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**KING
OF
GLUTTONY**

ANA HUANG



CHAPTER 1

Maya



"WE'RE FUCKED, DO YOU HEAR ME? *FUCKED!* AND NOT in a good way. In a dry, lubeless, close-your-eyes-and-think-of-England way."

"Is that really what you do when you're having bad sex? Seems counterintuitive."

"Maya." Ezra sounded pained. "Please. This is an emergency."

"I'm well aware." I nestled my phone between my ear and shoulder and grabbed the bottle sitting on the top shelf of my parents' medicine cabinet. "First, stop talking about lube, or the lack thereof. Second, calm down. I have a plan."

"Oh, thank God." He let out a relieved sigh. "What is it?"

"We're pulling every product in the pasta line off the shelves. Put together a press release that we can send out within the next two hours. The sooner, the better."

"*Every* product?" Ezra spluttered. "But the reported cases have only been linked to the lasagna. If we pull every product in the line, the financial loss would—"

"Still be less than the long-term harm of keeping them on the shelf. We haven't traced where the outbreak started, but the frozen

pasta all comes from the same factory. The last thing we want is to pull the lasagna, only to have new cases crop up related to *other* products. This is about consumer trust and health, not money.”

As the chief brand officer for Singh Foods, my top priority was protecting the company’s reputation. That included managing crisis communications—and a listeria outbreak linked to our most popular product *definitely* qualified as a crisis.

“Right.” Ezra cleared his throat. “Then consider it done. I’ll have a draft press release to you within the hour.”

His foul language and dramatic outbursts aside, Ezra was great at his job as communications director, which was why I didn’t question him before I hung up.

I clutched the bottle I’d “borrowed” from my parents and slipped out of their bathroom. Despite my cool assurance on the phone, my heart raced like it was in the last mile of a marathon.

Ezra was right. It was a *lot* of product to pull off the shelves, but I’d convinced the CEO it was the right thing to do after the third reported case. I’d staked my reputation and possibly my job on it.

If it turned out the contamination really was limited to the lasagna, and our stock didn’t improve after the press release...

My heart rate climbed another notch.

No. I’d made the right call. I couldn’t risk more people getting sick because I wanted to save the company money.

Something about the outbreak nagged at me, but I couldn’t pinpoint what it was, so I pushed the thought aside for now.

I had one non-work-related item on my to-do list tonight, and it was just the distraction I needed to brighten up an otherwise hellish day.

I jogged downstairs and almost made it to the kitchen when a familiar figure stopped me in my tracks. She planted her hands on her hips and pinned me with a suspicious stare.

Crap.

I quickly hid the bottle behind my back and summoned my most innocent smile. “Hi, Diya.”

Diya was my family’s head of household. She’d practically raised me and my sisters, which meant she knew all of our tricks inside and out.

“Hand it over, Ms. Maya.” She held out her hand, her expression stern.

“Hand what over?”

“Don’t be cute. Tonight’s party is important for Mr. and Mrs. Singh, and I won’t let you ruin it by pulling a childish prank on that boy.”

I suppressed a grimace at the mention of *that boy*.

“I would never prank anyone, not even him.” I placed my free hand on my heart. “I’m a top executive at a Fortune 500 company. Do you really think I have time to run around and play tricks on our dinner guests?”

Diya raised her eyebrows and kept her hand outstretched. She didn’t say a word.

Dammit. So much for my distraction.

I reluctantly moved the bottle out from behind my back and placed the laxatives in her hand.

She clucked her tongue in disapproval.

“He wouldn’t have died,” I said defensively. “It’s the mild version. But he would’ve thought twice about accepting another dinner invitation from us.”

Despite our busy schedules, my family gathered for dinner at my parents’ Westchester estate at least twice a month. Tradition was important, and my parents made sure we honored it. I usually looked forward to the dinners...unless *he* was also invited.

“Considering your families have been friends for generations, I doubt it.” Diya shooed me toward the stairs. “Go. Dinner starts soon, and your mother will have a heart attack if you show up

dressed like that.”

I knew better than to argue.

“Good to see you too!” I called over my shoulder. “One day, you’ll let me have some fun!”

“Don’t count on it!” she yelled back, but I heard the smile in her voice.

The adrenaline high from my run-in with Diya faded when I got to my room. It was hard to control my overthinking when I didn’t have another person to distract me, and I automatically reached for the stash of sweets in my nightstand drawer.

I’d blitzed through my favorite chocolate bonbons after news of the first listeria case broke earlier that day, so I settled for the backup gummy worms instead. I shoved one into my mouth.

It’s fine. Everything is fine. It wasn’t like my family’s company’s reputation hinged on my actions or like tens of millions of dollars were at stake.

If I failed, I would be a public laughingstock, the name business school professors trotted out as a prime example of what *not* to do. My past accomplishments wouldn’t matter; people would only see my failure.

No big deal.

I consoled myself with another gummy worm and checked my phone. No updates from any of the news alerts I’d set for “Singh Foods.”

Okay. I let the double hit of sugar calm my nerves. In this situation, no news was good news.

No news is good news.

I repeated the mantra as I changed out of my jeans and T-shirt and into a silk dress. By the time I finished my hair and makeup, I’d coaxed my heart rate down to something resembling normal.

I had an hour left until dinner, so I slipped out of my room and down the back staircase toward the conservatory.

The sunny, glass-enclosed space was my favorite room in the house. When I was a teenager, I spent hours here reading, doing homework, and daydreaming. No one else ever came in here except to clean, so it was perfect.

I sank onto a cushioned wicker couch and checked my phone again. One new email from Ezra. He’d sent the drafted press release.

I read it over and sent back my notes. They were minimal; Ezra had done a fantastic job.

Still, my stomach knotted as I stared at the landscaped greenery outside the windows. This wasn’t how I’d wanted to spend the last weekend before Labor Day. I was supposed to be hanging out with my friends, not dealing with a work emergency before I had dinner with one of my least favorite people on the planet.

Sometimes, I wondered what’d happen if I simply...walked away. No more stress, no more sleepless nights or clawing my way toward some undefinable destination.

It sounded nice, but the thought of giving up made my skin itch in an entirely different way. I wasn’t sure what I was striving for, but I knew I had to do more and *be* more. If I stood still, people would pass me, and that was unacceptable.

Ezra replied in record time with an edited statement. I read it over twice before I sent the fateful response.

Approved.

I put my phone away and bounced my knee. God, I could use some chocolate right now. Maybe—

“Hiding in your own family’s house? That’s a bit sad, Sal.”

My leg froze mid-bounce as every muscle recoiled.

There weren’t many things in the world capable of sending me into instant fight-or-flight mode, but that deep, languorous drawl was one of them.

I didn’t have to turn to know who’d arrived.

It was the fucking devil himself.

CHAPTER 2

Maya



POP CULTURE DEPICTED THE DEVIL AS A HIDEOUS thing, clawed and fanged with red skin and horns that broadcast his evilness to the world.

Pop culture was wrong.

In reality, the devil was tall and sculpted, with perfect teeth and a year-round tan that made him look like he'd just returned from a beach vacation in the south of France. Thick, artfully tousled brown hair hid his horns, and he moved with the lazy, self-assured confidence of someone who was used to getting everything handed to him on a silver platter.

If you hadn't grown up with him (which I had) or endured his lifelong, cleverly hidden snark (which I also had), you might be duped into thinking he was an angel instead of Satan reincarnate.

Fortunately, I knew better.

Unfortunately, no one else did.

Lucifer, otherwise known as Sebastian Laurent, leaned against the wall and gave me the half-smirk he only revealed when it was the two of us.

He was too smart to let it show in front of other people.

Everyone thought he was this perfect golden boy, but I'd seen through his mask since we were three years old, when he'd purposely tripped me during a game of tag and claimed the candy prize for himself.

It was the first and last time a boy ever made me cry.

"I was hiding from you." I ignored that hated nickname, *Sal*, and gave him a saccharine smile instead. "I didn't want to spoil my appetite before dinner."

"Is that the type of hospitality you offer an old friend?" He asked. "No wonder your company's in trouble."

My jaw tightened. He *would* bring up the crisis the first chance he got. "We're not friends, and this has nothing to do with work."

"Frenemies, then." Sebastian straightened and sauntered over. His walk was loose-limbed and graceful, as if it took him a fraction of the energy it would for anyone else.

He sprawled onto the couch opposite me, seemingly oblivious to my go-away-and-jump-into-a-lake-of-flesh-eating-piranhas energy.

Some people never get the hint.

"We're not that either," I said coolly. "*Friends* is still part of 'frenemies.'"

"That's what you say, but I know you better than most 'friends.'" A knowing smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "How many sweets have you stress-eaten since news of the first case broke?"

Damn him.

"None." The falsehood slipped easily off my tongue. "I don't do that anymore."

Sebastian's eyes bored into mine. They were clear amber shot through with flecks of gold. In the dying sunlight, they appeared almost leonine.

"Liar," he said softly.

My skin flushed. My heart beat in double time again, its

rhythm a loud drum in my ears as we stared at each other. The air crackled with long-simmering animosity.

I loathed him so much I almost couldn't breathe.

"Is there a reason why you keep showing up where you're not wanted?" I asked. "Or do you simply enjoy getting on my last nerve?"

"Yes and yes."

I really wished I could've pulled off the laxatives stunt. Seeing him writhe in discomfort would've been worth every bit of the consequences.

"You keep forgetting I'm an invited guest." Sebastian leaned back, his gaze filled with cool amusement. "I didn't barge in here unannounced."

"You were invited to dinner, not here. With me." *This is my spot*, I almost added, but that sounded too petty. Besides, if Sebastian knew how much I loved the conservatory, he'd never leave.

"You can get up and leave any time you want." He shrugged. "No one's forcing you to talk to me."

"I was here first. I'm not leaving."

"Ah." A faint smile touched his mouth, contrasting with the boredom stamped across the rest of his face. "Then it appears we've reached an impasse. *C'est dommage*."

Translation: That's too bad.

I wasn't a native French speaker like him, but I was fluent in the language thanks to my Swiss boarding school education.

I swallowed some other choice words I could've said in French.

This was ridiculous. We were full-grown adults acting like children, but that happened every time we were in close proximity. He always brought out the worst in me.

But Sebastian was like the world's most annoying peacock. He craved attention. Maybe if I deprived him of that oxygen, he'd do me a favor and wither away.

Instead of acknowledging him further, I pulled out my phone again. A deluge of news alerts flooded the screen, and all thoughts of my unwanted company fled as my pulse kicked into overdrive.

The press release.

It'd gone out, and the media had latched onto it like wildfire to dry brush.

A frantic skim of the headlines revealed only a basic regurgitation of the facts, so I went to the one corner of the internet where I was guaranteed to see opinions: social media.

My heart climbed into my throat as I typed "Singh Foods" into the app's search bar. The topic was already trending, with new posts refreshing every other minute.

There were a few cynical naysayers, but overall, the initial reactions were overwhelmingly positive.

The vise around my chest loosened. For the first time in hours, I was treading water instead of drowning.

I exited my socials and switched to my email, where I sent Ezra a follow-up and checked the rest of my messages.

Sebastian didn't say a word the entire time, but the heat of his stare seared into my skin.

Now that my initial adrenaline rush had subsided, I was hyperaware of how silent it was. Of the way my blood pulsed in my veins and the way his presence charged every molecule in the room.

I didn't have to see him to *feel* him there.

Silent. Assessing. Judging.

I stared at my phone, willing myself not to twitch or do anything that would indicate his scrutiny had any effect on me whatsoever.

Which it didn't. Obviously.

"It's a good press release." His tone contained the casualness of an afterthought. "Let me guess. You convinced your father to pull the entire line because you were worried about

cross-contamination. Trust over profit. Very on-brand for the chief brand officer.”

I remained silent and jabbed the *Delete* button on a generic party invite with more force than necessary.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Sebastian yawned. “Smart. It’s what I would’ve done.”

“I’m so glad I have your seal of approval.” I couldn’t hold back anymore. “What would I have done without it?”

I regretted taking his bait the second the words left my mouth, but it was too late. I caught a flash of triumph in his eyes before he unfolded himself from the couch. It was almost time for dinner. I should leave too, but I’d rather gouge my eyes out than leave with him.

“Always happy to be a source of validation,” Sebastian drawled. He retrieved something from his pocket and tossed it at me. I caught it a split second before it smacked me in the face. “You’re welcome.”

I heard a glimmer of laughter as he left the conservatory and disappeared into the depths of the house.

I waited until he was well and truly gone before I unclenched my fingers. An orange-foil-wrapped candy sat in my palm.

It was a chocolate bonbon.

Of course, I didn’t eat the chocolate.

I wouldn’t put it past Sebastian to give me expired candy, and the bonbon was clearly a power play. A subtle way to indicate he knew things about me that he had no business knowing, and a sneaky reminder that I needed the stress relief because I was caught up in a public relations shitstorm.

Meanwhile, he was riding high on a wave of glowing publicity, including two newly minted Michelin-starred restaurants in the

Laurent Restaurant Group’s portfolio and a fawning profile in the *New York Times*.

My family didn’t own restaurants. Our money came from frozen foods, and there was no Michelin star equivalent for frozen foods.

I knew that, but it didn’t stop me from wanting one.

I think that was the real reason Sebastian grated on my nerves. No matter how hard I worked or how much I accomplished—personally, professionally, academically—he always made me feel like I was behind.

I got straight A’s by studying my ass off; he got straight As just by waltzing into the classroom after rolling out of bed.

I was salutatorian; he was valedictorian.

I won the International Marketing Excellence Award; he won it first *and* got more press coverage for it.

It was infuriating.

I glanced at him across the dining table. He was busy chatting with my younger sister Neha and pretending to be a normal human being.

Dinner started half an hour ago, and both the Singh and Laurent clans were gathered in my parents’ formal dining room. My father sat at the head of the table, with my mother on his left and Sebastian’s father, Michel, on his right. Michel’s wife, Yvonne, gossiped with my mom about the latest society scandal while Neha’s husband gulped down his wine like this was his last supper. My grandmother sat at the other end of the table, her expression serene as she took everything in. She wore a plain white linen shirt that contrasted with the enormous emerald earrings dripping from her earlobes.

The only person missing was my youngest sister Priya, who was vacationing in Bali with her boyfriend. It was their six-month anniversary, which was why my mother let her absence slide.

Everyone seemed to be having a grand time except for me and