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**KING  
OF  
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ANA HUANG



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**KING  
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## CHAPTER 1

*Isabella*

“So you *didn't* use the glow-in-the-dark condoms I gave you?”

“Nope. Sorry.” Tessa returned my crestfallen stare with an amused one of her own. “It was our first date. Where did you get those condoms anyway?”

“At last month’s neon skate party.” I’d attended the party in hopes it would free me from my creeping life rut. It hadn’t, but it *had* supplied me with a bag of delightfully lurid party favors that I’d doled out to friends. Since I was suffering from a self-imposed man ban, I had to live vicariously through them, which was hard when said friends didn’t cooperate.

Tessa’s brow wrinkled. “Why were they handing out condoms at a skate party?”

“Because those parties always turn into giant orgies,” I explained. “I saw someone use one of those condoms right there in the middle of the ice rink.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” I restocked the garnishes, then turned to straighten the various glasses and tumblers. “Wild, right? It was fun, even if some of the things I witnessed traumatized me for a good week after...”

I rambled on, only half paying attention to my movements. After a year of bartending at the Valhalla Club, an exclusive members-only society for the world's rich and powerful, most of my work was muscle memory.

It was six on a Monday evening—prime happy hour in other establishments but a dead zone at Valhalla. Tessa and I always used this time to gossip and catch each other up on our weekends.

I was only here for the paycheck until I finished my book and became a published author, but it was nice to work with someone I actually liked. A majority of my previous coworkers had been creeps.

“Did I tell you about the naked flag dude?” I said. “He was one of the ones who *always* participated in the orgies.”

“Uh, Isa.” My name squeaked out in a decidedly un-Tessa-like manner, but I was on too much of a roll to stop.

“Honestly, I never thought I’d see a glowing dick in—”

A polite cough interrupted my spiel.

A polite, *masculine* cough that very much did not belong to my favorite coworker.

My movements ground to a screeching halt. Tessa let out another distressed squeak, which confirmed what my gut already suspected: the newcomer was a club member, not our laid-back manager or one of the security guards dropping by on their break.

And they’d just overheard me talking about glowing dicks.

*Fuck.*

Flags of heat scorched my cheeks. Screw finishing my manuscript; what I wanted most now was for the earth to yawn and swallow me whole.

Sadly, not a single tremor quaked beneath my feet, so after a moment of wallowing in humiliation, I straightened my shoulders, pasted on my best customer service smile, and turned.

My mouth barely completed its upward curve before it froze. Just up and gave out, like a webpage that couldn’t finish loading.

Because standing less than five feet away, looking bemused

and far more handsome than any man had the right to look, was Kai Young.

Esteemed member of the Valhalla Club’s managing committee, heir to a multibillion-dollar media empire, and owner of an uncanny ability to show up in the middle of my most embarrassing conversations *every* time, Kai Young.

A fresh wave of mortification blazed across my face.

“Apologies for interrupting,” he said, his neutral tone betraying no hint of his thoughts on our conversation. “But I’d like to order a drink, please.”

Despite an all-consuming desire to hide under the bar until he left, I couldn’t help but melt a little at the sound of his voice. Deep, smooth and velvety, wrapped in a British accent so posh it put the late Queen’s to shame. It poured into my bloodstream like a half dozen shots of potent whiskey.

My body warmed.

Kai’s brows lifted a fraction, and I realized I’d been so focused on his voice that I hadn’t responded to his request yet. Meanwhile Tessa, the little traitor, had disappeared into the back room, leaving me to fend for myself. *She’s never getting a condom out of me again.*

“Of course.” I cleared my throat, attempting to lighten the cloud of thickening tension. “But I’m afraid we don’t serve glow-in-the-dark gin and tonics.” *Not without a black light to make the tonic glow, anyway.*

He gave me a blank look.

“Because of the last time you overheard me talking about con—er, protective products,” I said. *Nothing.* I might as well be babbling about rush hour traffic patterns, for all the reaction he showed. “You ordered a strawberry gin and tonic because I was talking about strawberry-flavored...”

I was digging myself into a deeper and deeper hole. I didn’t want to remind Kai about the time he overheard me discussing strawberry condoms at the club’s fall gala, but I had to say *some-*

thing to divert his attention away from, well, my current condom predicament.

I should really stop talking about sex at work.

“Never mind,” I said quickly. “Do you want your usual?”

His one-off strawberry gin and tonic aside, Kai ordered a scotch, neat every time. He was more predictable than a Mariah Carey song during the holidays.

“Not today,” he said easily. “I’ll have a Death in the Afternoon instead.” He lifted his book so I could see the title scrawled across the worn cover. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway. “Seems fitting.”

Invented by Hemingway himself, Death in the Afternoon was a simple cocktail consisting of champagne and absinthe. Its iridescent green color was also as close to glow-in-the-dark as a regular drink could get.

I narrowed my eyes, unsure whether that was a coincidence or if he was fucking with me.

He stared back, his expression inscrutable.

Dark hair. Crisp lines. Thin black frames and a suit so perfectly tailored it had to have been custom made. Kai was the epitome of aristocratic sophistication, and he’d nailed the British stoicism that went with it.

I was usually pretty good at reading people, but I’d known him for a year and I had yet to crack his mask. It irritated me more than I cared to admit.

“One Death in the Afternoon, coming right up,” I finally said.

I busied myself with his drink while he took his customary seat at the end of the bar and retrieved a notebook from his coat pocket. My hands went through the motions, but my attention was split between the glass and the man quietly reading. Every once in a while, he would pause and write something down.

That in and of itself wasn’t unusual. Kai often showed up to read and drink by himself before the evening rush. What *was* unusual was the timing.

It was Monday afternoon, three days and two hours before his weekly, precision-timed arrival on Thursday evenings. He was breaking pattern.

Kai Young *never* broke pattern.

Curiosity and a strange breathlessness slowed my pace as I brought him his drink. Tessa was still in the supply room, and the silence weighed heavier with each step.

“Are you taking notes?” I placed the cocktail on a napkin and glanced at his notebook. It lay open next to Kai’s novel, its pages filled with neat, precise black writing.

“I’m translating the book into Latin.” He flipped the page and scribbled another sentence without looking up or touching his drink.

“Why?”

“It’s relaxing.”

I blinked, certain I’d heard him wrong. “You think translating a five-hundred-page novel into Latin by hand is *relaxing*?”

“Yes. If I wanted a mental challenge, I’d translate an economics textbook. Translating fiction is reserved for my downtime.”

He tossed out the explanation casually, like it was a habit as common and ingrained as throwing a coat over the back of his couch.

I gaped at him. “Wow. That’s...” I was at a loss for words.

I knew rich people indulged in strange hobbies, but at least they were usually fun eccentricities like throwing lavish weddings for their pets or bathing in champagne. Kai’s hobby was just *boring*.

The corners of his mouth twitched, and realization dawned alongside embarrassment. *Seems to be the theme of the day*. “You’re messing with me.”

“Not entirely. I do find it relaxing, though I’m not a huge fan of economics textbooks. I had enough of them at Oxford.” Kai finally glanced up.

My pulse leapt in my throat. Up close, he was so beautiful it

almost hurt to face him straight on. Thick black hair brushed his forehead, framing features straight out of the classic Hollywood era. Chiseled cheekbones sloped down to a square jaw and sculpted lips, while deep brown eyes glinted behind glasses that only heightened his appeal.

Without them, his attractiveness would've been cold, almost intimidating in its perfection, but with them, he was approachable. Human.

At least when he wasn't busy translating classics or running his family's media company. Glasses or no glasses, there was nothing *approachable* about either of those things.

My spine tingled with awareness when he reached for his drink. My hand was still on the counter. He didn't touch me, but his body heat brushed over me as surely as if he had.

The tingles spread, vibrating beneath my skin and slowing my breath.

"Isabella."

"Hmm?" Now that I thought about it, why did Kai need glasses anyway? He was rich enough to afford laser eye surgery.

Not that I was complaining. He may be boring and a little uptight, but he really—

"The gentleman at the other end of the bar is trying to get your attention."

I snapped back to reality with an unpleasant jolt. While I'd been busy staring at Kai, new patrons had trickled into the bar. Tessa was back behind the counter, tending to a well-dressed couple while another club member waited for service.

*Shit.*

I hurried over, leaving an amused-looking Kai behind.

After I finished with my customer, another one approached, and another. We'd hit Valhalla happy hour, and I didn't have time to dwell on Kai or his strange relaxation methods again.

For the next four hours, Tessa and I fell into a familiar rhythm as we worked the crowd.

Valhalla capped its membership at a hundred, so even its

busiest nights were nothing compared to the chaos I used to deal with at downtown dive bars. But while there were fewer of them, the club's patrons required more coddling and ego stroking than the average frat boy or drunken bachelorette. By the time the clock ticked toward nine, I was ready to collapse and thankful as hell that I only had a half shift that night.

Still, I couldn't resist the occasional peek at Kai. He usually left the bar after an hour or two, but here he was, still drinking and chatting with the other members like there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

*Something's off.* Timing aside, his behavior today didn't match his previous patterns at all, and the closer I looked, the more signs of trouble I spotted: the tension lining his shoulders, the tiny furrow between his brows, the tightness of his smiles.

Maybe it was the shock of seeing him off schedule, or maybe I was trying to pay Kai back for all the times he could've gotten me fired for inappropriate behavior (a.k.a. talking about sex at work) but didn't. Whatever it was, it compelled me to walk another drink over to him during a lull.

The timing was perfect; his latest conversation partner had just left, leaving Kai alone again at the bar.

"A strawberry gin and tonic. On me." I slid the glass across the counter. I'd made it on a whim, thinking it'd be a funny way to lift his mood even if it was at my expense. "You look like you could use the pick-me-up."

He responded with a questioning arch of his brow.

"You're off schedule," I explained. "You'd never go off schedule unless something's wrong."

The arch smoothed, replaced with a tiny crinkle at the corners of his eyes. My heartbeat faltered at the unexpectedly endearing sight.

*It's just a smile. Get it together.*

"I wasn't aware you paid so much attention to my schedule." Flecks of laughter glimmered beneath Kai's voice.

Heat flooded my cheeks for the second time that night. *This is what I get for being a Good Samaritan.*

"I don't make a point of it," I said defensively. "You've been coming to the bar every week since I started working here, but you've never showed up on a Monday. I'm simply observant." I should've stopped there, but my mouth ran off before my brain could catch up. "Rest assured, you're not my type, so you don't have to worry about me hitting on you."

That much was true. Objectively, I recognized Kai's appeal, but I liked my men rougher around the edges. He was as straitlaced as they came. Even if he wasn't, fraternization between club members and employees was strictly forbidden, and I had no desire to upend my life over a man again, thank you very much.

That didn't stop my traitorous hormones from sighing every time they saw him. It was annoying as hell.

"Good to know." The flecks of laughter shone brighter as he brought the glass to his lips. "Thank you. I have a soft spot for strawberry gin and tonics."

This time, my heartbeat didn't so much falter as stop altogether, if only for a split second.

Soft spot? *What does that mean?*

*It means nothing,* a voice grumbled in the back of my head. *He's talking about the drink, not you. Besides, he's not your type. Remember?*

*Oh, shut up, Debbie Downer.*

Great. Now my inner voices were arguing with each other. I didn't even know I *had* more than one inner voice. If that wasn't a sign I needed sleep and not another night agonizing over my manuscript, nothing was.

"You're welcome," I said, a tad belatedly. My pulse drummed in my ears. "Well, I should—"

"Sorry I'm late." A tall, blond man swept into the seat next to Kai's, his voice as brisk as the late September chill clinging to his coat. "My meeting ran over."

He spared me a brief glance before turning back to Kai.

Dark gold hair, navy eyes, the bone structure of a Calvin Klein model, and the warmth of the iceberg from *Titanic*. Dominic Davenport, the reigning king of Wall Street.

I recognized him on sight. It was hard to forget that face, even if his social skills could use improvement.

Relief and an annoying niggle of disappointment swept through me at the interruption, but I didn't wait for Kai's response. I booked it to the other side of the bar, hating the way his *soft spot* comment lingered like it was anything but a throw-away remark.

If he wasn't my type, I *definitely* wasn't his. He dated the kind of woman who sat on charity boards, summered in the Hamptons, and matched their pearls to their Chanel suits. There was nothing wrong with any of those things, but they weren't me.

I blamed my outsize reaction to his words on my self-imposed dry spell. I was so starved for touch and affection I'd probably get giddy off a wink from that half-naked cowboy always roaming Times Square. It had nothing to do with Kai himself.

I didn't return to his side of the bar again for the rest of the night.

Luckily, working a half shift meant I could clock out early. At five to ten, I transferred my remaining tabs to Tessa, said my good-byes, and grabbed my bag from the back room, all without looking at a certain billionaire with a penchant for Hemingway.

I could've sworn I felt the heated touch of dark eyes on my back when I left, but I didn't turn to confirm. It was better I didn't know.

The hall was hushed and empty this late at night. Exhaustion tugged at my eyelids, but instead of bolting for the exit and the comfort of my bed, I made a left toward the main staircase.

I *should* go home so I could hit my daily word count goal, but I needed inspiration first. I couldn't concentrate with the stress of facing a blank page clouding my head.

The words used to flow freely; I wrote three-quarters of my

erotic thriller in less than six months. Then I read it over, hated it, and scrapped it in favor of a fresh project. Unfortunately, the creativity that'd fueled my first draft had vanished alongside it. I was lucky if I wrote more than two hundred words a day these days.

I took the stairs to the second floor.

The club's amenities were off-limits to employees during working hours, but while the bar was open until three in the morning, the rest of the building closed at eight. I wasn't breaking any rules by visiting my favorite room for some decompression.

Still, my feet tread lightly against the thick Persian carpet. Down, down, all the way past the billiards room, the beauty room, and the Parisian-style lounge until I reached a familiar oak door. The brass knob was cool and smooth as I twisted it open.

*Fifteen minutes.* That was all I needed. Then I'd go home, wash the day off, and write.

But as always, time fell away when I sat down. Fifteen minutes turned into thirty, which turned into forty-five, and I became so immersed in what I was doing I didn't notice the door creak open behind me.

Not until it was too late.

CHAPTER 2

*Kai*



“Don't tell me you invited me here to watch you read Hemingway for the dozenth time.” Dominic cast an unimpressed look at my book.

“You've never seen me read Hemingway.” I glanced at the bar, but Isabella had already moved on to another customer, leaving the gin and tonic in her stead.

Strawberries floated lazily in the drink, their vibrant red hue a shocking contrast to the bar's dignified earth tones. I typically avoided sweet drinks; the harsh burn and subdued amber of scotch was much more to my taste. But like I said, I had a soft spot for this particular flavor.

*Fine, but if you change your mind, I have strawberry-flavored condoms. Magnum-size, ribbed for your—*

*Apologies for interrupting, but I'd like to order another drink.*

*Gin and tonic. Strawberry flavored.*

Reluctant amusement drifted through me at the memory of Isabella's horrified expression. I'd interrupted her and her friend Vivian's condom conversation at last year's fall gala, and I still remembered the interaction in vivid detail.

I remembered *all* our interactions in vivid detail, whether I wanted to or not. She'd touched down in my life like a tornado,

gotten my drink wrong during her first shift at Valhalla, and hadn't left my thoughts since.

It was aggravating.

"I haven't seen you read him in person." Dominic flicked his lighter on and off, drawing my attention back to him. He didn't smoke, yet he carried that lighter around the way a more superstitious person would cling to a lucky charm. "But I imagine that's what you do when you're holed up in your library every night."

A smile pushed through my turbulent mood. "Spend a lot of time imagining me in the library, do you?"

"Only to contemplate how sad your existence is."

"Says the workaholic who spends most of his nights in his office." It was a miracle his wife tolerated him as long as she had. Alessandra was a saint.

"It's a nice office." On. Off. A tiny flame burst into life only to die a quick death at his hand. "I'd be there right now if it weren't for your call. What's so urgent you demanded I rush here on a Monday, of all nights?"

I'd requested, not demanded, but I didn't bother correcting him. Instead, I tucked my pen, paperback, and notebook in my coat pocket and cut straight to the point. "I got the call today."

Dominic's bored impatience fell away, revealing a spark of intrigue. "This early?"

"Yes. Five candidates, including myself. The vote is in four months."

"You always knew it wouldn't be a coronation." Dominic tapped his lighter's spark wheel. "But the vote is a formality. Of course you'll win."

I offered a noncommittal noise in response.

As the eldest child and presumptive heir to the Young Corporation, I'd lived with the expectation of becoming CEO all my life. But I was supposed to take over in five to ten years, not in four months.

A fresh wave of apprehension swept through my chest.

Leonora Young would never willingly cede power this early.

She was only fifty-eight years old. Sharp, healthy, beloved by the board. Her life revolved around work and hounding me about marriage, yet it'd undeniably been her on the video call that afternoon, informing me and four other executives that we were in the running for the CEO position.

No warning, no details other than the date and time of the vote.

I ran a distracted hand over the gin and tonic glass, taking strange solace in its smooth curves.

"When's the news going public?" Dominic asked.

"Tomorrow." Which meant for the next four months, all eyes would be on me, waiting for me to fuck up. Which I never would. I had too much control for that.

Though there were technically five candidates, the position was mine to lose. Not only because I was a Young, but because I was the best. My record as president of the North America division spoke for itself. It had the highest profits, the fewest losses, and the best innovations, even if certain board members didn't always agree with my decisions.

I wasn't worried about the vote's outcome, but its timing nagged at me, twisting what should've been a career highlight into a muddied pool of unease.

If Dominic noticed my muted enthusiasm, he didn't show it. "The market's going to have a field day." I could practically see the calculations running through his head.

In the past, I would've called Dante first and sweated out my worries in the boxing ring, but ever since he got married, dragging him away from Vivian for an unscheduled match was harder than prying a bone away from a dog.

It was probably for the best. Dante would see right through my composed mask, whereas Dominic only cared about facts and numbers. If it didn't move markets or expand his bank account, he didn't give a shit.

I reached for my drink while he laid out his predictions. I'd