

The ocean was a choppy, icy silver crumple stretching from Half Moon Bay's sheer cliffs to the thin dark thread of clouds laying claim to the horizon. A cold wind, scented with salt and seaweed, rushed up over the sands, its harsh kiss scraping the last bit of warmth from West Harris' cheeks. With the sun clinging to the sky, the beach below should have had at least a few of the local diehards making good use of the remaining light despite the chill in the air.

But it was Christmas Eve and Half Moon had already rolled up her shores for the coming stretch of holidays.

"You're going to be late, boss." For a large man, Marzo should have made a racket stepping across the gravel and broken shells lining the cliff's edge but he was a sneak at heart, silently approaching West from behind. West was used to his bodyguard-driver-slash-friend's stealthy ways but he'd barely caught his start of surprise when Marzo's voice boomed in his ear. "And don't look at me like that. You hate being late."

"I'm looking at you like that because I hate being called boss." He gave the ocean one last look, drinking in its chaotic darkness. Up until a few weeks ago, West would have said his life was going exactly as he'd planned it. So the uneasiness eating through his thoughts perplexed him. "Why do we do this, Marzo? What's the point of shoving ourselves around a table to share a meal with people we either see all the time or hardly at all?"

"Really? You've got to ask that? Sheesh, you're more screwed up than I thought, West." His friend... one of his few friends... loomed over him, a stupid grin pulled over his broad face. West waited, letting Marzo stew in his own thoughts. "You know, I didn't know your dad but I've got to say, he didn't do you or your brother any favours. You need what Lang's got... a good guy and a nice family to come home to."

"Can you really see me with an auto mechanic?" He lifted an eyebrow, daring Marzo to challenge him.

"Maybe that's what you need then. Someone who's had to worry if they've got enough eggs to feed everyone that morning." As usual, the other man quickly rose to the attack and West kept a smile from stretching over his face. "And don't go all Cheshire cat on me. I'm serious. Your biggest problem is that the only thing you've had to work for are relationships and you suck at them."

"Then why do you work for me?" The conversation went serious as Marzo sighed heavily.

"Because for all the shit-ass things you are, deep down inside you're an okay guy. You just make some shitty decisions and then act all high and mighty when everything goes to crap around you. Sure, you can make a buck like it was as easy as breathing but do you have anyone you really want to spend all that money on?"

“You don’t spend money, Marzo. You make it work for you,” West corrected. “It’s a stepping stone to bigger and better accomplishments.”

“Really? Because after knowing you?” His friend snorted. “It’s less of a staircase and more of a wall you’ve built to keep people out.”

It was odd standing in his grandmother’s living room and not seeing her holding court in the massive red wingchair by the room’s river rock fireplace. The chair was still there but instead of an imperious looking grand dragon of a woman directing her grandsons on what they should do with their lives, a different kind of dragon sat cross-legged on the plump cushions, reading a thick book to a pair of disgruntled looking cats.

Okay, West studied his niece, so the cats are the same and if he took everything he knew about his grandmother and Zig, the dragons were as well.

“Um... Lang went out to grab some peas,” Deacon said from the doorway. “We kind of had an incident. Should be back soon. Where’s Marzo?”

“He went to one of his sister’s place... or maybe his cousin’s. I can’t remember.” He tried to piece together the conversation he’d had with Marzo before they pulled up to the house. “Truthfully, he’s got a huge family. I think they just all find the nearest stadium, throw down a few hundred picnic tables and eat until they pass out. He said he’d pick me up tomorrow.”

His carry-on sat in the hallway behind Deacon and West blinked, realizing he didn’t even know where he’d be sleeping that night despite having practically grown up there. He tried explaining away the pang in his chest as heartburn or even a virus. Anything other than regret his grandmother handed Lang the keys to everything important in her life without giving West a second thought.

“She liked him better than you, asshole,” he muttered to himself. “*You* reminded her of Dad and wasn’t he her biggest regret.”

“Let me take this up. Lang said to tell you you’re in the blue room.” Deacon’s expression flickered between confusion and resignation for a second. “Don’t understand why he calls it that. Room’s painted something I’d call celery.”

"It used to be blue. Well have blue wallpaper. Grandma hated it so we took it down one summer." She'd let him choose the colour for the walls, assuring him he'd always have a place—that room—in her home if he needed it. "Lang had the one down the hall. *That* was purple before we got to it."

"Yeah, he's still...we're in that one." His brother's husband hefted the suitcase up before West could stop him.

"Don't worry about the bag. I'll take it up," he said softly. "You don't have to wait on me."

"I'm not. Heading upstairs anyway. Hell, you know this place better than I do probably and just to keep things straight, you're not a guest. To me, you're a part of Lang that broke off and drifted away for a bit so don't think you're getting out of dishes or anything." Deacon screwed his mouth up into a grimace. "Okay, maybe not putting you to work but you can keep the kid entertained and out of my hair. She's got opinions about everything, including what goes into dinner."

"Considering her favourite food is canned peas with mayonnaise. I'd not trust her culinary suggestions." West drawled. "I shall go do my due diligence and entertain the niece."

"Thanks. And for the record..." Deacon paused at the foot of the stairs. "We're glad you're here. It'll be nice to have you this week. Lang's really looking forward to it."

The cats didn't even look up when West entered the room but Zig broke into a wide smile, scrambling carefully out of the chair to launch herself at her uncle. He endured the hug, squeezing her briefly then letting her go to study her very serious face.

"What's the matter? Did the Wicked Witch of the West forget to send you a flying monkey for Christmas?" He rubbed at a bit of something on her cheek. "And who taught you how to eat? There's crumbs all over your face."

"Bah, I had some of those puffy mints. They've got like chalk on them or something." Zig tugged on his hand. "Come here. I'm finishing up the book. You can listen to the last chapter."

"What are you reading?" West sat down in the chair opposite of her, shaking his head at Zig's scowl. "Don't make that face. You look like Deacon and you don't want to go through high school with that kind of ugly on you. Now, book....reading...what?"

"The Princess Bride." She picked up the book after settling down again between the slumbering cats. "It's about true love. And well, stabbing people."

"Neither of which I know anything about," he confessed. "And probably never will if I'm lucky."

"It sucks when no one loves you. I know." Zig studied him, her gaze peeling back layers of his emotional armour until West felt like he lay bared soul before her then she murmured, "And you should get a boyfriend. Maybe you'll be happier because right now, you kind of suck."