

Blood red love

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“If it isn’t Charlie,” Nasir said with a smile as she stepped into the back room.

“Hello everyone, I’m back on popular demand. What can I get you?” she asked. She received the same order for drinks as last time, and Charlie came right back with them.

“Would you be my good luck charm during this first game? I sure could use some luck,” one of the men asked her. Charlie didn’t know his name, but he was a tall black man with deep ebony skin. He wore his hair in small braids down to his shoulders, decorated with gold cuffs. He had the most alluring eyes, the colour of honey.

“It would be my pleasure, sir,” Charlie said and walked over to him. He helped her sit on his lap and he placed his hand on her back to support her. She was surprised by how respectful he was.

“Please, call me Adisa,” he said in his dark voice. There was a faint trace of an accent when he spoke, but Charlie couldn’t place it. It suited him. The game started and Charlie tried again to understand it. It was somewhat like poker, but played in teams and it didn’t seem like the traditional poker combinations were what scored them points.

“Since we haven’t been able to guess your real name, mysterious Charlie, may we know what you want to do when you grow up?” Nasir asked.

“I’m quite grown already. What is to say I’m not satisfied with being a waitress,” she said. There was a soft laughter from several around the table. Neither Millard nor Vidar joined in. In fact, Vidar had barely acknowledged her presence. Charlie didn’t know why that rubbed her the wrong way.

“My dear Charlie, you are far too bright to have your sights set so low,” Adisa said. It was Charlie’s turn to laugh.

“Well, I guess you have me all figured out. I am hoping to return to my studies next year. I’m taking a sabbatical,” she confessed.

“I’m thinking political science, maybe something with that new feminism in focus,” Henry suggested.

“Do you really think I’m that boring?” Charlie asked, pretending to be hurt.

“No, no, the only suitable major for a woman like Charlie would be art history,” Millard told them.

“I can’t see her going for something like that,” the Asian man said. He was mostly silent, and the smoothness of his voice surprised Charlie. “I would guess something more surprising, IT maybe,” he continued. Charlie looked at him, stunned.

“By the look on our lovely waitress’ face, I would say you hit the nail on the head,” Nasir chuckled.

“You are right, I do study IT,” Charlie confirmed.

“IT is a large field. What do you specialise in?” Adisa asked. At this point, Charlie gave up. She didn’t see the harm in letting them know.

“I have a bachelor’s degree in Information Science and am working on my degree in cyber security,” she said.

“Fucking fantastic,” Vidar mumbled.

“Excuse me, what was that?” Nasir asked him with a playful smile.

“Nothing,” Vidar huffed and went back to ignoring everyone.

“Well, the mystery is starting to unfold. Now that we know what you are passionate about, maybe we can figure out that pesky name of yours. Clarissa?” Adisa guessed.

“Sorry, but no,” Charlie said. “It looks like your glasses are empty. Do you want another round?” Everyone but Millard asked for the same thing they always did.

“I would like for you to pick something you think I would like,” he told her. Charlie smiled and nodded, even though she didn’t like him.

“I will give you a grand if you bring him a neat scotch,” Henry said.

“Fuck off Henry, just because some of us have developed tastebuds,” Millard said. His temper was just below that polished surface of his and it made Charlie nervous. She walked out to the bar.

“The usual, but switch the Cosmopolitan to a Madras,” she told Jenni.

“Is it going okay?” her boss asked as she started pouring.

“Yes, they are... friendly?” Charlie said. Jennie raised an eyebrow. Mia and Rebecca, who were the two waitresses that were scheduled to work, gave her sideways looks.

“They are upset that none of them got to wait on the sexy, sexy men in that room,” Jenni told her when she saw Charlie notice the looks.

“They do realise I never asked for this, right?” Charlie asked. She didn’t need her colleagues to turn against her.

“They do, but sexy men and money tend to draw out the worst in people,” Jenni told her. Charlie nodded and took the tray with the order and headed back. The evening continued with her switching laps now and then and when she noticed the drinks running low, she asked if they wanted another round. It was close to midnight when Henry declared it was time for the men to talk business. They all ordered food and asked Charlie to come back an hour later. Charlie headed for the kitchen. As it wasn’t her night to work, she didn’t feel the need to help out in the bar area. Instead, she handed the food order into Lilly and Leo. She then plopped down on a chair that was out of the way of the kitchen staff.

“Didn’t think you were working today,” Lilly said.

“I wasn’t. Had dinner with my brother’s family. But the Thursday gang asked me to serve them. So here I am,” Charlie said.

“Wow, fancy. So how was the two little monsters?” Lilly asked. Lilly was just as much part of the family as James was. The four of them had grown up together and treated each other like siblings. Well, James had asked Charlie out.

“They were as adorable as ever. Aiden was a cuddle bug as always,” Charlie informed her friend.

“He is only that way with you,” Lilly pointed out. Charlie shrugged. “Has something happened? You seem a little unfocused,” Lilly then said. Charlie sighed and glanced towards Leo. “Leo, take your break, and take it far from here,” Lilly told him.

“Lilly,” Charlie objected.

“Don’t care, now spill,” she said as soon as Leo had left the kitchen.

“James asked me out,” Charlie told her.

“Oh.”

“Like on an actual date.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Lilly chuckled. What did you say?” Lilly asked.

“I said yes. Do you think that’s a good idea?” Charlie asked.

“I do, but, more important, what do you think?”

“I don’t know. He is hot, and he’s a good guy. I mean, he’s a detective. He is literally one of the good guys. And I know I can trust him,” Charlie told her.

“And you have had a crush on him like forever. Full on Charlie- heart- James,” Lilly said.

“Right, so it’s a good thing, right?”

“I would say so. But if you feel it’s not, that’s okay, too,” Lilly pointed out. “Does it have something to do with the asshat, shit-eating, mini dick of an ex?” she then asked. Donald, the name that was never mentioned in Lilly’s company as it would provoke an unplanned killing spree. If Charlie hadn’t had abandonment issues before she met him, she sure as hell had when he left her. In Vegas. All alone. After stealing all her money. And her car. And the key to the hotel room she had paid for. Charlie didn’t think it was strange she had been single ever since that day.

“No. I know James isn’t like him. Not even close. But, I don’t know. What if it feels like dating my brother?” Charlie asked.

“Eww. Then you say; ‘This has been nice but we both know we are better off as friends’,” Lily told her.

“Right, I’ll never know if I don’t try,” Charlie said.

“No, you won’t,” Lilly agreed. “When is the date?”

“Tomorrow, it gives me less time to chicken out. He’s picking me up at six.”

“When you get back home, if you get back home, wink, wink, nudge, nudge. You better call me and tell me everything. In details,” Lilly told her.

“I promise.”

After her hour long break, Charlie collected the food, once again helped by Leo, and knocked on the door to the back room. After giving permission, they entered and she started handing out the food.

“My dear Leo, we meet again,” Nasir said, smiling at the kitchen assistant.

“Y-yes, hello,” Leo said. Charlie tried to hold back her smile. Leo was too precious for this lot.

“Have you been able to find out the lovely Charlie’s name?” Nasir asked. He was now shamelessly flirting with Leo.

“N-no sir,” Leo told him, blushing. Charlie felt pity for her friend and decided to rescue him.

“Now, now. It’s cheating to illicit the help of Leo,” she said as she put down fish and chips in front of Nasir.

“Oh, but that infer that I play fair. That’s no fun. I much prefer to cheat any way I can,” Nasir said and all the men chuckled.

“You are a bad, bad man, Nasir,” Charlie told him. But she had achieved her goal, and the focus was no longer on Leo, who looked utterly relieved. “I’ll just get your drinks. I will be right back,” she then said and made sure Leo walked in front of her. She got the drinks for the men and then left them to eat their food in peace. After clearing out their dishes and getting a new round of drinks, Charlie’s night continued as it had begun, with her being handed around as a lucky charm. The men seemed to make sure she didn’t end up in Millard’s lap. If it was to annoy him, or to keep her safe, Charlie didn’t care. She was just grateful to not have to sit on his lap. Something about him made every one of her instincts shout danger. While Millard did his best to get her onto his lap, and failing. Vidar kept ignoring her. Charlie tried to tell herself it was a good thing. He was obviously a giant douchebag, she would admit he was a sexy douchebag, but still. She was better off staying off his radar.

As the night came to an end, all the men got up, thanked Charlie for a lovely evening, and left. Charlie tidied up and got the room ready for the cleaners. She then headed out to the bar where Mia and Rebecca were talking to Jenni.

“Hi, Charlie. Thanks again for stepping up. They seemed satisfied judging by the size of the envelope,” Jenni said, handing her another white envelope, heftier than the last one.

“Thanks, they are starting to grow on me. Most of them,” Charlie said and put the envelope in her bag, without counting. She didn’t want to flaunt it in front of Mia and Rebecca.

“Good to hear, it might have been suggested that it should be repeated next week,” Jenni told her. Charlie noticed the two other waitresses’ frowns.

“I’m game,” she said.

“We have always rotated the Thursday club,” Rebecca objected.

“Yeah, it’s only fair to give everyone a chance to get the tip,” Mia agreed.

“That is true, but that was before the customers asked for Charlie. The Thursday club is a big spending, regular, customer. I won’t piss them off just to pretend that life is fair. You both have

had your chance, more than once, and they never asked for either of you specific. So suck it up and put your big girl panties on,” Jenni told them.

“Thanks Jenni. I’ll see you in two days,” Charlie said and fled before it turned into a discussion. She had one goal; get home and count the money in the envelope. She got to the bus stop and was happy to see the next bus was only five minutes away. A black car stopped in front of her. Fuck, she thought as she recognised it. The driver’s door opened and a familiar man exited and walked around the car.

“Good evening, mademoiselle,” the driver said and opened the door in front of her.