

CANCER SWEETENS AQUARIUS

Signs of Love #5.5

ANYTA SUNDAY



Cancer Sweetens Aquarius

Gripping a crochet hook, Reid stood barefoot in the dimly-lit saloon. Mangled wool wrapped his other hand.

Three weeks ago, everyone was happy. He'd made Sullivan speechless and Joanna snicker when he'd left home for bananas and returned home with twins. There'd been an emergency with Theo's grandma Darla and he'd swooped in to help Theo and Jamie with the toddlers.

Anyway, they were happy.

Until BAM! Their marina neighbors—Mason and Elijah—were leaving. Mason had found a new job in San Diego. Elijah and Joanna had to say goodbye.

A week later, they'd left.

Left Joanna heartbroken.

Staring at the wool cutting off the circulation in his fingers, Reid blinked back the memory of Joanna's tearful goodbye with her boyfriend. His stomach dropped with sympathy.

He squared his shoulders and used the hook to untangle himself.

"It's the middle of the night." Sullivan's sexy, sleep-croaky voice startled Reid, and he swung around to the partition

where Sullivan stood in his flannel pajama pants, a tank top over his impressively toned chest. His eyes beheld Reid with concern.

Reid dropped the hook and the wool onto the couch and laughed hollowly. "I'm trying to fix this."

Sullivan pushed into the room and bent over the heater. "It's cold in here. Why don't you have this on?"

Cold floorboards bit Reid's feet as he paced between Sullivan and the couch. He gazed toward the drizzling rain and the inky sea beyond. "Maybe if . . . or . . . but . . ."

He twisted on his heel toward the couch, and Sullivan hooked strong arms around him, stilling him. Sullivan's front blazed against Reid's cool back and he sank into it.

"Hey, love," Sullivan murmured into his ear. "We'll figure it out."

Reid sighed. "I-I don't know what else to do."

Sullivan rubbed Reid's arms soothingly. "Deep breath."

"I can't. She's sad. That makes me sad."

A ticklish sigh breezed through Reid's hair. "I promise, we'll find a way to cheer her up."

Sullivan's earnestness had Reid swallowing back a tidal wave of skin-tingling, heart-pounding love. Every year, every month, every day it grew stronger. It fueled him.

And made him fiercely protective of his family. He turned and leaned his forehead against the crook of Sullivan's neck. "We've been trying since Elijah left. Two weeks, Sullivan. Two."

"I confess, I'm surprised she didn't crack a grin watching you try to crochet her slippers." Reid pulled back, following Sullivan's fond gaze to his crochet hook and wool. "You really can't crochet."

Reid laughed and forced a scowl. "The lady in the store said it was easy. Lying tart." He ran a hand through his hair. "The trip to the movies didn't work. Neither did the vegan ice

cream”—he prodded a finger against Sullivan’s chest—“but that’s on you and your no-sugar craze.”

“It’s not good for you,” Sullivan retorted.

“It’s good when your favorite sports team loses. It’s good when you’ve had your tonsils out. And it’s good when your heart breaks.”

Sullivan raised his hands in defeat. “Fine, go nuts with the sugar. Eat all the ice cream you want.”

Reid pulled Sullivan with him to the couch and settled onto it. Sullivan pressed close along his side, thigh to thigh, arm to arm. Reid rested his head on the back cushion. “I just love her, you know?”

“Really? I had no clue.”

Reid whacked Sullivan in the stomach, eliciting a chuckle. “She’s so spirited, full of adventure and meddling awesomeness. And she makes me laugh.”

Sullivan rubbed his leg, warming him through his thin cotton pajama pants. “Joanna is turning out to be an incredible young woman.”

Reid smiled at the ceiling. “Do you know the best meddlesome thing she’s done?”

“I absolutely do.”

“Interviewing me to be your manny.”

“Running away whenever we were in a room together, hoping we’d kiss.”

“Which we did,” Reid murmured.

“Eventually.”

Reid lifted his head and shot Sullivan a look. “Hey, that part’s all on you.”

Their noses were an inch from bumping. God, the man was beautiful. He leaned closer. “You were clueless.”

Reid breathed in Sullivan’s musky, oaky scent. “Cluelessly in love with you.”

“Ah, I wanted to kiss you from the first time I saw you. It

only compounded from there.” A soft smile touched Sullivan’s lips as he leaned in—

And bypassed Reid’s lips.

Reid blinked; Sullivan bent down and pulled off his thick woolen socks. A massaging pressure at his foot had Reid moaning. Sullivan lifted his numb foot and covered it with a warm sock. The second one followed.

Reid snuggled closer against Sullivan. “I feel better.”

“Warmer, anyway.” Sullivan kissed Reid’s forehead, lips firm and comforting. “Would you like a shot of liqueur?”

“You know that’s basically sugar right?”

“That smirk is unbecoming.”

“I’m sorry.” Reid smiled harder.

Sullivan shook his head and padded toward the kitchen.

“So what’s our plan for tomorrow?” Reid asked as Sullivan procured shot glasses.

“Seeing the sunrise with you sounds good,” Sullivan said.

Reid snorted. “I love you. Good luck.”

Concern softened the strong lines of Sullivan’s face. “You meant about Joanna.”

Reid nodded. “Yeah.”

Sullivan stared at the glass bottle for a long time before twisting off the cap. “Sometimes the heart just needs time.”

“She doesn’t have to be over him. I’d just love to see her smile and mean it. It could be from the world’s worst joke for all I care.” Reid sat straight. “How about you try that one?”

That earned him a withering look. “You really know how to make a man feel special.”

Sullivan handed Reid a shot glass.

Reid took it and knocked it back, throat burning. He spluttered out a cough and a firm hand patted his back.

Sullivan smoothly downed his shot and set their glasses aside. He wound an arm around Reid’s shoulders and rubbed,

thumb skating over the neckline of his night shirt, tickling his neck.

“So you’ll attempt the dad joke?” Reid asked, a cheeky grin pulling at his lips.

Those intense blue eyes soaked up every inch of Reid’s face, lingering at his mouth, his eyes. “As long as it warms your heart.”

Reid squirmed, voice breathless. “It warms something. You can practice on me right now if you like.”

Sullivan smiled slowly and bumped their noses together. “That was a decidedly sexy turn in conversation.”

Reid groaned, and palmed his head. “You’re right, how can I even think about my own fun right now?”

“If it helps, that kind of fun puts a smile on *my* face.” Sullivan’s laugh was husky and a flare of heat shot through Reid’s body. “Any way I can sugar you up?”

“I suppose you could frost—no wait, I’m getting carried away by your sexiness.” Reid pushed back against Sullivan’s chest, putting a few inches between them. “Back to Joanna. We don’t do anything until we have a plan.”

Sullivan lunged for the nearest pen and paper. “What are we waiting for?” He scrawled PLAN in block letters at the top. “What about taking a trip to town and waking Joanna up to fresh glazed donuts?”

“I’m having a difficult time switching from sexy to sweet. Give me a sec.”

Sullivan urgently crossed out the idea.

Reid peeled his eyes away from his gorgeous man. “Weren’t you detailing all the antioxidant properties of cinnamon last week? What about baking cinnamon buns?”

“Maybe we should think of something else to make her smile. I work hard to keep you out of the kitchen.”

Fair enough. Reid had caused enough havoc in the kitchen over the years.

His gaze dropped to the bench at the wall, and he leapt to his feet.

Sullivan snagged his hand, staring at him quizzically.

Reid grinned. "I know what to do. I'll give her the Christmas gift I got her." He pulled his hand free and headed to the hollow bench where they stashed their gifts.

Sullivan lurched in front of him, arms splayed wide, panic crossing his face.

Reid halted. "What are you doing?"

Sullivan cleared his throat. "Last week we made a pact not to look inside this bench until Christmas day."

"Yes, but that was for Joanna. Have you not wrapped your gifts yet, Sullivan?"

"No—yes. Yes! That's exactly it. I haven't had a chance to wrap mine yet."

"If you're too busy, I can do it for you and feign surprise."

Sullivan laughed drily. "No."

"Christmas is for Joanna. It doesn't matter if I know what you got." Reid winked, and whispered, "Serious couples know everything." He tried to duck under Sullivan's arm, but Sullivan sat on the bench.

"I am serious. I seriously don't want you seeing your gift."

Reid frowned. "Fine. Pull out the palm-sized, reindeer wrapped one."

Sullivan gestured Reid to back up. Then he cracked open the bench and rummaged inside. He pulled out Reid's gift for Joanna and double-checked the lock on the bench.

He cradled the gift. "What is it?"

"Gents and gentlemen, what we have in here is a bracelet." Reid plucked it from his palm and leaned against the table. "It has stones in the shape of the Pisces constellation."

Sullivan peered down at the gift. "Sounds special."

A lump formed in Reid's throat. "She's been a part of my

life for three years now. I know she's your daughter but I've found a very good friend in her."

Sullivan watched him quietly, his eyes shiny. "Sullivan?"

Sullivan stepped up to him and clasped his hands around Reid's shoulders. He swooped down and brushed his lips against Reid's, softly urgent. Tenderness surged inside of Reid and his grip on Joanna's gift doubled.

Sullivan teased his mouth open with his tongue, and they both moaned; vibrations tingled through Reid's body.

"Oh, wow." He swallowed. "Are you trying to distract me from my mission?" Sullivan's nose pressed against his, and he whispered another kiss over the bow of his lips. "Because it's almost working."

Sullivan smiled and stepped back. "No, I am one hundred percent on-board with this mission. Being the meddler is a nice change of pace."

"Do you think she'll like it?"

Sullivan gently loosened Reid's grip on the gift and inspected the neat wrapping carefully. "I think she'll love it."

"Love what?" came Joanna's sleepy voice.

Reid and Sullivan jerked toward her voice. She rested against the partition leading to the back of the boat, wearing flannel pants and what looked like one of Elijah's T-shirts. Her bright red hair tumbled wildly over her shoulders. Almost seventeen, and she was stunning. Stunning and sad.

"Sunrise has come early," Reid said.

Joanna's nose crinkled and Sullivan chuckled.

"Yeah, okay," Reid conceded. "That might be a little over the top."

"Why are you up?" Sullivan asked his daughter.

She shrugged. "There's a leak in my room."

Reid pounded into Sullivan's arms. Instinct.

Joanna rolled her eyes—was that the faintest smile on her

face? “Not Titanic-type leaking. Just your regular cracks-around-the-porthole leaking.”

Reid pulled away from Sullivan—but not too far—and dusted off invisible lint. “I was totally not panicking. I was testing your dad’s reflexes.”

“Sure. He caught you and dropped—what’s this?” Joanna moved into the room and crouched, picking up her wrapped gift.

Sullivan flashed him an apologetic smile for dropping it. Hardly anything to blame when Reid had tried to vault him.

Reid grinned at Joanna. “That’s for you to open.”

“But it looks like a Christmas present.”

“It was, but I want you to have it now.”

Her eyes widened, questioning.

Sullivan cleared his throat. “Better you open it than Reid starts baking.”

Reid snickered. “Big man scared of me and some cutlery.”

Joanna eyed him frankly. “You really are quite frightening in there.”

Reid scowled. “Will you open it?”

“Why are you so keen?”

“Just open, please. No wait—”

Joanna arched a brow. “Yes or no?”

“Get comfy. On the couch. Sullivan will make us elderflower syrup tea.”

“I will?”

“Yes,” Reid said, batting away his crochet attempt. He slung himself next to Joanna on the couch. “I might mix up the homemade syrup bottles with the liqueur ones—that’d make a memorable post break-up.”

Joanna narrowed her eyes on him. “Break up? Is this”—she waved the gift—“you trying to make me feel better?”

Reid patted the back of her freckled hand. “Boys can cause a lot of heartbreak. We may need to start a tradition.”

“I thought traditions were supposed to be fun?” She grinned but her lips quickly flattened and her shoulders slumped.

Reid pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry it hurts.”

“We’ll still talk on the phone. They’ll sail up here.” She pulled back with a resigned sigh. “Yeah, it hurts.”

Sullivan stood at the kitchen counter, teacups in hand, watching them. He looked pained. Like memories crashed together and beat out the climactic part of a symphony.

“It can rip your heart out, losing someone,” Sullivan said quietly. He looked meaningfully at Reid. “*Thinking* you’ve lost someone.” He swallowed. “Makes you want to drown.”

A nervous laugh punched through Reid’s nerves.

Sullivan left the kitchen and crouched in front of his daughter. “Things change with time.” He squeezed her knee. “If it’s possible, and it’s important, you’ll find a way to make it work.”

Joanna threw her arms around her dad’s neck.

Sullivan braced a steady hand on Reid’s thigh and hugged her with his other.

When she pulled back, she was nodding. Not smiling yet, but this was the closest Reid had come to his goal. “Like how Reid rowed over the ocean for you?”

Sullivan’s chest expanded as he breathed in deeply. His gaze shifted from Joanna to Reid and held. “The most courageous thing anyone has done for me.”

Reid’s body thrummed with love, his feet perfectly warm in Sullivan’s socks.

Sullivan continued, murmuring. “It makes me want to give you your Christmas gift early. Now.”

Beside him, Joanna gasped. She started picking at the gift wrapping.

She pulled out the delicate gold bracelet and slipped it around her wrist. “It’s beautiful.”

She hugged and hugged and hugged him.

“Is it enough to make you smile?” Reid teased, praying it was.

She withdrew, and the old Joanna was back, a minxy twinkle lurking in her eyes. She cocked her head and eyed her dad. “You know what would make me happy?”

Sullivan seemed to read her mind, because he laughed, and pushed to his feet. He nervously rubbed his nape, glancing at Reid, and the biggest smile stretched across his face.

“What?” Reid asked, tucking his feet under him. “What would make you happy?”

She just winked at him.

Reid looked inquisitively toward Sullivan, but he was doubled over the bench, rifling through their—

Ahh. The minx wanted the Christmas gift Sullivan had gotten her too. Well, she certainly knew how to play her hand.

Sullivan returned, smile replaced by a quieter expression, a nervous tick in his jaw.

Reid had never seen Sullivan so flustered before, ever. He was always so calm. Rational, even-keeled.

Sullivan cleared his throat and knelt. Reid glimpsed a plush, square jewelry box, and laughed. Of course they both went the jewelry route for Joanna. Next year, he would insist they shop for presents together. Hopefully whatever—earrings?—he bought her matched the bracelet.

Sullivan looked at him, Adam’s apple jutting. Did he want Reid’s approval for giving Joanna her gift?

Reid nodded, encouraging him, and Sullivan opened the box.

Not earrings. A beautiful, white gold ring. “God that’s beautiful.”

Reid glanced at Joanna who gazed at her dad, tears in her eyes.

Sullivan spoke, voice cracking. “You like it, Reid?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s *gorgeous*. It clashes, of course, but I’m happy to take the bracelet back and see if we can find one that will match.” Reid gaped at the white-gold beauty again. “Did you check the size, because this looks like it might fall off her. Unless it’s a toe ring? But this is far too nice to be covered up by a sock.”

He looked up from the ring to Sullivan’s flabbergasted face. “What?”

Joanna made a weird noise in the back of her throat, like a suppressed giggle. He faced her. “Aren’t you going to put it on?”

Joanna laughed. This gift truly did bring back her smile. “You want me to put it on?” Her dimples deepened as she looked at Sullivan. “What do you say, Dad? May I?”

Sullivan groaned and murmured, and Joanna plucked the ring out of its case, grabbed Reid’s hand, and slipped it on him.

The smooth gold ring sank to the base of his finger and hugged his skin with perfect tightness. Reid blinked.

Heat rolled up his neck, and he swung his head to Sullivan. “You’re *proposing*?”

Humor and fond exasperation beamed out of Sullivan as he took Reid’s gilded hand. “Not very clearly. Let me remedy.”

Sullivan’s deep breath funneled softly between Reid’s fingers, around the ring. “Reid Glover, this ring is meant for you.”

Reid’s chest hopped with butterflies and Sullivan’s outline blurred and sharpened and blurred again.

Sullivan kissed his knuckles. “Will you marry me?”

~ **The End** ~

Author's note

For all of you wondering what will happen to Mason: rest assured that he will eventually get his HEA. Stay tuned...

