

## Blood red love

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Charlie had enjoyed a day off; the day had been spent in front of her computer. Lilly had reminded her there were other people on the planet and it was nice to meet them face to face. Charlie had taken it in stride. She had tomorrow off as well, and she would eat dinner with her brother and his family. That counted as real life socialising. Not to mention she got more than enough of real people when she worked. The calls from her father had stopped coming, to Charlie's relief. As it was unusual for him to give up that easily, Charlie had called her brother and made sure he wasn't planning some kind of reunion during the dinner. Huxton promised her he would never do something like that to her and added that he wouldn't put his sons in the middle of a confrontation like that. She believed him and was looking forward to the dinner. After spending most of the day at the computer, she decided one screen needed to be exchanged for another. She ordered pizza and started scrolling to see what movie she was in the mood for. Her phone rang, and she answered without looking to see who it was.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi, Charlie," Jenni said.

"Hello boss, everything okay?" Charlie asked, knowing her boss never called unless she needed to.

"I know you are supposed to be off tomorrow, but is there any chance you can come in? I'll give you Friday off instead," Jenni said.

"What time do you need me? I'm having dinner with my brother and his family, but I could work once we are done," Charlie said.

"Oh, you're an angel. Just come when you can. We will manage until then," Jenni told her.

"I hope no one is sick. I could do without getting a cold," Charlie said.

"No, no one is sick. The Thursday club asked for you to serve them. Apparently, they liked you. They have never requested a specific waitress before." Charlie didn't know how she felt about it, but she had to admit the tip had been amazing and the men hadn't been that bad.

"Nice. I'll take it as a compliment. I'll try to get there as soon as I can tomorrow."

"No worries, enjoy some time with your family," Jenni told her.

When Charlie arrived at her brother's house the next day, the door was opened by James.

"Hi," Charlie said, surprised.

"Hi, Charlie. I hope you don't mind me joining in the family dinner. Huxton invited me as it has been a while since we have had a chance to hang out," James said as he let her in.

"No, not at all, James. You are family," she said. "Where is that brother of mine hiding?"

"The twins both had... eh... diaper incidents. I let the parents deal with it and volunteered to look after the BBQ and man the door instead," James said. Charlie laughed.

"I would have done the same," she admitted. "So how's life as a big time detective?" she asked as they walked onto the deck on the backside of the house, looking out over the very kid friendly garden.

"It's not that much different from being on patrol," he said.

"Yeah right, that's you being modest. You became detective for a reason and I have to think they want to use you for those skills," she said, nudging him with her elbow.

"Yeah, it's pretty awesome," he admitted with a grin. "And thank you for the help on my first case. I know I have said it before, but I really appreciate it and I will send more work like that your way whenever I can."

"No problem. It was fun. And thank you, it's nice to get to work with what I love every once in a while," she told him.

"Who knows? If we get you in as a regular consultant, you may even be able to quit working at that bar."

"I will gladly accept any work from the police department. But let's face it, they can never even begin to pay me what I earn at 'The red lady'," she told him.

"Money isn't everything, Charlie. It's not a safe place to work," he pointed out.

"Now you sound like my brother," she said.

"Who sounds like me? Where can I find this genius amongst men?" her brother said as he came walking with a boy on each arm. They looked to have come fresh from a bath.

"There are my favourite nephews!" Charlie said, hurrying over to say hello. Liam was the outgoing one and would cuddle with anyone that offered. Aiden was the shy one. He preferred to stay close to his dads. His one exception was Charlie, that somehow had managed to win him

over. As soon as he saw her, he started squirming in his dad's arms and made grabby hands towards her.

"I don't know what you have bribed him with, but please take the crazy monkey," her brother laughed. Charlie happily obliged and put Aiden on her hip. He snuggled in closer to her and she enjoyed the snuggle just as much as he did.

"Hey, Charlie," Tyson called as he joined them. He gave her a hug as best he could. "It didn't take long for the little monkey to attach himself to you," he added.

"Aiden is my soulmate," Charlie said.

"What were the two of you talking about before I interrupted you?" Huxton asked.

"I was trying to convince Charlie she should quit her job at that bar," James said.

"And I was telling James that I won't do it. The pay is too good and I actually like the work. The hours suit me," she told them.

"Leave her be. She knows what she's doing," Tyson said as he flipped the burgers.

"Thank you, you are my favourite brother," she told him and kissed his cheek.

"Hey, hey. I'm your favourite brother and don't go smooching on my man," her brother said and walked over to give his husband a proper kiss. With that, the conversation topic was switched to Charlie's relief. They sat down to eat and the twins shared a deconstructed hamburger. Most of it ended up on the ground or in their hair. Tyson had made cheesecake for dessert and Charlie reaffirmed he was her favourite brother.

"I need to get going," Charlie finally said as she had finished her second helping of cheesecake.

"So soon? I was thinking you could help us put the kids to bed and then we could break out the wine and beer and have adult conversations," Huxton said.

"Sorry, they needed me to work tonight. I will take a rein check on the rest. I have had an amazing time, like always," she told them.

"I can drive you," James offered. Charlie didn't see a way around it.

"Thanks," she said. She said goodbye to her brother, Tyson and the twins and smiled at James as he opened the car door for her.

"I know it's not my place to say where you can and can't work," he said, as they had been driving for a while.

“It’s okay, James. I know you do it because you care. It’s sweet of you. But I’m all grown up, I can take care of myself,” she told him. He gave her a side glance.

“I’m not that blind, Charlie. I know you’re all grown up,” he said. The way he said it stirred something deep down in her stomach. If it was the combination with the side glance or if it was the way he put the emphasis on ‘all’, she didn’t know. But it didn’t sound like an innocent remark. “You know, some of the people who are patrons at the bar where you work are under investigation from my department. I just don’t want to read your name in one of the reports,” he said. “Take this Vidar Grims. We have been trying to catch him for years, but whenever we try to arrest him, his hands are squeaky clean,” James huffed. Charlie stiffened up a little. Best not tell him Vidar gave her a ride home the other night, Charlie thought.

“I appreciate you telling me this. But they are just customers. They come in, I serve them drinks and food, they leave money and go. That’s as far as my relationship with them goes. Sometime I smile and say something kind to them, that’s it,” she told him. He sighed and nodded. They were almost at the bar. James pulled up close enough so he could see the entrance and turned towards her.

“Call me when you get off work and I will pick you up,” he said.

“James, that will not be until late night, or early morning depending on if Jenni needs help to count the money. I will take the bus,” she said.

“Fine. Then let me take you out to dinner the next time you have the evening off.”

“Dinner as in...?”

“A date, I’m asking you out on a date, Charlie. And before you say anything, I have cleared it with Huxton,” he told her with a smile playing on his lips. Charlie didn’t know what to think or how to respond. This was James, her high school crush, her brother’s best friend, and a gorgeous male specimen.

“Okay,” she said. “Are you free tomorrow?” He laughed.

“You don’t waste time, do you?” She shrugged.

“I got tomorrow off since I’m working today. If you’re busy, I have next Saturday free,” she told him.

“No, no. I don’t want you to chicken out on me. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at six,” he told her. They said goodbye and Charlie hurried inside.

“Perfect timing. They just got here,” Jenni said as she saw Charlie. Charlie changed in record time, made sure she had what she needed and headed towards the back room.

