

## Out of Character

Sherbet hugs her knees to her chest and rests her head against the window, her mind a muddle of incoherent thoughts. The door creaks open and a man in his late-twenties staggers in, immediately shifting the air in the unfurnished room.

He coughs into his fist. ‘Hello?’

Startled by his sudden intrusion, Sherbet shoots upright, her lips twisted into a perplexed frown.

‘I’m sorry to barge in on you like this,’ he says, moving towards her. ‘I’m Jaykob. From Chapter One.’

‘I *know* who you are, but why are you here? This is *my* scene. *My* chapter.’

‘I see that now,’ he says, his eyes darting around the dimly-lit, austere space. ‘It’s just... Well, I was hoping I’d find some answers in Chapter Two. I hadn’t realised Author would change POVs.’

Sherbet swings her legs around and stands with her hands on her hips. ‘As I said, this is *my* chapter. *Chapter Two: Sherbet*. That’s me. *I’m* the main character. You’ve had your turn.’

Deep furrows appear between his brows. ‘I won’t keep you, then, but you wouldn’t happen to know what happens to me, would you?’

Her eyes narrow.

‘Author ended my chapter on a rather disturbing cliffhanger.’

‘Yeah? How did it end?’

‘I **tumble out of bed and I stumble to the kitchen.**’ He draws a breath. ‘I want to know whether I’m dead or not.’

‘Erm... if you were dead, you wouldn’t be here pestering me, would you?’ she scoffs. ‘Besides, Author wouldn’t kill off the romantic lead in the first chapter. This isn’t a thriller, you know. We’re in a rom-com.’

His lips part into a relieved smile. ‘You’re right. Hadn’t thought of that. Thanks.’

‘Glad to be of service,’ she says, retaking her seat. ‘Now, get out of here before Author returns. I can’t have you spoiling my scene.’

Jaykob turns to go, but stop and asks, ‘Why do you think she had me *stumbling* to the kitchen?’

Sherbet heaves a sigh. ‘As opposed to?’

‘I don’t know. Strutting? Marching? Strolling? Stumbling implies I was under the influence of something... or too sick or weak to walk.’

‘Well, were you?’

‘Was I what?’

‘Under the influence? Something *illegal*, perhaps?’

‘Of course not!’ he exclaims, horrified at her suggestion. ‘I shared a bottle of red with my blind date Avah the previous night, but...’

‘How’d it go?’

‘How did what go?’

‘With Avah!’ she says, rolling her eyes. ‘Did you like her?’

He shrugs. ‘She wasn’t really my type. Too mousy. Quite unremarkable. Why do you care anyway?’

‘I don’t. Not really. But I think it’s safe to assume Author intends to bring us together, considering she’s named chapters after us.’

‘What... Like, romantically? *You and me*?’

‘Obviously.’

He presses his lips together and shakes his head. ‘Sorry, but, you’re not exactly my type, either.’

Sherbet cocks her head. ‘How do you know? You hardly know me.’

‘I know enough. Not to be judgmental, but for starters, what’s with this room?’ he asks, waving his arms around. ‘Who lives like this? Where are the pictures? The knick-knacks? There’s nowhere to sit. It’s just a room with a door and a window seat.’

‘Is it my fault Author’s too lazy to describe the setting?’

‘Fair... But what’s with *Sherbet*? Is that even a real name?’

‘I could say the same for you, Jaykob with a K,’ she snarks. She takes a breath and blows out her cheeks. ‘Anyway, I doubt Author will ever finish writing this novel. She has no plan. She’s totally pantsing it. It’s her first, you know.’

Jaykob raises an eyebrow. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘How could you not? It’s *tell, tell, tell* all over the place and, oh, my God! So wordy. You’d think she’d know not to string multiple adjectives and adverbs together in a single sentence. “Sherbet sat on the plush, velvet-effect, ruby-red cushion and gazed pensively out the ginormous, white-trimmed bay window, which overlooked the spaciouly lush-green enclosed garden.” *Amateur*.’

‘But, if Author doesn’t finish writing this novel, you realise we’ll both die, right?’

‘We’ll be shelved even if she does. Not a chance in hell any reputable publisher would print this rubbish.’

An all-encompassing light switches on just then as Author’s laptop whirrs back to life.

Sherbet straightens; panic crosses her face. ‘Get out, now!’ she hisses, pointing to the door.

Jaykob rushes towards it, then turns around to say, ‘I guess we’ll meet again in later chapters, Sherbet.’

‘*Yeah.* I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.’

**“Tumble out of bed and I stumble to the kitchen.” from Dolly Parton’s *9 to 5*.**