

A

TIGERS AND
DEVILS

SHORT

**CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL,
AND ALL THAT CRAP**

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“Hey, Fran—”

I didn’t get any further.

“Oh, *hello*,” came the voice from the other end of the phone. “Finally calling to see whether we’re alive, are you? We’ve only been gone three weeks—did you just notice we’ve left?”

“I texted you!” I hissed, peering around the kitchen to check if Declan was still asleep on the couch. He was, his foot propped up before him encased in its bloody bandages. He was wincing in his sleep; when he woke I would have to force some more painkillers down his gob as he was trying to be all manly and do without them as much as he could. “And you texted me back, remember?”

“Texts!” she scoffed. “We could have been kidnapped by terrorists, for all you knew.”

“I didn’t know Tuscany was known for its terrorists,” I replied. “But I guess those grapes need protecting from Western imperialists.”

“Hilarious.” There was a scuffling noise in the background and the drone of a male voice. “Roger says hi by the way.”

“Tell him I said hi back. And to watch out for Osama bin Wino.”

“*You can talk to him in a minute!*” she yelled off-line, then returned to me. “Honestly! So why are you calling?”

“I need your help.”

“I should have known this wasn’t a courtesy call.”

She was being very belligerent. Fran could be that at the best of times, but there was a boisterous edge to it, that... hang on. "Are you *drunk*?"

"I'm in Italy! Of course I'm bloody drunk! They take your passport off you if you're not lying in a ditch somewhere with a bottle of grappa."

I heard an interrupted snore from the lounge room, but when I peeked around Dec was still asleep. "How very Contiki tour of you. Anyway, how do you cook soup?"

There was a startled silence on the other end of the line.

"Hello?"

"Sorry, I thought I was talking to Simon Murray."

"Give me a break!"

"Why are you asking me about soup?"

I sighed heavily. "I want to make some for Dec. Isn't that what you do when people are sick?"

Fran took pity on me. "How is Dec?" There was mumbling again. "*That's what I'm asking!*"

I had to bite back a laugh. "He's getting there. Still a lot of pain. I promised him soup. From scratch."

"Simon, you can be so sweet when you want to be. Why don't you always want to be? *Shut up, Roger!*" She took a deep breath to collect herself. "You could have Googled a recipe, you know."

"But you're the best cook. And Declan deserves the best. So seeing you're not here, he'll have to settle for whatever monstrosity I produce."

"You would so be getting a hug if I were there right now."

“Thank fuck for all the ocean between us, then.”

“Bastard. What type of soup do you want to make?”

“Chicken noodle.”

She giggled. “That’s a bit clichéd, isn’t it?”

“You know me. Always living up to the stereotype.”

“Grab a pen, and listen to me....”

I dutifully obeyed.



I was no Kylie Kwong in the kitchen, I knew, but the soup seemed to at least smell like soup as it simmered away on the stove. Fran had warned me not to add the noodles until the last few minutes so they wouldn’t get all starchy and fuck the soup up. They were waiting to be added as soon as Declan woke and felt like eating. He had opened his eyes halfway through the process and laughed at me in my grimy butcher’s apron (I was feeling very *Masterchef*) but had quickly fallen asleep again. The meds were playing havoc with his system, so I guess I could understand why he wanted to get off them as soon as possible.

“Simon?”

When I walked back out into the lounge, he seemed alert. He sniffed the air and asked, “Are you cooking?”

“Yes.”

“Nah, I must still be asleep. Weird dream, though.”

“I’m cooking, nuff-nuff. I take it you’re hungry?”

“Smells like soup,” he said sleepily. His hair was ruffled and smushed up against the left side of his face. I had to resist the urge to tame it back down, because it made him look adorable. Ack, *adorable*! Dec would die if he knew I was applying that word to him.

“It is.”

“Heinz or Campbell?” He then perked up slightly. “Or did my mum bring some over?”

Offended, I said icily, “I made it.”

“Campbells, then,” Dec said decisively, his head dropping back down on the cushion. “You don’t like Heinz.”

“Ye of little faith,” I said scornfully. “The only thing that came out of a packet in this soup is the noodles.”

He opened one eye. “Really?”

“Really.”

“You cooked?”

“I cooked. For you.”

“Wow, you must really love me.”

I leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. “No, I’m just feeling sorry for you, lying there all weak and defenceless.”

A strong arm snaked around me and pulled me down to the ground next to the couch before I could even put up any resistance. “Oh?” he asked, sounding proud of himself.

He was such a sucker. He had me right where I wanted to be. I kissed him slowly, manoeuvring myself so I wouldn’t brush up against his leg by accident. His body was warm—*too* warm—so the meds were probably making his body work overtime. He broke away suddenly and winced.

“I’ll get you your painkillers.”

“Thanks.”

While I was in the kitchen I dumped the noodles in and gave the pot a stir. Back in the lounge I handed Dec his pills and a bottle of water, and he took them eagerly.

“Your bandages are pretty gross,” I said casually. “I should change them for you.” I knew he wouldn’t be happy about it. It was necessary, but it was also painful navigating around the scars from the surgery that were still tender and raw.

“Wait until after lunch,” he suggested—anything to stave off the inevitable.

“Yeah, because it would be far better doing them on a full stomach.” I grinned to try to make a joke of it. “Come on, we have enough time.”

Being a nurse was a hard job.

“Fine,” he sighed.

Watching horror movies always makes me nauseated, but it’s funny how when you’re treated to the sight of gore in real life, if it’s the gore of the person you love, you don’t even bat an eyelid. Dec watched me as I unflinchingly cut free the bandages and wiped away at the mess on his knee before wrapping it all up in a plastic bag. He let slip a moan when I applied fresh antibacterial gel and began wrapping the knee

back up. When I looked back at him, a fresh sheen of sweat had broken out upon his forehead. I kissed him and said, "Let me just get rid of this and wash up, then I'll get you soup."

His humour returned, and he called out after me, "Thanks, Florence."

I gave him the finger as I walked to the bathroom. I could see Maggie lying on our bed through the open door. She wasn't happy having been moved over here temporarily and was avoiding us both even though Declan was out there to be a warm mattress for her to lie upon twenty-four/seven. With the gunk disposed of and my hands clean, I detoured past her to try to give her a pat. I ended up in the kitchen with a fresh set of scratches across the back of my hand as thanks for it.

The noodles were soft, and the soup wasn't starchy. *Thank you, Fran. This just may be edible.*

I ditched the butcher's apron before carrying two bowls of soup with buttered, crusty bread. Too bad there was no fresh parsley in the house to add to the look. Declan looked appreciative (and surprised) as I helped him into a sitting position and presented him with his tray.

"Wow, looks good."

"A ringing endorsement if I've heard one."

"Here comes the moment of truth though," he laughed and sipped delicately from his spoon.

I watched him, waiting for the spit-take.

"Mmm," he murmured. "It's good."

"You lie!"

"No. Taste it yourself."

I did. It didn't seem like it would poison me, but Dec was really making a show of it, smacking his lips and sounding like that demented Skeksi from *The Dark Crystal* whenever he spotted a Gelfling.

"Okay, 'fess up," he said, laying aside his spoon for a moment. "Fran or Google?"

"I'm insulted."

"Okay, it was Google. You would be too cheap to call Fran internationally."

I frowned and relented. "Just don't check your phone bill next month."

He laughed as he picked up his spoon again. "However long you talked, it's worth it."

"I promised you soup, remember?"

"Yeah, but you threatened me with packet."

I stared at him and said quietly, "You're worth making soup from scratch."

"Simon, you sap!"

"Yeah, well," I grumbled. "I'm a sap for you, I admit it."

"I like you when you're sappy."

I could see his eyes were growing heavy again.

"It's a rare thing," he murmured, his words slurring a bit.

I lifted the tray out of his hands. "No, it's not," I said. After all, he had never seen me before he came into my life. Obviously. I had *never* been like this before, with anyone. People always said when you really

loved somebody, all bets were off and all things changed. I guess I was proof positive of that. I was about to take the tray back to the kitchen when he tugged on my leg.

“Stay here.”

I really wanted to clean the kitchen and get it out of the way, but lying there with him was just too inviting. I made sure I wasn't touching his leg and scooted in next to him. He was still nuclear-warm, but the drugs were obviously working as he looked more at peace.

“Love you,” I said, but he was asleep and didn't hear me. That was okay; he knew it anyway.

I closed my eyes, feeling sleep beckoning me with the rhythmic lull of his breath and the rise and fall of his chest. Dishes could wait. Dinner could wait.

Florence's work was never done.