Chapter 12

I Mean, Are Wieners Even Religious?

Since we were out and about and all vaguely frustrated, I decided to treat everyone to a real Rhode Island staple—a hot wiener from New York System. I herded my little flock into the small, diner-style restaurant. There were signs offering fish and chips and all kinds of other culinary delights, which were no doubt delightful. My friends would never know. To give them the full experience, I ordered while they grabbed a booth. They would be forced to reckon with my choices. Hospitality—do it aggressively, or don’t bother, that’s my motto.

I ordered coffee milk for everyone, fries and of course, hot wieners. I waited as the guy at the grill deftly lined the steamed buns up on his arm, followed by wieners and all the toppings. If I tried to do that, I would drop them everywhere—if I didn’t eat them first. That wasn’t false modesty. When I was a seventeen, I told my dad I wanted to apply to work here so I could learn how to do it. After my dad stopped laughing, he explained why I should reconsider. It wasn’t that I wasn’t coordinated. The problem was, after I mastered the ability to do the trick of lining up all those buns and filling them, I’d get bored. When that happened, I’d stop paying attention, which meant a floor full of deliciousness and very unhappy customers.

Once our wieners were ready, the cook slid them onto a plate, two each, and I took everything over to our table. I placed them reverently before my friends. I might have even bowed. Respect needed to be shown to our meal.

“What is this?” Edda asked, eyeing our spread warily.

“That, my friend, is a hot wiener with mustard, meat sauce, onions, and celery salt.” I grabbed the bottle of apple cider vinegar and slid it her way. “That is for your fries before you put ketchup and salt on them.” I gave a final game show host flourish to our drinks. “And this is coffee milk. Don’t question it, just enjoy.”

“I feel like I should question it a little,” Edda said. “No ketchup on the wieners?”

I pointed at the sign that told all diners in no uncertain terms that anyone asking for or putting ketchup on their hot wiener would go to wiener hell, which sounded like the worst kind of hell. I’d always wondered about that sign—was the hell supposed to be for the wieners, or for us?

Tally grabbed her first bun, taking a tentative bite. Then her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped in her seat. “That is so good.”

I slid into the booth next to her. “You’re my new favorite. Congratulations.”

Edda snagged the vinegar and applied it carefully to her fries. “Don’t get too excited. I was her favorite before, and I have several scars with her name on them.”

Grant hadn’t said anything, so I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He wasn’t even smiling as he drank his coffee milk, which I’m pretty sure is illegal in the state of Rhode Island. He would probably go to wiener hell for it.

“How is your wiener?” I asked him completely straight-faced and with every ounce of sincerity I own, which honestly isn’t much.

Grant set down his coffee milk. “How many times since we’ve walked through these doors have you said or thought the word wiener?”

“A lot,” I said. “At least this much.” I held my arms out wide, almost smacking Tally in the face.

Grant rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. “Is there a reason you can’t say hot dog like a normal person?”

“Yeah,” I said, taking a sip of my drink. “It’s not a hot dog.” When he looked like he wanted to argue, I waved at my plate. “Look, a lot of people will argue with you about the differences, and most people use the term interchangeably. I can show you the paper I wrote on it in high school when we get home. Just know this—they aren’t the same thing, and if you call it a hot dog here, a townie is going to shank you.”

Edda put her hands flat on the table. “Hold up, you wrote a paper?”

“Sure did. Lots of sources and everything.” Which was true. I was very proud of that paper. “If ‘wiener’ is upsetting you, the other acceptable term is a ‘gagger,’ but never, ever a hot dog.”

“You’re just making this up now,” Grant said.

I put my hand over my heart. “May I be dragged screaming down into wiener hell if I’m lying.”

Grant looked like he wanted to keep arguing, but Edda stopped him with a look. “So what’s the plan now?”

“We need to take you back to the house. I want you to try to hack into whatever cameras the hotel has and see if we can figure out who Tanzer left with. Can you do that?”

Edda daintily ate her fry. “Are you serious right now? Can I do that? *You* could probably do that. People put all kinds of things in place to safeguard their computers, but security cameras? Sometimes they don’t even bother to change the password on the software. I don’t think it will be any problem. We just have to hope they keep a recording of their video feed for a long enough time.”

 I took another glorious bite of my food and chewed for a second. “If my mom is still there, I’ll ask her if Ed found anything. If not, maybe one of us can take Tally out shopping.”

Tally looked wistfully at her empty plate. “My pride wants to argue with you. I don’t have access to my money, and I haven’t been working anyway. But there are things that I need—certain basic supplies.”

“You need good clothes, too.” I waved her off when she tried to argue. “Look, people pay attention to appearances. You need good clothes to fit in. Also, it’s just…you need clothes, okay?”

An evil grin lit Tally’s face. “You’re being *nice* to me and you hate it.”

“I do,” I said, sucking up the last of my coffee milk with my straw. “I really do.”

“Okay, then,” Tally said. “I’ll go shopping.”

Is it terrible that I liked her more because she was doing it out of spite?

Once our bellies were pleasantly full, we went home and split up. Edda attacked the video feeds from her perch in the dining room. My parents took Tally shopping. Oh, to be a fly on the wall for that excursion. I decided to take a walk. Mostly because I’d just eaten a lot of heavy protein, and walking would help the food settle. I also wanted to take a peek at the neighborhood. It is always good to know your surroundings well, because then if something was wrong or out of place, you’d see it sooner.

I made Grant go with me. He was quiet for the first block, which was how long it took before my patience snapped completely. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

“That was faster than I thought,” Grant said. “I was sure you’d take longer to break.”

I growled, shoving my hands into my pockets. Then I stopped and sighed. Stupid Cupids. Stupid feelings. I reached out and grabbed his wrist. “You’re sad. I think. I don’t like it.”

He looked at my hand on his wrist and I tried to let go, but he grabbed my hand with his. Fine, if it got him to talk, he could hold my hand.

“Do you know how my arrows work?”

I tipped my head back and forth. “Sort of.”

Grant laughed, and I was happy to hear the sound, even if it was smaller and sadder than usual. “Which means Jonah or I tried to tell you, and you tuned us out partway through.”

“Yes,” I said. “Exactly that.”

“I make my own arrows out of things you don’t normally make them out of. Different materials hold emotions differently, and it’s not identical for every Cupid. We don’t do things the same way because no one feels things in an identical way, and the arrows have to be attuned to us or they won’t work as well. So I might use sea glass and wire from an old toy to hold nostalgia. Metal from a toy car and bright hair ribbon might work for joy. It’s something we have to learn how to do.”

“Like you’ve been teaching Jonah.”

“Right. To do that, you have to learn to open yourself up to feelings, memories, thoughts. You can’t run from any of it, even if you want to. Hiding from tough feelings—it’s a very human thing to do. It’s not easy to have to be honest with yourself about things all the time.”

“No arguments here,” I said. Hiding from feelings was my super power. “So you have to find things that resonate with you.” We turned a corner and a neighbor’s dog came running along the fence, a big, brown pit bull. Since his body language was friendly, I paused and let him sniff the back of my free hand through the fence. There’s always a chance I’ll need to do some sneaking, and it was good to know where the dogs were and to introduce myself. “Wait, does that resonating thing stop when the arrow is made?”

Grant shook his head, his smile pained. “Now you’re getting to it. No. We can’t shut it off. It’s the price we pay to use the arrow. The emotion has to cut both ways, otherwise we might be too free with them, you know?”

I digested this—it made sense. All magic had a price, just like anything else in the universe. “But I’ve seen you use your magic before. You’ve always seemed fine.”

Grant leaned over to let the dog sniff his hand before we moved on. “It’s usually fine. I’m used to it—feeling what they feel, seeing what they see.”

“You get their memories, too?”

Grant nodded, his face tilted away from me as he scanned the neighborhood. “Yes. I think it keeps us honest in a sense.”

“If you’re not willing to take the emotional hit, you shouldn’t dish it out? That sort of thing?”

“Exactly.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes, looking like any other couple out for a walk—if that couple was taking a little too much interest in their surroundings. Grant knew what he was doing and was getting the lay of the land as much as I was.

I could have let it drop. Grant had given me enough information that I could guess at what was bugging him, but I had the feeling that he needed to unload his burden a little. “What arrow did you hit her with? The old standard?”

“Love? No,” Grant said, the side of his mouth kicking up as he stepped to the side creating a bigger gap between us so that we didn’t walk over the sidewalk chalk dinosaur that one of the neighbor kid’s had lovingly drawn. It was pink and blue with a giant head, but it made me smile. “I shot her with acceptance.”

“Oh,” I said, as he pulled us back so that our shoulders brushed as we walked. “With her reaction, I just assumed—”

“Acceptance is a powerful thing.” Grant dropped my hand and skipped down a chalk hopscotch board until the end, then back down to me again. Once he was finished he crossed his arms and waited.

I rolled my eyes, but skipped and hopped faithfully to the top and back. It was faster than arguing with him. “You were saying?”

He took my hand again and resumed walking. “Your dad loves you, which is powerful enough on its own. But he also accepts you completely as is. Russel would never ask you to change who you are. He would encourage you to grow and become a better you, but even if you didn’t, his feelings wouldn’t change. Not everyone has that.”

“So the receptionist?”

“Jen. She would do anything to have her parents accept her.” He stopped at another corner, dropping my hand to rub at the back of his neck. He watched as a family on bikes rode past, not looking at me. “Jen fell in love at sixteen with a girl named Katie who lived down the street.” He still wouldn’t look at me, even though the bicyclists were gone. “First love, and all that it entails. At that age, you feel everything so deeply. You love desperately. Jen’s parents found out.”

My heart dropped. “And it didn’t go well?”

He shook his head slowly. “They’re conservative. Religious. Kicked her out of the house. She had to go live with her aunt which meant changing schools. Uprooting her life completely. They haven’t spoken to her since.”

“But you made her feel accepted, and that’s upset you?”

“It wasn’t real.” Grant’s words were choked. “She deserves to really have that. That acceptance should be hers, and I can’t do a damn thing to fix it. Worse, I used it to get something we wanted.”

And that was the problem. Jen hurt and Grant couldn’t help her. I turned him around gently, raised up on my toes, and wrapped him up in a hug. “We didn’t want the information for selfish needs—we needed it to save people. So I don’t think you can really say we used her. At least not selfishly.” I gave him a little shake. “You can’t help everyone.”

“I know.” He slipped his arms around me, buried his head into that niche where shoulder and neck meet.

I squeezed him tighter. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t try.”

He leaned back then, blinking, his eyes wet. “What?”

I shrugged. “We have a pretty kick-ass team. Think we can’t figure out something to help Jen? Please,” I scoff. “We’re professionals.”

He gave a surprised laugh. “What, you’re going to beat her parents into compassion and empathy?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. Give me some credit.” I used the palm of my hand to wipe his cheeks. “I’ll work on it. Unless I can’t think of anything. *Then* we move on to the beatings.”

Grant slowly shook his head. “You’re a complete sham, you know that? Acting like you have no heart.”

“I have one, it’s just not like the one you have. Or other people. Normal people. Shut up, okay?”

Grant just laughed and pulled me tighter into his arms, kissing me right there in the middle of the sidewalk.

Well, that backfired, didn’t it?