

A GOOD DAY FOR CHARDONNAY

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*Welcome to Del Sol,
Home of Something . . .
Or Somebody Famous . . .
Someday . . .
Maybe . . .*

Sunshine stared into her cup of coffee as though it were a witch's cauldron, a window revealing all the ways she could kill her parents. Their deaths would be slow and methodical and painful. Much like the date she was on now.

She looked across the table at said date—the third one her parents had set her up with in as many weeks—and feigned interest by lifting a brow in dire need of professional attention.

“There’s a lot more to pest control than people realize.”

She’d tried to wax her own brows once.

“Our work can get pretty dangerous.”

Ripping out one’s facial hair took nerve.

“Last year I was attacked by a swarm of carnivorous beetles.”

And painkillers.

“Another time, I thought I’d been bitten by a copperhead and fell down three flights of stairs.”

And possibly a blood coagulant.

“Turns out I was just electrocuted.”

If Sun were totally honest with herself—

“I will never stick my hand inside an RV’s plumbing system again.”

—and she liked to think she was—

“I don’t care what the literature says.”

—Carver wasn’t the worst date she’d ever had.

“Then there was the time I tried to tame a jellyfish.”

His height alone was enough to turn heads.

“Its name was Loki.”

And he’d been graced with thick muddy curls.

“He glowed in the dark.”

Ashen-gray eyes.

“Not that Loki had anything to do with my job.”

And a sharp angular face.

“It’s just, in case you’ve ever wondered—”

On a scale of one to Ferrari, Carver was a solid Ford Explorer.

“—jellyfish *cannot* be domesticated.”

He’d make some lucky girl a fine ex-husband one day.

“I have the doctor’s bills to prove it.”

Still, there was something off about him.

“They don’t have brains.”

Something Sun couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“Jellyfish. Not doctors.”

He was handsome but not in a charming way.

“Insects do, though.”

Smart but not in a clever way.

“Did you know there are over five million species of insects in the world?”

Nice but not in a genuine way.

“And thirty-five thousand species of spiders.”

In a word, he was not Levi Ravinder.

“Thankfully, they rarely bother humans.”

But so few men were.

“Even ones as pretty as you.”

True, Carver paled in comparison to Levi Ravinder, but so did every other man Sun had ever met. The fact that she’d been in love with Levi since she was a kid didn’t help. No one stood a chance against the bad boy from a crime-ridden family who’d done good.

And now, instead of being with the man of her dreams, she was stuck with bug guy. She could only hope her parents’d had the foresight to buy side-by-side burial plots before setting her up.

“Is that your phone?”

Sunshine snapped out of her musings and dug through her bag for her phone like it was a life preserver on the *Titanic*. “Hello?” she said, sounding more desperate than she’d intended. She cleared her throat and began again. “Sheriff Vicram.”

A male voice eerily resembling her BFF’s spoke in hushed tones.

“You told me to call if he came back.”

Sun froze. Her sidekick since kindergarten, who also happened to be her chief deputy, sounded panicked. Though he did seem to panic more often than most men, Sun fought a wave of anxiety.

“Randy,” he added.

“He didn’t.”

“Did too,” he said defensively.

“Okay, look, stay calm, Quince.”

Quincy Cooper had been her bestie since she'd throat-punched Peter Bailey for knocking him down on the playground. Quince had grown since then. Now he looked roughly like an industrial freezer with a grin that could melt the panties off a comatose nun.

Peter Bailey eventually got throat cancer, but Sun liked to think it had less to do with her throat punch and more to do with his three-pack-a-day habit.

"Stay calm?" he mimicked, incredulous. "You stay calm. Have you seen the size of this guy?"

"Quince, we've got this." She grabbed her bag and stood. "Call for backup. Everyone. Get Zee and Salazar there ay-sap. I'll be there in five. By the way, who's Randy?"

He released an annoyed sigh, drawing it out as though he were competing for Miss Drama Queen, USA. "The raccoon."

She stopped, slammed her eyes shut, and spun to face away from her date. When she spoke, she spoke softly so Carver the pest-preneur wouldn't overhear. "You called me about a raccoon?"

"Yes, I called you about a raccoon. You told me to. He's wreaking havoc all over town."

"All over town as in *your house*."

"There, too."

She took a deep breath and turned back to Carver. "I'm so sorry. I've been called in. Power outages on the other side of town. People running into walls. It's utter chaos."

He shot out of his chair. "Oh, no, that's okay. I mean, you are the *sheriff*." There.

That odd niggling at the back of her neck.

It was the way he said *sheriff*. As though her holding such a position was preposterous. Never mind her master's degree in criminal justice. Or her ten years on the Santa Fe police force, seven of which she served as a detective. To him, she was a curvy blonde. End of story. She'd sensed it the moment his gaze landed on her.

And her breasts.

Mostly her breasts.

Curse her ability to read people like the ingredients label on a bottle of water.

Most people, anyway. Levi Ravinder? Not so much.

When she started to walk away, Carver called out to her. "Do you want me to get this?"

She stopped again, stunned. After a moment, she took a deep, calming breath. As slowly and methodically as she'd been planning her parents' deaths, she

pivoted around to him. “Not at all.” She walked back, took out a ten, and dropped it onto the table.

“Oh, yours was only a couple of bucks.”

She knew exactly how much her cup of coffee was. It was a freaking cup of coffee. With a nod, she gestured toward his triple espresso caramel soy macchiato with a dash of cinnamon and extra nondairy whip, and said, “It’s on me.”

He beamed at her, clearly impressed. “Well, thank you, Sunshine. Most women don’t take that kind of initiative.”

And she’d moisturized for this.

“I’d love to see you again.”

Wedging a smile between the hard lines that had marbled her face, she turned and headed out the door. Not that she’d actually expected him to pay for her coffee. Going dutch was always best in these situations. But, seriously, it was a dollar fifty.

One.

Dollar.

Fifty.

A buck and a half.

Twelve bits.

She couldn’t rush off to her power outage fast enough. The fact that she’d lied about it was entirely beside the point.

She unlocked her cruiser and settled inside, thankful she hadn’t dressed so much to the nines as to the five-and-dimes. Sixes at best. Sure, she’d applied makeup, a rarity these days, but she wore a peach summery sweater, faded jeans, and pretty suede boots with just enough of a heel to make her a danger to herself and anyone within a ten-foot radius.

Making a quick U-turn out of the parking lot, she headed toward Quince’s house. She almost felt bad about abandoning her half-date soy latte with a splash of objectification and extra nondairy whipped misogyny. Carver was new to town, the owner and operator of the Four Cs, a.k.a. the Creepy Crawler Critter Control. And he—

Wait. She stepped on the brakes and frowned in thought. How did someone get an RV up three flights of stairs?

* * *

Sun had to make the arduous drive through the town of Del Sol to get to Quincy’s cabin. So, like, five minutes. Caffeine-Wah had opened the outdoor area beside their coffee shop. Both locals and tourists sat around a blazing firepit despite the

sultry night, listening to an acoustic guitarist and drinking cappuccinos spiked with either Irish cream or Dark River Shine, Del Sol's homegrown corn whiskey.

Even the newlyweds, Ike and Ida Madrid, were there, with their prize rooster, Puff Daddy, on a leash, much to the delight of the other patrons. Four months ago, those two had been mortal enemies, and yet marriage became them. Surely there was hope for the rest of humanity. And Sun. Eventually.

She glanced over at a couple of the locals as she passed, only mildly curious where one might obtain a leash for a rooster. Bernadette, the owner of Swirls-N-Curls, and Juana, the owner of Sun's favorite Mexican restaurant, Tia Juana's, sat at a high table having way too much fun for there to only be coffee in their cups.

The two women were Del Sol natives, born and raised, thus Sun's mind meandered to the question that had been plaguing her since moving back. She'd been encouraged—a.k.a. blackmailed—into looking into a local myth that had been around for decades about the Dangerous Daughters, a group of women who, according to legend, secretly ran the town.

Because of that, she looked at every woman who'd been born and raised in the small hamlet as a potential Daughter. But she just couldn't see Bernadette running a town. A bingo parlor maybe, or a speakeasy, but not a town.

Juana, however, was another story. That woman could run a battalion.

Sun took a right at the town square and spotted Doug, their local flasher, walking toward the illuminated park. Painfully thin and wearing his usual trench coat, thick glasses, and a headband with a feather in it, he made a U-turn when he saw her cruiser and headed down a dark alley. She'd clearly foiled his plans for the evening. Served him right. That man was a menace.

Feeling good about the fact that she'd saved an innocent pedestrian from a flashing that could never be unseen, Sun drove out to Del Sol Lake and parked down the street from Quincy's cabin. Mostly because she had no choice. He'd taken her quite literally when she said to call in everyone.

Two deputy's vehicles sat on one side of the narrow road leading to his house along with several vehicles whose owners Sun could only speculate. Though one did look hauntingly familiar. White Buick Encore. Cracked taillight. Sign that read HONK IF YOU LIKE THE TACO. Which did not mean what her mother thought it meant.

Sun spared a moment to pinch the bridge of her nose when a hand shot out of a bush and pulled her behind it. Thankfully, the hand was attached to a body. A body named Quincy Lynn Cooper.

Wearing a pair of night-vision goggles that covered the upper half of his face, he dragged her around the cabin and yanked her behind yet another bush, before shushing her with an index finger over his mouth and pointing to his back porch.

“I didn’t say anything,” she whispered, slapping at his hand, annoyed at being yanked while having to navigate the rough terrain in heels.

“He’s there,” Quince said, his whisper much softer than hers. It was then that Sun realized he was wearing full tactical gear to go with the goggles and comm set. It took everything in her not to react, and she fought a strong urge to pinch the bridge of her nose again.

Instead, she looked through the foliage and saw nothing. “Where?”

“There.” He pointed toward the shadows of his back porch. “Somewhere. I heard him, but the coward is too afraid to show his face when I’m around.”

Sun frowned. Stakeouts were not a favorite pastime, and who knew how long it would be before the masked bandit emerged from the home he’d invaded. The same home he’d been invading repeatedly for weeks, according to the behemoth beside her.

Quincy’s small cabin sat on the banks of the Pecos River, and she let the sound of rushing water wash over her. She could even smell it. Fresh and clear. His cabin had previously been a rental for tourists and resembled four others just like it, but they were far enough apart to offer a nice bit of privacy thanks to some strategically placed vegetation.”

Maroon paint, in bad need of a fresh coat, framed the exposed pine exterior and wraparound porch that ran the length of the abode. Sun loved little more than sitting on that porch with Quincy, sipping on a glass of chardonnay and watching the setting sun glisten over the Pecos like diamonds and ambers and amethysts. But the sun had set an hour earlier, hence the goggles.

When he handed her a pair along with a comm set and a quick, “Here,” Sun fought a giggle. He’d gone all out. For a raccoon. She took the equipment and feigned a fit of coughs to cover her amusement.

He didn’t buy it. He pressed his mouth together and ignored her as she struggled to untangle a blond lock of hair from a branch, then slipped the headset onto her head.

“Quince,” she said, letting her eyes adjust to the green glow behind the goggles to focus on figure after figure stalking through the forested area, “when I said to call everyone in, I didn’t mean, you know, *everyone*.”

“Well then, you shouldn’t have said everyone. Besides, I needed help from on high.”

“God?” she asked, fitting the earpiece he handed her into her left ear.

“No, sniper. Zee is on top of Mr. Chavez’s barn.”

A hushed female voice came over the radio. “You look great, boss.”

Then another. Deputy Tricia Salazar, a curvy twenty-something with doe eyes and chipmunk cheeks, was learning to be Zee’s spotter. “I agree. You should wear your civvies more often, boss.”

Sun turned and, even though she couldn't actually see the deputies atop the rickety barn, flashed them her best supermodel smile. She could only imagine what that looked like with the alien tactical gear on her face. "Thank you, guys." She tossed her hair over a shoulder. "At least someone noticed."

"Oh, yeah," Quincy said, keeping a weather eye on his back porch. "How'd the date go?"

"Well enough to justify a plea of temporary insanity when I kill my parents. Why are you risking my deputies' lives for a rodent?"

He snorted. "They'll be fine. Even if they fall, it's not a tall barn. They'll shake it off."

"Like when you fell off your grandfather's barn and cried for two hours?"

"I was six. What did this one do for a living?"

"You mean after my last blind date, the breatharian life coach?"

"Yeah." He scratched his chin. "I wouldn't have figured your mother as one to set you up with a man living out of his van. Clearly, you're depreciating with age."

"Clearly. Mom said he was still finding himself."

"How old was he?"

"Early seventies. Thankfully, tonight's victim was more age-appropriate. And he had a job! Pest control. Or at least I think it was pest control. I wasn't really paying attention." When he ripped off the goggles and turned to gape at her, his eyes glowing green through her lenses, she asked, "What?"

"Let me get this straight," he said, ironically straightening to his full height of six feet, four inches, with shoulders spanning a similar distance. "You were on a date with a *pest control* guy when I called with a *pest control* issue, and you left him at the *café*?"

She stabbed him with the best glare in her arsenal, number 12.2—she'd recently upgraded—even though its genius was wasted behind the goggles. "Of course I left him at the café. Can you imagine what he would've charged for an after-hours emergency?"

"Budget issues?"

She snorted. "That's an understatement. My left pinky is bigger than our budget."

He gave her a surprised once-over. "As opposed to your right one?"

"I know right? I have weird fingers."

"Please. You should see my toes."

"I want to see them," Zee said over the comm."

"Never, sis. My toes are very private."

Quincy and Zee had decided they were twins separated at birth when they met four months ago. Since Quince was a blond-haired, blue-eyed wreck with few

worthwhile talents—because the ability to sleep standing up didn't count—and Zee was a tall, gorgeous black woman who could shoot the wings off a fruit fly at hundred yards, Sun highly doubted the validity of their claim. Also, neither was adopted. So there was that.

“Okay, Quince, I have a random, off-the-cuff question,” Sun said randomly and off-the-cuff.

“Shoot.”

“What in the name of God is my mother doing here?” Sun watched as her mother tiptoed through the sultry night air, easing closer to Quincy's back porch. She'd pulled her graying blond hair into a ponytail that always made her look younger than her fifty-five years. A gauze tunic hung loosely over her slim frame.

“You said to call for backup.”

“And you called my mother?” she asked, her voice rising a notch.

“No. I called her book club. Those ladies are fierce.” The grin he wore made it impossible to be annoyed. He had a point, after all.

Sun scanned the area, now littered with women who'd run out of fucks to give decades ago, and focused on two in particular. They carried butterfly nets, one as though it were an assault rifle, the other as though it were a missile launcher.

“Just two more quick questions,” she said.

He pulled the goggles back into position, and said, “Hit me.”

“Why the hell do they have butterfly nets and where did they get them on such short notice?”

He chuckled and gestured toward a wily, five-foot firecracker in full camouflage regalia and neon pink crocs that were so blinding through the goggles Sun had to look away. Wanda also happened to be the one carrying her butterfly net like a missile launcher, which fit her personality to a tee.

“I think every time the men in white coats come for Wanda, she steals their nets and runs away.”

The deputies laughed softly through the comm, Zee's an alluring, husky thing, and Deputy Salazar's a bubbly giggle like champagne. Or denture-cleaning tablets.

“That wouldn't surprise me,” Sun said, wondering in the back of her mind if any of her mother's book club mates could be associated with the Dangerous Daughters. If it were even real. “It would also not surprise me if she brought the butterfly net more for you than for the raccoon.”

He laughed again, but quickly changed his mind. Concern flashed across the part of his boyishly handsome face that she could see. “You're joking, right?”

Sun shrugged. Wanda had always had a thing for the intrepid deputy. Sadly, the intrepid deputy had always had a thing for Sun's mother, which would explain his calling in her book club more than his lame-ass excuse.

She used to think Quincy's crush was just a post-pubescent schoolboy thing, but since she'd moved back to Del Sol four months ago, Quince constantly asked about her mom. How was she? What she was up to? Had she ever had an affair with a younger, freakishly comely man?

It was weird. And getting weirder every day. So much so, in fact, that Sun had caught onto his ruse about a month in. He was deflecting. Straight up. He was in love with someone else, and he didn't want her to know. *Her*. Sunshine Vicram. His best friend since the sandbox.

Sun vowed to find out who he was rounding the bases and sliding into home with if it were the last thing she did on this Earth. To date, she'd narrowed it down to thirty-seven women (and two men, just in case). She was so close she could taste victory. Or wishful thinking. Emotional figures of speech tasted startlingly similar."

Her phone dinged with a text from her date asking if everything was okay.

Before she could answer, Quincy whispered so loudly he probably scared off the masked bandit. "There he is!"

Sun glanced at the porch and, sure enough, the little guy was climbing out of a tiny hole in the ceiling of Quincy's porch as though being poured out of it, his fur fluffing up to three times his actual size. It reminded Sun she needed to cut back on the carbs.

Quince slid his goggles down and raised his dart gun, a non-lethal tranquilizer launcher that looked like a combination of an assault rifle and a water gun.

"Please don't tranq my mother," Sun said, cringing as she stood beside him and watched the critter through her goggles.

Before he could get a clear shot, however, Wanda ran forward, her net at the ready. "I'll get 'em!"

"Shit," Quince said. Abandoning his cover, he vaulted around the bush toward the melee of vigilant women.

Sun fought off the branch again and followed, trying not to twist her ankle. She watched as Wanda, her mother, and Darlene Tapia, another member of the infamous Book Babes Book Club, ascended the stairs to the porch and rushed the panicked, screeching creature.

Poor little guy. Sun would've screeched, too. Those women were alarmingly fast runners.

"Don't get near it!" Quincy shouted.

"It's okay, handsome." Wanda took a swipe at the ball of fur, just missing it by several tenths of a mile. "I was vaccinated for rabies when I was a kid. I'm immune."

Sun's heart jumped into her throat as Wanda got closer. The rabies angle had yet to occur to her. "I'm not sure it works that way, Wanda!"

"I can't see anything," Elaine Freyr said, now watching from a safe-ish distance on the porch as her friends advanced. She spun in a complete circle, searching the shadows of the porch. "Where'd it go?"

Darlene Tapia followed suit. All three women were in the dizzying midst of full-on adrenaline rushes, screaming and recoiling with the slightest movement, Wanda swinging wildly as the raccoon scurried about trying to escape. Wanda was either going to kill the raccoon or concuss someone else.

Quincy took up position about ten feet out and raised the rifle again.

"Don't you dare," Sun said, glaring at him as she ran past. She hiked up the stairs, ducked another swipe from Wanda's net, and slid to a stop beside her mother, her gaze darting about.

"Son of a bitch," Quincy said with more whine than all of southern France. "He got away."

"And whose fault would that be?" she asked him over her shoulder. She turned back to the maniac who'd birthed her. "Mom, it's okay. We've got this." When Elaine didn't move, Sun put a hand on her arm. "Mom?"

Her mother stood frozen, staring up into a darkened corner of the porch. Sun pivoted slowly and came face-to-face with a very angry raccoon, their noses only inches apart.

It sat hunchbacked on a high windowsill, a slow hiss leaking from between its exposed teeth, as it gazed at her with wide, feral eyes. Eyes that glowed like they belonged to a creature possessed by a powerful evil. One so ancient, so primordial, it predated human language.

Then she realized she was still wearing the goggles and the ominous metaphor lost its ardor. Much like Sun's hopes to go her entire life without wrestling a raccoon in the dark with a gang of bookworms cheering her on. But stranger things had happened.

Before she could react, she heard the thud of compressed air. Quincy had taken a shot with her barely inches from the terrified animal. What the actual hell?

He'd just moved up a notch on her hit list, overtaking Ryan Spalding, a boy who'd claimed she'd given him a hand job under the bleachers in high school, when she realized it was a misfire. The gun. Not the hand job. She'd never touched Ryan's penis, much to his chagrin.

Quincy let loose a dozen expletives followed by a sheepishly meek, "Misfire."

She wanted to roll her eyes but didn't dare take them off the rodent. They were locked in a stare-down of legendary proportions. "Zee," she said softly into

her comm set, staying as still as she possibly could, “you wanna help me out here?”

Zee’s smooth voice came back to her. “Will do, boss.” Her calm tone spoke volumes. Like elevator music. Or an acid trip. She was already in the zone and probably had the creature in her crosshairs. “One inch to the left.”

Sun eased to her left a microsecond before a dart whizzed past her ear.

It hit home just as the raccoon catapulted off the sill and onto her goggle-covered face. She screamed and sank her fingers in its fur to rip it off, but it held on for dear life, anchoring its razor-sharp claws in her scalp. She stumbled back and tripped on something hard and short. Probably her own indignation.

Her mother screamed but it barely registered before Sun found herself falling. No. Not just falling. Tumbling, suddenly weightless. She’d done a backflip over the wooden porch railing and seemed to be plummeting headfirst toward certain death.

A familiar set of arms caught her in mid-air before all three—the owner of said arms, the facehugger, and Sun herself—slammed onto the rocky earth beneath them. Air whooshed out of her lungs and, even with the insulation of her rescuer, the hard landing sent a jolt of pain through body parts that, until that moment, she was unaware existed.

It also dislodged the raccoon. The furball shot into the darkness and landed a few feet away with a soft thud.

She rolled off her rescuer and lay on her back, gazing up at the stars and gasping to force air into lungs that had seized up, when her mother’s head popped into her line of sight.”

“Honey, are you okay?” she asked, concern lining her pretty, upside-down face.

“Peachy, Mom,” Sun said, her voice strained. “Thanks for asking.” Her gaze slid past the woman who birthed her and back up to the stars again, hoping for a glimpse of the Little Dipper, wishing she could pluck it from the heavens and beat her chief deputy with it. “Deputy Cooper?”

“Yeah, boss?” he replied, panting close by.

“Are you conscious?”

“Yes.”

“Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn’t beat you to death with a feather duster?”

“I made you bacon the other day.”

Damn it.