

## A V Day Short

Brady walked into My Place with one goal in mind.

Get drunk.

The popular restaurant/bar outside of Harrington was packed for the festivities, but thank God he didn't see one paper heart or shred of red in sight. His gaze swept over the familiar bar, now restored to glory by the capable hands of Dalton Pierce, wood master extraordinaire. The once designated man whore of the group had happily settled down with Raven, and even now as he helped her work the bar, they kept exchanging moony glances that would've been cute if it wasn't a tad bit nauseating.

He raised his hand in greeting to the couple, and slid onto a bar stool next to Cal, who sported his fiancé in his lap. A wave of irritation washed over him. Really? In the past, they'd always gathered at a bar to tie a few on and make fun of the ridiculous sappy holiday women adored and men survived—Valentine's Day. Now, it seems his friends and partners had gone to the Dark Side, and left him alone. Tristan seemed the last one to hold onto his man card, and unfortunately, he didn't see him tonight.

Cal grinned and patted him on the shoulder. "Glad you made it, man. You doing okay?"

He tried not to scowl. Cal was usually the grumpy one, but he looked practically glowing with his arm firmly wrapped around his woman. "Yeah, fine. Hi, Morgan."

"Hi, Brady. We have a platter of sweet potato fries coming. Do you want anything else?"

"No, thanks."

Dalton glided over and plopped a glass of beer with the perfect amount of head on the bar. "Hey, dude. You okay?"

"Why is everyone asking me if I'm okay?" he asked. He took a long swallow of the brew, nodding in pleasure. Nice hops, little bitterness. Raven was a pro at getting the best beers available on draft.

"Cause you don't look happy," Morgan noted, a frown creasing her brow.

Brady dragged in a breath, disgusted it was obvious. It was stupid to mourn the tradition of hanging out with his friends, who were really like brothers, to trash Valentine's Day. They'd made a vow years ago to avoid all the expensive dinners and pricey flowers, making sure their girlfriends knew they refused to celebrate the holiday. It had gotten them all in trouble one time or another, even causing a break-up or two. But they always stuck to the plan.

Until this year.

"Just a bad day. Ignore me. A beer and some fries is what I need. Where's Tristan?"

"Got stuck in New York so he can't make it," Cal said.

Raven glided over, leaning over the bar with concern. "Hey, do you not like the beer? You okay?"

He shook his head, a grin twitching his lips. Damn it. He couldn't even be annoyed because the women they chose were so damn perfect. They cared about him because he was part of the group, and honestly? They were the coolest women to hang out with.

Ah, hell, it was time he faced facts. He was jealous.

He was thirty-five years old and ready to settle down. Endless dating and hoping he'd finally found his future spouse ended in bitter disappointment. It was starting to get to him, but it wasn't his friend's fault or anyone else's. He needed to chill, and accept they were all getting older and starting to settle down from their wild days. It had just happened first to Cal and Dalton.

"I'm good, Raven, thanks for checking on me. And I love this IPA."

She lit up. "Thanks, I'm trying to circulate some smaller breweries and get them some business." A shout at the end of the bar brought a shake of her head. "Sorry, I gotta get back there and make frou frou cocktails that are pink and red. Valentine's Day is such a sham."

With a wink at Dalton, she disappeared, ready to mix up a new batch of her signature cocktails. Damn, she was perfect for Dalton. As Morgan was for Cal. If only he could find his dream woman. Someone elegant, loyal, soft spoken, and agreeable. Someone who'd let him be in charge and take the lead. Someone who wanted to settle down and have children and run a household, rather than work outside the home. Yes, it may be old-fashioned but it was what he wanted and he refused to apologize.

"Hey, Charlie made it!" Morgan said happily, standing up and waving her over to the bar.

Ah, shit.

He half closed his eyes and took another swig of beer. As usual, the woman bounced rather than walked, stopping right behind him. Her long dirty-blonde hair brushed the back of his neck, emanating the faint scent of tangy citrus from her shampoo. She never wore perfume, and chose to keep things brutally simple. From her too wide hazel eyes, pin straight hair, and make-up free fresh face, she looked about twelve years old. Unfortunately, in his opinion, she also acted like it.

"Hi guys! Happy Valentine's Day! Thanks for inviting me."

"I'm surprised to see you here," Morgan said. "I figured you'd have a hot date."

She laughed, warm and big and loud. No delicate giggle for her. "Not this year. It's weird. Most years even if I'm dating someone, they seem to disappear around Valentine's Day."

He snorted. She swiveled her head and gazed at him, a faint reservation gleaming in her eyes. He fought back the slight irritation at her wariness. From the moment they met, she reminded him of a wounded puppy each time they spoke. Just because he disapproved of her clothes, and slightly outrageous behavior and ability to bring chaos everywhere she went, didn't mean he treated her badly. He wanted to teach her a bit about professionalism. Unfortunately, Cal, Dalton, and Tristan were enamored with her since she joined Pierce Brothers Construction. Her ability to renovate a house in record time made her a bit of a Rockstar. She seemed to eat, breathe and live work, but Brady knew at

her age, it was only a matter of time before she got bored and moved on. He was only trying to protect the company and all of them from leaning on her too much and getting burnt when she bounced off to more exciting waters.

“Hi, Brady,” she said, a tad quieter.

He nodded. “Hello.”

Cal cleared his throat, sensing the tension. “What can we get you? Beer or wine?”

“Beer, please. Blue Moon.”

He signaled Dalton over, and when Charlie and Morgan began chattering, Cal mouthed him the words: “BE NICE.”

He ruffled under the instruction. Why were they so protective over her? She seemed perfectly able to hold her own. When she asked him to change the plans of the new house they were renovating no less than three times, he’d been endlessly patient and given her a lecture on organization and respecting her peers. Somehow, it got leaked back to Cal, and was forced to defend himself.

He brooded and took in her outfit choice for today. Ridiculous. She looked about ready to go to a cheerleader try-out in her ripped, blinged out jeans, hot pink sneakers, and fuzzy silver shirt with hearts that scrawled PINK over her full breasts. He noticed she dressed up for the occasion, donning a wristful of silver bangles and sparkly pink fingernails. How could anyone in the world take her seriously, especially at a renovation site?

The fries came, and he spent the next half hour drinking his beer, snacking, and talking with Dalton amidst customers. Charlie came back from a game of darts with Morgan, and somehow, everyone splintered off, leaving him and Charlie alone.

He got up from the stool. “Here, sit.”

“No, thanks.”

He remained standing. “I’m not going to sit while you stand. Just sit.”

She pursed her lips like she tasted something bad, and plunked her curvy ass on the stool. “Gee, thanks. You’re super nice tonight. What a change of pace from the way you usually treat me.”

He arched a brow at her dripping sarcasm. “Did you really say super?”

Blue sparks of temper shot at him. “Are you always so presumptuous and uptight?”

“Only when the English language is butchered in order to sound cute.”

Her mouth fell open. He tried not to notice the natural bubble gum pink color of her very lush lips. “It’s no mystery why you don’t have a date tonight. I doubt there’s a woman alive who would put up with you for longer than a hot second.”

He smirked. “You’d be surprised most women find me quite charming.”

“A shame too many have no taste.”

He smothered a laugh. “Touche.”

Her shoulders relaxed a tad. She took a sip of her beer, her gaze sweeping over the crowded bar which mainly consisted of couples. She gave a sigh. “I love Valentine’s Day. It’s so romantic. So hopeful.”

“So overrated and unnecessary.”

“Why am I not surprised you can’t see the beauty of this holiday? In the darkness of winter, it gives everyone a ray of sunshine. A hint of springtime and happiness.”

“Businesses created Valentine’s day because they desperately needed something to sell merchandise. Christmas sales are over, and Memorial Day is too far away. So, they came up with a genius idea targeted toward sad, lonely woman and boom—we now have a bump in the economy for restaurants, candy, and flowers. Genius.”

“Thank goodness you’re in the minority,” she retorted hotly. “Most men appreciate Valentine’s Day as much as women.”

Oh, this was too good. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and studied her. “Why do you think most men you’re involved with disappear around February?”

She blinked. “They don’t! I mean, some did, but that was just coincidence!”

“No. It was a planned exodus for their well-being and their wallets. You just never connected the dots.”

She gasped. “You’re horrible! Twisted! I’ve had plenty of relationships on Valentine’s day!”

“Name one.”

She opened her mouth, paused, then shut it. Her face was so expressive, he knew every thought flickering in her head. He also knew the moment of victory, when she realized there was not one name she could utter. “Timothy,” she said stiffly. “He got me a stuffed bear and box of candy and took me to dinner. It was wonderful.”

A delighted grin broke over his mouth. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying!” In pure temper, she jumped up from the stool, poked her finger at his chest, and got in his face. “You—you—you’re evil! And you’re going to be alone forever unless you change your attitude.”

He shrugged. “I’m just honest.”

Her breath struck his lips. Her eyes shot blue fire, and she rose on tiptoes, grabbing his shoulders, her trembling mouth an inch from his. “Look at Morgan and Cal. Look at Dalton and Raven. All the other couples in this bar tonight, too. They’re enjoying Valentine’s Day because they’re in love and happy. That’s what I’m looking for Brady Heart. So you can take your sad little ideas and go be alone and stop raining on everyone else’s parade!”

Her words shook with passion, and in that moment, time stilled as Brady was struck with the sheer intensity of the woman before him. Her nails dug into his skin, lips open as if waiting for a kiss,

temper turning her eyes to an electric, shimmering blue, the sharp tang of citrus zinging the air around them.

WTF?

For one endless, timeless, horrible moment, he fantasized about yanking her against his chest and slamming his mouth over hers. Fantasized about sliding his tongue inside for a taste, notching his hard dick in the notch between her thighs, and taming her in the way she deserved. Teaching her about finesse and eroticism and patience and filthy, dirty pleasure.

As if catching his sudden thought, her pupils dilated and she suddenly pulled her arms back as if burnt. He took two steps back. Their gazes ripped away, steeping them in an awkward, nerve-rattling silence amidst the chaotic laughter and chatter around them.

"I'm gonna call it a night," he said shortly. "Lots to do."

"Gonna watch *Love Actually* again, huh?"

And just like that, the tension disappeared and they were back to normal. "Better than destroying your ideas of Cupid. Have a good night."

He called out a good-bye to everyone and walked out of My Place.

And refused to think about Charlotte Flowers for the rest of the night.