

COVER ART by Vanessa Westermann

EXCERPT

“You know something.” It came out sharper than Matt intended. He had to tamp down on that surge of impatience, that need to know, no matter the cost.

“Let me look into it.” Jeffrey must have seen something in his expression, and added, “More guesses won’t help you.”

He was this close to pushing for more. He’d seen that flash of recognition before Jeffrey hid it. He was holding out on him.

A gust of wind whipped through the open door, splattering rain on the concrete floor. Bringing in the summer scent of water on scorched earth.

Deception—it seemed like that was his dad’s legacy. That and a house full of leaks and creaking floorboards. If he could just get one fact, something that rang true for once, then maybe he could stop wondering, stop dwelling on the what ifs.

Luckily, there was no one in the world he trusted more than Jeffrey. If the man made a promise, he kept it. “Okay,” he backed down. “Thanks.”

“Now.” Jeffrey rubbed his hands together. “Where’s that chocolate?”

Matt opened the indigo blue box, revealing the cushioned contents. “Candied orange peel dipped in semi-sweet chocolate. Burnt caramel flecked with *fleur de sel*, enrobed in dark milk chocolate.”

Jeffrey shot him a look. “You do want answers.”

“Damn straight, I do. Seems like every time I turn around, all I find are more secrets.” More lies.

“I’m sure your father had his reasons.” His tone was even, but Matt caught a flash of something sharper hidden beneath. “If he’d had more time, I don’t think he would have left you with as many loose ends to tie up.”

“Loose ends? They’re more like knots. Each time I think I’ve unraveled one, they only get tighter. I can’t believe you of all people are defending him.” The sting of betrayal caught him off guard.

“All I’m saying is, it’s hard to blame a man for dying. I’ll help you slice through your Gordian knot. But first”—Jeffrey picked up the candied orange peel—“tell me how you got that crisp, clean break on the coating.”

Change of subject. Okay, then. He could talk about chocolate all day long. “Come by Chocoholic’s sometime, and I’ll show you.”

Jeffrey shook his head and wagged a finger at him. “You’ll just put me to work.”

“Hmm...” He selected one of the caramel chocolates, decided it was time to lighten the mood. “Isn’t that what I used to say to you? The tables have turned, haven’t they?”

Jeffrey laughed. “Pass me another chocolate, wise guy. Better yet, pass me the box. I’m wary of the day you come to collect your bill.”

“Didn’t you say, ‘Chocolate is worth its weight in gold?’ Soon you’ll be drowning in debt, old man.” But he’d take intel over gold, any day.

“Well then, by now, I must be in over my head. Why struggle?” Jeffrey bit into a chocolate-coated curl of orange peel and closed his eyes on a hum of appreciation. “Death by chocolate?” he asked, his voice muffled by the candy. He swallowed and said, “There are worse ways to go.”

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