

Popcorn LOVE



KL Hughes



Chapter One

“STOP WHINING,” VIVIAN HUFFED BEFORE stuffing a forkful of Cobb salad in her mouth.

Elena rolled her eyes as she took a sip of her sparkling water and crossed and uncrossed her legs under the café table. “*You* stop whining,” she hissed at the other woman. “A refusal does not equate to whining, Vivian. You continuing to push the issue, however, *does*.”

Vivian finished chewing her food in silence before dabbing at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. Both she and Elena were no strangers to proper manners. They had been raised to never forget them after all.

“Oh come on, Elena. It’s time for you to live a little. It’s time for you to move on. It’s *time* for you to get your sexy ass out there and share it with the world!”

Elena quirked a brow at her best friend. “The world?”

Running a hand through her long, ash blonde hair, Vivian leaned back in her chair. “Okay, so maybe not the *world*. That would put a whole new meaning on the phrase ‘sleeping around’, wouldn’t it?”

“I am not *sleeping* with anyone,” Elena said. “I have no desire to dabble in the dating world, let alone jump into bed with a string of nameless, faceless one-night stands that could only offer momentary satisfaction, and at the risk of heavy consequences.” Elena knew well that some of those consequences could change one’s entire life.

“*Exactly!* That’s the problem!”

“No, dear. The problem is *you* continuing to hound me about this ridiculous idea of yours to set me up on a string of dates that I have absolutely no interest in.”

“How do you know you have no interest in them? You haven’t met any of them yet. *I* haven’t even met any of them yet.” Vivian pointed a finger at her friend as if she had just made the most brilliant argument for her case. Elena simply stared at her, unblinking and unfazed.

“Look, Elena, it doesn’t have to be some big ordeal,” Vivian said. “It’s not like I am going to put you on a strict schedule of dates or try to marry you off to the first good-looking man or woman—”

“Woman?”

“Well, there *was* that time in Cancún.” Vivian’s soft laugh grew louder as she watched Elena’s cheeks color. “That was the one and only spring break I convinced you to take with me during college.” She let out a blissful sigh. “Best spring break of my life.”

Elena’s blush spread as she ducked her head and lowered her voice. “Dios mío,” she muttered. “I should *never* have let you talk me into that trip. It was a complete circus, a circus, may I remind you, of which you swore to never speak again!” She snatched at her glass of water and took a long sip, the cold liquid an instant relief. “Oh, and in my defense, I was *highly* inebriated that night. I’m sure you recall the nine tequila shots I took. *Nine*.”

“Oh I recall.” Vivian turned a wicked grin on her best friend. “I recall you took all nine of those shots off of nine different parts of that chick’s body.”

The pink tint painting Elena’s cheeks deepened into a rich cherry red. She cleared her throat roughly as she glanced around the café before hissing, “*Still*, it was only one time.”

“Not true. Have you forgotten about that girl in sophomore year? What was her name, the one who somehow talked you into pledging ADPi?”

Elena’s voice lowered to a near whisper. “Audrey.”

“Audrey, yes! That’s the one! She was a real nut job.”

With a silent wish that this conversation would fall into the fiery pits of hell, never to be spoken of again, Elena cleared her throat. “She was *eccentric*.”

“She stalked you for a *month* after you quit the sorority! You had to get a restraining order!” Vivian laughed. “Oh my God, remember when she sent you that teddy bear?”

Elena's blush crept down her neck to turn the visible parts of her chest splotchy and red. "Please don't."

"When you pressed its ear, it played that recording of her..." Vivian's speech was broken around her laughter. "...her singing 'Wind Beneath My Wings' and audibly crying!"

Elena sighed and pressed her forehead into her palm. "That was a rather unfortunate experience."

"It was *hilarious!*"

"Why am I friends with you?" She practically guzzled down the remainder of her water, eager to be done with this ridiculous affair.

"Because I am incredible. Anyway, my *point* was—"

"Oh, you had a point?"

Vivian smiled at her, nudging Elena's leg under the table with her foot. "My *point* was that I could set you up on dates with both men *and* women, if that is something you are interested in. It's obvious that you are at least a little gay. I swear I will only set you up with the best of the best, and who knows? I could introduce you to your Mr. or Ms. Right! If nothing else, I could at least set you up for a good lay."

"Okay, this conversation is over now." Elena clucked her tongue as she rose quickly from her seat and grabbed her purse.

"Oh, come on!"

Stepping around the table, she bent to peck Vivian's cheek. Their waiter returned with the check at that moment and Elena smirked as she pointed to Vivian and said, "Lunch is on her," then headed for the door.

"Think about it!" The door jingled with Elena's exit, and Vivian was left there to cover the bill.

* * *

The sound of Elena's heels clicking against the marble floor of her parents' foyer reverberated off the walls as she made her way quickly through the place. She was eager to see—

"*Momma!*"

A pint-sized ball of energy crashed into her side from seemingly out of nowhere, and Elena stumbled but caught herself before she could fall. With a laugh, she turned and swooped up the small boy

attached to her leg. “Munchkin!” She twirled her son around and planted a dozen little kisses across his face.

“*Mooooooooom!*” He whined as she set him back on his feet, then giggled, even as he made a show of wiping at the bright red smudges marking his puffy cheeks. “You got lickstick on me!”

“And it looks fabulous on you.” Elena reached out and ruffled his dark brown hair, the same deep shade as her own, just as she noticed her mother Nora standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching them.

The elder woman’s long sable hair, bits of gray peeking in, hung in a single braid over her shoulder, and her chestnut eyes, so like Elena’s, were warm and kind as she smiled at her daughter and grandson. Small wrinkles around her eyes showed years of both joy and stress, but Elena thought she looked ever young. She hoped to age as gracefully.

“It looks like Momma gave you a makeover, Lucas,” Nora said. “Come and let me see.”

Grinning, Lucas ran back over to his grandmother. She crouched down so that she could be eye-level with the boy as he asked, “Does it really look fablous, Gram?”

“Oh absolutely!”

“You see?” Elena said. “I told you. Now, can you say ‘thank you’ to your Gram.”

“Gracias Gram.”

Nora kissed his cheek. “De nada.”

Stepping over and scooping her son up, Elena squeezed him against her in a loving hug. “Good boy.” The sensation of one of his small hands tangling in the hair at the base of her head made her sigh. He always played with her hair when she held him. Over the years, it had come to soothe them both.

She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her mother’s cheek. “Hola, mamá. How was he today?”

“Oh, he was fine.” Nora smiled. “You know he is always a perfect angel.” She crooked her finger at her daughter to beckon her to follow, as she turned to head back into the kitchen. “I was just making some tea. Would you like a cup?”

“Yes, please.” Elena dropped onto a stool at the kitchen bar and settled Lucas on her lap. He continued to play with her hair as she and her mother carried on.

“How was your day, dear?” Nora asked. “Everything going well at the office?”

“The spring fashion shoot is developing smoothly.” Elena gently bounced her son on her knee and patted his pudgy little thigh. “Honestly, things could not be better at the office.” She sighed. “Things with Vivian, however...”

“Oh?” The tea kettle whistled from the stove, and Nora poured the heated water into two waiting cups. “The dating thing again?”

“Yes. She will not give—”

“Momma, I drew a dinosaur today,” Lucas dropped his head on his mother’s shoulder and played with the necklace dangling from her neck.

Elena patted his leg as she corrected him. “*Drew*, Lucas. Not ‘drawed’. You *drew* a dinosaur today, and I am sure it was the best dinosaur drawing ever. I can’t wait to see it, munchkin, but what did Momma tell you about interrupting people when they are talking?”

“Uh, not to.” Lucas chewed on his lip, his reply a guilty murmur.

But Elena’s smile stayed warm. “That’s right. You are such a smart boy.”

He grinned and hid his face in the crook of his mother’s neck, letting her short dark locks fall over his features as Elena turned back to her mother. “She will not give up on this ridiculous idea that I am in dire need of a love life.”

“Oh, I don’t know that she is necessarily focused on providing you with a *love* life, per se.”

“*Mother!*” Elena hissed, scandalized at her mother’s teasing smirk.

Laughing softly at her daughter’s reaction, Nora said, “Lucas, dear?”

When his little face peeked out from under his mother’s hair, Nora smiled at him. “Ear muffs, please.”

Lucas huffed out a disapproving sigh as he brought up his hands and cupped them tightly around his ears to block out any sound.

“Perhaps Vivian is right, Elena. You need to get out more, and not just to the office. It would do you some good to meet new people, and

truth be told, dear, your sex life is lacking. Let off some steam. Have some fun.”

“You, of all people, are telling me to have fun,” Elena drawled, “to go out and have s-e-x with someone I don’t *know* just to ‘let off some steam?’”

“Well, *do* be responsible about it, but yes,” Nora said. “I know your father and I kept you on a rather tight leash when you were younger, and things were admittedly strained when Lucas was born, but you are an adult, Elena. We have treated you as such for quite some time now, and you are a responsible woman. I trust that you will take care of yourself, but it may be good for you to simply let loose for once and stop holding onto things you cannot change. Stop being afraid to connect with people.”

Elena sighed as she took the cup of tea her mother offered her and blew at the hot liquid. “Thank you.”

“At least think about it,” Nora said as she blew at her own tea. “It’s time to move on from the past. You know what your father always says.”

“Sólo se vive una vez.” Elena nodded.

“It’s true,” Nora said. “You only live once, and you are in your twenties. You don’t get those years back, my darling. So have a little fun.”

Elena tugged on Lucas’s arm to let him know he could drop his hands from his ears. She then rested her head on top of his and closed her eyes. Maybe her mother and Vivian were right. Maybe it was time.

“I will think about it.” Though her eyes were closed, she knew her mother was smiling.

* * *

Later that evening, after putting Lucas to bed, Elena collapsed onto her plush leather couch and reached for the remote. With a sigh, she flicked through the channels on her flat-screen television. She cycled through all of them twice before giving up and clicking the damned thing off again.

She laid her head on the arm of the couch and closed her eyes, the events of the day spiraling through her mind. Her mother and

Vivian were right: She was only twenty-seven and already extremely successful and wealthy, but if she was deeply honest with herself, she was also lonely. She was so lonely she could feel it in her bones.

A single tear slipped from the inner corner of her eye and over the bridge of her nose, and before Elena even realized what she was doing, her cell phone was pressed to the side of her head and a soft ringing echoed in her ear.

“El—”

“Okay.” Elena began before Vivian could get a word out. “I will do it. I will let you set me up.”

Vivian’s squeal of excitement made Elena roll her eyes as she swiped at her cheeks, thankful that her friend couldn’t see her. “See?” Vivian said. “I knew there was some good sense still floating around in that head of yours. Why the change of heart?”

“Is insanity a fair answer?” Elena could only imagine how pitiful she looked in that moment.

“No, but I will let it pass for now. I can’t wait to get started. I already have at least two people in mind.”

She interjected before Vivian could get swept up in her excitement. “I have a condition.”

“Of course you do. What is it?”

“A babysitter.”

“You want me to set you up with a babysitter?” Vivian asked, confused. “Seriously? I was thinking someone more your status, Elena.”

“I don’t care about status, Viv.” She sighed. “You know that, but no, I was referring to my condition. You have to find me a suitable babysitter for Lucas. My mother already keeps him during the days while I work, and I don’t want to put any extra burden on her. Oh, and also, no more than two dates a week, maximum. I refuse to give up too much of my time with Lucas.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re the world’s best mom.” Vivian’s voice fell into a bored drone. “I’ll buy you a trophy later.”

Elena chuckled. “Those are the terms. Do we have a deal?”

“Oh, we definitely have a deal. I find you a babysitter, and then we work on finding you a spouse.”

“Let’s not go overboard.”

"I'm just saying. You never know. Anyway, I'm guessing you will want to meet the sitter ahead of time?"

"Of course. Just let me know when you have someone for the position, and I will set up a meeting."

"Deal."

"Oh, and Viv?"

"Yeah?"

Elena sighed, blowing a wild strand of hair from her face. "Thank you."

She could practically hear Vivian's smile through the phone, even though she spoke in a whisper. "You got it, babe."

* * *

Her hand shot into the air as Elena rushed to the curb for a cab. She was already ten minutes late for her lunch date with her potential babysitter. Thanks to Vivian's last-minute phone call a few hours before Elena's lunch break, information on the applicant was limited. In fact, Elena knew absolutely nothing about the young woman she was about to meet except that she was a senior at New York University. Vivian hadn't even given her a name or appearance to go by, so Elena could only hope that the café she chose wouldn't be too terribly packed; she didn't want to spend half of her lunch searching for the girl. Then again, it was entirely possible that there would be no one waiting for her at all. She would be nearly twenty minutes late by the time she got there, after all.

When the cab pulled up to the curb by the café, Elena handed the driver a few bills and dashed inside. She let out a breath of relief when she saw that the café was mostly empty, only a few people dining. So she let her eyes shift from occupied table to occupied table. When a young woman with a long yellow-blond ponytail and startlingly bright green eyes smiled awkwardly and waved her over, Elena let out another sigh and crossed the café to meet her.

The young woman rose from her seat, and Elena took in the old jean jacket, white tank top, and skin-tight jeans with narrowed eyes. Her style was bland, but the girl was definitely in good shape; that much was obvious, and Elena hoped it meant she would be able to

keep up with Lucas. The boy was a bundle of energy during the day, but he could be even worse in the evenings, transforming into an unholy nightmare the moment she tried to put him to sleep, if he wasn't yet ready to go.

"Hey, uh, Elena Vega, right?" She held out a hand, and Elena watched the girl's emerald eyes rake the length of her body quickly before darting back up to lock onto hers. Women were strange in that way, always scanning one another, sizing each other up, and comparing. It didn't bother Elena, though, or she never would have survived the fashion industry.

She plastered on a smile and nodded as she took the outstretched hand and shook it firmly. "I am," she said. "How did you guess?"

"Your friend said you were some big business something-or-other." The girl plopped heavily back down into her seat. "You're the only person who's come in here in the last fifteen minutes wearing anything even remotely expensive and looking all shit-my-meeting-ran-late."

Elena arched one slender brow at the young woman's blunt speech, but she could hardly help the chuckle that escaped her as she lowered herself into the opposite seat. "Yes, I apologize," she said. "It has been a terribly busy day."

"It's cool."

"I'm sorry," Elena said, blushing slightly. "I just realized that I don't even know your name."

"Oh, it's Allison. Allison Sawyer."

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POPCORN LOVE

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