



*Colstead  
Et  
Andie*

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# Chapter 1

WHETHER IT MADE SENSE OR not, Freddie was sure her bags hadn't been this heavy when she had thrown them into her car that afternoon. Then again, that afternoon she had still been full of cans upon cans of energy drinks. Whatever wings they had given her had long worn off though. She groaned into the early morning air and closed her trunk. The muscles of her leg, never in the best shape after her injury, felt exhausted from overuse as she shuffled toward the hotel.

She shouldn't have gone back through her bag that fourth time. That had been when she had added so many just-in-case clothes. Lex had told her what the convention would be like but nothing about what she should wear. Thus. Just-in-case.

Her shoulder ached. Just-in-case was heavy.

Her shift at the bar had been hell and she hadn't gotten out of there until two, when she was supposed to have been off at midnight. She was almost to a bed. Check in and an elevator ride was the only thing that stood between her and the chance to pass out for the few hours left until the first day of the convention.

In the lobby, a large sign by the door made her pause. Despite the hour, Freddie grinned. *Artistry Entertainment presents Lockup: A Crime & Punishment Official Fan Convention*, the *O* in *Lockup* a graphic of a pair of handcuffs.

After six months of waiting, Freddie was finally there. On the opposite wall hung huge posters of the cast of actors she was there to see. The main characters came first and then the most important two, to her anyway. Rachel Davis and Andrea Canton, the two actors of her

favorite character relationship. They were the reason she had worked so hard to come to the convention. She fought back a squeal of joy at the sight of the faces of her ‘ship’ members.

All at once, her bags didn’t feel as heavy.

Freddie was surprised to find that, except for the front desk attendant, the lobby was empty. It was four in the morning but weren’t conventions supposed to be nonstop partying? Everyone online had told her repeatedly for the last few weeks to prepare for no sleep and a hangover that would last for a full week. After a busy night at the bar, she wasn’t going to complain about the quiet though.

She grabbed her phone from her back pocket and shot a text off to Lex, her roommate back in LA, letting her know she had arrived safely and that she would see her when Lex arrived the next morning after Lex got an enviously good night’s sleep.

At the desk, the attendant had given into the pull of the hour. The young woman sat with her face in her palm, her mouth agape as she slept.

Freddie was going to have to wake her, and she already felt bad. Graveyard shifts were the worst. She cleared her throat. “Uh, hello?”

The attendant didn’t so much as twitch.

Freddie dropped her soccer duffel on the floor and pulled off her beanie. “Um, excuse me.”

The attendant’s face slipped off her arm and her eyes popped open wide. “Oh my God!” She squeaked. “I’m sorry!”

Freddie gave her best reassuring smile. “Hey, it’s cool, dude. Take your time. I’m fine,” she said, trying to ignore the throbbing in her feet that contradicted her words.

“Welcome to—” the girl began a rehearsed welcome speech with wide eyes.

Mid-speech, the automatic doors opened behind Freddie followed by the sound of footsteps.

“Wow!” The desk attendant shot a glance at the clock and then back to the waiting customers. “A lot of you for a four a.m. check-in.” She tittered a polite, customer-service laugh.

A large, burly man stepped up beside Freddie, too far into her personal space. The smile she had tried for fell before it could do the attendant any good.

He was a head taller than her and at least two of Freddie put together across the chest. He stared down at her, his eyes narrowed, his presence chilling.

Freddie took a step back. Why was he glaring at her?

“Um. Hi.” She twisted her beanie in her hands. “Can I help you with something or...?”

He took a step forward.

The air of intimidation was like a brick wall coming at her. Freddie took a hasty sidestep down the counter. The already sensitive muscles in her leg pulled. She ground her teeth and fought the urge to reach down and massage them. “Um.” *A simple excuse-me would have worked too.*

Someone stepped up to the counter behind him, mid-yawn.

A thrill shot through Freddie’s nerves like she had missed a step on the stairs, like she was on a roller coaster she hadn’t signed up for.

*Ximena Colt.* No, Freddie corrected her stunned inner voice, not Ximena Colt. Ximena Colt was a character. Andrea Canton.

That was *Crime & Punishment’s* Andrea Canton!

With another physical jolt, Freddie realized she was staring. She ripped her gaze away and glanced around the room, but it was impossible not to take another look to be sure. There was no mistaking her.

The bodyguard’s glare darkened.

Now she understood why he was being so aggressive. More than likely, no one was supposed to have been in the lobby this late to see the cast arrive. Andrea Canton was makeup-free, something Freddie had never seen before. Her full lips were less defined, maybe, and the shine of her hazel eyes was not as bright. But her jaw seemed as chiseled as it ever had been in any picture and her light-brown skin glowed. Her hair was a beautiful deep brown, nearly black, pulled back by a red headwrap. She was stunning, even if she looked exhausted, like she had been traveling all day.

The burly man cleared his throat.

*Oh.* How long had she been standing there frozen? She was supposed to be checking in. “I’m sorry,” Freddie said.

The attendant glanced between Freddie, the intimidating man, and the actor at the end of the desk. She clearly had no idea who Andrea Canton was.

“I, uh... Sorry. Someone should have left a room key for me.”

“Sure. What’s your name?”

“Freddie Nguyen. N-G-U-Y-E-N.” Her face went warm when her voice cracked. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Andrea Canton again.

Behind her hired muscle, Canton had pulled out her phone and was staring at it with an intensity that made Freddie think she knew that Freddie had recognized her.

Should Freddie say something? Maybe “Thank you for your work”? No.

She stiffly looked back to the shuffling attendant. No one wanted to be hassled at four in the morning. Plus, she had a feeling that if she tried, the bodyguard would take a bite out of her.

“Oh, there it is. Here you go, Miss. N-guy-en.” The attendant handed her the card key, butchering Freddie’s last name as she read it.

Freddie took it, ready to remove herself from the scornful gaze and attitude the wall of muscle next to her was giving out. “Thanks.”

She turned to grab her bag.

Instantly the man blocked her path.

*Whoa.* “Excuse me?”

He had planted himself in front of Freddie, arms crossed. “I’m sorry, but due to the late hour, Ms. Canton would appreciate her privacy at this time.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry—” he repeated in obvious annoyance, “—but due to the late hour, Ms. Canton would appreciate her privacy at this time.” The man glared at her as though she were a fangirl who couldn’t give an actor their space.

Heat began to warm her cheeks and throat. It was so uncomfortable to watch when fans were disrespectful of actors as people, tried

to force them to be what they wanted, or insisted on breaking their boundaries. That wasn't her.

"Yeah, no. My bag—"

His hand went up to silence her again. "Ms. Canton will be available at her scheduled events, Miss. I'm going to have to ask you to leave her alone at this time."

"Dude, that's fine. I understand, but—" She tried to reach around him, but the man moved with her like they were playing *The Mirror Game*. When he moved, Freddie got a clear view of Ms. Canton.

Discretely, she was side-eyeing Freddie as though she couldn't decide whether to ignore the insistent fan or greet her so that she would move on.

This was going horribly wrong. "Look, I'm trying—"

"Ma'am, it's time—" The bodyguard placed a directing hand on Freddie's shoulder.

Like a magnet repelled by a negative charge, Freddie scrambled back. "Hey, please, don't touch me!" With the sudden movement, her leg muscles pulled stiff, making her stomach roll. She couldn't help herself. She jerked her weight to her other foot, trying to get rid of the uncomfortable sensation. But she hadn't accounted for the sudden shift in weight distribution.

*No, no, no!*

Freddie yipped and reached for the counter but to no avail. Like a cartoon character slipping on a banana peel, she lost her footing and hit the lobby floor hard.

Pain shot through her tailbone and into her hips. "Ahh, ow!" she groaned.

"Oh my God!" Andrea Canton vaulted past her bodyguard, her hands outstretched like she was trying to belatedly catch Freddie. "Adam!" She shot a glare back at the bodyguard.

Freddie let out another whimper. She really didn't care that her butt hurt. It was her cramping calf that sent stress through her like cold water. Gritting her teeth, she massaged her Achilles hard, trying to force the discomfort in her over-tight muscles to ease.

Andrea Canton dropped to her knees beside her. "Are you okay?"

Freddie looked up to politely brush the situation off and gaped. She was face to face with *Andrea Canton*.

“I’m so sorry! That was completely unacceptable.” Canton was staring at her with wide eyes.

Freddie needed to say something, but her tongue felt stuck to the roof of her mouth. Inside of her, the excited adrenaline of a fangirl warred with the humiliation of the situation. “Uhm...”

Andrea Canton’s eyes had little gold flecks in them. She had never noticed that in pictures.

With a concerted effort, she relaxed her calf and the cramp eased. “Yeah, I’m good. I just...” She was on the floor, and – ow, her body hurt. She pointed at the bag behind the bodyguard’s feet.

“Are you serious? You were only trying to get your bag?” Andrea Canton snarled, shooting a glare over her shoulder at her bodyguard. She reached around his legs for the bag, snatched it, and gently placed it next to Freddie. “I’m so sorry for my bodyguard’s behavior.”

Freddie used the distraction to scramble up, doing her best not to put full weight on her leg. “It’s okay. Err, thanks.”

“Do you need help?” Ms. Canton stood as well.

Freddie shook her head, fighting the desire to flee at top speed. “I... Thanks.”

Canton turned back toward her bodyguard. “I think you hurt her!”

“No, I’m good. I...” Freddie needed to go. The humiliation burned in her chest. “Thanks for this.” She shouldered the straps. “And, uh, goodnight.” She ignored Andrea Canton’s look of concern and moved as quickly as her leg would allow to the elevator. She jammed the up button, silently begging the elevator to arrive quickly.

When the elevator door opened, she scrambled in. Of course, Freddie had to turn around and face Ms. Canton while she waited for the elevator doors to close. She pressed the Close Door button twice.

Andrea Canton moved to speak but the elevator dinged and the doors closed.

“Oh, thank God.” Freddie sagged against the elevator wall and pinched the bridge of her nose. She couldn’t imagine how that could have gone worse.

What the hell had just happened? Why was Andrea Canton there so early? She wasn't scheduled to appear until that Saturday morning. And what was wrong with her security guy?

The muscles in her leg throbbed. With a groan, she held her foot off the ground to relieve the feeling that the back of her calf had twisted like a pretzel of stiff muscles. She was glad when the elevator doors slid open on the empty hallway of her floor.

Freddie followed the numbers and headed left until she was standing in front of her room door. Her hand shook so much as she tried to insert the key card, she had to try twice before the red light clicked to green.

It was dark inside, except for a faint light coming from one of the bedside lamps. Freddie smiled, touched that Red had thought to leave a light on for her.

Freddie flopped onto her bed, fully clothed. The night had been long, and the interaction at the front desk had tipped her from tired to dead on her feet. With a sigh and a prayer to all the fandom gods out there that Andrea Canton wouldn't remember anything about her, she fell asleep.



## Chapter 2

“WAKEY, WAKEY, EGGS AND BAC-Y.”

Freddie whined and tried to roll over into the pillows. She wanted to hold on to sleep a bit longer, but the weight on top of her wouldn't let her move.

“*Waake* up!” a singsong voice crooned. “Wake up, Freddie. It's *moorning!*”

Something tickled her ribs.

“Noo.” Freddie groaned. She just needed a little longer. Just a little—she opened her eyes and her heart jumped into her throat. “*Jesus Christ!*”

There was nearly six foot of leggy underwear-clad woman sitting on her.

“Whoa, Mama! Red!”

The dyed-fire-engine-red hair and the huge, toothy smile were so startling, she tried to scramble away.

Red was nestled over Freddie's hips, bearing a huge goofy grin and a steaming Styrofoam cup of coffee. Her large round eyes sparkled with delight, her thin lips pulled into a smile so wide that it took over her face. “Oooh, I like it when sexy women call me *Mama.*”

Freddie tried to adjust, blinking hard. Where was she supposed to put her hands? She didn't know, so she left them hanging in the air. “Uh, ew?”

Red put the cup gently down and then none too gently threw her arms around Freddie. “IT'S YOU! IT'S YOU! IT'S SO GOOD TO SEE YOU! HOLY CRAP!”

Despite many years of online friendship, she and Red hadn't met in person before. Freddie grinned and clutched back, her head ringing with Red's scream. The enthusiasm she felt on the inside easily matched the volume Red was putting out. It had been far too long. They should have met in person years ago.

Red clasped the sides of Freddie's face. "There's no screen between your face and mine!" She laughed and gave her a huge smacking kiss on the lips, then crawled off her and handed her the coffee. "What time did you get in last night?"

"Four-something." Freddie stretched. She couldn't stop smiling.

"Damn. You're going to be tired today."

Freddie sat up and reached for the fragile cup. The coffee smelled weak and disappointing, but it was still coffee, so she took a sip.

Red browsed through her suitcase, totally unconcerned about the amount of pale skin she had on display.

It was funny, the week before, Freddie had been nervous at the thought of finally meeting, well, her best friend—other than Lex, that was. What if she and Red had a different dynamic in person? But already it didn't feel that way. She didn't feel like she was meeting someone for the first time at all.

"No way. Not today. I refuse to give in to exhaustion."

Red beamed back. "Good. Way to be a trouper."

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Forty-five minutes later, she and Red were showered, dressed and, in Red's case, heavily made-up, as they headed down to the lobby.

Red took Freddie's hand as they stood on the elevator, beaming at her. "It's so awesome to see you." Her face fell. "Oh God, but it's only for a few days!"

"Hey!" Freddie bit back a laugh. So far Red was everything that she had hoped she would be. Warm. Dramatic. Passionate. "Don't worry. We'll do it again."

Red nodded, looking like she might cry. "Okay. You promise?"

Freddie offered her pinky. "Promise."

The doors opened and Red vaulted out. Her upset was completely forgotten as she began to pull on Freddie's arm like her dog, Sammy, did when she hadn't been out all day.

"Where is Lex gonna be?" Red stretched up on her toes even though she was at least four inches taller than most.

"Uh..." Freddie reached for her phone but before it was in her hand, a sound like a boiling tea kettle made them turn.

A short Black woman hit Red from the side in a body-slam, yanking Red's hand out of her own.

Red stumbled back a few paces, laughing. "Oh my God, Lex!"

Freddie laughed as her roommate hugged Red, her head only reaching Red's chest.

Red grunted. "Geez, muscles. Loosen up."

Lex let go, chuckling.

"I know. The muscles are beyond." Freddie reached over and playfully squeezed Lex's bicep, fruit of hours spent as a hobbyist rock climber.

"Are you excited?" Lex bounced in place, playfully giving the air a few hyper punches.

"I'm excited!" Freddie hugged Lex and let her kiss her cheek.

They moved together toward the convention center, coming face to face with the merchandise booths.

All around them, the faces of *Crime & Punishment* stared down from every angle. Stalls from one end of the room to the other displayed dolls and action figures of the show's characters, *C&P* stickers, buttons, T-shirts, and signed promotional photos, as well as that of other popular TV shows and movies.

It was like walking into a fandom candy store.

"Are we going to the bar tonight?" Red asked.

"Uh, are you *kidding*?" Lex looked scandalized. "If there is even a five-percent chance that Rachel and Andrea might show up like they did during the last con, then I'm there."

Freddie was pretty sure all the con attendees were planning a late night in the bar for that exact reason. She picked up a T-shirt and held it up to herself for her friends' approval. "So, then, panel, dinner, and getting ready before the cocktail hour, and bar?"

Lex nodded.

“Look, it’s Colstead!” Red squealed, holding up two boxes with small bobblehead-like dolls in them marked as Samantha Halstead and Ximena Colt, the two halves of their favorite couple. “They’re so cute!” She smushed the boxes together and made kissing noises.

The man behind the booth cleared his throat and pointed to a sign: *“Please do not make the dolls kiss. I don’t care who you’re into. It’s gross.”*

Freddie and Lex burst into laughter, as Red, flushing, put the toys back in their places.

A sudden, high-pitched sound startled Freddie. It was as if she had stepped on a mouse. Abruptly, Red was very close to her, hands digging painfully into Freddie’s arm.

“Ow! What is it?” she hissed.

Red squeaked again. Her eyes had grown wide, her breath quick and shallow.

Freddie followed Red’s gaze. “What is—? Oh.”

Ten feet away a small, wild-haired redhead was looking through the T-shirts. With her cute, freckled face, comfortable-looking jeans and an anime-themed hoodie, she was the source of Red’s panic.

“There she is.” Red’s voice was barely audible. “It’s Iris.” Red shot a glance back at the woman across the room.

“Hey, hey, okay.” Freddie grasped Red’s shoulders. “It’s no big deal, right? It’s just Iris. You’re gonna talk to her and it’s gonna be great. No worries. You guys talk all the time.”

Red stared back at Freddie but made no move.

“Go talk to her!”

The look on Red’s face was one of sheer panic. She threw another look at Iris, scrambling to get on Freddie’s other side and bumped noisily into a table.

At the sound, Iris looked up, saw them, and smiled.

“Uh-oh, I think she sees you, Red.” Lex let out a low whistle.

Red tentatively waved, her spooked eyes growing ever wider. A low whine came from her chest.

Across the room, Iris gave Red an open and, Freddie thought, very flirty wink.

The whine in Red's chest broke and she let out a breathy laugh. She turned around as if to flee the room and tripped over a chair, her long legs flailing like an overturned spider.

"Oh my God!" Freddie cried, as both she and Lex rushed to help her up.

\* \* \*

The first panel that afternoon was fine. The actors were hilarious, as were the fan-made videos they showed on the huge screen behind them to pander to their delighted audience. Freddie had enjoyed it, but it wasn't why she was at the con.

After the dinner break, the three of them bundled into Red and Freddie's room to hang out while they got ready for the scheduled cocktail hour with the C list panel actors.

"What are you guys wearing?" Freddie frowned at her duffel.

"Clothes," Red said.

Freddie stuck her tongue out at her, but Red didn't see. She was looking in the mirror, her face contorted, her mouth dropping open and twisting in that odd way that makeup-wearers do when they apply their mascara.

Lex stepped out of the bathroom wearing a crisp button-up and tie.

Freddie gaped. "Are we dressing up?"

Red had stripped down again and was pulling on a cocktail dress that matched the color of her cherry, Jolly Rancher hair. "I am, but you don't have to."

Freddie had only brought one slinky sexy dress and one tailored suit, neither of which she wanted to use yet. She pulled out her clothes and debated. "Can I just go naked? Do you think anyone would mind?"

Red snorted. "You know, somehow, I don't think anyone would. I've seen your tummy pictures, girl. Let those bad girls *out!*" she cried, pulling at Freddie's T-shirt.

Freddie laughed but quickly stepped out of reach, shoving her shirt down. Yeah, there had been a time she had posted pictures of her

washboard, but that was before. She rubbed at her softer stomach and opted to dress in the bathroom.

“You okay, Fred?” Lex asked.

She looked up fast, feeling caught.

Lex was watching her, the look on her face saying that she knew exactly what Freddie had been thinking.

“What? Yeah, totally.” She gathered her clothes quickly and fled to the bathroom, hoping she wouldn’t feel this self-conscious all four days.

\* \* \*

It was her friends and not the minor *Crime & Punishment* actors who were making this cocktail hour fun. The three of them and a few acquaintances they’d met online stood in a corner of the conference room, drinks in hand, talking and laughing.

Despite all the excitement in the air, it was still early when Freddie started to feel tired. She hadn’t gotten a lot of sleep the night before. While her friends stayed rowdy and began to slip off into smaller clusters, she hung back, sipping her drink and yawning. How long did she need to stay before she could slip away without Lex calling her an old lady?

“So, will you guys make fun of me if—” She paused at the expression on their faces. “What?”

Red’s face had gone a pinky pale then a reddish purple. A few feet away Lex turned from her conversation and also froze, mouth hanging open.

Freddie touched her face, checking it for spontaneous boils, but no, they weren’t looking *at* her, they were looking over her shoul—

“Hey, ’scuse me.” A velvet voice spoke from behind her.

Her mind jerked to a stop.

*Oh God.*

A hand brushed politely against her shoulder, leaving a trail of warmth behind it.

Freddie slowly turned. She was fairly sure she could pick that voice out of a crowd blindfolded, and she wasn’t even Freddie’s favorite actress.

The door that Freddie had been standing in front of had opened, and a small line of people were waiting for her to get out of the way, led by none other than Andrea Canton.

Freddie gaped. “Gorgeous.” The word popped out of Freddie’s mouth before she could stop it.

Blame it on those lips that she couldn’t stop staring at. Blame it on the perfume that was enveloping her.

Andrea was the polar opposite of the night before. Where she had previously been casual and tired-looking, she was now *Andrea Canton*, in all her glory. Her eyes had been shadowed in gold, making the hazel of her irises melt and shine. Her cheeks were no longer sallow from want of sleep but instead had been contoured to highlight their natural angle, as had her eyebrows. Her full lips had been perfectly lined and filled in light pink. Her black, shoulder-length hair was silky, and flowed around her face. Her skin looked like it had been powdered with gold dust so it shone. She wasn’t much taller than Freddie, who couldn’t be called anything but average height, but her presence was monumental. She had been beautiful the night before, dressed in everyday clothes and everyday make-up but now...

Freddie’s mind caught up with her and her eyes went wide. Dear God, she had *said* that—out loud.

Her hand snapped over her mouth, trying to smother anything else that might pop out. “I’m sorry!” That had been so rude! That had been so...gay, dammit. So in her face. She stepped to the side, rambling and desperate to sink back into the shadows unnoticed. “I— I apologize. I’m sorry.”

But the weary and exhausted look that Andrea had worn the night before was gone. In its place was a warm, sparkling smile and then a rich laugh. Her hand fell onto Freddie’s bicep and squeezed lightly. “Thank you, lovely.”

Freddie’s heart began to pick up pace. Its gallop had turned into an all-out sprint. What perfume was the woman wearing? She smelled... God, she smelled amazing, something musky like sandalwood, coconut, and yet lightly floral.

“What can I say? Makeup can do magic.” She gave Freddie a kind smile and pulled her in close, enclosing her in a tight hug.

Freddie stood frozen, feeling Andrea's hair tickle her face, feeling the curve of her body, and smelling the scent of her skin and make-up as her neck and throat drew oh-so close.

"Thanks for being here." She stepped past Freddie and was gone.

Freddie blinked, watching as the burly bodyguard from the check-in strode by her, followed by a sight all the more astounding: Rachel Davis came through the door with a smile for Freddie, a generic thank-you, and a nose boop that made Freddie go cross-eyed.

Freddie swayed.

"Dude, you look like you've been hit by a truck." Red steadied her, her eyes following the actors, filled with longing.

"Uhh..."

Lex laughed. "She has—the Colstead truck. Damn, I wish I was you right now. Damn!"

"Did that just happen?" Freddie asked weakly.

"Would you mind if I smelled you?" Red's eyes were unnaturally large and eager. "You know what? I'm just gonna do it. Don't make it weird."

Now that Rachel and Andrea had made it across the room, Freddie's mind slowly began to clear.

It was beginning to not make sense to her that Rachel was the more popular actor of the two. Yeah, even now, Rachel's hair was pulled back into this Chapstick style, and she had a swagger that made them all claim her as their own. But... *God, Andrea Canton*. There was something about her that was...alluring, magnetic.

Andrea looked up from the camera she had been posing for, her gaze traveled across the room before settling on Freddie. Was that mild curiosity on her face?

Freddie flushed and looked away. Did she remember her as the dangerous bag lady?

"Dude. She's looking at you," Lex hissed in her ear.

Freddie opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

\* \* \*

The energy in the room had changed with the arrival of the actors. Red and Lex, badasses number one and two, had brazenly marched up



to Rachel and asked for a picture—once they could get through the crowd.

Freddie held back, unable to watch the crowd for long. It was like watching a nature documentary. Rows upon rows of people surrounded Rachel and Andrea on all sides, calling their names, pulling and pushing at each other, trying to touch them. If either Rachel or Andrea took a step in any direction, the chaotic scrum migrated with them, shouting question after question.

Rachel and Andrea, however, were smiling, signing papers, and taking photographs with everyone who asked, all as if they weren't surrounded by a crowd exerting ocean-floor-level pressure on them. Rachel seemed the more exuberant—laughing louder, making silly faces—compared to Andrea's more sedate smiles, but both seemed accustomed to being in the eye of the fandom storm.

Red and Lex came back from their photo request grinning like fools.

"You should go." Lex nodded toward the actors.

Freddie shifted in place slightly. "I dunno. How do you even get in there?"

"Oh, you wimp." Red rolled her eyes. "You push!"

She wasn't so sure about that. Some of those fans looked like they would bite.

"Come on. I'll get you through." Red reached for Freddie. "You'll regret it if you don't."

"Hey!" Freddie tried to swat her hands away. She wasn't shy. She didn't need a human battering ram—probably. She just kind of...bad. "All right, all right. Damn!" She took a deep breath and dove.

It was like swimming upstream through solid buildings. No one wanted to let her through, and the closer she got to the front, the more people pushed and cursed.

"Ex-cuse-me," Freddie gasped, trying to fit between two elbows.

"Watch it!" Someone yelled and shoved her.

She squeaked as her foot caught on someone else's. She popped free of the crowd and barreled straight into Rachel Davis. "Oh, crap! I'm sorry!"

"That's all right, sweets. There isn't a lot of room here, is there?"

“You’re not wrong.” Freddie shifted, trying to get the person against her back to give her some space.

“Which one are you after?” Rachel’s bright-green eyes landed on her with her full attention.

Whoa. It was hard to process under the weight of that stare. Instead of trying to speak, she held up her phone.

The photo was a blur and then Rachel’s attention was gone, on to the next person.

Not far from her Red and Lex were pushing their way through toward Andrea. Freddie was mildly tempted to follow, but this time she *had* grown shy.

Andrea’s bright face smiled at the crowd, doing her best to answer as many questions as possible.

Because of that, or perhaps for some other reason, Freddie couldn’t approach her. She let the sea of bodies push against her until she had been moved out of the mob. Her gaze never left Andrea’s face.

## Chapter 3

PICTURE REQUESTS SATISFIED, FREDDIE, LEX, and Red left the cocktail hour, heading down the hall toward the bar.

“Jesus, Fred, I can’t believe you didn’t get a picture!” Red moaned.

“I paid for the photo op with them tomorrow.” Freddie shrugged self-consciously. “I’ll have one of Andrea soon enough.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t get an individual photo op with Andrea!” Lex protested.

“Plus, I got one with Rachel.” Freddie waved her phone at her friend as proof.

“But Andrea was right there, Fred. I mean, come on!” Red continued.

She glanced at Lex but couldn’t meet her eye. Instead, she paused to give her Achilles a stretch. She had walked a lot that day and it was growing stiff.

“Hurting?” Lex asked.

“It’s fine.” Freddie’s answer might have been a little too quick. She didn’t want to talk about her leg, especially when Lex already knew the answer. As soon as she had stretched enough, she began moving again. “I’m good.”

“Oh my God, *drool*. Did you see Rachel’s jacket? So gay.” Lex happily moaned, pointedly not looking in Freddie’s direction. “It reminded me of one that Lucy wore at a Xena con.”

As always, Freddie was thankful for Lex’s silent understanding. She and Lex—and Red in fact, had electronically met in the fandom for another show before getting into *Crime & Punishment*, and in

Freddie's mind, they were the best thing to come from fandom life. After her injury, she had lost everything that had ever mattered to her. It was only the support of Red and Lex that had kept her going.

"Aw, Lex." Red grinned and pulled her under her arm. "You're so old."

"Oh hush." Lex laughed, pushing her away. "I'm only ten years older than all of you."

"Yeah, whatever you say, Mom."

Freddie smiled listening to their banter.

She didn't regret her choice not to get a picture with Andrea Canton. She was pretty sure the photo op was going to feel less exposing. Or, maybe, it was more like it would be more official, less... invasive.

She was probably still smarting from the humiliation of the night before. What if the burly dude saw her and decided she had a bomb strapped to her chest?

She blinked and shook her head. The incident the night before probably wasn't helping her leg either. She bit the inside of her cheek. Though she had been told to keep moving after her six weeks of UCLA physical therapy, to continue on with PT through her doctor's office, she hadn't. Who could afford physical therapy without private insurance? What was the point of spending all that money when her career was gone? So, she had let that part of her slide. And now her muscles were protesting.

"You look like you're a million miles into your head." Red pulled her against her by the waist, leaning too much weight on her for Freddie to hold comfortably.

"Nope." Freddie groaned and pushed Red at Lex. "Nope. I'm right here."

"Okay, good. Hurry up! I wanna get a seat at the bar." Red laced one arm through Freddie's and the other through Lex's.

"You really think they're going to come down?"

Maybe it was just Freddie, but she thought that the packed hotel bar would be the last place the actors would go to *relax*, even more so after their impromptu appearance tonight at the cocktail hour. Hell, even *she* wasn't completely sure about going at this point. She was

tired. A good stretch and a quiet and relaxing drink sounded a lot better than a busy bar.

That desire for quiet only intensified when they stepped through the doors and she was hit with the smell that seemed to be in every bar in the country: alcohol, slightly sour cleaning rags, perfume, recycled air.

The packed-to-the-brim room went deathly quiet as every single head turned to see if the newcomers were who they had all been waiting for. Freddie chuckled. They hadn't gotten a jump on the game at all by leaving the cocktail hour early.

The silence only lasted a moment before the bustle picked back up at full volume; with people talking, laughing, telling jokes, and then telling them again when the cacophony was so loud that the punchlines couldn't be heard. The bartender was dancing, moving quickly from one end of the bar to the other, filling and making drinks as he went. In the corners, taking up small booths or cuddled together in scattered pairs, strangers were hitting on strangers, hoping to get lucky.

"I need more glasses!" The bartender bellowed, and Freddie controlled the impulse to run at top speed and refill the glass rack behind the bar. After years of working at a bar herself, it was almost second nature.

She rubbed her face and forced a steadying breath. This wasn't Alan's. She wasn't at work.

"Well, I don't think we're going to get a barstool," Lex yelled to them through cupped hands. "I guess we aren't the only ones who heard that the cast came down every night last year."

There were no tables available, so they ordered their drinks and awkwardly stood in the middle of the floor as a group, squished between other random groupings.

"Three Jack and Cokes, a vodka cranberry, a tap Bud Light, and a cooler Fat Tire!" The bartender bellowed at his exhausted looking bar-back. "Move!"

Freddie sighed at the tension building in her shoulders. The people pressed against her back were too warm and they kept bumping into her all the time, so she had to concentrate not to spill her weak drink.

She swallowed, the back of her neck beginning to itch. No one else seemed bothered by the bar's energy. As a matter of fact, it seemed to feed them, pumping them up; but it was giving Freddie a headache.

"Hey, so, um, what do you guys think of going somewhere else?" Freddie tried with an overly large grin. "This feels like I'm at work."

"You don't want to see if the actors are coming down?" Lex asked.

"They were just down here at the thingy. You really think they're coming down again?"

"I hope so." Red craned her neck toward the bar doors again.

When a woman beside them, wobbling ever so slightly, "accidentally" steadied herself on Freddie's ass. Freddie grimaced. She was probably too tired, that was all. Tomorrow night after some downtime, she would enjoy this more. "You know what, guys, I'm gonna get out of here."

"Are you sure?" Lex asked.

"Uh, yeah. If they come down every day, then I can do this tomorrow, right?"

"Do you want us to come with—?"

"Nah. Thanks, though."

Instead of heading toward the elevator, Freddie left the bar and started out the front door. Her leg muscles were tight, but not so badly she couldn't walk for a while in the peaceful evening air.

The moment she stepped outside, her overstimulated nerves calmed. She didn't want to be alone, exactly, but she did want somewhere that wouldn't make her head pound. This was Anaheim, but it wasn't that late yet. There *had* to be a Disney-themed bar or restaurant nearby that had calmed down for the night.

\* \* \*

Freddie passed two bars within a block, but they seemed to be as busy as the hotel bar. At each one, she frowned and continued on, especially when a shouted ship war blared from the second. She had no interest in walking into a ship war.

What was she even doing, out by herself? Her friends were back at the hotel. Everything she had been looking forward to was back there.

So why was she walking the streets of Anaheim looking for something else?

Just when the streets were starting to grow far too dark and silent for her comfort, she noticed a small sign up ahead. The plaque hanging in front of the storefront was subtle with flowery calligraphy and a wine glass. Unlike everywhere else she had passed, she couldn't hear music pounding, nor anyone singing karaoke from inside as she approached. She didn't know anything about wine, but she stepped in anyway.

Her shoulders unclenched the moment she was inside. *This* was exactly what she had been looking for.

She took a seat at the bar, a bit intimidated by the feel of the place. This wasn't like Alan's bar at all. Then again, maybe that was the best thing about it. The bar was dark and still, a few tables and booths populated by people whispering with their heads together. The lighting was dim, and the soft jazz track was the perfect complement, saying *come in, stay awhile, and relax*.

"What can I get you, Miss?" the bartender asked in a low voice.

Freddie cleared her throat, running her hand through her choppy hair. She felt like a kid at the adults table, her legs swinging as she looked at the menu. She didn't even know what half of the stuff on it was or what language it was in. Alan's wasn't a wine type of place other than their house glasses of eight-bucks-a-bottle—Mondavi that no one ever ordered. "I, uh, is there something that you recommend for beginners? Or maybe a house red?"

He smiled kindly, which helped her feel a little better. "What type of liquor do you drink? Do you usually drink fruity, mixed drinks, or are you an on-the-rocks kind of girl?"

"Beer, usually." Alan's always had a mix of local microbrews, and that was something Freddie enjoyed. From nitro brews to old fashioned stouts, she could find the difference in the smallest of flavors. If she had a choice, that was what she picked.

He nodded and began fussing with a bottle for her. He poured a mouthful's worth. "Give this a try."

She took the glass and took a tentative sip. "Oooh." It was like candy in a glass. "I didn't know wine could taste like this."

“There’s a full spectrum out there.” He clicked his tongue and shot her a wink.

The flavor was good. She could get behind this kind of wine. Thumbing her phone open, she skipped the social media she usually went to and opened her internet tab. She would melt into the fanfic she had started three nights before. Once it was open though, she found herself staring off into space, enjoying the light jazz music that played quietly through the bar. She let her cheek fall against her fist, propping up her head. With a tired sigh, she took a huge mouthful of the wine.

“Hi.”

A lot of things happened very quickly. Freddie saw who stood next to her. She did something, she had no idea what, but suddenly she was choking, doing her best not to dribble wine as she swallowed back a hack.

“Oh my God!” Beside her, Andrea Canton’s face twisted into horror. She cried out and none too gently began to pound her on the back.

The choking sensation got worse. Freddie’s eyes burned.

*Not happening, not happening, not happening.*

She swallowed hard, taking all of the wine down in a swallow that felt hard and round.

Freddie wheezed, waving Andrea Canton’s hands away. She stared at her through bleary eyes. This woman had a habit of just showing up, didn’t she? Didn’t she know she was too beautiful for that? Surprising young and innocent gays while they were minding their own business was probably bad for their health.

They stared at one another, Andrea’s eyes wide with shock.

“I’m so sorry!” Freddie gasped. Her voice was thick from the sugary residue in her throat. Was there a hole anywhere she could jump into? God, she had spit all over herself in front of Andrea Canton after falling on the floor in front of her the night before.

Andrea clicked her tongue, her brow twitching. “Wow. Gotta admit, that’s probably the biggest greeting I’ve gotten. And that’s saying something.”



A small whine came from her throat. Andrea's eyebrows rose and Freddie snapped her mouth closed.

This was it. She was done. There was no saving her dignity anymore.

"Here." Andrea handed her a napkin from the bar.

Freddie began to dab at herself.

"You okay?"

Freddie nodded, her face was so hot it was beginning to hurt. Words. She thought now was probably time for some words.

*Speak!*

Her mind rattled the word and she gave a start. "Yeah. Yeah, totally. I'm good. Uh. Hi. Andrea Canton."

Andrea surveyed her. Freddie wasn't sure if she imagined the discomfort in her eyes or not. After all, she had made an ass out of herself and probably freaked Andrea Canton out. Again.

"You're the woman from last night, right?"

The question was like a swift kick to the gut. Freddie knew it. She knew she was going to be remembered for the wrong reason. Damn it. "Look, I swear I wasn't trying to bother you. I just—"

"No!" Andrea squeezed Freddie's arm lightly "No, yeah. I know."

"—trying to get my bag and—"

"Adam was totally out of place."

Freddie paused when she realized she was talking over Andrea at the same moment that Andrea herself paused.

"I'm so sorry." They both said it at once. They looked at one another and started to awkwardly laugh.

Freddie looked up at the scarf wrapped around Andrea's hair. This time it was forest green and gold. It suited her.

Andrea shifted in place, settled her arm on the bar. She began to pick at the napkin Freddie hadn't needed. Her fingers twitched ever so slightly like she had too much caffeine in her system.

Was she nervous? That didn't make any sense. How could she be nervous approaching her? Shouldn't it be the reverse? Carefully, Freddie scooted back giving Andrea some more room, just in case that would help.

“So, listen.” Andrea glanced back at her and flashed a little smile before going back to studying the bar top again. “I was wondering, can I buy you a drink?” And as if she was worried Freddie would say no, she barreled on before Freddie could speak. “It’s the least I can do after Adam accosted you last night. And I want you to know I filed a complaint about his behavior. I’m so sorry. That should never have happened.”

Was she staring? Freddie looked away, just in case.

“Would that be okay?”

“Yeah. Of course. I mean, no.”

Andrea had begun to smile but it dropped like a stone. “Oh.” She straightened from her lean, eyelashes fluttering. “Right, yeah. Okay.”

Freddie mentally swore at her blunder. “No, no, I mean, you *can*. But you don’t have to. It wasn’t your fault and I’m fine.”

A small smile came back to her face. “Okay. Still. It would make me feel better.”

Freddie nodded. “Thanks. That’s really nice of you.”

They looked at one another again.

Andrea stuck out her hand. “Andrea Canton.”

Freddie bit back a laugh and instead slid her hand into Andrea’s. “Freddie Nguyen.”

Andrea nodded, her gaze darting to Freddie’s and then away again.

Freddie’s hand was tingling as it fell back into her lap.

“I’m sorry!” Freddie hopped off her stool and pulled out the stool beside her. “Would you like, can I...”

Andrea’s smile was shy, far more than Freddie thought she would see on the face of an actress. “Oh, yeah. Okay.”

Freddie tucked the stool under her and then scrambled back on hers.

“So, what can I get you?”

“I don’t know. Whatever you’re having, I guess.” Freddie could still feel the tingle from their hands meeting, and it was distracting.

“Okay.” Andrea said with a lingering look and smile. She raised a finger toward the bartender and ordered.

The bartender poured and handed them each a glass.

“An apology.” Andrea gently clinked their glasses.

Struck by how cute her smile was, Freddie took a tentative sip. “*Eugh!*” For the second time that night, she found herself making horrible faces in front of Andrea.

It was like taking a punch in the mouth. What at first was kind of sweet quickly turned into acid, making her mouth and tongue go dry. “God! That’s so bad.”

Beside her, Andrea had just hummed with satisfaction. “You don’t like it?”

Freddie took another sip in an effort to be as polite as she could under Andrea’s watchful eye. She didn’t want to insult the drink Andrea had bought her, but also, she thought this was probably what paint thinner tasted like. “It’s not bad.”

“Are you sure? Because I can get you something else.”

“No.” Freddie said definitively. No way she was going to let that happen.

Andrea nodded, a small frown on her face. “Okay, well. Enjoy.” Her hand came to rest on her chest, over her heart. “And really, I’m sorry, again.”

Freddie nodded and forced the sip of the wine down her throat. Her stomach felt like she had taken a shot of something.

The burn was enough that she barely noticed hopping down to pull Andrea’s chair out again. Andrea had tastebuds, right? Did she not like them, to punish them that way?

With a small smile over her shoulder, Andrea walked back to the booth directly behind Freddie.

The booth looked like it had been a sanctuary for the night. A soft-looking sweater sat on the table beside a book.

Trying to be discreet, Freddie looked at the binding, surprised to see it was a Stephen King. Andrea saw her looking and caught Freddie looked away. So, Andrea liked horror. That didn’t make sense at all. She had this quiet, professional, but sweet persona. It didn’t mesh with a book about the ritual killing of teenagers. She glanced back.

It was surreal. She watched her on her TV. Even if she hadn’t been a big fan of her character, she still was part of her ship. And there she was.

Andrea was picking up her book again and—

Were those reading glasses?

Freddie bit back a smile. She had never seen those in photos.

The juxtaposition between the persona Freddie had seen behind the scenes and these small signs of who Andrea might actually be made her all the more curious.

She picked up the wine glass and took another sip. It really was so gross. How was it possible Andrea liked it?

Freddie tapped her fingers on the bar top. Covertly, she glanced back and began to heat from the inside out. Andrea was already watching her, amusement on her face.

She couldn't help but laugh. Okay, she wasn't fooling anyone. "Excuse me." She waved the bartender over. "Can I have another of the one I had earlier? And will you send another to her?" she pointed over her shoulder.

"Sure thing." He poured the pink wine and handed her one glass.

Andrea looked up from her book to the approaching bartender. Eyebrows furrowed, she took the glass and glanced toward Freddie.

Freddie held her own glass up.

A small smile broke across Andrea's face. She held the glass up and they pretended to clink across the space.

The sip was like a soothing balm on Freddie's overly dried tongue. She savored it.

Andrea, however, looked like she had been fed garbage. Her eyes grew wide, her face morphing into an expression of disgust.

Freddie stumbled off of her stool and to Andrea's booth. "Are you okay?"

Andrea looked like she had been deeply offended. "Oh...wow." She breathed. "Girl, no. That is disgusting!"

"What? No way!"

"It tastes like candy!" Andrea smacked her lips in distaste.

"Wha..." A cramp hit Freddie's stomach as she tried, she really tried not to laugh. "I hate to remind you of this fact, but most people like candy."

Andrea's nose wrinkled. "Mmm-mm." She shook her head.

"Okay, I admit." She bowed in defeat. "I don't know much about wine. I'm not even sure if I like it."

Andrea's gaze traveled across her face. "If you don't know if you like wine then what are you doing in a wine bar?" The smile on Andrea's face had changed. Where a moment before she'd had eyes that had been full of laughter, now they were wary. Her gaze darted to the seat where Freddie had settled and Freddie understood.

"Oh." When had she even sat down? "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to intrude on your space. Ahh!" Freddie sprang back up like the seat was hot. "I made you uncomfortable. I didn't mean—"

"No." Andrea spoke quickly. Her hand shot out as if she meant to grasp Freddie's wrist but stopped short. "No, it's okay. I'm sorry. You just caught me off guard. You know." Andrea shrugged.

"Right." Freddie was still leaning up, half in a crouch.

"Sit."

Freddie did, suddenly too aware of what she was doing. How exactly had she gotten here? Was she really sitting with Andrea Canton in a wine bar in Anaheim or had she fallen and hit her head at work?

"So." Andrea's shoulders twitched, looking too tense.

Was that because of her? The last thing Freddie wanted was to make anyone uncomfortable.

"Why are you here if you don't like wine? Shouldn't you be at the hotel?"

Freddie's nose scrunched.

"What?" Andrea smiled and tucked her book under her sweater.

"I'm just debating if I'm going to make up something that makes me seem suave and cool or if I'm going to tell you the truth."

Andrea's mouth popped open at the same moment her eyebrows twitched up, the two expressions intermingling at Freddie's comment. Then she burst into rich and full laughter.

The sound made Freddie squirm with excitement.

Andrea's shoulders hadn't loosened at all, but there was a slight lessening of tension in her eyes.

Andrea's gaze lingered on Freddie's face, a small smile on her lips. "Charming," she said, almost to herself.

Freddie's stomach flip-flopped. *Andrea Canton called me charming.* She smiled down at the table. "I don't know about that."

Andrea clicked her tongue. “Tell you what? Why don’t we start with the truth and go from there.”

Freddie released an exaggerated sigh. “All right. I might as well admit that I was looking for some quiet. It’s pandemonium back at the hotel.”

Andrea opened her mouth and then closed it, only to open it again. “Okay, but *why* is that something you wouldn’t want to admit? We all need some peace and quiet at times.”

She shrugged. “I’m too young to be this old.” Freddie’s nervous fingers reflexively picked at her wine glass. “Anyway, I left the bar and just kind of started walking. I like this place. It’s...”

“Chill?” Andrea offered.

Freddie smiled. That was exactly it. “Very chill.”

The bartender set two glasses on the table, one pink and one deep red.

Freddie gave him a nod and a thanks, then turned back to Andrea. “What?”

Andrea blinked a few times as if she had been daydreaming, then picked up her glass. “No way you’re old anything. Are you even old enough to be in here?”

“What?” Freddie pretended to balk. “A lady never tells her age.” She smirked at her with a playful shrug. “I think it’s the freckles. They make me seem younger than I am,” she said.

Andrea pursed her lips. Was she holding back laughter? Did she just make Andrea laugh again? “You look like you’re nineteen.”

She playfully fawned, enjoying Andrea’s smile in response. “Oh my, you are too kind, m’lady. No, definitely not. Twenty-eight, actually.” Freddie realized she had no idea how old Andrea was.

“Ah,” Andrea said lightly.

Andrea was assessing her again, and Freddie didn’t know what to do with that. It made her feel all sorts of things in the pit of her stomach, so she studied her glass and tried to gather some charm, whatever kind of charm she had. She had to have *some* in her.

“Sounds like you get that a lot, Ms. Nguyen.”

“God, no. Call me Freddie. Please. If I still get carded when I walk into bars, then I kinda think I’m too young to be a ‘Ms.’ anything. I can’t help but think that the same rule applies to you.”

“Is that your way of saying that you would like to call me *Andrea*? Or is that your way of asking my age, because someone just told me that a lady never reveals her age.”

Freddie’s stomach swirled. In interviews, she was always Andrea. Most of the fandom called her that, but it had never occurred to Freddie to do the same so openly. “What? N—no, I meant, I...”

Andrea grinned. “It’s all right, Freddie. I’m thirty-four. I haven’t been carded in years. I can see why you do, though. You really twenty-eight?”

Freddie frowned at the smirk on Andrea’s face. “I think there was a compliment in there somewhere, maybe.”

Andrea looked down and straightened the napkin in her lap.

*Did she just blush?* That felt like winning a prize.

“So, what do you do, Freddie?”

“Right now?” Freddie sighed. “I work at a bar while I’m finishing my graduate degree at UCLA.”

“How much do you have left?” Andrea asked.

“One more semester after the current.”

“Oh wow. So, you’re close. What are you going for?”

Freddie’s teeth ground. She had been so proud of her answer once: she’d been a forward on the UCLA soccer team, division one with her eyes on the Olympic team. That had been her focus, academics had been second. The question poked at a raw spot not too deeply buried inside. Her answer felt like she was speaking of someone else. “Social work.”

The hint of a smile touched Andrea’s lips as she studied her. “Okay, but that’s amazing, so why the hesitation?”

Freddie swallowed. “Right. Uh.”

“Snap.” Andrea sat back in her seat sharply. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, no, you’re good. I’m just...ugh, it’s complicated.” She had to get better at this question.

“Okay, yeah, I get it.” Andrea nodded slowly. “But also, have you ever said screw it and totally let it all go for a complete stranger?”

“As in?”

Andrea sat up straighter in her seat, leaning across the table with a look of thoughtful separation. “I mean, you don’t know me. I don’t know you. We’re probably never going to talk again. Right?”

As depressing as it was, Freddie had to nod.

“So then?” Andrea sipped her wine. “What’s up?”

“I don’t...” She sat up too. “See, the thing is...”

Andrea waited, attentive, but there was no pressure coming from her either.

“Okay. I’m supposed to be playing soccer. I was at UCLA because I was recruited for their soccer team. I wanted to go all the way—to the US team, the World Cup, the Olympics. But I got hurt.” Freddie shrugged, trying to brush it off. “So now it’s social work.” She shook her head, realizing how that sounded. “*Not* that it’s a second choice. I was always going to do it eventually. After, I mean. I—”

Andrea nodded. “I get it. And I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

Freddie gave her a half-smile. It was all she could manage at that moment.

“Okay, but why that?”

“What?” Freddie frowned.

“Act like it’s no big deal. It obviously is.”

Freddie didn’t know what to say. “I...”

Andrea’s gaze was penetrating yet somehow Freddie didn’t quite feel as exposed as she usually would. “It’s okay.” Andrea finally broke the silence when Freddie still hadn’t found how to explain. “It’s awkward. I get it. It’s cool.”

“I just want it to be no big deal, I guess.”

Andrea nodded once. “Okay.”

It was a simple response but something in its nonjudgmental simplicity made Freddie feel better.

“Do you miss it?”

“Yes.” Freddie chuckled darkly. “No.” She sighed. “That question is so complicated.” She missed playing soccer, having a body that was strong and able to take wear and tear. That wasn’t what haunted her



though. It was the fact that it was her own fault that she didn't have that anymore. She had lost it by being young and dumb. Life had forced her to grow up suddenly after she had been hurt. Every day she lived with the wish that she had gotten there sooner. "The answer might be too deep for casual conversation."

"Okay. I get you." Andrea gave her that sweeping look again. "Another glass of wine?"

"It's up to you. I bet you have a busier day tomorrow than I do," Freddie offered.

Behind Andrea's smile, that distant yet inexplicable analytical stare that she had been using all night appeared again, the one that made Freddie feel like her soul was spread across the table to be read. "I think I can have one more." She held out a finger, playfully definitive. "One."

Freddie nodded and smiled to herself. While she couldn't tell what was going through Andrea's head, she also didn't seem all that anxious to get away.

Freddie took a sip and glanced around at the people also in the bar. "Aren't you worried that your fans would find you here? I mean, I accidentally did."

She could tell at once that the question did indeed make Andrea retreat under her *Andrea Canton* façade a little deeper. It made Freddie's jaw clench. She shouldn't have asked, shouldn't have brought up something that would remind her that Freddie was a fan.

Her gaze dropped, her finger toying with the stem of the glass. "Andrea, I'm sor—"

"I'm not sure if I should tell you. You're a fan."

Freddie looked back up, expecting caution in Andrea's eye. Instead, the look of wary exhaustion she had seen the moment before had gone. She was smiling at Freddie mischievously. "What?" Intrigued, she leaned in closer and cocked her head expectantly.

"Honestly..." Andrea's eyes twinkled as she bit her lip.

This time Freddie's breath caught for a whole other reason than being starstruck. "Well, now you have to tell me! Oh, come on! I told you about being an old lady who searches out quiet wine bars instead of partying like a normal person."

Andrea's eyebrows slowly rose. "Uh-huh, and then next it will be like Andrea, I told all of your secrets and now you never get peace."

"It's true, I'm a fan, but I pinky-swear to hold my tongue, whatever you tell me."

"Oh?"

Freddie held out her extended pinkie. Pausing only for a second, Andrea linked hers with Freddie's. And held it.

Wait. Was it Andrea who was holding on longer than necessary, or was it Freddie?

She glanced down at their linked fingers and pulled away. She needed to watch herself.

"Well." Andrea leaned back against the booth, looking the most comfortable that she had all night. "You were honest with me, so it's my turn. To answer your question, no, I don't worry about it."

"Why?"

Andrea's lip pulled up in the corner. "Because they all stay in the bar."

Freddie didn't mean to laugh quite as loud as she did. "That's for sure. It was slammed. Standing room only. Something about you and Rachel Davis spending every night in the bar at the last con? Everyone was very hopeful."

"It was a super small convention then, I mean tiny. My first episodes hadn't been airing for more than a few months, and we hadn't gained much of a following. So, yeah."

Freddie eyed her. She thought she was beginning to understand. "But you didn't go every night, did you?"

Andrea's tongue clicked. "Very astute. Yeah, no. It was my agent's idea. We went just enough so that they thought we'd return nightly. That left us free to go somewhere quiet nearby and relax."

Freddie chuckled. "Your agent is an evil genius."

"I suppose tomorrow night will be my or Rachel's night. Someone was at the bar this evening or is at the bar, I'm not sure. I'll go down and let them touch me, pull on me. Then, if I need another evening away to decompress, I can have it." She spoke slowly, low, and almost regretfully. The humor had left her voice, leaving it dry and brittle.

Freddie studied her face, reading what little she could. “All right. Honesty hour. You sound like you hate them.” It wasn’t an accusation, and she was pleased to see that Andrea didn’t take it that way.

“Uh-oh. Do I?” She looked down at the table. “God, that’s bad because I don’t. Not at all. As a matter of fact, I love them. They gave me a career. Some of them are so kind, so complimentary. I guess it’s just a lot. It’s a hard job, harder than most would think.”

Freddie wanted to ask for more information but thought better of it. “Actually, that makes perfect sense. I saw you tonight at the cocktail hour. I don’t know how you do what you do. I feel like I’m too center stage working with the kids and they don’t care what you do at all. Kinda impossible to embarrass yourself. I can’t imagine being in your shoes.”

Andrea took a sip. “You work with kids?”

“Oh.” Freddie shrugged. “Kind of. Not really. Work with is a stretch. I run this pick-up soccer game in Everly park Thursday nights.”

“You do?”

Freddie nodded and took a sip of her wine. She didn’t understand the look on Andrea’s face.

“Do you like kids?”

“I mean, yeah, of course. Kids are amazing little humans. And nothing gets your mind off your own problems like helping with theirs,” Freddie confessed.

“Oh?”

“For sure. It’s been a crazy couple of years but when I’m with them all, of that falls away, you know? I’m free for a while.”

“That’s beautiful.”

Freddie shifted in her seat as Andrea watched her. Her eyes were becoming unfocused, confusion and something else in Andrea’s face.

“What? Did I—?”

“Oh.”

Freddie’s back straightened. She reviewed everything she had said in a millisecond, trying to recall if she’d done or said something rude.

“You’re the one I hugged.”

The heat that slammed into Freddie burned her from the inside out. She froze, her mind yelling a justification for her actions before her mouth had even opened.

Andrea relaxed back against the booth, crossing her arms over her stomach. "I don't know how I didn't realize." Andrea mused. "I should have recognized those eyes."

That stopped Freddie short. "Uh, what?"

Andrea was still staring. "You gotta know you have stunning eyes. Has no one ever told you that?"

Yeah, they had. She had gotten her father's eyes, not quite brown, not quite green, and they were always commented on. Freddie had just never heard that from someone with eyes like Andrea's.

The night had been like a confessional of embarrassments, every one of which made Freddie shift in her seat. "Oh God. Yeah. Sorry about what I said to you. I uh, you're just... I wasn't prepared."

"Are you apologizing for calling me beautiful?" Andrea asked in a dry tone.

Freddie paused, her nerves slowly melting into a smile as she looked at Andrea. There was something playful warming Andrea's eyes. It was maddening. One moment Andrea would be cold and aloof, the next bright and expressive, and the next looking at her in a way that Freddie couldn't figure out.

"To be fair, what I said was gorgeous. Beautiful doesn't cover it."

Andrea grinned all the wider, shifting into a large open-mouthed, toothy smile instead of the polite *Good Morning America* one. "You smelled amazing."

An inarticulate sound popped from Freddie. That seemed to be Andrea's talent. She kept saying things that stopped Freddie dead, making her bumble and stutter. "Uh...thank you? I think?" Why was her stomach full of butterflies?

"You'd be surprised about how often that is not true. The ones who smell nice tend to stand out from the rest, especially when you consider all the people I hug in a day at events like this. I can come back to my room smelling...let's say, interesting."

"Ew. Really?" That was disgusting.

Andrea leaned across the table, conspiratorially. “Really.” She sat back and studied her—again.

What the hell did that *look* mean?

Andrea’s fingers traced an unseeing, meaningless shape on the table as her eyes sharply watched Freddie. “Tell me, when we met in the lobby—”

Knowing where this was going, she spoke the truth before embarrassment could shut her up. “Yeah, you were even more gorgeous then.”

“No, no,” she said. She didn’t understand what the look on Andrea’s face changed into then. Her eyelashes fluttered, and a delicate pink touched her cheeks.

She was beautiful.

“What then?” Freddie asked, a crooked grin on her face. Her voice had pitched itself low of its own accord.

“I—I was gonna ask—” Freddie’s grin grew. She had actually made Andrea stumble. “—what were you doing in the lobby at four in the morning? That was supposed to be the crazies-free hour.” Andrea finished.

“Hey! I had no intention of saying *anything* to you. I only wanted my bag.”

At Freddie’s mock outrage, Andrea laughed once more, rich and full in a way that Freddie knew she would remember once she left here.

The longer they talked, the clearer it was that this woman was absolutely nothing like her character. Ximena Colt was stiff, often abrasive. Andrea was...fun. Okay, *fun* wasn’t the right word since she was too reserved for fun, but she had a feeling that if she continued to pry away Andrea’s layers, then fun would be exactly what she was.

She couldn’t stop herself. Freddie wanted to know more.

They finished their glass of wine, the chatter coming easily. Then, by unspoken agreement, they paid and rose. Freddie’s heart was beginning to grow sore as she realized their night was almost done. The conversation paused as they gathered their belongings and headed toward the door.

“Come on!” She continued to tease Andrea as she had been a few minutes before. “Why won’t you just *tell* me the answer? There must be something you don’t like. We’re literally never going to see one another again after this weekend, remember?”

“Tell me why you want to know. You’re not a reporter, are you?” Andrea narrowed her eyes in such a way that came off playful instead of menacing.

“If I were a reporter, is that really something that I would ask you?”

Andrea’s snort was delightfully undignified. “If you were a reporter, that is exactly what you would ask me.”

“Oh.” Something on Freddie’s face made Andrea laugh harder. “Well, you were the one who brought it up! Kinda.” Freddie opened the front door for Andrea.

“All right. Fine.” They had wandered out of the bar and now stood in front of it while Andrea made her confession. “I hate the ship wars. That’s my least favorite thing.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I do. I hate it.” Andrea gushed as if the words had been dying to be free. “It seems like such an insignificant thing, yet it is the only thing that people seem to care about.”

“Does it bother you that one of the ships they always ask you about is Sam and Ximena?” This was something that she had wondered about a lot. It had to be awkward for these straight women.

Andrea’s shoulders went up and down. “No. Though sometimes it’s unsettling to see photos of Rachel’s face kissing mine or, you know, the nastier photos.”

Freddie stifled a laugh behind her hand.

“I know her boyfriend! I work with her! She’s like an older sister. It’s awkward!”

“So, if you don’t like the shipping questions, then what *would* you like people to be interested in?”

Andrea stood and thought for a few moments, her laughter fading slowly. “Have you heard of Intertwined Hearts?”

Freddie bit back her laugh, barely. Andrea didn’t understand the power of the fan girl. Not only had she heard of the nonprofit, but she had applied for an open program they were running. To Freddie’s

credit, she had applied everywhere she could, but Intertwined Hearts had been one of the first. “I applied.”

Andrea paused in her tracks. “You did?”

“Are you kidding?” Freddie shook her head. “Yeah, dude. The ability to build whatever social program you like? That’s a rare thing. And *paid*? I couldn’t pass it up.”

Andrea’s eyes lit up and she let out a delighted laugh. “Yes! Exactly!” She clapped for emphasis. “That’s why I wanted to do it. I can’t think of a better way for us to diversify what we cover. We could branch out into English-as-a-second-language classes, or special needs support or anything, really.”

“It’s a great idea. I need another thousand supervised hours to get my license and start my doctorate program. If I could get them while creating my own program that I’m passionate about then that would be great.”

“Oh! I’m so glad to hear that it’s drawing people in.” Andrea bounced in place. “Intertwined Hearts is my passion project. I love it so much. It took me a long time to get it off the ground, and it does wonderful work. I think...” Andrea worried her bottom lip. “I had hoped that I could use the show to support the nonprofit once I was on it, but it hasn’t worked that way. Nobody has ever asked me about it. They only want to know about Andrea’s relationship with Samantha or her relationship with Charlie, or who is the funniest on set.”

Freddie grinned. “Oh yeah, who’s funniest?”

“I have been told I am.” Andrea sniffed with her nose in the air.

“I can believe it.”

Adam stepped out of a nearby car. “Andrea.”

Andrea’s shoulders stiffened. She nodded curtly in his general direction. “I suppose my clock struck midnight.”

“Does that mean if we wait long enough, he turns back into a mouse?”

Andrea’s smile did not touch her eyes.

Freddie was sad to have the night be over. She wished that there was a way they could keep talking. “Thank you for the evening, Andrea. It was really nice to spend some time getting to know you.”

The barest moment of sadness flashed across Andrea's expression before she smiled and nodded once. "I enjoyed it. Thank you. I wanted to be alone tonight, but the company was better than that."

Freddie scuffed the ground with her shoe. "Anyway. You better go before he has a coronary."

"Yes, I guess I should. All right. Goodnight, Freddie. Thank you."

Adam stepped forward and took Andrea's arm as though he were escorting POTUS. Andrea yanked the arm away and glared before she climbed into the car on her own. A few seconds later, the car pulled away and disappeared.

Freddie walked back to the hotel on cloud nine. That had been so much fun. Nothing had gone as she'd expected, but Andrea had been a particularly nice surprise. Not only was she beautiful, smart, funny, and perhaps even a bit silly, but she was also passionate and caring.

Barely noticing the crowds around her as she floated into the lobby, Freddie stopped just inside the door at a small table that was littered with information about the con. She leafed through the brochures and flyers until she found what she was looking for, a small green and yellow pamphlet at the bottom of the stack with the Intertwined Hearts logo. Freddie gathered them, so they were front and center.



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BY OLIVIA JANAÉ

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