly. “Very impressive.”

For the first time in my life, people looked at me like I was normal, even good at what I did. No one here would say or even think that Hansa Raj was the slow and ugly one. No, they saw me as someone who could be a winemaker and a sommelier.

Orion slid an arm around me after Chloe walked over to try some fried alligator that we were serving with a crisp blanc de blanc sparkling wine to cut the grease and enhance the sharpness of the gourmet nuggets.

“How do you feel?” He nuzzled the side of my neck.

I closed my eyes. “Like I’m in a dream. Don’t wake me up, Orion. I want to stay here forever.”

“It’s not a dream. It’s your life now.”

Until you wake up because you always wake up, and that’s when your dreams end, my inner critic reminded me.



Chapter 24

Orion

I watched her serve guests at Whispering Vines, this after a *very* long week at the vineyard. But it was Saturday, and she worked from two in the afternoon to closing at Whispering Vines. I'd tried again to talk to her about quitting her job, and she'd given me a "mind your own business" speech. I suggested that I'd just increase her salary, which made her *very* angry.

"Are you increasing my salary because I'm sleeping with you?"

"We're *sleeping* together but not yet having sex, so I don't think it means what you're trying to postulate it does," I snapped.

She ignored what I said and continued, "Because if that's the case, you know what that makes me, right?"

Wrong! But I saw her point, and I shut the fuck up. Instead, I did what I could to make her life easier. I cooked her dinner or took her to Liesel and Atlas's place. I dropped her off and

picked her up when I could or made sure she took my truck, Atlas's Subaru, or any of the other vineyard vehicles.

The two guys she was serving were openly flirting with her, and I had half a mind to tell them to show some fucking respect.

"You're scaring my customers," Seraphina murmured as she stood across from me behind the bar.

"Am not," I protested.

"You're frowning and snarling. All that's left to do is piss around Hansa, so everyone knows who she belongs to," Seraphina continued sardonically.

I was saved from making a comment about the "piss around" remark when I heard my now designated *former* friend and now pain-in-the-ass's voice from behind me. "Hey, Seraphina."

"Hey, baby, how are you?" Seraphina held her cheek out, and Eli leaned over the bar, lifting himself on his hands to kiss her. Fucking show off! *So, you can do handstands. Well, that don't impress me much!*

"Hey, O." Eli sat down next to me and then pointedly turned and waved at Hansa. She smiled back, and then, just to piss me off, Eli blew her a kiss. My girlfriend flushed.

"Cut it out, Eli."

"You're right, he's so gone on her," Eli said to his godmother. "You know, don't you, that I asked her out because Seraphina said it would annoy the hell out of you."

“Yeah, I heard something like that.”

Seraphina winked at me and poured her godson a glass of Pet Nat bubbly. “You were being a jackass with that whole Naina situation that I felt we had to do something. I thought if you saw Eli making moves on Hansa, you’d extricate your head from your ass, and you did.”

“In my defense,” Eli said somberly, “I wouldn’t have asked her out if I didn’t want to hit that.”

“Hit that? For fuck’s sake. Show some respect,” I snarled. “And stay away from my girl. Every time you sniff around her, it makes me want to rearrange your face.”

“Why do you think I do it? I like her, Orion, very much. She’s fun and funny. She knows her wine. I want her to look through Mythos’s wine list and make sure it works with the food. She has a knack for it—maybe she can be our floor sommelier.”

“She already has a job and wants to make wine, not be a sommelier.” And she isn’t going to work in your handsome presence day in and day out. I trusted her, sure, but Eli? Fuck no!

The work on the Callahan-Chef Occitan restaurant was going well, and the event this weekend had started a buzz in the media about *Mythos of The Bayou*. We were excited about having a fine dining restaurant at the vineyard, something we’d always wanted and had planned when we built the Callahan building and tasting room. Now, it was going to become a reality.

“I see *her sister* is back in town,” Eli mentioned. “Just saw her outside Ruby’s.”

Ruby’s was a fancy bar that had recently opened and was attracting a higher-end clientele than Everwood’s other joints, which were more down-to-earth. But that’s what I liked about the Santa Barbara wine country: there was something for everyone.

I hadn’t been in touch with Naina since she allegedly dumped me. I didn’t want to keep in touch. A part of me knew that, eventually, there would be a showdown because I was now dating Hansa. All I hoped for was that Hansa would not carry the brunt of it. I didn’t want her to be made to feel bad about the fact that it took me so long to pull my head out of my ass.

“Is she on her way here?” I asked.

“I don’t know, *cher*. She’s with someone driving a Lambo.”

“Good for her.”

“Looks like she was slumming it when she was hanging out with you,” Eli continued because he had no fucking boundaries.

“Eli, stop harassing Orion,” Seraphina admonished.

“Come on, Seraphina; you can’t ask a Casanova like me to...” Eli raised both hands when his godmother glared at him. “Fine, fine. I’ll stop. *But* if you let her go, O, rest assured I’ll be waiting in the wings.”

“I’m not reassured,” I muttered, and then just like the cloud over me lifted because Hansa came up to us and kissed me on the mouth. She didn’t take the initiative often to kiss or touch me, and *never* in public.

I slipped a hand around her waist and pulled her close. “Hey,” I whispered. Yeah, Eli was right. I was totally, completely gone for her.

I pulled her on my lap. She fell onto it and gasped. “This is my place of work,” she hissed.

I squeezed her hip. “When can we go home?”

She leaned into me; it always took a moment for her to do that. First, she tried to pull away, then she stiffened, and finally, she hesitated for a moment before giving in. “In an hour,” she whispered, and I knew she was aroused. I knew her body now, could hear her breath when it miscued, as it did when my hands roamed her body.

“Yeah?” I brushed my lips against hers and had the pleasure of seeing her face light up. She was jittery about having sex, especially because she was having her period. I didn’t actually have a problem with period sex—but she did, and after she got used to me, to us, we could cross that bridge.

“I have tomorrow off,” she told me, joy in her eyes. “I...do you want to...do—”

“Yeah, I do.”

She licked her lips, her smile big and full. The bar door jingled, and she turned to see who it was, and just like that, her

body went from soft and pliant to stiff and unyielding. But it was her eyes that crushed me. The laughter was replaced with fear. I didn't even have to turn to see who'd entered the bar. I knew.

She scrambled off my lap like I'd just been diagnosed with a contagious disease. I'd have held on to Hansa on principle, but I knew she was freaking out, so I let her go.

"Hey, Orion." Naina came up to us and smiled like we'd been friends forever. She even leaned down to hug me. "Eli. Nice to see you."

She then glared at Hansa.

"Hi, Naina," Hansa said sweetly.

Naina didn't respond but turned to Seraphina instead. "My friend here" — she pulled her friend forward — "owns the Mason Hotel Group, and I told him he just had to check out your wine bar, Seraphina."

Hansa smiled awkwardly and was relieved when one of the guests waved at her.

"Your sister said hello to you, and you ignored her. Can you explain why?" I wasn't about to let it go.

"And how is that any of your business." Naina's claws unsheathed.

The owner of the Mason Group, a good-looking man in his early forties, tried to dissipate the tension by introducing himself.

“This is a beautiful bar, Seraphina.” He held out his hand to her. “Barry Mason.”

She shook it, and her smile didn't waiver. “Naina, I don't tolerate my guests being rude to my employees and my guests. Barry, it's good to meet you.”

Naina's smile faltered. She hadn't expected this. She thought that we'd all genuflect since she brought a wealthy guy who worked in hospitality to the bar.

“Are you Chef Occitan?” Barry, probably a master businessman, tried to mitigate the unpleasantness with his friendliness.

Eli shook his hand and rose.

“I love *It's A Fairytale*,” Barry gushed. “Naina and I were just there last week. Tremendous place and Storm is a magician.”

Eli nodded, his lips pursed. “Thanks. It was nice meeting you. Seraphina, I'll see you at home.”

Eli was in the process of selling his place in San Francisco and moving to Everwood. He was staying with Seraphina while he got settled because he was sick and tired of living out of his suitcase at the Grape Escape Inn.

He went up to Hansa, who was walking by with soiled dishes and kissed her cheek deliberately. “You take care, beautiful, and I'll see you tomorrow.”

Hansa, who looked happy a second ago, was now quiet and mousy. “Okay,” she mumbled, and with her head down, went

into the kitchen.

This is how she managed her family, I realized. They took a shot at her, and she tried to become invisible. I wanted to do something to make her feel better, but I wasn't sure what it was. If I made a scene, it would only make her feel worse.

Naina sat down on the bar stool Eli had vacated, and Barry took the one next to her. Seraphina's amethyst eyes were stormy.

"I've been talking about the amazing wine you serve to Barry," she continued to prop Seraphina up. "And we're planning to come to the tasting room soon," she also dropped some of her charm on me.

"I love Callahan wines," Barry seemed sincere enough. "When Naina said she knew you, I wanted to come by. My bar manager was here over the weekend for your tasting event. He was impressed with your wine list."

I saw Hansa come through the kitchen with her hands loaded with plates of food. I couldn't stand how her shoulders were slumped, how she looked defeated like she used to before we fell in love, and it broke my fucking heart.

"Thanks, Barry," I said to him absently.

I waited for Hansa to serve the food, her usual ebullience a few notches below rock bottom, but she faked enthusiasm with the guests. "Chef Milo swears by his smoked duck with the blue cheese dressing."

The bar was busy enough that Hansa was not going to be free, but not so busy she couldn't come by and kiss me as she had earlier.

As she walked past the bar, I rose and pulled her into my arms. "You know, you usually kiss me as you walk by, and I feel a little deprived."

It was a stretch. She hardly ever kissed me in public, but I wanted...no needed her to know that I was here, with her, on her team, and I wasn't going anywhere. She got the message because her eyes went from blank to shiny.

I lightly kissed her mouth. "Barry, I know Naina didn't introduce you to Hansa, her sister, and the tasting room manager at Callahan Vineyards—"

"*And* up-and-coming winemaker," Seraphina added. "Orion and Hansa made a GSM together, and Swan's Symphony is already sold out before it's out of barrels next year. Martin Reeves bought it all."

Barry's eyes glittered. He was a restaurant man. "Martin Reeves?"

Hansa tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let her.

"Hi, Hansa." Barry was polite enough to extend his hand, which she shook. He wasn't a moron. He knew what was happening and what Naina was doing.

"Is anyone going to serve us anything?" Naina sounded playful enough, but the steel in her voice was evident.

Barry looked from Hansa's tight posture to Naina's arrogant one. "Nice meeting you, Hansa, and I look forward to trying your GSM."

Hansa didn't look at him; she just nodded and pulled away from me. She went to the bar's other side and began filling orders for the guests while Seraphina asked Barry and Naina what they'd like to drink.

Barry looked through the wine menu and smiled. "How about the wine-tasting menu? Naina?"

"Sure," she replied airily.

The thing I'd learned after going on a few dates with Naina was that she didn't love wine. She liked and drank it, but she believed that the more you paid for the wine, the better it was, which wasn't always the case.

"Hansa, would you do the honors?" Seraphina asked, a twinkle in her eye that spoke of a well-intended scheme to bolster Hansa's confidence. "I'll take care of Camy and her friend." She tilted her head toward the regulars whose order Hansa was filling.

Seraphina may as well have asked Hansa to jump off a tall building.

Hansa was used to staying in the shadows when Naina was around. Her sister commanded attention effortlessly, her presence like a spotlight that inevitably cast shadows around her. And there, in one such shadow, stood Hansa, who seemed

to visibly shrink under the weight of her sister's glamorous aura.

Hansa hesitated for a fraction of a second before stepping forward, her professionalism masking the nervousness I knew all too well. She began with an organic French wine, a rosé from Provence.

"This wine," Hansa started, her voice gaining strength, "embodies the essence of the Mediterranean coast. It's like a summer day in a bottle, with hints of Indian coriander and cumin subtly enhancing its citrus and berry notes."

Naina, to my irritation, barely concealed a smirk, but Barry was listening intently, his interest genuine.

"Coriander and cumin? Seriously, *Choti*, I thought you were learning wine, but it looks like you can take the girl out of India but not India out of the girl," Naina commented. She wore a smile, and one couldn't fault her for her tone, but you had to know their history to see the barb. Also, calling her *Choti* was one of those things Hansa's family did to put her in her place.

I was about to defend her, but surprisingly, someone else decided to do it without calling Naina a bitch to her face, which I was tempted to do.

"I think it's rather interesting to expand the tasting profiles of wines to include flavors from around the world," Barry, who was not a complete moron, stated.

“Hansa, pour me a tasting menu as well,” I asked so she’d look at me. When she did, I winked at her, and it brought a small smile to her face. She arranged four glasses before me and poured the rosé into the first glass.

“You know, for a rosé, it has a lot of flavor,” Barry mused.

Hansa, as always, got excited when she was talking about wine. “I know what you mean. This rosé is quite exceptional. Chateau Bélanger, a quaint estate near Aix-en-Provence, has a unique approach to viticulture. They cultivate vines and olives, a tradition they’ve upheld for centuries. The proximity of their olive groves to the vineyards has a fascinating impact on the terroir. The soil, enriched by the olives, imparts a distinct character to the grapes. This unique interplay of vineyard and olive grove gives the rosé its distinctive flavor profile—a hint of herbal complexity, possibly a subtle nuance of olive, intertwined with the traditional notes of a Provençal rosé.”

As she spoke, she seemed to forget that her sister was around, trying to make her feel like she was less than who she was. I felt pride expand in my chest. *Fuck, she’s brilliant and mine.*

Barry thought so, too. “I love me a bartender who knows her wine.”

Hansa flushed and then eagerly moved on to an Italian red, a biodynamic Brunello di Montalcino. “This Brunello,” she explained, “has the robustness of a traditional Tuscan wine but with a twist. There’s a faint hint of Indian black pepper and

cloves that dances on the palate, reminiscent of the spices found in the markets of Delhi.”

Barry nodded appreciatively, his gaze fixed on Hansa. “You have a unique way of describing wines. Have you ever considered working as a sommelier?”

Hansa’s eyes flickered with surprise and then pride. “I don’t think I’d be...you know.”

“Passing those Somm exams is not easy,” Naina inserted herself into the conversation, and I saw the panic in Hansa’s eyes. Would Naina blurt out that she has dyslexia as she had that she was still a virgin? I wish I could convince her that her dyslexia was not something she should be embarrassed about but something she should be open about; she should take pride in how far she’d come despite her challenges. And even inspire others who were silently suffering.

“I think your sister will be fine, considering her wine expertise,” Barry said supportively.

Naina’s chagrin was clear. “She barely passed her—”

“What’s the next wine, baby?” I interrupted Naina because I knew what she would say, and I didn’t intend to hear or let Hansa listen to this nonsense.

A subdued Hansa served the last two wines on the tasting menu and went to take care of new guests who’d arrived.

I couldn’t curb my anger. “What the fuck are you doing, Naina?” I demanded.

She looked at me with innocent eyes. “You can’t talk to me like that.”

“Hey, man, take it easy.” This was from Barry, who had felt the undercurrents but didn’t understand them, so he gave Naina the benefit of the doubt.

I held my hand up at him. “I don’t like how you treat your sister. I don’t like how you put her down all the time. She’s not going to fight you because she’s a fucking sweetheart, but I’m not. You come at her again, I swear to—”

Naina burst out laughing. “Oh my god, Orion, are you *really* dating my sister? I heard a rumor, but I couldn’t believe it. Your standards have certainly fallen since we were dating.”

Barry didn’t like that at all because he visibly stiffened. *Yeah, man, this is who she is. You can thank me later.*

“You know, Naina, you seem okay when you’re not around your family. But when people see how you treat your sister, you stop being okay, good, or decent.” I rose and tossed the last of my wine. “Yeah, I’m dating your sister. We’re moving in together, just in case you didn’t know. And, no, I won’t let you fuck it up by throwing your poison at Hansa. She’s put up with you and your parents because she loves her family, and the sorry truth is that she felt she only had you. But now she’s got my family—and in our family, we care for each other. Next time, go to Santa Barbara or Los Olivos if you’re dying to have a glass of wine; I speak for Seraphina when I say we don’t want you here.”

Shaking with rage, I walked out of the bar, feeling the need to punch my fist into something. I stood outside, my hands on my hips, letting the cold air calm me.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Seraphina.

“You made Naina cry.” She grinned. “Good work. Could you do it again when I can watch?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I don’t want to hurt her or anyone else. It’s just that Hansa is not going to protect herself. I don’t know how to....” I stopped talking as my voice rose, anger churning my insides.

“You’ve been with her for a short few months. Her family has been ripping into her for twenty-four years. She’s not going to find herself overnight. It’s going to take time. And it’s okay to be angry. I’d be upset if you weren’t angry. You love Hansa, and when someone you love hurts, you also feel their pain.”

I felt tears burn the back of my eyes. “When I think about all that she’s had to deal with all her fucking life and that I added to it as well, I feel sick.”

Seraphina put her arms around me and hugged me. “I know. But as your father would say, it’s not about how badly you fuck up; it’s about how you un-fuck it.”

I chuckled, holding her close to me, smelling that mysterious, magical scent of hers, which was like a bouquet of spicy flowers from the best Callahan vintage. “Atlas said the same thing.”



Chapter 25

Hansa

Naina's tears flowed freely as she lamented, "I don't know why he's so angry with me." Gently, I draped an arm around her, offering what comfort I could.

She pushed me away angrily. "I don't need your pity," she snarled.

Naina had a propensity to become a *pukka* Bollywood heroine with all the histrionics; all that was missing was the back of her hand on her forehead as she bemoaned her life. The instant someone called her on her bullshit, Naina started crying, which was an excellent deterrent to anyone who may want to confront her about her behavior.

When challenged, my parents became belligerent and mean; Naina wailed. My family was a total clusterfuck of dysfunctionality.

Her date, witnessing this display, wore a look of utter confusion. Clearly, he hadn't anticipated an evening embroiled

in Naina's emotional theatrics, which I suspected were less pronounced when she was alone with him.

"Naina, don't cry," I urged.

"You have to tell Orion to stop being so cruel," she implored me through teary eyes.

I felt at a loss, torn between my role as a sister and the need to keep the peace.

Orion came back into the bar, and I saw his eyes darken as he took in the scene. The attention of everyone present was riveted on what had become the *Naina Raj Show*. *The drama, the pain, and the angst follow the journey of one woman as she walks through her life without ever facing any consequences for her shitty behavior. Always playing in a theatre near Hansa Raj!*

Naina saw him and met my gaze with a challenging look. "You have to tell him to be nicer to me."

This was typical of Naina; she used me as her shield whenever someone backed her into a corner. But now, her manipulation had taken a darker turn. She wasn't just seeking my support but trying to pit me against Orion as twisted proof of loyalty to my family.

"He's right here, Naina; you should tell him yourself," I suggested, withdrawing my hand from her shoulder. It struck me how adept she was at manipulating those around her; I'd always been easy prey.

Naina shook her head. “No. *You* have to. He’s not listening to me.” She turned to Barry. “He was dating me like a week ago and—”

Orion cut in sharply, “I never dated you, Naina. We went out a couple of times, that’s all. Hansa, let’s leave; Seraphina said she’ll close up.”

Naina protested, her voice cracking, “How can you let him be so disrespectful to me? I said we can’t be together anymore, and this is how he—”

Orion’s patience snapped. “Naina, I know you want everyone to think you dumped my sorry ass, and really, I don’t give a shit what anyone says about me but Hansa. I told you it was over. I tried to wait until after your damn birthday but Christ, I couldn’t stand you any longer.” His gaze then softened as he looked at me. “Hansa, are you ready to go?”

Naina’s tears, a familiar scene, failed to move me this time. I knew their insincerity all too well.

Stepping away from her, I nodded to Orion. “I’ll just grab my things.” And as I did, I saw relief written on Orion’s face. He’d fully expected me to cave and take my sister’s side. Hell, a month ago, he’d have been right.

Naina, still sniffling, couldn’t hide her disbelief. “You’re choosing him over your sister?”

“I’m choosing me,” I replied, a sense of resolve washing over me.

It wasn't easy to walk away from her. I was raised to be the pacifier who sacrificed to keep the peace.

A part of me wanted to stay back and convince her I was a part of the family. But now I knew what a real family was like, how the Callahans took care of one another. They treated me like I was one of them. I hadn't had to prove my loyalty or worth to them; they accepted me just the way I was and were there for me. For the first time in my life, I felt seen, loved, and, yeah, not treated like the ugly duckling. Maybe I was no swan, regardless of my name, but I was worthy of love, affection, and respect.

"Naina, I think we should leave as well. I can drop you at your parents'. I need to get back to Montecito." Barry seemed to have sussed the situation and wanted to get the hell out of Dodge. *Well, buddy, good for you!*

Suddenly, Naina realized that during her drama, she'd forgotten she was here with someone who wasn't falling all over himself for her. "But I thought we would go to your place."

Barry looked uncomfortable because no one was even pretending not to be watching the Raj Sister special. "I have an early meeting," he said calmly without even trying to pretend it wasn't an excuse he'd just made up.

I was a good person. Really, I was. I didn't enjoy it when other people were hurt. But I couldn't help feeling some satisfaction at seeing Naina get her comeuppance.

As my sister shifted tactics, trying to coax Barry, I walked out of Whispering Vines and away from her with Orion. For once, I was leaving behind the drama, not as the enabler, but as someone who had finally chosen her well-being.



Orion was silent as we drove. He'd turned on the music in his truck and the subtle, and evocative music of Maurice Ravel filled the night, soothing us. Orion loved classical music, as did I. He was a big fan of impressionist music by Debussy and Ravel but would also spend time in his cellar with Carmen's *La Habanera*, Aida's *O Patria Mia*, or Tosca's *Vissi d'arte* on full blast.

I put my hand on his as it rested on the gear shift. He smiled but didn't look at me as he hummed along with Ravel's *Boléro*.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Nah, baby, thank *you*. That was a difficult thing for you to do," he murmured, now turning to catch my eye to let me know that he was proud of me for standing up for myself, which wasn't easy.

How did he know, I wondered. My sister was being a certifiable bitch, and I should be happy to kick her in the teeth. But it wasn't that simple. Family meant a lot to me, despite how mine treated me. My first instinct was always to make peace—walking away like this was entirely out of character.

“I look different from everyone in my family,” I whispered, wanting to explain to him what I’d been understanding about myself and my family dynamics in the past few months. “I was always and still am the outsider. I’m the less successful one. The less smart one. The lesser everything one.”

I squeezed his hand to stop him from objecting to that description of me as I now knew he would.

“I’ve always struggled for acceptance, bending over backward for my parents and family to notice me. I know it seems like I’m being a doormat, but they’re my family, my constant. These past weeks have been difficult. It’s also been a huge relief not to hear them go on about what a colossal failure I am. Yet, it’s tough knowing this inner peace comes from letting my family go,” I sighed.

Orion waited to see if I was done and then pulled over to the side of the road a mile from the vineyard.

He turned to me, his face in the shadows, lit by moonlight. “I know this hurts you. I know it’s not easy for you. My family is everything to me. Atlas is a father, brother, and friend. Now, Liesel is as close to me as Ariel. Seraphina is an integral part of our family, our guardian angel. I get it. *But* I also want you to understand that family is not just about taking from you; it’s also about giving. Your family takes from you but doesn’t give back. The fault is not yours.”

I put a hand on his cheek. “But I’ve conditioned them to treat me like they do.”

He grabbed my hand, brought it to his mouth, and kissed it. “You are the child, the younger sister, and you have had to carry the burden of maintaining the peace in your family, which is grossly unfair. You didn’t condition them; they conditioned you to put up with their abuse.”

I cringed at the A word. “It’s not *that* bad.”

“Yes, Hansa, it is. I never want to and never will come between you and your family. If you say, hey, I want to make this work, I’m with you all the way. But I’ll also not allow them to talk down to you or treat you poorly.”

I pulled my hand away and stared blankly at the darkness before us. “I don’t need *you* to condition me in needing a knight in shining armor.”

“Hansa,” he said, his voice calm despite my harsh words. “I want you to trust that I will always care for you. Not to manipulate you or make you do anything or be someone else, but only because I love you and can’t stand to see you mistreated.”

The dam, holding tears that threatened to fall all evening, collapsed under the weight of Orion’s sincerity and kindness. Naina had been horrible to me, but that didn’t drive me to tears; I was used to that. But someone saying they love me and want to care for me destroyed me.

He pulled me close and kissed my hair. “Hey, hey. No crying.”

I clutched his sweater as I let it all go. “I can’t believe that you love me. How can you? When my own family doesn’t?” I asked bleakly.

“I’m your family now. I love you. Atlas, Liesel, and Ariel do. Seraphina does. Hell, Eli, who met you a second ago, was ready to wring Naina’s neck today, and the only reason he didn’t is because he cares about you.”

I sniffled. He was right. People cared about me. Had people always, and I’d just been too much in my head to see it? My friend Grant did and always had—even now, as he lived in New York, he kept in touch and knew what was happening in my life. But I’d not let others in because I feared they’d treat me like my family did. Trust had been elusive, but my defenses hadn’t been able to withstand the Callahans. Thank god for that!

I kissed Orion softly on his lips. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He brushed my hair from my face.

“For loving me.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that. Just say you love me, too, and we’re good.”

“I do. You know. I do. I used to have a crush on you, but it’s morphed into this huge thing inside my heart, and I’m scared that it’s going to destroy me when...you...you know?”

Orion kissed me. It was a sweet kiss filled with love. I’d kissed only a few boys, but I knew this was special. It was a benediction, a healing, a promise.

I kissed him back with hunger, and his hands moved to my breasts, plucking my nipples, touching my thighs, cupping my pussy, roaming my body. I couldn't help myself and explored him; when I stroked him over his jeans between his thighs, he groaned and pulled away.

“Babe, you're killing me.” He turned on the car to get us home.

“Ah...well...tomorrow?”

I was on day two of my period, so by tomorrow, it would be nearly gone.

“Thank fuck because there's just so much masturbation a body can take.”

I giggled at that. “You masturbate?”

“Doesn't everyone?”

“What do you think about when you do?”

The Callahan Vineyard gate recognized the truck and opened automatically. “I think about you. I think about all the things I'll do to you once I have you under me, over me, all around me.”

“I think about you too,” I confessed. “You'll have to teach me...how to...you know.”

“How to have sex?” he asked cheekily as he parked the truck in front of his cottage.

“Something like that.”

He grinned. “Hansa, I’ve never made love with a woman I’ve been in love with—so I know we’re going to be as great together in bed as in the wine cellar. Kissing you is better than any sex I’ve had. Being with you is fucking amazing. Making wine with you. Spending time with you. I didn’t know this, but I can see it now, clear as a young, filtered Sauvignon Blanc, that I’ve been waiting for you.”

If a heart could burst with happiness, mine was ready to splinter into a thousand pieces and come back together to be bigger and more fulfilled than ever.

“Orion Callahan, you give good love,” I told him as we made our way to his place...*our place*, my new home.



Chapter 26

Orion

“It’s not winter, O, but it’s gonna be a bit cold,” Atlas warned me when I told him about my plan to take Hansa glamping in the vineyard to my favorite spot. It was March, which always heralded a hectic time at the vineyard, and as a winemaker, this period was both exhilarating and demanding.

The vines, dormant through the winter, awakened, and the buds, which would eventually unfurl into leaves and grape clusters, started to swell. It was a critical time; the threat of frost loomed large, capable of jeopardizing the year’s harvest.

Every day, I walked the vineyard rows, inspecting the buds and monitoring their progress. The health of these buds was an early indicator of the potential quality and quantity of the year’s harvest. I spent hours in the fields, sometimes from dawn until dusk, ensuring the vines were in optimal condition to support the new growth.

We also had to be vigilant about frost protection. On nights when the temperature threatened to drop too low, we employed various methods to shield the vulnerable buds. This

could mean anything from using wind machines to circulate the air to deploying frost blankets or even, in extreme cases, lighting small fires strategically around the vineyard to raise the ambient temperature. So far, this had not been an issue, but I was nervous about it *and* prepared for it.

Spring was also when we made all our pruning decisions. The way we trimmed the vines could affect not just this year's crop but the next year's as well. It was a delicate balance, determining how much of last year's growth to cut back, making choices that would influence the vine's productivity and the quality of the grapes.

The workload was intense, and the days were long, but there was a unique satisfaction in it. Watching the vineyard come to life in the spring, seeing the first signs of what would, hopefully, be another excellent harvest, was a reminder of why I loved being a winemaker. It was a connection to the earth and the cycle of the seasons, a dance with nature that was as challenging as it was rewarding.

And this year, I'd do it with Hansa, which would only make it better.

"I know, but I've got it all planned out: heaters, warm blankets, you name it. I want this to be special for Hansa."

Atlas chuckled, clapping me on the back. "Leave it to you to turn a night in a vineyard into a romantic escapade. What's the occasion?"

"Just because," I replied, feeling a smile tug at my lips. "Hansa's working hard, *and* I think tuning her family out is

stressing her out. I don't think the little showdown with Naina last night helped."

He nodded, amusement flashing in his eyes. "I haven't seen you this excited about a woman...well, not since you were in love with Abigail Dunsmore in fifth grade."

"Abigail was, and is still a total stunner!"

"Best looking teacher in the school district! She's probably going to be the teacher our kids have a crush on," Atlas laughed.

I glanced across the vineyard, where the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the rows of vines. "I'm setting everything up at the hilltop. You know, the one with the perfect view of the valley."

"Orion's Hill!"

My family had named it as it was where I used to go as a child when my parents died to find comfort.

"Yeah, that one," I admitted, feeling a warmth spread through my chest at the thought of sharing my hilltop with Hansa.

As dusk settled over the vineyard, I could picture it all: the tent set up with its cozy interior, the soft glow of lanterns, and a bottle of our finest wine waiting to be uncorked. I could almost hear Hansa's laughter, see the sparkle in her eyes as she took in the view, and feel the gentle touch of her hand in mine. Yeah, it was going to be a good night!

Hansa recently adjusted her schedule, and now every Sunday was ours. As a winemaker, I didn't have official days off. You did what you must whenever it was needed—the same went for a family business. Atlas and Liesel took care of the tasting room in Santa Barbara's Funk Zone, which we kept open Thursday through Sunday as it saw a lot of foot traffic from locals and tourists. It had been a tactical decision to open that tasting room, which had paid off. We'd signed more people into the Callahan Vineyards Wine Club, which I hoped to hand to Hansa to manage as I got busy with the vines from spring through harvest. It would also be an excellent way to bump her salary without raising her hackles and hopefully convince her to give up working at Whispering Vines, which Seraphina had reluctantly told me she'd be okay with.

I was getting ready to call it a day in the Callahan Vineyards wine cellar when Ariel came to see me. T—the weekend had taken its toll on her, not because the event had been busy but because Tej had been at the vineyard. I think this was the first time she'd seen him in eight years since she left for New York.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked, her face drawn tight.

“Sure.” I waved a hand at a chair in my office plus lab, where I blended, tasted, tested, and managed my wine.

She looked defeated, and I hated to see her like this. But Ariel was private and didn't go about blabbering about her feelings.

I held up a bottle of a 2020 Pinot Noir that had been opened for the tasting event, and she nodded. I poured a glass for each

of us.

We toasted and clinked our glasses, taking our time to savor the wine. As a family steeped in winemaking, we didn't guzzle; we tasted and enjoyed.

She set her glass down and pierced me with her troubled blue eyes. "I don't think I want to be a lawyer anymore."

Tell me something I don't know! "Okay."

"I love the law, and I loved working for the ACLU, but I'm burnt out. Fighting for immigrant rights...where the victories are few and far between. I just don't think I can do it anymore." She drank some wine and looked at my scarred table. My father sat at the same table in this same office when he'd made wine.

I waited for her to get to where she needed to go. Ariel was the thoughtful one, the mindful one. She took her time to tell her story.

"I wanted to ask you if I could get a job at Callahan Vineyards. I know we're not rolling in money, and I'm happy to negotiate salary...obviously, but I want to work here. I want to get back into wine. Run events for Callahan. I've been talking to Seraphina to see if maybe I could work there as well. You know, get into the swing of all things wine."

No wonder Seraphina was okay with Hansa leaving her employment; she already had a replacement waiting in the wings.

“Ariel, you own as much of Callahan Vineyards as Atlas, and I do. You don’t have to ask. Tell us what you want to do, and we can make it work.”

She looked at me, surprised. “Seriously?”

I patted her hand. “Yeah. Atlas and I have been waiting for you to make a decision about your future. You want to talk to me about what happened in New York?”

Her eyes went hazy, and she shook her head. “Not ready.”

“Okay.” A part of me wanted to shake her and scream that we were family; she shouldn’t worry so much about telling us what was happening with her. The other understood her reticence. Losing our parents, the way we had, all of a sudden, made us a tighter unit, but it also left us with a need to hold on to our individualities—and ourselves.

“I know it frustrates you and Atlas...but...” Ariel shrugged. “I’m not done processing everything. Not just New York but Tej and what happened. He came to New York a year after I left before he got married.”

I didn’t know that, but I didn’t let my surprise show. She was talking, and I wasn’t going to distract her.

“He...” — she shook her head — “It’s been many years now, and I realized this weekend that he’s moved on and on and on. He got married, he’s getting divorced, and he’s dating again. He looked at me like I was an old acquaintance. He even smiled and shook my hand. *Shook my fucking hand!*”

Atlas and I had always protected our hearts. We'd waited until we were older to fall in love. Ariel had been in her early twenties when she'd fallen in love. I suspected that Tej was her first boyfriend and lover. He'd made an impact. I didn't know Tej as well as Atlas did, but what I knew about him was that he was a standup guy. But sometimes, two standup people were just not right for one another.

She laughed bitterly. "Here I was all maudlin about seeing him. Scared of what it would do to me, how it would feel, and he was just fine. Very, '*hey, Ariel. How are you, babe? How was New York? Did you move back home?*' Casual like."

"But then, so were you, Ariel," I pointed out. "You shook his hand and congratulated him on making partner. You didn't behave like you were affected."

Her back straightened. "Of course not. I have my pride."

I didn't say, case in point, but she scoffed as she realized what I was trying to tell her.

"I think the saving grace is that he doesn't *hate* me like he used to. When he came to New York, he was so angry. So *brutal*." She closed her eyes as if she remembered pain still hurt. Probably did. Ariel put up a lot of walls because she was the sensitive one, the emotional one, the one who got hurt a lot more easily than Atlas or I did.

"Atlas and I would love for you to take over marketing for Callahan Vineyards. With Duck Face gone, we need someone, and you're already doing the events."

Her face lit up before doubt took some of the excitement away. “But I don’t have a lot of experience with marketing.”

“You have a lot of experience with Callahan wines.”

She nodded. “That I do. You really think I could do this job?”

“Ariel, here is what I’ve always known. Pinot Noir is difficult to grow, and my sister can do anything she wants.”

She finished her glass of wine and rose. She kissed my cheek. “I hear from Atlas you’re sprinting Hansa away for a night in the vineyard.”

“I’m not talking to you about my sex life,” I muttered.

She grinned. “That’s okay. Liesel and I’ll get it out of Hansa.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “You’re like the Everwood Gossip Network.”

“Not *like it*, we are the EGN! Seraphina is the CEO and top gossip.”

“Do you know she asked Eli to take Hansa out, so I’d get jealous?”

Ariel nodded. “Yeah, we all sort of knew. And before you get your knickers in a twist, it worked. You dumped that horrible sister of hers, and now you’re planning to deflower the little swan.”

I cringed. “For the love of everything decent, woman, just be quiet and go away.”

Did she just say *deflower*? These were the kinds of words that could kill the mood and a boner. Good thing I was made of stronger stuff and was pretty desperate at this point to have sex with my girl that nothing could debone my boner. But it was more than sex. I wanted the intimacy. I wanted to explore this new world with her.

“Oh god, you’re so madly in love,” Ariel remarked at the look on my face. “Alright, have a great evening, and you can thank me for the lingerie I helped her buy.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t have to tell me what. That was a cock blocker move.”

She laughed. “I know. I’m thrilled for you *and* her. She deserves someone good like you. She deserves love. And you know she’s been madly in love with you for years?”

“It was a crush.”

Ariel shook her head. “No, she was and is in love.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah!”



Chapter 27

Hansa

The sight that greeted us took my breath away: a tent set up amidst the rows of vines, bathed in the soft glow of lanterns. It was a cozy haven amid sprawling nature.

“Wow, you did this for me?” I could hardly breathe. No one, but no one, had ever done anything to make me feel so special ever before.

The evening Orion planned for us in the vineyard was like something out of a dream. As we walked hand in hand towards the hilltop, my heart fluttered with excitement and wonder.

“I did this for *us*,” Orion corrected me, and my heart opened wide to let him in.

Orion took me inside the tent, which was set up with comfortable cushions and warm blankets. It was inviting and intimate. In the center was a basket of food from Whispering Vines, and beside it was a bottle of a 2019 Callahan Pinot Noir. The attention to detail and the care he had put into everything was overwhelmingly touching.

We settled on the blankets, leaning against cushions, holding hands, kissing, and continuing to fall in love.

Orion uncorked the wine with a practiced ease, pouring two glasses.

“Whenever we drink a Callahan wine, I think how wonderful it is that we drink wine that *you* made.” I clinked my glass with his. “To a wonderful vintage.”

“To us,” he amended.

“My father said that every wine has a story,” Orion began, swirling the wine in his glass.

“I’ve always loved hearing about the journey from vine to bottle. What’s the story behind this one?”

He put an arm around me and pulled me close as he took in the bouquet of the wine. “The year 2019 was a tough one. The season started with an unusually wet winter, so the vines grew like crazy, and I was fucking scared of mildew and mold.”

“Tough start.”

“It was.” He bent his head to brush his lips against mine. “But the thing about winemakers and grapevines alike is resilience. Spring rolled in, and with it came the beautiful balance of sunny days and cool nights.”

I set my glass down on the canvas floor of the tent. I’d dressed up for the evening. I wore a long black dress, boots, and a sweater. But with the heaters, the tent was warm, and I removed my sweater.

Orion traced a finger down from my throat to my cleavage, his eyes intent on me. “Just as I started thinking it was going to be an easy vintage, a heatwave came in late summer. I was worried the grapes would become too sweet, and we’d have to add acid to the wine.”

My breath quickened as Orion cupped a breast and squeezed.

“What did you do?” I whispered.

He slid a sleeve of my dress down my shoulder and inhaled deeply when he saw the new Victoria’s Secret lingerie that Ariel had helped me buy. Black lace, designed to show off rather than support. He ran a finger over the swell of my breast.

“We employed shade cloths and increased irrigation to protect the grapes, which you know is not popular in wine country.”

I closed my eyes as Orion pulled down the entire top of my dress, leaving me naked to my waist except for the bra. “That summer was scorching.”

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” He unhooked my bra. I should’ve felt self-conscious, but I didn’t. This was Orion, and in the past few weeks, he’d become *my* Orion.

“Your nipples look like some of the best pinots we grow.” He bent his head, took a nipple in his mouth, and suckled. “That summer heat concentrated the sugars in the grapes, leading to richer, more robust flavors.”

”Orion.” My hands were in his blonde hair, tugging him closer to my chest.

“Hansa.” He raised his head to look at me. “Let me have you. Please.”

“Yes. Yes.”

Orion pushed me down on the cushions and got to work on my boots to get them off. I leaned back, enjoying how his eyes darkened as my breasts jiggled.

“I remember that summer. It was so hot. But I bet those grapes developed a unique character because of that.”

Orion ran his hand up my naked legs to my thighs. “Yes, very unique. We had to harvest earlier than usual to maintain the right balance of acidity. It was a race against time.”

He pulled my dress down and off me. I lay in a pair of panties, and that’s all.

“God, you’re stunning. Are you wet, baby?”

Hansa, the one who I used to be, would have died of shame, but the woman I was becoming enjoyed his dirty talk. “Why don’t you find out?” I challenged.

He pulled my panties off me. And then he took his time, moving his hands up my legs to finally, finally, finally slide a finger inside me. I moaned as he stretched me out.

He moved so his face was between my legs, and I waited, breathless.

“You smell so fucking good.” Then his mouth was on me, and I felt him everywhere, inside me, outside, all over me. My hands moved to my breasts, and I held them, squeezing as he had, as I did when I masturbated.

“The 2019 vintage produced a wine that had depth and complexity.” He licked me and gently suckled my clitoris. “Layers of dark fruit, a hint of spice, and a lingering finish that speaks of the Santa Barbara sun. A lot like you.”

I start to shake. This was like no orgasm I’ve ever had before. This was something else. My hands wrap themselves in his hair. I don’t know whether I wanted to pull him off me or push him further into me.

I was lying in a tent, naked with a fully dressed man who was eating me out. The paradox of the situation slammed into me just as my orgasm did. *Holy mother of god!*

He lifted off me, and I watched him with half-closed eyes as he removed his clothes. “You okay?” he asked.

He watched me watch him as he stroked himself. I felt heat rush through me. There was something profoundly erotic about seeing him pleasure himself. A private moment that he was letting me witness.

I’d always wondered about oral sex, never understood why people wanted to taste each other’s fluids. It couldn’t be hygienic. *But* here I was, curious to taste him as he’d tasted me. I licked my lips.

“Not this time, babe,” he said hoarsely.

I looked up from his hand, stroking his erection to his eyes. “Not this time what?”

He smiled. “I’ve had some dirty fantasies about those wine-colored lips of yours wrapped around my cock.”

“You have?” *He had?*

He pulled out a condom from his jeans and tore it open. I was mesmerized, watching him slide the latex over his erection. I’d been prepared to ask him about using protection as they’d told us to during sex ed, but the fact that he’d already thought of it was a relief. This was my first time, and it was confusing enough that I didn’t know if I could muster the courage to ask about contraception.

This might be your first time, Hansa, but it’s not his first rodeo. He knows about condoms and all the other stuff. And he definitely knows how to go down on a girl.

He moved over me, on top of me, and I was glad, thrilled that we were out here in the vines. There was a rightness about it. The fact that he knew this was what I didn’t know I wanted made me feel like a princess who was being coddled and pampered by her prince.

“You’re very tight,” he whispered, his fingers inside me, between his body and mine.

After the orgasm I had, I didn’t think I could have another. My vibrator was not able to do such a thing. But Orion Callahan was better than a vibrator; no two ways about it.

My breathing accelerated again. “Yes,” I whispered.

He kissed me then, and for an instant, I wondered how I'd feel about kissing his mouth after he'd been down under. But arousal was a potent thing, and I relished the kiss and loved tasting myself on him.

“We're going to go slow.” He spoke as if the words were strangling him. “If you feel nervous or want me to pull back at any point, you just say so. Okay?”

I pulled him closer. “I don't want you to pull back,” I said confidently. “I want to feel you inside me. I want—” The tip of his erection entered me, and it was pleasure and pain mixed together. I teetered on the edge of something amazing and moaned.

His eyes were on mine, and I couldn't look away.

“I love you,” he whispered and pushed himself further in. My insides felt raw, like they were being pulled apart in the best way possible.

“I love you, too,” I breathed. “So, so much.”

He moved then, and my body protested the intrusion. The pain was overwhelming the pleasure, and I felt tears spring out of my eyes.

“You want me to stop?”

“No. No.” I held on to him, feeling like I was at the precipice of something that would change me and alter my brain patterns. Is this how sex always was? This potent?

“Baby, am I hurting you?” he begged.

His body was warm against mine, bigger than mine. His smell was wine and cologne, and they inundated my senses.

“Yes,” I whispered.

He was about to pull out, alarm written all over his face. I smiled and held him close. “Of course, it’s going to hurt. It’s my first time.”

“But...” He moved again and groaned. “Fuck, but you feel good.”

“Make the pain go away, Orion.”

His eyes were raw with pleasure, and a hunger entered them, one I’d never seen before. He moved so he was fully seated inside me and then shifted so he’d hit me deeper.

“How does that feel?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah?” He moved one hand to my breast and squeezed a nipple, watching my reaction. He bent down and suckled me, first softly until I was going out of my mind and then with more pressure until his teeth were grazing over my heated flesh. He moved his other hand right over my mound to put pressure on my clitoris.

I could feel how wet I was getting, and he started to slide in and out more easily. The pain, the pleasure, everything was replaced by this desperate need to reach some destination. My body moved on its own accord, swaying to music from deep within. As he went deeper, my hips rose, away from the mattress he’d used to make our makeshift bed.

“Hansa,” he cried as he moved faster, “come for me, *please.*”

How? I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do when I could barely think. Each time he pulled out and then pushed in, it was like a coil was getting tighter and tighter inside me. He began to pump in and out with speed as if it was out of his control. His blue eyes were locked with mine, and I could see how he felt; watching his pleasure was erotic. He lifted a thigh so he could go even deeper, and that’s all it took. Everything inside me splintered like ice cracking during a thaw.

I closed my eyes at the onslaught, but he wouldn’t have it. “No. Baby, look at me. *Now!*”

I lazily opened my eyes; my body was throbbing; the second orgasm had ripped through me hard, and I could still feel the aftershocks pulsing around him.

“Yeah, like that,” he crooned as he began to fuck me in earnest. “Tell me you love me, baby.”

“I do. I do love you,” I cried out because it felt like there was a fire inside me, burning, hotter than hell, more vicious than anything I’d ever experienced.

I came for a third time as he found his release and slumped over me.



Chapter 28

Orion

We wrapped ourselves in the blankets, eagerly diving into the delicious spread that Seraphina had packed for our charcuterie dinner. The array was impressive: fresh olive bread with creamy, freshly churned butter, a variety of cheeses including goat cheese, Manchego, sharp Irish cheddar, and creamy blue cheese. The meats were just as tempting: porchetta, Spanish chorizo, prosciutto, and bresaola, accompanied by fresh figs, salted almonds, dried apricots, and raw honey.

Our hunger, intensified by the amazing sex we'd just had, made the food taste even better. As Hansa dipped her finger into the honey and then sucked on it, a small drop lingered at the edge of her lip. I couldn't resist leaning in to lick it away.

"Seraphina sources her meats from a butcher in Montecito who prepares everything in-house," Hansa said, her voice infused with admiration.

"Seraphina never does anything half-assed, and I bet Chef Milo insists on only the best for his kitchen."

She sipped some wine and nestled her cheek against my shoulder, a soft sigh escaping her lips. “I still can’t believe I’m here with you.”

“Why?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. My past behavior and my shallow actions had left traces of doubt in our relationship.

Hansa hesitated before confessing, “Just a few months ago, I was worried Naina would come in and announce that you two were getting married.”

Her openness and willingness to share her fears was a significant shift from the past. Where once she would have held these thoughts close to her, she was now laying them bare, trusting me with her vulnerabilities. This change, this deepening of our connection, was a sign of how far we’d come and a reminder of the distance we still had to travel together.

“That was never going to happen,” I told her, taking her hand in mine. “*Never.*”

She blinked. “Because you don’t want to ever get married or ___”

“I absolutely want to get married, and I hope one day, when you believe in me and us, we’ll get there, but I would never marry a woman like Naina.”

She looked at me, shock in her eyes. Oh yeah, I’d let her know I wanted this forever.

Hansa worried her lower lip with her teeth. “She’s my sister, and I know she has flaws, but we all have them. No one is

perfect. It annoys you, doesn't it, that I don't give up on her."

"You don't have to worry about what I think about your relationship with your family. It's irrelevant and none of my fucking business. Your sister is a grade-A bitch. And, as long as we both know that, and if your family, or anyone for that matter, tries to hurt or bully you, I won't stand for it. We're all good, and I'm not annoyed with you. I am, however, *very* pissed with your parents."

Damn it! I really didn't want to bring her family into our conversation this evening, so I decided to give her something else to think about. I extended my hand to her. "May I have this dance?" he asked with a playful yet sincere smile.

Hansa giggled. Best fucking sound in the world. "But we're naked."

"Then let's put some clothes on."

We got dressed again, laughing, kissing, drinking wine. I took her hand, and we stepped outside into the cool spring air. The vineyard around us was serene and beautiful under the starlit sky. We danced slowly, our movements gentle and in sync with the music. It felt like we were the only two people in the world at that moment, lost in the music, the beauty of the vineyard, and each other.

There was an ease and a rightness in the way we held each other, in the way our eyes met and held. The laughter, the conversation, and the comfortable silence wove together into perfect harmony.

When the music faded, and we settled back into the tent, I felt a sense of contentment and happiness. Under the soft glow of the lanterns, wrapped in blankets and each other, I felt a peace I hadn't felt in a long time. Hell, since my parents had died. This wonderful, beautiful, passionate, and loving woman had wormed her way into my heart and had somehow made the hole in my heart of losing my parents smaller. This is what Atlas had with Liesel, I realized.

"I need you to tell me the truth about something," she breathed as we settled back inside the blankets, slowly falling asleep.

Her head was on my shoulder, and I stroked her naked back from neck to ass in slow movement. "Always."

"Are you...ah...do you wish that I dressed better? Was prettier? Did something with my hair? I mean, I know I don't wear enough makeup and—"

"Baby," he interrupted me softly, "I think you're absolutely gorgeous."

I felt her tears against my shoulder and continued to hold her close. This wasn't going to be easy; she was building herself up after a lifetime of being told she wasn't good enough. I kissed her forehead and tried to comfort her.

"But I'm not, Orion. Look at my sister and my parents; they're so beautiful, and I look nothing like them."

I rolled her under me and thrust against her thigh. I was either half or fully erect around her these days. If I'd thought

having sex would reduce my half and full mast to relaxed, it wasn't happening. Not right away, at least. I wanted to fuck her again and again and again. I felt like I'd been replaced by a rutting bull who wanted to take more and more and more.

“Why do you think you're not good-looking?” I asked.

“Look at me. Of course, I'm not.” The brightness of lovemaking was starting to dim as she let self-doubt envelop her.

“I never got hard with your sister.” I went on my haunches and pulled my jeans toward me. I found a condom and put it on. “Are you sore?”

She looked at my erection like she was seeing it for the first time. “Ah...I guess...I—” She whimpered as I entered her.

“Orion.”

“Let me show you how beautiful you are to me,” I murmured and started to fuck her again.



Chapter 29

Hansa

I couldn't stop smiling, even though my jaw was starting to hurt. It was a goofy, sunny smile. I don't think I'd worn it before because I'd never felt this good about anything.

"Really? You trust me to manage both the tasting rooms?" I asked Atlas when he offered me my promotion.

He'd booked a meeting for me along with the head of finance for Callahan Vineyards, Nalini Shah, who was also responsible for Human Resources in the company boardroom. We were a small company, around a hundred people full-time and migrant workers during harvest and part-timers in the summer.

"Trust you?" Nalini grinned. "Hansa, you're doing great work. I can't tell you how much it helps the business to know that we've already sold Swan's Symphony for next year."

My heart was ready to spring out of my chest. Orion had been telling me I was doing good, but until now, I hadn't believed it. He was my boyfriend. Of course, he thought I was

fabulous. *Oh my god! I had a boyfriend, and he thought I was fabulous!* This was my life now.

“I want to make some changes,” I offered, “to both the rooms and how we...I guess I should discuss that with Orion?”

“And Ariel,” Atlas added.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Yeah, she’s coming on board as a Director of Marketing,” Nalini added. “We’re excited to have you both at a director level at Callahan Vineyards. This is gearing up to be a banner year for sales. We have the Harvest Festival coming up when Callahan wines will have center stage, and sales are going really well. Wine Club memberships, from what I hear from Orion, are on the rise because of you.”

I flushed. In the past three months, I had increased wine club membership by nearly seventy-five percent. This was the lifeblood of our business, and it was all about interaction with guests at the tasting rooms.

“Orion mentioned you want to hire two people?” Atlas asked.

“Yes, we’re short-staffed *all the time*. Orion has had to pitch in here at the tasting room and sometimes even Louis from the cellar. We have Hannah and Oscar in the Funk Zone, but you and Liesel have to manage that on the weekends, so I think—”

Atlas raised a hand to stop me. “What I wanted to say was, yes, we can hire two people but on contract and not full-time,

not yet. Will that work?"

"Yes," I cried out, excited. "Thank you."

"We're very happy to have you here." Atlas rose and held out his hand, which I first shook, and then because he was my boyfriend's brother, I hugged him.

Atlas laughed and patted my back. "You're an amazing woman, Hansa Raj," he whispered. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

I pulled away feeling very unprofessionally emotional.

I left the office and ran down to the tasting room, where Liesel was taking care of things with Ariel while I had my meeting.

They screamed, "Congratulations" when they saw me.

We hugged, jumping up and down. "Can you believe it? Me? I'm the Director of Customer Experience at Callahan Vineyards. Me?"

"Of course, you are." Liesel kissed my cheek.

"Ariel, I'm so excited that we will be working together. So, you're not going to be a lawyer anymore?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to work here and for Seraphina since you're probably abandoning her."

This was true. I couldn't work there and here. Plus, the pay raise I'd gotten and the fact that my rent was going to be free when I officially moved in with Orion at the end of the month meant that I wouldn't have the time or need to work at

Whispering Vines. I felt a pang but then let it go. My leaving was allowing Ariel to work there.

“But I still plan to come work the bar once in a while with both of you,” I announced.

“But of course.” Liesel looked at her watch. “Ladies, I have to go pick up Clara at the train station.”

Clara was Liesel’s art agent who sold her paintings through her gallery in Healdsburg and online through her enormous network of art enthusiasts and museums.

“And I have a meeting with the Harvest Festival people.” Ariel winked at me. “This is so much more fun than drafting asylum briefs.”

After they left, I pulled out my phone to find Orion. He’d usually be in the cellar in the winter, but now, he could be anywhere in the vineyard. He’d soon be busier than ever with everything a winemaker had to do in the spring to care for his vines. *And* I’d work with him and learn from him. It was all my dreams come true.

I texted Orion: *I got a promotion. I’m a director now!!*

He replied immediately: *Congratulations, Little Swan! I’m so proud of you.*

I was going to type to ask him where he was when the tasting room door jingled open. I turned to see who had entered, and my smile faltered for an instant and then fell completely. I replaced the genuine joy I’d been feeling with a

plastic version of itself that I'd perfected wearing whenever my family was around.

My mother wore a pair of rust-colored slacks with a silk blouse and a matching blazer. She was always dressed sophisticatedly, whether she was out and about in Everwood or at an Indian event.

"Mama." To protect myself, I went to stand behind the counter. "Hi."

The wine-tasting room was open per se, but it was too early for guests to roll in. I was planning to go through inventory and shift rosters while I had some free time.

"*Choti.*" She walked up to where I was and set her big Louis Vuitton bag on the bar stool. "I've heard something very distressing. And since you won't pick up your phone or come home when we ask you to, I had to come all the way to see you."

She said it with a sneer, like it was beneath her to come to me, and that it was my lot in life to go to her.

I took a deep breath and waited for her to land her blows.

"By the way, what are you wearing? This is a workplace. You're lucky you still have a job."

My spine straightened. "I actually got promoted today. You're looking at the Director of Customer Experience for Callahan Vineyards."

That caught her by surprise, and the vain part of me enjoyed it, but the other part of me, the one who loved my parents, was

hurt that she was surprised and expected so little from me.

”*And* this is a perfectly professional outfit for Callahan.”

I’d given up my severe pants and white dress shirts some days ago after Orion had gently coaxed me. “You are a beautiful woman; stop hiding that sexy body of yours. Wear whatever you want.”

I’d gone to Marshall’s with Ariel and Liesel the week before I’d bought lingerie to buy dresses—happy, colorful ones. I got dangling earrings and comfortable sandals instead of boring sneakers.

As I stood in front of my mother, I wore a blue dress with white flowers that came to my knees. I loved how it flowed. I’d paired it with a dark blue jacket that came from a boring suit I’d bought when I’d graduated from university. Since spring *was* in the air, I was wearing my brand-new chunky denim sandals. After all, I’d had a wax, a manicure, and a pedicure—a girl had to show it off.

But the way my mother looked at me, doubt crept up. Maybe I looked like an idiot, not a director, and I so wanted to look like one.

“How can I help you, Mama?” I managed to croak out. “I have a lot of work to get through.” Which was true. I had to get things going here, and once Hannah, one of our part-time tasting room workers, started her shift, I had to go to the Funk Zone to get the lay of the land. I also needed to book a team meeting because, *yeah*, I had a team now. Atlas was going to

send the announcement email about my promotion and Ariel's new job to the company shortly.

My mother's lips pursed as they did when she was *very* disappointed with me. "I've heard that you have stolen Orion from Naina."

Hysteria bubbled inside me at her words. I cleared my throat unnecessarily. "Stole?" *Like he was a Kate Spade bag?*

"Yes. Naina is upset. *Terribly upset.* How could you, Hansa? They were going to be engaged soon, do you know that?"

"I think that would be news to Orion," I replied, trying to hold on to my cool and keep my spine straight.

Were they? Orion had told me they'd never even had sex. You wouldn't get engaged to someone *before* you fucked them, would you? I mean, this wasn't an Indian arranged marriage.

"You're giving the family a bad name. Hitting on your sister's boyfriend? Have you no shame?"

"He was *never* Naina's boyfriend." My throat was tight, and my hands were clammy. I felt like I was fifteen again, and I felt my voice get squeaky.

"Yes, he was. We saw them together. And Orion is a good boy, I know that, but if you throw yourself at him." She shook her head in disgust. "I don't know what he sees in you."

I don't either. I wanted to cry out.

“Is this all you want to talk about?” I dug deep to find the courage to end this conversation and not listen to her disparage me.

“I demand that you end this nonsense with Orion. Daddy and I have been talking to Vimla Aunty, and she knows a nice boy in Cleveland. We can set up—”

“No,” I cut in, my voice sharp.

My mother flinched as if I’d struck her. “*Choti*, what’s gotten into you using that tone with me!”

Just a *no*, and she was going all Mother Kali mode on me! I sighed inwardly. Nothing was ever going to change. They were always going to be like this. Always, always, always.

I’d gotten promoted today. I’d been happy, deliciously so a minute ago, and my mother didn’t care. She wanted to spew her poison at me.

“If that’s all. I’m busy.” I held my hand to point at the door.

My mother’s eyes became flinty. Naina cried when cornered, and my mother attacked. “You think Orion would be interested in someone like you when he can have Naina? He’s using you.”

“I thought you said he was a *good boy*,” I countered.

My mother scoffed. “If you throw yourself at a man, what should he do? You never had any self-respect. Does he even know about your...*other* problems?”

I gasped. We never talked about my dyslexia. It was taboo. Worse, it didn't exist. I was just not working hard enough. I was not smart enough. I was not enough, and that's why I struggled, not because I had a condition that was out of my control.

My mother read the gasp wrong, like I was embarrassed, even afraid that she'd tell Orion about my dyslexia. "Does he know how you barely passed any and all your exams? That's why we didn't pay for your university because we knew you'd fail."

Tears pricked my eyes, but I held them inside. No. I wouldn't cry. "I graduated, Mama," I whispered.

"Barely," she continued. "Does he know? Do the people here at Callahan know that about you?"

"Know what, Mama?" I challenged.

I could hear Seraphina, Liesel, Orion, Ariel, and even Atlas' voices inside my head. *You're not dyslexic. You are a talented, passionate, smart woman who happens to have dyslexia.*

"You know..." Mama trailed off.

"Yes. Everyone here knows I have dyslexia, and they support me. You know how? Orion makes sure that all the documents that are printed in the tasting room are done in a dyslexia-friendly font face. Atlas made sure my computer was set up with dyslexia software so I could listen to my emails or read them more easily."

I felt my breath calm as I reminded myself of my recent achievements: managing a wine-tasting event just a few days ago, blending wine and selling it to one of the country's leading distributors before it even went into the barrel, and losing my virginity to the hottest man in Santa Barbara County.

My mother snorted. "You told them your sob story, so they'll feel sorry for you! Don't you have any shame?"

"The only thing they feel sorry for me about is my family—how you all treat me." It was a *very* big act of defiance on my part. I'd never stood up to my parents, never told my mother or my sister to go fuck themselves, and now I was two for two with both Mama and Naina.

My mother took a literal step back like I'd struck her. "I'm disappointed in you, *Choti*. *Very* disappointed. Papa, Naina, and I, we've been trying to put up with your behavior these past few months, and obviously—"

"Put up with my behavior? What behavior are you talking about, Mama? The one where I'm your servant during parties, where I'm not even allowed to be part of the party because you want me serving drinks like the help, even dressing like them? Or the behavior where I quietly left home, got a job, and paid for my way through college? What behavior are you talking about? Because I'm at a loss." My voice, which had been rising, now erupted into full-on anger.

"You're such a selfish child. Can't help during a party with all this *natak*. And we didn't pay for your school because we

didn't think you could even finish the degree." My mother smirked. "Don't ever come home or talk to us—"

"The reason you're here is that I blocked you on my phone. And if you've noticed, I don't come to your place anymore and don't intend to."

"You think because you're sleeping with Orion, he cares about you? He doesn't. He'll get rid of you when he's used you up. And then, who will you be left with? No one. Mark my words, *Choti*, you will be all alone as you deserve to be."

"Mama, before Orion, I was all alone. I've always been alone. I've never been part of your family. And I guess I'm realizing now that I never will be." I paused for a second and then added, "And my name is Hansa, not *Choti*; you use that name to make me small, to make me less. Stop it."

I watched her storm out of the tasting room. Suddenly, feeling very old and tired, I put my hand on the bar to steady myself and then walked into the adjacent storeroom to be alone.



Chapter 30

Orion

Was there anything harder to do than watch the woman you love break down?

I heard Hansa's painful exchange with her mother, and after Rina left, I followed Hansa into the storeroom. She was crumpled on the floor, her forehead resting on her knees as she sobbed.

"Oh, baby," I murmured as I approached her.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Leave me alone." Her voice was muffled by her position.

"Yeah, that's not happening," I said gently but firmly, sitting down next to her on the cold floor. I reached out to pull her into my arms. She resisted at first, her body rigid with the effort to contain her pain. Then she resisted again, a testament to the walls she had built around herself. But finally, she relented, her body sagging against mine as the dam of her emotions broke.

I stroked her curly hair and rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles as she wept.

“I don’t know why it’s so hard for them to just like me a little, just accept me like I am. What’s so wrong with me?” she cried out between sobs.

Her tears pierced me. All I had were words, platitudes that felt inadequate in the face of her raw, aching pain. But I had to try. “Nothing. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you, Hansa,” I whispered into her hair. “You’re incredible, and if they can’t see that, it’s their loss, not yours.”

I wasn’t sure if my words could bring her any comfort, but I hoped that my presence, my unwavering support, would help her feel less alone in her struggles. As I held her amidst boxes and bottles, I realized the depth of my feelings for Hansa. It was more than love; it was a deep-seated need to be her sanctuary, her home.

Finally, the crying jag ended, and she looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. “I have to get to work.”

“You can take a minute; I have an in with your boss.”

She gave me a watery chuckle. “I have to go to the Funk Zone this afternoon. And you have to go back to the vineyard. I was going to ask you if” — she shook her head — “doesn’t matter.”

“Ask me what?”

“If we could celebrate my promotion?”

“I was going to do the same. I made dinner reservations at Bar Le Côte.”

It was a restaurant in Los Olivos, and she’d always wanted to go. “And I thought we could do some wine tasting while we’re there. Hit Storm for some Pinot, get some bubbly from Blair Fox?”

She closed her eyes, sadness slumping her shoulders. “I just want to go and lie down and spend the day under the covers,” she revealed. “I feel like my parents just dumped me, Orion. And why? Because I’m dating you or because, for the first time, I stood up for myself. That’s all it took for my family to abandon me.”

“Family never abandons. That’s the Callahan rule.”

“Well, I’m not a Callahan.” She flung at me and shoved her face into my chest as new sobs took her over.

I was going to wait. We’d been dating for a hot minute. We had sex five seconds ago for the first time. I’d planned to give it *at least* six months, get her moved in, get her comfortable. I didn’t want to wait because I needed more time. I was ready to go, but I knew she needed more time.

I wanted to be more than just her boyfriend; I wanted to be her partner for life. The decision didn’t feel like a choice but a fundamental truth that had always been there, waiting for the right moment to surface.

As Hansa’s sobs began to subside and her breathing steadied, I glanced around, my eyes searching for something,

anything that could symbolize the gravity of what I was about to do. And that's when I spotted it: an abandoned mushroom cork from one of our wine bottles. It wasn't traditional by any means, but neither were we.

Carefully, I removed the wire from the cork. It had the Callahan logo on the top, symbolizing the vineyard where our love had blossomed. I twisted it, shaping it into an awkward makeshift ring, a symbol of my impromptu but heartfelt intention.

"Hansa," I began, my voice steadier than I felt as I held her hand. She lifted her head, her eyes red and beautiful in their vulnerability. "I know this isn't how you might have pictured this scene, in a storeroom with a makeshift ring." I held up the twisted wire for her to see and saw those red eyes go wide. "But I don't want to wait for a perfect moment because every moment with you, even this, feels perfect."

She stared at me in disbelief. "Are you fucking nuts?"

I grinned. "Yeah, baby, nuts about you."

"Or just plain nuts. We've known each other...I mean...we just...we had sex for the first time last night, and you want to...?" She trailed away, unable to say the words.

I winked at her. "I love you, Hansa. I love your strength, your passion, your incredible heart. I want to be there for you, always. To love you, support you, and build a life with you. Will you marry me?"

"No," she replied immediately, pulling her hand away.

I pulled it right back and slid the makeshift ring on her finger. The Callahan logo shined in the light of the storeroom gold on black, not a diamond but *à propos* for us.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. The air between us was thick with anticipation, and I could hear the distant hum of the vineyard outside.

“I’ll eventually get you a proper ring. But with this ring, you become a Callahan, and my family is now yours, and we don’t abandon...*ever*, no matter what. Until death do us part, baby.”

She looked at me like I’d lost a few screws.

I knew she’d resist, but in the end, I also knew she loved me, madly, incandescently, and sure she was gun-shy with that family. Who could blame her? But she’d get there today or tomorrow.

Then, slowly, a smile broke through her tears, shining through her pain and lighting up her face in a way that made my heart leap.

“You’re a lunatic, but you’re *my* lunatic.”

“Fucking A.” I kissed her softly. She looked at the wire ring on her finger, an imperfect but sincere promise of our future together. It was a proposal that matched us—unconventional, spontaneous, but full of love and genuine intention.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice laden with a mixture of laughter and tears. “Yes, Orion, I will marry you.”

I knew she would say yes eventually, but not right away. My heart began to hammer with what I recognized now as joy. I

wished my dad was here; I wished he could see how I proposed to Hansa. He'd approve. He'd no doubt say, "*With a wire ring? The 2006 vintage? Good work, son.*"

My mother would love her and protect her as fiercely as Atlas, Ariel, and Liesel have. I wish they could see the woman who'd given me my happiness, the joy I'd lost when they left me. I'd always miss my parents, but with Hansa, it hurt less. She was the gift I didn't even know I needed.

Tears filled my eyes, and she frowned when she saw them. "What?"

I dropped a soft kiss on her Cabernet Sauvignon lips. "I wish my parents were here."

She put a hand on my cheek. "They probably are. I'm Indian, and we believe in the spiritual. This is their vineyard, and they're everywhere in the vintages we drink, in the vines we harvest, in the plans you and Atlas are realizing for the vineyard."

I hugged her. "I love you. I don't know how I went through life without you, but I'm so fucking glad I don't have to anymore."



Chapter 31

Hansa

I officially moved in with Orion a few weeks after he proposed. I thought he'd want to keep the proposal quiet for now, just between us, but he told *everyone*, and by that, I mean *everyone*, even the unsuspecting guests and servers at Bar Le Côte, where we had dinner to celebrate both my promotion and our engagement.

Atlas and Liesel were thrilled. Ariel wanted to plan the wedding. Grant was overjoyed when I called to tell him.

“No fucking way. You're gonna be Mrs. Orion Callahan?”

“Maybe I'll remain Hansa Raj. It's so old-fashioned to change your name once you're married,” I told him.

“I didn't mean legally, bitch, I meant in mind and body... speaking of body, now that he popped your cherry—”

“Ugh! Can you please be a little *less* crude?”

“Since he deflowered you?” Grant continued, “And you're finally...and I mean fucking finally getting some, *and* he proposed right after; I'm assuming you're mating like minks?”

I laughed. “Mating like minks?”

“Yeah, it seemed to fit,” he murmured. “You happy?”

“For what feels like the first time.”

“That is so damn good to hear. Now, you need to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to not go back to your family until they show through their actions that they will treat you better.”

“I won’t go back.”

I could hear him scoff at me all the way from New York. “I’ve seen this movie before. I agree it’s a *little* different because you’ve never ever said the things you did to your mother or Naina before, but you’ve blocked them before and then given in. You can’t do that this time. You need to teach them to treat you better.”

Grant always said: *People treat you the way you allow them to.*

“Not this time,” I assured him. “This time, I have family behind me.”

I hear him snuffle. “I can’t stand how happy I am for you, babe. I’ll be there in a few weeks, and then I want all the deflowering details.”

“No way, José! But you’re welcome to make Orion uncomfortable with your inappropriate questions,” I offered.

“I’d like that very much.”

I sent Grant pictures of *my* new place. Orion had already told me that he wouldn't fix up the other cabin because his place was now ours.

I loved my new home! How could I not when vines surrounded us? I loved how private the cottage was. And how *nice* it was. I hadn't lived in such luxury since I left my parents' house.

But what was the perfect icing on the cake was my new job. I was still not the most confident of employees and struggled with making presentations on the fly. When you can't quickly read what's on the screen, you have to prepare well in advance, and I used a lot of imagery on my screen to help guide me as well.

A month after my promotion, I asked to meet with the leadership team.

Now, standing before them, my hands trembled slightly as I clutched my notes. This was my moment to prove that I could elevate the Callahan Vineyard tasting rooms and ensure Atlas that the advancement he'd given me was not a mistake.

"Thank you all for giving me this opportunity to share my vision for our tasting rooms," I began, my voice betraying a hint of nervousness.

Orion gave me an encouraging nod, and I drew a deep breath, trying to steady myself. My hand automatically went to the locket I'd started to wear, a locket that Liesel had converted into something beautiful *and* wearable from the mushroom cap wire ring Orion had proposed to me with. It

had become my talisman. I'd even told Orion that we should wait for him to buy me a proper ring until after the harvest. I didn't want him to spend money on a ring when our promises had nothing to do with jewelry. Rumor had it (or rather Ariel had spilled) that Orion wasn't listening to me and was going to surprise me sooner rather than later.

“Our tasting room in the Funk Zone has immense potential, given its location. This plan focuses on maximizing foot traffic there and transforming our vineyard tasting room here into an educational hub for wine enthusiasts.” I clicked on the first slide of my presentation.

I went through the data that explained where we were today, our jump-off point. Then, I outlined my strategy to attract more visitors to the Funk Zone tasting room. “We'll leverage social media marketing and local partnerships to enhance our visibility. Special events, like live music nights and local art showcases, can create a unique and inviting atmosphere.”

I presented the tentative calendar I'd put together for the next two quarters. Atlas took notes, as did Nalini and Ariel. I'd shown the presentation to Orion, and he'd helped me refine it, so I knew I had the approval of at least one leadership team member.

Shifting gears, I clicked on the slide about the vineyard tasting room. “Here, I propose we host wine-tasting and winemaking classes led by our experts. Invite other winemakers to talk to people. This will educate those who want to learn and create a deeper appreciation for our wines.”

As I delved into the details, the marketing plan, the event calendar, and the educational curriculum, the leadership team listened with what I thought seemed to be appreciation. My confidence grew. The meeting room had transformed from being a source of intimidation into a stage where I could share my passion and vision.

I concluded with a slide showing projected foot traffic and revenue increases. “With these initiatives, we’re not merely selling wine; we’re creating experiences that resonate with our customers, encouraging repeat visits and word-of-mouth promotion.”

There was silence after I finished, and I braced myself for questions.

Atlas was the first to speak. “Hansa, this is impressive. Your plans for the Funk Zone are exactly what we need to stand out in a competitive market.”

Ariel, our *brand new* marketing director, chimed in, “I love the idea of using our vineyard for educational purposes. It adds another layer to our brand story.”

Nalini, as CFO, was the pragmatic one and raised a few questions about logistics and budgets, but even her queries were constructive and supportive.

By the end of the meeting, the nervousness I had initially felt was replaced by a sense of accomplishment and belonging. I had not only presented a comprehensive plan but had also held my own in a room full of experienced professionals.

As everyone filed out, offering words of encouragement and excitement about my ideas, I realized that I was no longer *Choti*, the unsure girl overshadowed by her sister's accomplishments, by her parents' hurtful assessment of her life—I was Hansa, the one who was taking the tentative steps to become more than she ever thought she could be.

Orion stayed back in the meeting room after everyone left.

“They said yes.” I raised my hands up in the air. “Yes!!!”

Orion came up to me and put his hands on my waist. “Now that you’re going to be busy with all this tasting room business, who’s going to help me with winemaking?”

I kissed him. “I’m Superwoman! I can do anything *and* everything I want to do.”

I didn’t know which god had smiled at me, but I’d found a supportive partner who was determined to take my self-doubts away.

“You give me so much,” I told him. “I don’t know why you’re with me. I don’t give back.”

He didn’t protest when I asked him such questions, which I often did. You didn’t build self-esteem in a day; it was going to take some time.

He kissed my nose and then nuzzled mine with his. “You share my passion for wine. You support me as I take a detour from the vineyard’s legacy to try new things. You hold my hand when I’m having a bad day. *And* you give fabulous head.”

I nodded, mischief glinting in my eyes. “It’s the blowjob that’s keeping you with me, isn’t it?”

“The hand jobs are not bad either, and the sex is amazing as well,” Orion countered.

I leaned my head back and laughed. “I love you,” I said simply.

He swept me down as in an exaggerated dance move and landed a smack on my mouth before straightening me. “Got to go, baby. The vines are waiting.”

I smiled at him and felt the pang as I always did, that I couldn’t share the great things happening in my life with my parents, that they didn’t care—that they had seen my struggles but not the rewards.

“Stop thinking about them,” Orion ordered because he could read my emotions *just like that*. It was disconcerting, but the saving grace was that I could read him just as well. In a short time, we’d become what I thought a *true* couple should be: supportive, loving, and having stunningly good sex.



Chapter 32

Orion

“It’s not that I want secrets between us, but this feels like a no-win situation, and I have no choice but to do it,” I explained to Seraphina.

While Hansa was at the Funk Zone tasting room, I’d dropped by Whispering Vines to talk to Seraphina about my plan, which, with every passing minute, I felt was ill-advised but also unavoidable.

It was still early, and the bar wasn’t busy yet. There were a few tourists, day drinkers, and me. I sat at the bar while the four tourists sat at the table by the window overlooking Main Street, and the day drinkers were ensconced in a dark corner.

“What exactly are you worried about if you tell her?” she mused.

“If I tell her before I do it, she’ll say I shouldn’t do it. *And* if I tell her after, she’ll doubt the sincerity of her parents if she knew I’d talked to them. That is if they cleaned up their act and actually showed up for her.”

Seraphina nodded thoughtfully, understanding my conundrum. “I think you shouldn’t tell her *before* but definitely after. Her parents will have to earn her trust, and that is pretty much dead yeast needing to be chucked out, so to speak.”

That was pretty much what I’d planned to do, and I was relieved that Seraphina agreed.

“And I’d like it very much and consider it a huge favor if you’re with me when I talk to them,” I requested.

Both of Seraphina’s eyebrows raised as her amethyst eyes glittered. “Would you now?”

“I’m going to need a little magic from the Everwood fairy godmother if I’m going to get the Raj family to be a family again. Hansa’s struggling with giving up her family. And it fucking breaks my heart.” I ran a hand through my hair. I needed a cut, but with Spring in bloom, I was running around the vines like a chicken without its head.

I was glad that Hansa was not working late every evening so we could spend some time together. We ate dinner at the main house or at our place with Atlas, Liesel, and Ariel, if she didn’t have a shift at Whispering Vines, where she’d started working a few days ago.

Family was important to both of us, and I knew that Hansa loved this closeness. Every day, she told me, felt like a celebration because we ate together. Some days, we each went our own ways, and we’d all decided that there was no pressure to eat together or drink wine on the porch of our place or the

main house. But so far, we all seemed to love the time we spent with each other. It let us catch up on Callahan business and pop by Liesel's studio to see what she was working on. Liesel was still helping with the tasting room in the Funk Zone but had to stop working at Whispering Vines because she had a show coming in a few months and was pedal-to-the-metal working on canvases.

“When do you want to do it?” Seraphina asked.

I looked at my watch. “I asked Karan and Rina if they could be here by four-thirty this evening.”

The Rajs closed their dental practice at four every evening, and since their offices were close to Whispering Vines, it didn't seem dramatic to invite them here for a drink.

“So, you were hoping you'd second me into peacekeeping duties?” she teased.

“Something like that,” I agreed sheepishly. “First, I thought I'd see them at home, but then decided neutral ground would be better.”

Seraphina agreed. “Well, Ariel will be here shortly, and she'll manage the bar. We can sit at the far end of the room.” She pointed to the table for four that was tucked away in the other dark corner from where the day drinkers were ensconced.

I picked up a reserved place card and put it on that table. This was either going to be the best idea I ever had, or it was going to be the worst.

Spoiler alert: it was a shitshow!

Karan and Rina arrived at Whispering Vines ten minutes late, as expected, immaculately dressed to assert their authority. Unlike Atlas, I didn't frequent corporate meetings but understood enough about power dynamics to level the playing field. However, I had no intention of playing games; the stakes were too high for Hansa and me.

After exchanging handshakes, hugging Seraphina, and waving at Ariel as part of the usual social niceties, we settled down with a bottle of Callahan Pinot Noir from Seraphina's wine list. Alright, I admit, it was a subtle power move. *So, shoot me!*

Karan drank some of the wine and nodded politely. "Very nice. You know, Orion, we're big fans of Callahan Vineyards."

"Thanks, Dr. Raj." Hansa's father had been my dentist for a decade now, so I called him what I always had.

Rina had not been my dentist, so I'd always called her by her first name. But I wasn't sure how to handle that now. Would she feel slighted if I didn't address her as doctor? Did I give a shit? Yeah, I did. I wanted this meeting to go well. I wanted to not be the cause of Hansa's family being at odds with one another.

Rina made some small talk about an upcoming wine event, and we all fell silent.

I took a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. "I wanted to talk to you about Hansa," I began.

“It has been brought to our attention you both are *dating*,” Rina said, her Indian accent pronounced, which, according to Hansa, happened when she was irritated and/or stressed. She was probably both.

“Yes, ma’am.” *Ma’am?* Oh fuck! I was screwing this up.

“Son, you were just with Naina. This is very inappropriate,” Dr. Raj said softly. “We’re already facing backlash in the Indian circles. It’s a small community in Santa Barbara, and you can imagine how embarrassing it is for us that Hansa is with a man her older sister rejected.”

I counted up to ten, slowly, before I spoke. “Naina and I were *never* dating. We were friends who went out a couple of times.”

Rina’s mouth twisted. “Naina told us what happened. You were jealous of her success, and it bothered you that she wasn’t spending enough time with you. Fine. Whatever. But so? You start with Hansa?”

I shook my head. *Oh, Naina!*

“I told Naina I couldn’t see her anymore on her birthday,” I realized I needed to clear this up, or they’d be stuck on it like a faulty record player. “Naina is a...” *fuck, Orion, don’t say bitch*, “is not the woman for me.”

“Because she’s more successful than you?” Rina demanded angrily.

“Oh, Rina, come on, you know Naina lied,” Seraphina murmured, challenging Hansa’s mother. “She was saving face,

and you know it. Orion didn't want to explore a relationship with her. He's too polite to tell you, but I'm not. Naina is a spoilt and selfish woman who's all about keeping up appearances. Orion is a down-to-earth farmer."

Rina's eyes flashed anger. "How dare you talk about my—"

"Rina" — her husband touched her shoulder — "you know Seraphina is right. Naina did lie to us, and we both know it. We didn't challenge her on it because we didn't want to upset her. But it was clear on her birthday that they were not a couple."

Alright then! At least Dr. Raj didn't hate my guts.

Rina picked up her glass and took a sip of the wine. "I still don't understand what you're doing with Hansa. Are you trying to make Naina jealous?"

"Rina, no offense, but I don't give a sh.... This has nothing to do with Naina. I love your daughter, the younger one," I specified. "She's an incredible woman, talented and kind. But I feel she doesn't always get the appreciation she deserves, especially from her family."

Rina bristled at my words. "Hansa has always been too sensitive. We only want what's best for her. But to go around talking about family business with an outsider. That's the nonsense that girl pulls."

"That girl is *my* family," I bit back. "We're engaged to be married." I held up my hand so she would throttle whatever vile thing about Hansa she was about to spew. "Here is what I

want to tell you. We're building a life together. And you can choose to be part of it or not. I promise you, give me a few months, and Hansa will be fine not being in touch with you lot if you don't stop treating her the way you have been. You belittle her, and that's unfair."

Karan frowned, clearly uncomfortable. "We treat our daughters equally. Naina is just more... accomplished."

Seraphina interjected gently, "But don't you see? By constantly praising one and criticizing the other, you're destroying Hansa's self-esteem. She's building a life, making a name for herself as a wine expert. She deserves your support, not constant comparisons."

I could tell they were struggling to accept this perspective, entrenched as they were in their views. But I had to make them understand that they either had a relationship with their daughter based on mutual respect or there would be no relationship.

"And if there was a comparison, Hansa holds her own," I added. "She's put herself through university, and followed her dream. Overcame dyslexia, which is fuck...very hard. She's managing our tasting rooms. She's making wine. Eli, our friend who's opening his restaurant in the vineyard, wants her to take over as his floor sommelier, and Chef Occitan was instrumental in *It's A Fairytale* to win a Michelin star. What does Hansa need to do to be respected by you?"

Rina swallowed hard, not giving an inch. "How dare you?" She stood up. "You don't get to talk to us like that just because

you're spending time with our daughter. Mind your own business and stay out of ours. *Chalo*, Karan."

I turned to her father, intent on clarifying my stance. "We plan to get married, hopefully by the end of the year. She has moved in with me, and we're looking forward to starting a family soon. You can choose to be a part of our lives or not. However, let me assure you, if you come to our home or workplace and speak to her the way Rina did last time she came by, I'll ensure that you never get near your daughter again."

Rina was about to speak when her husband held his hand up and stood. "Son, this is not how we do things. We're your elders, and you cannot talk to us this way."

"But you're not behaving like my elders, Dr. Raj, not the way you're treating my future wife, who is *your* daughter." I rose and looked him in the eye. "A few days ago, Rina came to Hansa's place of work. I overheard their conversation." I turned to Rina. "You told Hansa that she *deserves* to be alone. You called her selfish and a disappointment. You insinuated I was using her for sex. And then you ridiculed her for having dyslexia by implying that it was a sob story she told people for sympathy."

Dr. Raj looked at his wife not with irritation but shame because he'd probably said similar things to Hansa at some point or another. I'd bet the vineyard on it.

"Hansa is planning a future with me," I continued firmly, "A future where she is valued and respected. If things don't

change, you risk alienating her.”

Their expressions shifted between defensiveness and confusion. It was clear they hadn't expected this confrontation, nor were they prepared to acknowledge their parenting mistakes.

The meeting ended with no resolution. Karan and Rina walked away, saying nothing, and I felt a mixture of frustration and sadness. I'd hoped for a breakthrough, an understanding, but it was clear that change would be slow, if it came at all.

Ariel came over once they'd left, her expression sympathetic. “That didn't look like it went well.”

“Yep. That was a shitshow. But it needed to be said.”

Seraphina nodded in agreement. “Change is hard. But Orion, you did the right thing, standing up for Hansa.”

Now I'd have to tell Hansa, and she'd be angry and hurt. Fuck me! I'd really thought that her parents would listen and try to understand, but I'd ended up distancing her even more from them.

When I left Whispering Vines an hour later and got to my truck, I realized that the shit show was not over. The universe was giving me a run for my money.

Naina stood by the truck. She was in a little black dress with high heels, looking like the supermodel she was. But she wore no makeup, and there was a vulnerability to her face that I'd not seen before.

“Hi.” She smiled tentatively.

I nodded at her.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

I was tempted to tell her to go fuck herself, but instead, I tried to respond as Hansa would. She would never turn her family away, and now that they were somewhat my family, too, I felt compelled to follow her lead.

“Sure.”

We sat inside the truck. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't exactly warm in early spring. The sea air draped Everwood in a light chill every evening, which was perfect for vines to thrive and produce the finest grapes by harvest.

“You met my parents today?” She stated but ended it as a question.

I nodded, staring straight ahead at Main Street. I wasn't in the mood to listen to her go off on Hansa, but I was marrying into this family, and I needed to learn patience.

“I was at home when they came back. Papa told me what you said to them, and...he and Mama are fighting. But...” — she took a deep breath — “you're right, we've been treating Hansa horribly.”

Say what? I turned to look at her. The light flooding from the street showed me she was upset and looked guilty.

“You know, I never paid attention until Barry...he was the guy I was with at Whispering Vines last time...” She waved

her hand to indicate the bar outside our window.

The guy with the Lamborghini. Sure. I didn't say anything and just waited. I'd already stepped into it with her parents, and I just didn't have the energy to take it up with Naina.

"He looked at me like I was..." She shook her head. "You know I never realized how I talked to Hansa? How I behave when she's around. I'm suave, sophisticated, and even nice when I'm away from my family. If you ask my friends, they'll say Naina is kind and helpful. Supportive. But then with my own sister..." Tears ran down her cheeks, and I sighed.

"Ah, fuck, Naina. Don't cry."

"No. Barry said I was mean and cruel. And now, when my father repeated what my mother said to Hansa, it was like having an out-of-body experience, seeing myself as I am with my sister. I talk to and about Hansa like my mother does."

I didn't know what to say except *hallelujah; Naina has seen the light*, and since that would be inappropriate, I made assenting sounds.

"I'm going to make up with her, Orion. I will do everything I can to be a better person...a better sister."

I didn't say, "I'll have to see it to believe it," but she could sense that sentiment radiating from me in waves.

"I know you don't believe me. But I promise I'm going to change your mind." She looked at her hands on her lap. "I spoke to a therapist after Barry dumped me for being such a bitch. First, I blamed him for being an ass, but slowly, I started

to wonder if it was me. You didn't want to date me, and Barry didn't either. Neither of you cared about how I looked or my big-time job; you just didn't like the person I was."

I kept my mouth shut because I agreed with her, and saying, "Not telling me something I don't know" would be impolite.

"I always thought you were a nice guy but not good enough for me. Handsome enough but *not* good enough. Not until you made the *Wine Spectator* cover and then suddenly...I'm so shallow."

I chuckled. "I'm guilty of being shallow as well. I fought my attraction for Hansa because I didn't think she was my type. I thought *you* were my type. But then I got to know her, and she's everything I've always wanted and didn't know. She's my best friend, lover, and partner. It took me a while to figure it out. I wasn't very nice to her either, Naina. But you know what, I apologized and made amends, and she gave me a chance."

Naina wiped her tears with the back of her hands. "You think she'll give me a chance?"

"She's fucking dying to. It's killing her to cut you all off. I can't stand to see her hurt...which is why I talked to your parents, and I fucked it up. Now I have to tell Hansa that I've done my part in further messing up her relationship with her family."

Naina put her hand on my shoulder to comfort me. "Trust me...I know you don't feel it right now, but trust me, you didn't fuck anything up. You are a wake-up call for my parents

like Barry was for me. I don't want to lose my only sister... who's always been good to me no matter how much of a shit I was to her. I used to think she was weak, a doormat, but now I realize, thanks to three hundred dollars-an-hour therapy, that she's the strong one, the one who held on to her family even though we'd been shitting on her."

"She's remarkable," I whispered.

"And you're madly in love with her." This time, she didn't end the statement with a question.

"Yeah. Madly."

Naina smiled. "I'm happy for both of you. Mama said you were engaged and...that's lovely." Her eyes filled with tears again. "Will you let me give an engagement gift to both of you?"

I frowned. "Sure."

"You know when Hansa said she'd never been to a Michelin-star restaurant, I showed off about all the ones I'd been to. It was so petty and nasty. My gift is an engagement party for both of you in San Francisco at *It's A Fairytale*."

I blinked. "What?"

"What do you think?"

I laughed. "Think? It would be great. I mean...I can't afford it, but I know Storm, the chef, very well, as does Eli. He was his sous chef."

“I know,” Naina replied. “I love that restaurant. It’s such a *fairytale*...so I’d like to invite all of you and my family and Hansa’s friends there.”

I leaned back thoughtfully. “Can we do this at the end of next month? I need to juggle some finances to buy her the ring I want to.”

Naina frowned. “I thought you already proposed?”

“Yeah. I did. It was impromptu. I made a ring out of a Callahan mushroom cap wire and asked to marry me on the floor of the tasting room storage closet.”

A laugh burst out of her. “Oh, that’s so perfect. But if you want another ring, though she won’t care, why don’t I—”

I held up my hand. “No one is fucking buying my girl an engagement ring but me.”

“I respect that. Can this be a surprise for her?”

“Yeah. I’d like that. And your parents will be there?”

“Oh, yes, with bells on.”

Maybe she was sincere. Perhaps she’d see this through. Possibly...just maybe, I hadn’t destroyed Hansa’s relationship with her entire family.



Chapter 33

Hansa

Orion had told me to act surprised because he'd been unable to hide that we were all going to San Francisco to celebrate our engagement (because he'd now bought the ring). I'd told him no way; we couldn't spend that kind of money on a ring *and* a Michelin-star restaurant when he told me it was an engagement present from Naina.

Talk about a mind fuck!

When Orion first told me how he confronted my parents, I'd fallen in love with him some more. He'd fought for me. No one else ever had. And he'd done it, not to ask my parents to go fuck themselves, but to ask them to take me back and treat me well because he couldn't stand seeing me hurt. Now, if that isn't the best fiancée in the world, who is?

Naina had come to our place and apologized. My parents had done the same. I can't say we were all one big happy family. But we were figuring out how to get along in this new family dynamic where I was not servant class.

We were staying at the Four Seasons, which I assumed was also a gift from Naina because we could not afford to house the whole family at the Four Seasons. The Callahans may own a vineyard, but we didn't have the money that warranted expensive hotels. Mid-priced Air BnB was more our style!

"Now, I'm going to leave you so you can make yourself *prettier*," Orion instructed as I watched him put on his dinner jacket. I lay in bed naked after our afternoon siesta and sexy time, feeling incredibly lazy *and* turned on despite the sex marathon session we seemed to indulge in every chance we got.

Well, can you blame me? Here was six-foot-two of raw muscle wrapped in a designer suit that looked like it was made for him. I was used to seeing Atlas in a suit, but with Orion, it didn't happen often...in fact, it happened so seldom that he had to go to the tailor to adjust his suit as he'd lost weight since he'd bought it a year ago.

The dark blue of the suit made his blue eyes pop. Finally, he'd gotten a haircut, and I missed the curls at his neck, but he looked...*oh, yeah*.

"Stop staring at me like that, or we'll be late," he admonished.

I held open my arms, and he crawled into bed and lay atop me. "You're making me crumple my suit."

I wrapped around him. "Do you know I love you?"

“Your sister may have told me.” He kissed me, first lightly and then deeply. I squirmed under him, my hips lifting to meet his. “Fuck, baby, we don’t have time for this.”

I found him hard in his slacks and stroked him. His eyes went from happy sea blue to stormy. “Hansa,” he groaned and pulled himself away from me. “Tonight, you can take advantage of me. For now, you need to get ready.”

“Fine! I’ll get ready so you can propose to me in front of my family and yours. *But* I want you to know that the best proposal was when you slipped this on my finger.” I held up the wire-ring locket I wore now on a gold chain. “This will always be *the* ring.”

He smiled at me, warm and tender. My heart skipped a beat.

“For me, too, but I have something for you that will knock your socks off. *And* your mother will approve and be able to show off to the Indian Auntie Gossip Network.”

I laughed. He’d got the hang of the intricacies of Indian aunties and had managed to charm a few of them he’d had the occasion to meet at an Indian event we’d gone to with my parents.

“He’s a winemaker,” my mother proudly told people and immediately pulled out her phone to show them the cover of *Wine Spectator* magazine he was on. “Isn’t he something?”

And when some mean auntie asked if Orion wasn’t dating Naina, she’d shut them down, “They’re friends. In our family,

we allow our girls to be friends with men—and not all of them have to get married. Don't be such a prude, *na*.”

When my mother used to complain about me, she went all out, and now that she'd decided I was *good* and *cool*, she was all in. I can't say I minded. It felt great to have my family respect me *and* be affectionate. My mother slipped once in a while, but both Naina and my father immediately pounced on her, and in a rare show of character, she apologized.

I took a shower and wished I'd taken Naina on her offer to go down to the spa to fix my hair. But it seemed so wasteful. I knew how to manage my hair; I didn't need to pay someone a hundred bucks to make it look like it belonged to someone else.

I managed to blow dry my hair with enough product that I'd learned to use from an Indian TikTok influencer who was all about her *natural Indian curly* hair. It now fell nicely around my face and didn't need to be scrunched away in a bun. I'd also gotten my eyebrows done, so I wasn't pulling a Frida Kahlo with the unibrow. I was Indian, and unlike Naina, who got my mother's genes, I had hair in places people didn't even have places. When you didn't have money and had Indian hair, you quickly learned to give yourself a bikini wax. I was an expert.

Nayva had found a dress for me from the designer she worked with. It was exquisite, crafted from a traditional Indian sari. The fabric was light pink silk, with its gold and blue border artfully repurposed into straps for the sleeves and the

bodice. This fusion created the perfect Indian-American outfit, making me feel like a *Desi Disney Princess*.

I was contemplating makeup when there was a knock on my door.

Naina came in looking like a...well, supermodel. She wore a light blue silk dress that hugged her in all the right places since she had no wrong places. She wore Van Cleef diamonds in that understated but expensive way of hers. *Her* hair had been coiffed professionally.

Naina was beautiful, and, in the past, it would have bothered me that I wasn't as good-looking, but lately, I didn't care so much. I was beginning to like how I looked. Orion looked at me like I was his favorite meal, so who cared about comparing myself to the world!

"Wow," I said. "You look amazing."

Naina held up a bag. "I'm here to do your makeup. Liesel and Ariel were going to come, but I said this was between the *behens*." The sisters!

I let her in and was delighted to have a relationship with Naina that I'd only seen siblings have in books and movies.

She sat me down in front of the vanity in the large bathroom.

"Do you want me to straighten your hair?" she asked. "It'll look more chic."

I touched a curl and shook my head. "I like how I look."

“You’re getting engaged, and there will be pictures—” she protested.

I put a hand on hers. “Naina, not every duckling has to become a swan. Ducks are pretty damn nice looking too.”

She was immediately contrite. “That’s not what I meant. You know that, right?”

“I know. What I’m saying is that I like how I look. I want to look like myself, not someone else, and if you straightened my hair, I would look like someone else.”

Naina straightened. “Got it. Makeup?”

“Fuck yeah. I want Orion to swallow his tongue when he sees me.”



Orion met me outside *It's A Fairytale* as our families waited inside. Naina deposited me in front of him as if she was giving me away. She kissed me on my cheek and whispered, “I think he’s swallowed his tongue.”

And she was right. Orion stared at me, mesmerized.

“Wow,” he finally breathed. “Wow!”

I felt very much like the most beautiful duckling in the whole world. My hair was behaving itself. I wore a dress that paid homage to my Indian heritage and a smile that made my face hurt.

He bent to kiss me, and I moved my mouth. “Hey, buddy, the lipstick is fresh, and you’re not ruining it until *after* photos

are taken.”

Orion put his hands on my hips and pulled me close to him. “I can’t even kiss you?”

“Nope. And no nuzzling the face either,” I warned. “I’d like these pictures to be picture-perfect.”

“Even if we’re not?”

His blue eyes were radiant, and I was melting, my lips moving closer to his. “Especially since we’re not.” I brushed my lips against his softly, gently, *without* messing up my makeup. *Priorities!*

He looked down at my cleavage *and* the Callahan Vineyard sparkling wine locket and took a deep breath. “I almost lost you, do you know that? I almost didn’t see you because I was so fucking blind.”

“But then Seraphina happened.”

His eyes were wet with emotion. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “And I’m so fucking grateful.”

I sniffled, my eyes ready to water in sympathy for his. “No crying until after the photos.”

Orion nodded, smiling as wide as I was. “Best fucking day of my life was when you lied about your age to do a wine tasting with me, and I didn’t even know it. Thank you for loving me first. For being kind and generous. For giving me everything that I could ever want.”

“And thank you for loving me best.” I brushed my lips against his again. “Should we go inside?”

“Hell, yeah. It’s going to be an epic dinner.”

A sense of awe washed over me as we pushed open the doors of It’s A Fairytale. The restaurant, renowned for its enchanting ambiance and Michelin-starred cuisine, was the perfect setting for...well, pretty much any celebration. As soon as we stepped inside, we were bathed in golden light.

The restaurant’s interior was nothing short of enchanting, as the reviews promised. Crystal chandeliers cascaded from the ceiling like waterfalls of light, their facets casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the walls and tables. Every corner I looked at was a meticulous blend of elegance and fantasy.

I could see the fusion of French sophistication and Californian vibrancy in the decor. The tables featured artful arrangements of delicate flowers and fresh produce, reflecting the restaurant’s culinary ethos.

“OMG, girlfriend,” Navya rushed up to us and gave me a hug. “Fuck me, but you look delicious.”

“You’re just saying that because you got me the dress.” I watched as Orion winked at me and walked up to my parents.

“She has new friends now and doesn’t give the old ones the time of day,” a voice from behind me proclaimed.

I turned and screamed. Grant was here!! I wasn’t expecting it. He’d said he wouldn’t be able to make it, and...the surprise

was entirely worth it.

We hugged, squealing in excitement, and I forgot about my makeup. “You’re here!”

“You bet your sweet ass. And it’s looking *very* sweet in this dress.”

Grant was taller than me, skinnier than me, whiter than me (obviously), and yet, we were almost the same people from the inside. He’d gotten laser surgery, so he’d retired his glasses, and it looked like he’d put on some muscle. I squeezed his arm from over his suit jacket. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m dating a personal trainer.”

“No kidding.”

“And he gives me up close and *very* personal training,” he leered. “I bet.”

It was great to have Grant with me again, to have him *officially* meet Orion, though he’d seen him around in Everwood, which was the nature of small towns.

Seraphina hugged me and grinned, “I didn’t even have to wave a magic wand.”

“And I don’t turn into a pumpkin at midnight either.”

“I think the coach turns into a pumpkin,” Ariel interjected. “You look amazing. But it’s not the dress or makeup, Hansa, it’s just...you’re radiant.”

“Good love does that.” Liesel walked up to us, slid her arm around Seraphina. “I’m assuming you and Orion have been

indulging in some good loving lately.”

I flushed. She was talking about how Atlas had caught us in the cellar having sex. *Can never ever unsee that*, he’d muttered, walking away to find *some soap* to wash his eyes.

“You’re one to talk. We all know what you and Atlas were up to when you disappeared during Thanksgiving Dinner,” Ariel remarked dryly.

”*And* Christmas dinner,” Seraphina added.

“It’s all the good food; it stokes *other* appetites,” Liesel said cheerfully.

Speaking of Liesel’s *other* appetite, Atlas came up to me and kissed my forehead. “Hey, gorgeous.”

He’d become my brother in the past few months since I started working at Callahan Vineyards. For someone who’d been the family sideshow—*nothing to see here, she’s just part of the décor*—it was incredible to have a family that saw me as someone vital to the unit.

I talked to my parents and their closest friends, who they’d invited to the party, so my mother could be assured that the Indian Auntie Gossip Network would get all the details about this exclusive event in one of California’s finest restaurants.

Our private conversations were briefly interrupted as we were seated and the first amuse-bouche made its grand entrance. The presentation was theatrical: servers, moving with almost balletic grace, brought in shrimp wrapped in ransom leaves. As they set the dishes down, a mysterious mist

from dry ice swirled around, creating an ethereal atmosphere. It was like witnessing a culinary spell being cast, each plume of smoke a whisper of the magic in the air.

Tasting the food was an experience in itself. The fusion of delicate French cooking techniques with the bold, fresh flavors of California was nothing short of a revelation.

Looking around, I saw our friends and family, their faces illuminated by the soft, golden light, sharing laughter and conversation. Their presence filled the space with warmth and love, adding to the fairy-tale ambiance of the restaurant.

Thank you, I mouthed to Naina when I caught her eye. She smiled at me and nodded. Barry was with her, and I felt that they might end up together. Well, Naina wouldn't end up with someone who drove a truck...a Lamborghini was more her style.

After the main course, as the tables were cleared for dessert, Orion gripped my hand. "It's time."

I nodded. We were already engaged, but this was different with our friends and family. Orion stood up, and a hush fell over the room; the servers stopped what they were doing, and the music went down to barely there. I rose with him, and he pulled me into him in a dramatic move, bending me so he could kiss me with a flourish.

"Well then," he said when I was standing in front of him.

"Well then," I replied, feeling like my heart would burst. This was a fairytale, wasn't it? This didn't happen in real life.

He pulled out a ring from his pocket, and my eyes all but bugged out. The engagement ring that Orion chose beautifully encapsulated our unique love story.

At first glance, the ring resembled a delicate cluster of grapes. The band was gold, its surface polished to a radiant shine. The gold twisted gently around, its organic curves reminiscent of vine tendrils, lending the ring a natural, earthy grace.

The highlight of the ring was, undoubtedly, the grapes themselves, represented by a cluster of rubies, each a deep, rich red, mirroring the hue of ripe grapes basking in the sun. The stones varied subtly in size to mimic a natural grape cluster, and their placement was both random and artful.

He didn't go down on one knee because we were not those people. He winked at me and slipped the ring on my finger.

"I love you," he began, clasping my hand. "This ring is not traditional. It's not diamonds, but we're not those people."

"No." I gripped my locket with my free hand. We were wine people. We were salt of the earth people. It was OK to play princess occasionally, but our everyday lives were in a vineyard with our vines.

"This ring is us."

I nodded. "Yes, it is. It's unconventional, full of warmth, and deeply connected to the earth and nature, much like us. I love you, too, Orion. And as soon as I have enough money, I'll also buy you a ring. Promise."

“Just ask your boss for a raise,” Liesel heckled.

We laughed then and hugged. “Can I kiss you now and fuck up your makeup?” Orion whispered as he held me close.

“You’d better.”

And you know Orion; he delivered.



Continue the story with the bonus story: on my website at .

Thank you for reading *An Ugly Love*. *The Ugly Duckling* has always been a cherished fairytale of mine. However, I’ve long questioned its message that acceptance comes only with transformation—suggesting that being an outcast is just a phase before becoming conventionally beautiful. With *An Ugly Love*, I aimed to challenge this, illustrating that not every duckling needs to become a swan. This story is about embracing the often messy and imperfect nature of being human and celebrating love as the force that truly moves our world.

If you enjoyed this story, you’ll *love* the first book in the series, , where I reimagine *The Little Match Girl* in a modern context. It focuses on Liesel and Atlas’s journey to their happily ever after.

And there’s more to come. The next story in the series, , featuring Tej and Ariel.



Also by Maya Alden

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The Little Match Girl Retelling

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Quake

Book # 1: Gaia Doucet

Inferno

Book # 2: Blaze Doucet

Storm

Book # 3: Zephyr Doucet



About the Author

Maya Alden has a passion for weaving tales of love and desire.

With a background in literature and a heart filled with hope, Maya combined unforgettable characters, sizzling chemistry, and heartfelt emotions. Maya invites you to join her on a journey of love, laughter, and happily-ever-afters that will leave you with a sigh and a smile.

You can sign up for her newsletter on her website at www.MayaAlden.com; and contact her via email at maya@mayaalden.com or via social media on Facebook (@authormayaalden), Instagram (@mayaalden_romance), TikTok (@maya.alden)