

CHAPTER ONE

Coralie smoothed her hair, taking a deep breath to gather her courage before rapping her knuckles against the door. This whole situation was stupid-crazy, maybe even certifiably insane. She couldn't believe she allowed Jessie to convince her to go along with it. She mentally questioned her sanity and wondered how she always found herself in these absurd situations.

The door swung open, revealing a pint-sized dynamo with a fabulous white bob that would make Cruella de Vil jealous. Except this woman's hair was tinged with a hot pink streak, and her beaming smile could power a small city.

“Well, hello there, honey! I'm Eleanora, but you can call me Elle. And goodness gracious, you're even more stunning than Jessie's wild exaggerations. Step right in,

my dear. I was just about to have a cup of tea. Care to join me?”

Following Eleanora’s lead, she found herself in the heart of the home—the kitchen. The bubbling pot on the stove released a fragrant symphony of tea leaves.

Eleanora gestured towards a chair with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Darlin’, have a seat, and let’s tame those wild thoughts with some good ol’ tea magic. Milk, sugar, or a dash of devilishness?”

Before Coralie could respond, Eleanora poured two cups with practiced precision. She handed Coralie a cup, the warmth radiating through the porcelain. “Here you go, love. Sip away your worries.”

Coralie’s nod was accompanied by the comforting warmth of the teacup cradled in her hands.

“Thanks,” she murmured, cautiously taking a sip from the oversized cup. The rich, flavorful tea danced across her taste buds, offering a soothing embrace like a warm hug on a chilly day.

Eleanora settled across from Coralie at the kitchen table, her shrewd gaze sweeping over her with an unapologetic curiosity. Coralie couldn’t help but feel anxious with anticipation. After all, this was the renowned Mrs. Wilde, the matchmaker extraordinaire. If anyone could navigate the treacherous waters of her love life, it would be her.

“So, how’s your sex life?” Eleanora blurted out, her straightforwardness causing Coralie to nearly choke on her tea.

Jessie's warning about Mrs. Wilde's blunt nature had been an understatement, to say the least. But Coralie had come to the Peculiar Hearts Dating Agency for a reason—to find love, even if the thought made her stomach twist with uncertainty.

Summoning her courage, Coralie straightened her posture. She met Eleanora's inquisitive gaze with a defiant spark in her caramel-colored eyes and a touch of humor snarking her voice. "Nonexistent."

Eleanora nodded, her eyes sparkling with amusement. Her words carried an air of understanding as if she had already seen Coralie's romantic future unfold. "I figured as much. That's why you're here, my dear. Seeking a second chance at love."

Relief flooded through Coralie, grateful she didn't have to delve into the messy details of her past relationships. Eleanora seemed to possess an innate sense of what she needed. It brought a flicker of hope to Coralie's weary heart. Could she truly open herself up to love again? Memories of her disastrous ex still lingered, fresh like an open wound that refused to heal. It had been two long years. She had remained closed off, unwilling to expose herself to the vulnerability that came with dating someone new and opening up to them.

Returning to Mystic River had been her escape, a refuge from the pain she endured. The house she inherited from her grandmother became her project, a labor of love and distraction. For months, she toiled away, dedicating herself to the renovation. It was a way to create her

own haven and a means of avoiding the potential heartache that came with opening her heart to another. She had convinced herself that she didn't need anyone else, not after the wounds inflicted by her ex.

Coralie doubted her decision to visit Mrs. Wilde, the matchmaker with an enigmatic reputation. It felt like a leap of faith that teetered on the edge of being a colossal mistake. She had confided in Jessie, expressing her reservations about the whole mess. But she had stood at Eleanora's door, unable to turn back. After all, Jessie had driven her here. It would be incredibly rude to stand up the sprightly matchmaker after her friend had made the appointment and likely bartered something with Mrs. Wilde. Coralie couldn't help but wonder what kind of deal Jessie had struck.

Coralie inhaled, steeling herself as she met Eleanora's piercing gaze. There was a glimmer of hope, so faint it was almost imperceptible. "Honestly, I don't know anymore."

"Your sex life may be nonexistent, but deep down, do you want it to be?" Eleanora asked, cutting right to the chase.

Coralie took a moment to ponder the question, considering the possibilities. Jessie's persistent nudging had pushed her to this moment, and perhaps it was time to let go of the past. She had grown comfortable in her skin, embracing her curves, plus-size hourglass figure, and innate sensuality. The hurtful words of her ex still lingered, but she refused to let them define her. She didn't

want to resign to a life of spinsterhood and missed opportunities.

She licked her lips, feeling a flutter of excitement in her stomach. Wasn't it time for her to indulge in some fun and pleasure? Besides, she had a looming high-school reunion on the horizon, and she needed a date who could turn heads.

"I may not be ready for a serious commitment at the moment, but I think I could handle some no-strings-attached fun," Coralie confessed, her voice taking on a husky tone. "And I definitely need a date for my reunion."

Eleanora pursed her lips, assessing Coralie with a shrewdness that made her squirm. "Is that all you want, my dear? A shifter with the perfect balance of charm and wildness? Are you absolutely certain that's all you're looking for?"

Coralie frowned, unsure of what she wanted anymore. It had been a long time since anyone had even asked her. She was still rediscovering the smart, sexy, and self-assured woman she had forgotten in the aftermath of her toxic relationship. Her ex had torn her down, leaving her with scars that were hard to heal. Trusting herself again was a daunting task.

But her mind drifted to her high-school crush, the guy who had made her feel like an absolute goddess. The vivid memory resurfaced, ignited by the impending reunion. Jax embodied everything she desired in a partner, and he lingered in her thoughts lately.

Coralie hesitated, her gaze dropping to the tea in her cup.

“I just got out of a really bad relationship,” she explained, her voice tinged with vulnerability. “I’m not sure I can make any promises right now.”

Eleanora’s eyes softened. She reached out to take Coralie’s hand, offering a comforting squeeze. “Darling, it’s okay if you don’t fully trust yourself yet. Sometimes, all we need is a little push to remind us of what we truly want.”

Coralie felt exposed under Eleanora’s perceptive gaze. The woman had a way of reading people as if she possessed a peculiar second sight. It made her feel both unsettled and intrigued.

“That’s exactly it,” Coralie admitted, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

Eleanora chuckled. “Oh, honey, if I had a dollar for every woman who felt that way, I’d be a millionaire. But don’t fret, my dear. I have a shifter in mind for you, one I know you’ll adore.”

Coralie raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. “What makes you so sure?”

Eleanora leaned in, her tone conspiratorial. “Because, my dear, he’s a teddy bear at heart, despite his rough edges. And let me tell you, who doesn’t love a teddy bear?”

Coralie couldn’t help but laugh, picturing a burly bear shifter as a cuddly stuffed animal. “I hope you’re right. My track record with men isn’t exactly stellar.”

Eleanora waved a dismissive hand, a knowing smile gracing her lips. “Oh, sweetie, you haven’t met the right one yet. But mark my words, you will. Love has a funny way of surprising us when we least expect it.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure I’d even know what to do if someone was genuinely kind to me. I seem to have a knack for attracting assholes,” Coralie said.

Eleanora burst into boisterous laughter, her whole face lighting up. “Well, no wonder you and Jessie get along so famously! Shifters can have their alpha egos in a twist sometimes, but rest assured, my dear, I’ll find you one who isn’t an asshole.”

Coralie couldn’t help but join in the laughter. She found Mrs. Wilde’s straightforwardness refreshing, a welcome departure from the polite and superficial exchanges she was accustomed to. “Hopefully, you can work your magic before the reunion next week.”

“I think we can manage to rustle up a date for you, my dear,” Eleanora reassured with a glimmer in her eyes. “But first, tell me, what kind of man are you looking for?”

Her high-school crush flashed in Coralie’s mind—sweet, lanky, and easy on the eyes. She met Eleanora’s gaze and cleared her throat.

“I want someone smart, fun to be around, trustworthy, and someone who makes healthy choices. I need someone who follows through on their promises and shows up when they say they will,” Coralie confessed. “I deserve someone who makes me feel good about myself and accepts me as I am.”

She swallowed, trying to suppress the lump forming in her throat. Exposing all her hopes and dreams to Eleanora felt strange, especially considering her track record with relationships. She had been cheated on, belittled, and put up with far too much crap for far too long.

Eleanora's eyes sparkled. "Well, honey, you just described a unicorn. But I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. Shifters can be quite unpredictable, but I have a feeling I know exactly what you're looking for in a mate."

Coralie shook her head, a smirk tugging at her lips. "A unicorn? I thought I was being reasonable."

Eleanora grinned back at her. "Darling, in my experience, finding a good man is like finding a needle in a haystack, but fear not, I'll make sure you find one."

"Really? And where are all these perfect men hiding?" Coralie asked skeptically.

Coralie couldn't imagine anyone measuring up to her high-school crush. They had met while painting scenery for the high school drama club. Jax had always made her feel safe and comfortable. They could talk for hours about everything and nothing. She regretted never expressing her feelings to him, but it wasn't until college that she fully embraced her curvaceous Latino body. If only Jax could have met the bolder, fearless version of herself. She wasn't even sure that girl still existed.

Leaning across the table, Eleanora patted Coralie's arm. "Well, honey, they may not be perfect, but they're out there. And trust me, I've got a match that's right for you."

Coralie smiled. Mrs. Wilde's confidence was contagious. Maybe, just maybe, there was someone out there who would treat her right and give her everything she deserved.

"I truly hope so," Coralie whispered.

"Trust me, honey. I've been playing Cupid longer than you can shake a stick at. I can find love connections where others wouldn't even think to look. Now mark my words, if he doesn't check to see if you ate or need to be eaten," Eleanora declared, pausing for dramatic effect, "he's not the one, sugar."

Oh, my word, Mrs. Wilde could make a woman blush, and heaven only knows when the last time a man had gone down on her, but maybe Coralie was ready to give this another shot. "Thank you, Mrs. Wilde."

As Coralie finished her tea and moved to stand up, Eleanora's grip tightened around her hand, halting her in her tracks. Coralie's eyebrows furrowed in curiosity as she turned her attention back to the matchmaker.

"Before you go, there's something important I need to tell you," Eleanora said, her tone hushed and urgent. Coralie leaned in, sensing the gravity of the impending revelation. "It's about your past, and trust me, my dear, it has the potential to change everything."