

## Designing Destiny

### Chapter Four

August 2023

"Aww, hell yeah! Come on, another round! It's Friday night, bitches!"

Laura's high voice cut through the blaring music overhead, her already tipsy grin and flushed face showing just thoroughly she was enjoying herself. Beside her giggled Amanda from Accounting, while across the high table – and seated directly next to Fern – leaned the rather less enthusiastic form of the IT guy Shane, staring morosely into his phone.

"Tee-hee!" Amanda rejoined, flipping her dyed-black locks with flirty, energetic abandon. "Aww, Shane, don't be so anal. Nothing wrong with a couple of drinks now and then, right?"

It was the four of them, out for drinks after the end of the workweek. Under ordinary circumstances, Fern wouldn't even have come. Not that the drinks weren't her thing, of course – she certainly didn't mind a good cocktail now and then. But it was just so... loud. She had to practically yell to hear herself over the din! And then Laura could be so talkative, and giddy, and, well... stupid.

Ehh, whatever. Maybe if she had a third drink she could tolerate it all a bit better. Maybe then she wouldn't find herself distastefully stacking this inane babble up against the dignified, thrilling conversation of the intelligent young people in Austen's novels.

"Uh, sorry, what?" Shane had just muttered something to her that she'd completely missed. "Sorry, I was spaced out-" He directed a wry glance down at the phone in his hand. "No worries. I was asking if you wanted to take my drink? Something just came up – looks like a server update flaked out. I have to go..."

"Oh- um, sure? I- I guess, yeah," she managed, watching in sudden trepidation as he slid his Long Island iced tea her way. "I mean, I just ordered another margarita-" "Hey, it's all yours," he shrugged, rising from his seat. And then, with a quick lean and mutter that only she could hear: "Good luck with these two."

"No-o, *Shayyyynnee!* You're such a fucking party pooper!" The simpering whines from the two women across the table made Fern want to dig her nails into her thigh, but Shane was already fleeing for the door. "When duty calls," he called back with an airy shrug. "Just Venmo me for my

part of the bill, 'kay?'"

And with that, he disappeared around the corner toward the exit. Fern was left shifting in her seat, trying not to envy him – and wondering silently just how real that server problem was. *Hmm, that was way too handy to be mere coincidence. Wonder if I can come up with any excuse to leave, too...?*

"Well, fuck! Guess it'll be more fun with just us anyway," Laura tittered, and Amanda rejoined with her own, characteristically loud laughter. "Uh, yeah! Girls' night, amirite?! Come on, Fernie – let's light this place the fuck up!" *Ugh, 'Fernie'? Really?!* Fern had a sharp retort burning on the tip of her tongue, but after a second's reflection chose to quench it instead in Shane's abandoned drink.

Wow. That was strong! Then again... Well, maybe it was exactly what she needed to make it through. Just sip. Think about that Woodridge project. Relive those approving smiles Destiny had given her upon her latest report. *Sip. Mmm, nice. Very nice...*

That was Shane's drink. Then came her own margarita, and by the time that one had dwindled to the bottom of its salt-rimmed glass, the room was tilting lazily around her. Somehow all of it – the hysterical laughter of her two companions, their obscene sex jokes, their tears of mirth over some penguin-filled TikTok playing endlessly on Laura's phone – it no longer mattered. It was all just a bleary wash of sound, blending crazily into the head-pounding rhythm of the club's music...

How she got home, it was later almost impossible for her to tell. She'd gotten into a car with them, she knew that much. She had a vague memory of fumbling her key into the knob, of dragging her uncoordinated feet forward and toward the bed. And besides that?

Well, nothing more. Nothing, that is, that could be distinguished from the stupefying waves of dreams that filled her brain the entire night.

\*\*\*

Falling once more. Blackness. That same pink light... that black silhouette, that same voice, with now a mysterious smile pervading every syllable of its soft incantations. The whisper of each sibilant *s* sending shivers skating up and down her spine, each *t* making her flinch at its crisp enunciation. Her eyes blinked up into the silhouette of the being looming over her, fearing and yet longing to see once more that flash of light, those crimson eyes that had so frightened her...

They blinked into view. Slowly. With infinite calm. And she shuddered once more, transfixed by

their gaze. Those infinite depths swirled, dilated, fastened upon her with terrifying authority. Her lips parted in a scream of horror... but no sound emerged. Paralyzed as she was, she was left, mouth agape, staring with palpitating pulse up at the figure that held her in its power.

"*Bibo.*"

The feminine voice filled her senses, its firm enunciation of those two short syllables rippling through her. Her muscles twitched, her body convulsed. All went black for that one terrifying moment. And then, as the pink glow returned and she blinked helplessly upward once more into the figure's inscrutable gaze, she found her throat gulping mechanically, her tongue thrusting incessantly, her lips working rhythmically. Liquid was coursing over her tongue, filling her cheeks, slipping full and cool and steady down her pulsing throat. She was drinking... something. Drinking upon command. Drinking without end, without thought of stopping. Drinking to bursting, to choking, with no way to halt or even to breathe-

"*Aaabb! Mmuhhh- Nuh- no, no, no-*"

She spluttered to life, limbs flailing against the bonds that held them... and found herself writhing in her very own bed, sweating and tangled in the familiar sheets. She lay there, panting in the darkness, while her pulsed quietened and her breath steadied and the horror of her nightmare slowly receded from her mind. *Ugh... oh, that had been... awful...* Her nearsighted eyes, gritty with sleep, blinked incoherently at the glowing number on the clock... but unable to make them out, she let them slide closed once more. *Uhnnn. Sleep. Yeah. No more nightmare. Yeah. Back to sleep...*

Five minutes later, Fern was unconscious once more: lying amid the crazy wreck of her single bed, still fully clad and with her blonde hair a frightful mess. But perhaps not even the sharpest-eyed observer could have seen the subtle swallowing motion of her jaw, or the delicately fluttering spasms of her fingers, and known that they were the symptomatic twitching of a young woman caught once more in the very same nightmare she thought she had escaped...

\*\*\*

Morning came – or so the birds said. Through the curtained windows came their insistent calls, along with the occasional revving of a distant engine and the low murmur of the drowsing city outside. 7:47, read the green digits on the nightstand clock, and still the limp figure on the bed slept. 7:48. 7:49. 7:50.

At last, Fern's limbs began to move, her body to twist, her breathing to shift into waking. She blinked... yawned. Blinked again. Head pounding. *Ugh, fuck. Wake. Awake. Head ache. Ugh. Fuck-*

It was only when she reached for the tangle of covers with clumsy fingers that she noticed it. *Damp. Wet. Wetness. Uhhh... huh?*

One minute later, she was sitting up in uncomprehending horror. Gazing down on her wreck of a bed. The disorienting, horrifying realization dawning at last that she, Fern, was sitting here in her work clothes, in the very epicenter of her thoroughly soaked bed.

*(To be continued!)*