

Ups and Downs

The next day, Josh showed up to take me to lunch. I was a little surprised. We didn't have a date planned, it was just spur of the moment. He took me to the coolest place.

It was a vegetarian barbecue restaurant. I had never seen anything like it. Of course, we didn't have any vegetarian restaurants back home, so just that was rare. But having something other than a house salad and soup was great. There were a lot of places that had meat in practically everything.

We were seated by our waitress, who took our drink orders and brought us some bread to snack on while we decided on our food. There were so many options! I was practically bouncing in my seat.

"You seem excited." Josh chuckled.

"I've never actually been to a vegetarian restaurant. Thank you for bringing me." I smiled.

"They have a few things for the meat eating crowd here. That's one of the reasons I picked it. I wanted you to have the foods you like instead of just some crappy salad, and I wanted to have the foods I liked." He winked.

"So, entirely selsh reasons then?"

"Yup." Josh laughed.

I snorted and looked over the menu. There were so many things I wanted to try. I decided on a BBQ seitan sandwich with coleslaw and fries. The picture in the menu looked just like my mom's pulled pork sandwiches. They always looked so good.

We placed our orders and snacked on the bread. I loved the atmosphere of the place. It had plank board walls and cast iron decorations. There were pictures of elds, corrals, and men herding cattle. In the center of the tables there was a small vase with silk owers and a little cast iron lantern.

"I wanted to thank you for the spell you gave me the other day. I used it in the food I made, like you said I should. Honestly, my chicken casserole never tasted as good as it did last night. I think I need a shaker of that spell for my spice rack." He joked.

"I'll get you a list of the spices that can mimic the avor without having to pay the cost of the spell each time. I'm glad it worked out for you. Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

"That's what I'm bringing you out to celebrate. I talked to my dad and mom. I told them honestly what I was thinking and feeling. They told me what they were thinking and feeling. Dad didn't realize how upset I would be at him giving the company to Greg. He didn't realize how much I cared about it. Instead of handing it all over to my brother, He's going to name us co-owners and me president of the company once he retires next year. My brother will start at the bottom, but with a larger salary than everyone else. This will give him the experience he needs." Josh explained.

"What wonderful news! I'm so happy for you, Josh." I smiled.

"If not for you, it could have ended in a big ght instead of with smiles and a plan. I don't know how to repay you, Clover. I really appreciate your help on this."

"You can give me a huge discount on your services and take over the accounting for the shop and teahouse. It would give me one less thing to worry about." I suggested.

"Done. I'll make it a permanent deal, too. For as long as both companies exist, your accounting will have a fty percent discount, sound good?" He asked.

"And you're still paying for lunch." I laughed.

"Well now you're just asking too much." Josh chuckled.

Our food was delivered shortly after. I had never had such a wonderful sandwich. The texture of the seitan was perfect and the spice and smoke in the sauce really made for an amazing avor. It turned out that they sold the bottles of sauce right in the restaurant, so I bought two. I had to add this to my meal rotation.

Josh and I talked all through the meal. I told him about the hectic ow of customers, about the upcoming vampire night at the teahouse, and about the pretty owers my mom sent. I didn't tell him that I thought they were from Steven, or anything about my life before this. I wanted to have some sense of normalcy.

When we got back to the shop, Josh asked me if I'd like to go to a club with him and his friends on Friday, since I would be busy on Saturday. I asked if my friends could come, too, and he agreed. I couldn't wait to ask Jen and Emmalyn if they wanted to come with. It would be so much fun.

I bounced into the shop and went to put my purse and sauces away in the oce before I headed back onto the oor. Jen had a big smile. I knew what was coming.

"Did you have fun with Joshie?" She asked.

"We had a lovely lunch. He took me to a place that serves vegetarian barbecue. It was so good and I have a new recipe now." I replied.

"So does this mean you're ocially dating?" Jen pressed.

"No. We're friends. Speaking of that. He asked if we would want to join him and his friends at a club on Friday. What do you think?" I asked, switching the subject.

"Oh! That sounds like fun. Are his friends as hot as him?"

"I don't know. What about you, Emmalyn? You want to go out?" I asked.

"Sure. I haven't been out in a while. I'm not great around crowds like in a club, but I'll just stick to you two." She answered.

"Awesome!" I squealed and did a little happy dance, making them laugh.

We worked hard for the rest of the day. I went into the oce to do the day's intake while they restocked and cleaned up. We were really starting to get in the swing of things. This would be even better as time went on.

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Thursday made the bottom fall out of my little happy cup. A delivery came with a box lled with all my favorite snacks and treats. Though I hoped it was from my mom, the note in the box dashed those hopes.

Darling Clover,

I've just gotten an apartment in town and went out to explore. I found a vegan market that has all your favorites. I bought you a supply until I can take you to the store and shop with you. Remember all the fun times we had shopping together? Then we can go back to my place. I've found all sorts of interesting vegetarian recipes. I would love to cook you dinner.

I live to serve you, my precious Clover, my darling mistress. I am your willing slave forever.

Only and always yours,

Steven

I cringed. He was in town. It was only a matter of time before he came to the shop to try and woo me. I groaned.

"What's wrong?" Jen asked.

"It's from Steven. I don't want to throw these away, because I've been craving some and hadn't had a chance to look up where to nd them here. If I accept them, that's the same as accepting him in his eyes. This had to have cost a good deal to buy and mail to me, even in town. There's no return address, so I can't send it back to him. What do I do?" I sighed.

"Keep it. There's nothing you can do. Might as well enjoy it." Jen said.

"Offer the snacks in the teahouse for free. I never keep whatever Derrick sends me. If there's no return address, it goes to a second-hand store. He learned that one the hard way." Emmalyn advised.

"Good plan." I nodded and carried the box to the teahouse.

I cut off the aps and wrote 'free snacks' on the side of the box. Several people immediately started looking through the box once I left it. I would have to nd that vegan market.

We nished out our day and I locked up. Josh texted me while I was eating dinner and we hammered out our plans for the next night. I was still super excited.

The whole day I'd been on a high that only the delivery of Steven's box had brought down. But it couldn't keep me down. I was free and I was going to enjoy myself.

It was decided, that Emmalyn, Jen, and I would meet them at the club a couple hours after we closed. He sent me the address. Apparently, his rm did the accounting for the club, so Josh was always on the list to get in. The guys would meet us out front and we'd all go in together.

The plan was for dancing and drinks, then Josh would take me back to my place. I texted the plans to Jen and Emmalyn, but made sure to let Jen know I would only need a ride to the club. She made some inappropriate and entirely accurate statements about who and what I'd be riding later that night.

Jen never judged me and I loved that about her. She was just happy to be around her friends and having a good time. That was exactly what I needed in my life, an uncomplicated relationship.

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Friday night came and I was amped up to go out. I'd been to some clubs in bigger cities while I was in college. I'd always had a lot of fun with my friends back then.

I had a wonderful dress for the club. It was dark green and tight until it reached my hips where it fell to mid-thigh. One of the downsides to being as tall as I was, dresses and skirts that should reach a person's knees tended to be shorter on me. I didn't mind it all that much, it only made it hard when I was trying to nd something more modest to wear.

After nishing my makeup and hair, I pulled out some shoes with a slightly thicker heel, so I wouldn't break an ankle while dancing. Once I was all put together, I read a book while I waited for Jen. She had texted that she was on her way, so I didn't gure on waiting too long.

Ten minutes later, she texted that she had arrived. I locked up and headed downstairs. Jen's parents may have been a little ighty, but her father actually had a really good paying job. They had bought her a nice car and I was a little excited to roll up in the expensive looking vehicle.

"You ready to dance your ass off?" Jen asked as I got in and buckled up.

"You know it. This is just the thing to take my mind off Steven." I answered.

She backed out of the parking spot and headed to the club. "You don't worry about watching your back tonight. I'm planning to be the only one without a hangover at work tomorrow."

"Any witch worth her salt wouldn't have a hangover. I already have a potion worked up and settled on my nightstand for the morning." I laughed.

"Did you make one for Joshie, too?" Jen giggled.

"If he drinks, it won't be enough to be drunk. As an accountant, he's got a responsible streak. Plus, he doesn't want to disappoint me with a case of whiskey dick." I snorted.

She laughed as we pulled into the parking lot of the club. They had valet parking, but Jen didn't like the idea of anyone else driving her car, so she parked it herself and we walked around to the front of the club. There was a bit of a line.

We walked past it. Josh had said to meet him by the entrance. When we approached, I saw Emmalyn there. She had her hair done up in a braid around the crown of her head. I thought it was adorable.

Emmalyn was wearing a blue dress that hung loosely from her slight curves and she had a shawl of the same color wrapped over her shoulders. I waved and she looked relieved. She'd told us she had issues with big crowds, I couldn't imagine that waiting there had been comfortable for her.

"You look so good, Emmalyn!" I smiled.

"My sister did my hair. She loves this sort of thing." She blushed.

"I didn't know you live with your sister." I said.

"Oh, I don't. She came by my apartment while I was trying to gure out what to wear. She wanted to invite me to a sleepover with her friends. Amelia has always tried to include me when she could. She helped me pick everything out." Emmalyn replied.

"Next time, you can invite her too, and we'll all have fun together. It can be a little payback for all the times she invited you out with her and her friends." I told her.

"Maybe. It will depend on how this all goes. I'm more of a staying in and hanging out sort of person." She said.

I nodded. "Got it."