



THE NANNY SOLUTION

TERESA HILL

Cherish



Teresa Hill

The Nanny Solution

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Sit. Stay. Roll over. Good boy. Well, these commands worked for the puppy. Unfortunately, Audrey Graham's new boss was not so easily tamed. After a difficult year, she needed to get back on track and accepting a job as "dog nanny" for millionaire businessman Simon Collier was the first step. But Simon, like the incorrigible puppy he'd bought for his young daughter, had a mind of his own. He was gorgeous, sexy and got what he wanted – and he wanted Audrey. Could Audrey really hold out against his irresistible charm – and did she really want to?

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“Simon, if you’re thinking that...that...”

“Yes?”

“That there’s going to be anything else between us – ” She blushed furiously.

He thought about how very much he wanted there to be something else between them. He wished it could be as easy between them as the dog disappearing, Simon pushing Audrey back inside, closing the door behind him, peeling off every stitch she was wearing and taking her back to bed for a good long time.

And he couldn’t say any of that to her.

At least he really shouldn’t.

He made a habit of not messing with the women who worked for him. He’d been tempted before, but he’d always resisted.

Of course, he’d never wanted to break all the rules as much as he did right now.

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The Nanny Solution

By

Teresa Hill



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Teresa Hill lives within sight of the mountains in upstate South Carolina with one husband, very understanding and supportive; one daughter, who's taken up drumming (Earplugs really don't work that well. Neither do sound-muffling drum pads. Don't believe anyone who says they do); and one son, who's studying the completely incomprehensible subject of chemical engineering (Flow rates, Mum. It's all about flow rates).

In search of company while she writes away her days in her office, she has so far accumulated two beautiful, spoiled dogs and three cats (the black panther/champion hunter, the giant powder puff and the tiny tiger stripe), all of whom take turns being stretched out, belly-up on the floor beside her, begging for attention as she sits at her computer.

To the woman in my life we all call Nannie,
My grandmother, Lurene Haggard,
In honour of her 84th birthday

Chapter One

“You look like a nun in that outfit!”

Audrey Graham sighed and turned around to face what might be her only friend left in the world, sixty-something, maybe even seventy-something, Marion Givens, her inspiration, best cheerleader, landlady and now unofficial job counselor.

“Thank you, I think,” Audrey said.

She’d wrapped herself from head to toe in the thick, concealing fabric of what she considered a neat, maybe even stylish designer warm-up suit, if there was such a thing as a truly stylish warm-up suit.

“It wasn’t a compliment,” Marion said. “Although with that face, I have to say you’re much too pretty to be a nun, at least. But from the back...”

Audrey frowned at her own reflection in the mirror.

She’d cut her long, brown hair six weeks ago in a fit of...needing to be different, she supposed, different in every way. It was curlier than it had been, now that it wasn’t so heavy and long, and it bounced around her face constantly. There was just no taming it, but she didn’t really spend any time on it, which was what she’d been going for.

Sometimes she thought it looked cute.

Hoped it didn’t look sexy.

She hadn’t worn any make-up this morning, not really, just some lip gloss and mascara, and she looked like...

Audrey just didn’t know.

Not like her old self, that was for sure.

Younger than she would have thought she could look, although she hadn’t been going for that, either.

She’d been hoping for...invisibility or something along those lines.

“I hear nuns have very peaceful lives,” Audrey said, grabbing her purse and fishing for her keys. “Peace sounds good to me. Although at the moment, I’m scared to death. I haven’t gone on a job interview in nearly twenty years.”

She’d been nineteen and looking for a job waiting tables at a place where she was really too young to work, a place where the wait staff wore low-cut tops and little, bitty skirts and the tips were really good.

She’d gotten the job.

Now forty was fast approaching—God, how did that happen?—and she was covering up as much of her skin as possible.

‘Bout time, Audrey.

“I don’t think the interview process has changed all that much,” Marion said, trying to reassure her.

“You’re sure he really needs somebody? This is not some kind of favor you called in, some make-work kind of thing?”

“I’m sure. He’s desperate. He was practically babbling when I ran into him at the restaurant—and this is a man who does not babble. Not ever. Plus, honey, remember the most important thing—he lives in the perfect place.”

Only five blocks from Audrey’s daughter.

She hated Audrey at the present, but she was still here.

Audrey hadn’t dreamed of being able to be that close to Andie. She never could have afforded it on her own.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Audrey said, glancing at her watch. She had to go.

“Relax,” Marion told her. “Breathe. He’s not an ogre, and he’s not brusque. Not really. Just rushed. Always rushed. Don’t waste his time. Don’t chitchat. He hates it when people do that. And don’t kiss up to him. He hates that, too.”

“Does he like anything?” Audrey asked, even more nervous now.

“Peace. He told me he just needs some peace and quiet, and you can give him that.” Marion looked like she’d surprised even herself. “Maybe the nun outfit was a good idea after all.”

Audrey’s hand gripped the steering wheel like a woman facing near-certain death.

Much as she desperately wanted to see her daughter, she hated coming to this part of town. In fact, she didn’t come here. Dreaded facing the people here.

Well, she’d just have to get over that.

Because Audrey’s ex-husband wasn’t really interested in being a father anymore, even if Andie was living with him now. Andie would figure out that she really couldn’t count on her father before long, and then...

She’d have to turn back to her mother, wouldn’t she?

Audrey was counting on it.

Honestly, time and proximity were her only hope.

Andie might not forgive her, but she’d need a mother, and Audrey intended to be as close as possible when that happened.

Which meant, she needed this job.

She took the turn onto Maple Street, gripped the steering wheel so hard she was surprised it didn’t snap in two as she passed the entrance to her old neighborhood, then heard nothing but her own heart pounding in her ears.

Breathe, she reminded herself.

You’re not that woman anymore, Audrey.

Not that wounded.

Not that angry.

Not that self-destructive.

The pounding eased just a bit.

Nineteen years of careful, predictable, perfectly acceptable behavior, building a good life, what she thought was a reasonably good marriage and a mostly happy family, and she’d thrown it all away in a fit of outrage and bewilderment last fall after her husband walked out on them.

It was as if the nineteen years counted for nothing, and all that she was was the woman she’d become in those raw, painful days and nights. While her husband walking away from her and Andie seemed perfectly acceptable.

Audrey closed her eyes again, breathing.

You’re not that woman anymore.

At the end of the block, she turned into the older, more traditional neighborhood of Highland Park. She’d known a bit of what to expect from living nearby for so long. But as she got closer, she realized that Simon Collier lived in the really fancy, older section of the neighborhood, in which the homes were practically estates.

Wow.

Impressive.

She was surprised he hadn’t put up a wall with a gate at the entrance, as some of his neighbors had.

The house was a huge, imposing structure of weathered gray stone soaring three stories high, the grounds extensive, if a bit...unkept-looking here and there.

She drove up the long, winding driveway and parked outside the two-story, four-car garage, got out of her car and looked at her watch.

Right on time.

In fact, she was all of two minutes early.

Cutting it too close for comfort, actually, but she'd nearly panicked trying to get out the door at Marion's, and it had slowed her down.

Precisely at 7:00 a.m., the first bay of the garage opened, and standing there beside a sleek, black Lexus convertible stood a man in an elegant, crisp, dark suit, white shirt, blue tie, shoes polished until they shined.

Simon Collier, she presumed.

It was a little scary how he appeared out of the darkness of the garage with the precision of a magician just as the big hand on her watch ticked onto 7:00 a.m.

Still, neat trick.

It helped her to smile just a bit, despite feeling as if she wanted to throw up. As she walked forward, she decided her best bet was pretending he was a very important client of her ex-husband's, coming to dinner at their home, and it was up to her to make sure he felt comfortable and had a good time.

She stuck out a perfectly manicured hand—her one beautyvice left—and said, “Mr. Collier? I'm Audrey Graham. Nice to meet you.”

He took her hand and looked as if he approved, most likely of her promptness and that she'd made no attempt to chitchat, if Marion knew him as well as she claimed to.

Audrey was still just trying to breathe normally.

Her eyes finally adjusted from the brightness of the morning sunshine to the shadows of the garage, and she realized he was a breathtaking man.

He was beautifully dressed, the suit obviously cut to hug a perfectly proportioned body, handsomely groomed, his hand strong and sure as it gripped hers for a moment, then withdrew. He had jet-black hair, still thick and full, perfectly tamed, dark eyes with little lines at the corners and a polite smile. He managed to look elegant, pampered even, and yet most thoroughly a man.

Younger than she'd expected, too. The more her eyes became accustomed to the light, the better and younger he looked.

She'd never expected this, given the neighborhood where he lived, the way Marion talked about him with something akin to awe and getting the definite impression that the man was worth a lot of money.

Sixty and balding with a potbelly would have been just fine with her.

Great, even.

But not this.

“Ms. Graham. You're right on time. Good. I'm sorry, but I have very little time this morning, which is almost always the case. We should get right to this.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“I have four problems in my life right now, Audrey. May I call you Audrey?”

“Please,” she said.

“Good. Please call me Simon. As I was saying, four problems. I don't like problems. I make it my business to solve problems, and right now I have four. Four is very bad.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, not knowing how else to reply to his crisp stating of facts.

“Don't be. I'm counting on you to solve three of those four problems for me. You understand this is a live-in position?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. My first problem is the yard. Marion tells me you used to have the prettiest yard in the Mill Creek.”

“I...” What did one say to that? She settled for, “People seemed to like it.”

“She gave me the address. I drove by yesterday to take a look. It was very nice. Not too fussy, not too...regimented. Big, lush, greening up already, even this time of year. You could do something like that, here?”

“Of course. But you should know, I don’t have any formal training in landscaping—”

“I don’t care,” he said, extending a hand in the direction of the front yard, and Audrey took off in that direction with him following her. “I’ve hired three landscape architects so far. I haven’t liked any plan they’ve shown me, and they’ve wasted a great deal of my time. You planned and planted the yard at your former home? And maintained it yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I want something like that. Something...normal looking. Not regimented. Not odd. Normal and green. Now, I want us to work together like this. I don’t want to be bothered with details. I want you to handle problems on their own as they come up. Give me a plan to look at, a budget to approve, and then do whatever it takes to make it happen. Understood?”

“Yes,” she said, trying not to sound scared out of her mind at the fact that three landscape architects hadn’t been able to please him and yet he expected her to do so, without any of the formal training they had.

And at the way the man issued orders.

Not in a mean way, just...as if he assumed every word would be obeyed, every expectation met without question.

They made it to the front yard, and he moved quickly, almost soundlessly in front of her, grabbing her by the arms to steady her when her own momentum would have propelled her forward.

“Sorry,” he said, giving her an exasperated smile, letting her go and stepping back immediately.

Up that close, she thought he definitely wasn’t old.

There’d been a flash of an impression of power and the firm, muscular build that few men had once they hit middle age.

And the eyes, with those little, crinkly lines at their corners...Maybe they’d led her to believe he was older than he actually was.

Was he even forty?

Audrey looked up at him, feeling every one of her thirty-nine years and wishing all the more that he was sixty and balding.

She wasn’t doing this again, wasn’t throwing herself at a man, thinking it was the way to forget all her problems, to solve them, to make everything right again.

He looked nearly as taken aback as she felt and went still for a second once he’d let go of her, as if he might have actually lost track of the orders he was firing off for a moment.

“Sorry,” he said again, recovering before she did. “I was afraid you were going to hurt yourself.”

He looked down toward her feet. There, mere inches in front of her, was a narrow, deep hole dug into his front lawn.

“This is my second problem,” he said.

“A hole in the ground?” She was lost.

“A number of them, all over the place. You really have to be careful walking out here. I don’t want you to break a bone. The last landscaper did. He’s trying to sue me right now. One more thing I have no time for.”

“Oh,” Audrey said. “I’ll be careful. You have some kind of...animal problem?”

“A dog,” he said, as if the mere word implied something vile. “It digs.”

Audrey worked to keep a straight face.

A mere dog could get the best of this perfectly controlled, very powerful man?

So he was human, after all.

He looked as if he knew she was thinking of laughing in his face and didn’t believe for a minute she’d actually do it, that anyone would.

Audrey wiped every trace of amusement from her face, and then watched in amazement as his own mouth started to twitch; he shook his head and swore so softly she wasn't sure she could even make out the words.

"Yes, I know, bested by a dog. I realize how ridiculous that is. Nevertheless, this is the state in which I find myself. I despise the dog. The dog despises me. We have been waging war for weeks, and the dog is winning. You have no idea how much it pains me to admit this—"

"Oh, I think I do," Audrey said.

Once again, the ends of his mouth threatened to curl upward a bit. She could almost feel him battling the impulse, before tamping it down and banishing it completely.

He cleared his throat and went on. "Marion also said you had a very well-behaved dog."

"We had a wonderful dog. She died two years ago."

"She didn't dig up things in your very well-designed yard?" he asked.

"She had a small corner of it where she was allowed to bury her bones. Would that be acceptable? One small, out-of-the-way spot where such things are allowed?"

He sighed. "If it's absolutely necessary."

"I think it probably is," Audrey said.

"Fine," he said, as if he'd just agreed to millions of dollars in concessions on a contract he was negotiating. "The dog belongs to my daughter, Peyton. She loves the dog, much more than she loves me at the moment. I'm not proud of it, but I'll admit, I tried to buy her affections with the dog and to some extent it worked. She's very happy to come here now. The problem is her mother only allows her to come for a weekend here and there, and the dog is here all the time. Because Peyton's mother decreed that the dog could not go to her house with Peyton. I think just to torment me even more than my ex-wife already has, and if that's the case, she's succeeded beautifully because the dog has wreaked havoc on my entire home life."

"I'm so sorry," Audrey said, surprised he'd admitted to so many of his own weaknesses—the child he indulged and the ex-wife who's needling still got to him—so forthrightly. Most men wouldn't have, would have relished seeming invincible. And there was something in his manner that Audrey imagined could be thoroughly intimidating but she found oddly amusing.

And there was something else. The distinct impression that while the situation at hand was annoying, he knew he would triumph in the end. As if it was a secret he knew, one that kept him calm and able to deal with just about anything.

Except a dog.

"It's here all the time," he complained. "It digs. It eats my socks. It ate my favorite pair of shoes, makes all sorts of noise at all hours and generally makes a nuisance of itself. I'm afraid it hasn't been successfully housetrained, either."

Audrey nodded, hopefully giving the situation the proper gravity he thought it deserved. "I assume you've tried dog trainers with no success?"

He gave her a pained look. "Three."

And they'd all just annoyed him and wasted his time, as had the poor, unfortunate, would-be landscapers. She wondered how Simon Collier acted when he was truly annoyed. If the earth literally shook or something?

"Again, I really don't have any formal training in...training animals," Audrey began.

He shot her a look that said 1) he obviously knew this. 2) they'd covered this point before, and he'd pronounced already that he didn't care about formal training, and 3) he didn't care to repeat himself.

"Okay," Audrey said. "I'm to train the dog."

He nodded, no doubt satisfied that he hadn't had to repeat himself further and she hadn't wasted any more of his time.

“Just so you know, it eats bushes, too.” He pointed to an unfortunate azalea, which she assumed was the dog’s latest victim. “It eats vines, flowers, everything. The dog eats it, chews it enough to kill it or pulls it out and drags it around the yard, in addition to digging in unexpected spots. Something else you’ll have to contend with.”

“Does the dog have a name?” Audrey asked.

“I call it any number of things,” he said, dry as could be, but amusement flashing beneath the surface.

Audrey was sure of it.

And she wondered for a second, in that flash of humor, if he was even younger.

Thirty-eight?

Thirty-six?

She suddenly felt ancient, envying him the utter confidence, the air of power, the obvious wealth and all the security she imagined it would bring, that he didn’t depend on anyone to secure his own future except himself. The kind of security that could not be taken away.

How would it feel to have that and know that no one could take it away?

“What does your daughter call the dog?” Audrey tried.

He made a face, distaste obvious, and reluctantly admitted, “Tinker Bell is its formal name.”

Audrey made a choking sound as she tried as hard as she could not to laugh, then covered her mouth and coughed—she hoped realistically—and then finally managed pure silence.

It was hard, but she managed it.

His mouth settled into a hard, straight line. “We’ve settled on Tink for short. It’s the most dignified thing we could come up with, given what we had to work with.”

Audrey nodded, afraid to even try to speak.

“I suppose I’ll be forced to introduce the two of you before you agree to take this on,” he said, then waited and waited.

Hoping she’d say she didn’t have to actually meet the dog first?

Should she agree to that?

Did she want the job that badly?

Audrey feared she did.

Then he saved her by saying, “But my business experience tells me to do everything I can to sell you on the job before you meet the dog. Shall I show you the living quarters?”

“Please,” Audrey said.

He lifted his arm, gesturing for her to head back the way they had come. “And on the way, I’ll tell you my third problem. My housekeeper, Ms. Bee. I adore her.”

“Really?”

He liked someone.

What a surprise.

“Yes,” he said, one end of his mouth actually curling up just a bit, as if he’d actually thought of smiling. “People may tell you that I’m...difficult. Demanding. Unreasonable. That there isn’t a woman alive who could live happily with me. It simply isn’t true. Ms. Bee and I get along beautifully.”

Chapter Two

So people talked about Simon Collier, too, and he obviously didn't like it. Audrey thought about telling him she understood and wouldn't listen to the gossip.

Except in all of the ten minutes she'd spent with him, she was fairly certain no woman would have an easy time living with him. She'd figured out all on her own that he was certainly demanding, precise to the point of perfectionism, and that from his youngest days, probably wouldn't have gotten the little check mark in the box titled *Plays Well with Others*.

Women included.

Of course not. He'd have all the power, and they'd have none.

Audrey had been in a relationship like that, and look how badly it had tuned out.

But this was about him and his Ms. Bee.

"I'm very happy for the two of you," Audrey said.

He gave her a wry smile. "We've been together for ten years. Our relationship has lasted much longer than my marriage, and we understand each other perfectly. She's precise, careful, orderly. Runs my house like a machine. Anything inside those walls is her domain. You are not to interfere in the least or question her or bother her, because I can't imagine living without her. I don't want to."

"Okay," Audrey said.

But what did she have to do with his love for his housekeeper?

"Unfortunately Ms. Bee—that's Peyton's name for her—hates the dog, if possible even more than I do," he said.

"Oh." Audrey got it.

"She threatened to leave me if I didn't get rid of the dog. I confess, I considered telling Peyton it ran away and that I couldn't find it or that it got hit by a car. But then she'd cry, and I hate it when my daughter cries. But I refuse to live without Ms. Bee, either."

"I understand."

"I promised her I would find someone to fix the dog, that she would never have to have anything to do with it again. It's the only way I could get her to stay. Which is where you come in. You're to see that the dog never bothers Ms. Bee, which is why I need someone to live on the premises."

They reached the side of the garage, and he led her up a set of stairs on the side of the building that led to the second floor and a door; he unlocked it and stepped back, letting her go inside first.

It was an open, L-shaped space, tastefully, if sparsely, furnished, a living room, small dining area and kitchen, obviously the recent recipient of Ms. Bee's attentions, because it was absolutely spotless. The hardwood floors gleamed, as did the countertops and the appliances.

The walls were a light, cheery butter-cream, and there were tons of windows that looked out over the backyard.

Audrey stuck her head in the door opposite the kitchen and found a bedroom and nicely appointed bathroom.

"The previous owners had a son in college who lived here, I believe, when he no longer wanted to live at home, precisely," Simon said. "I hope it's acceptable?"

"It's perfect," Audrey said.

Much more than she'd expected to be able to afford on her own, given her lack of experience at anything and lack of formal job training.

"So, you can fix the lawn, fix the dog and keep it from bothering Ms. Bee?"

She took a leap of faith.

Either that or told a full-blown lie born of the desperation to be near her daughter.

"I'm sure I can," she said.

“Excellent.” He named a salary she thought was more than fair, given the fact that she’d be living here for free. “When can you start?”

“When would you like?” she asked.

“I suppose this instant is out of the question, given the fact that you need time to move your things in. Dare I hope, tomorrow?”

“You don’t want any references or a résumé—?”

He shook his head. “Marion vouched for you. That’s all I need.”

Audrey nodded. “Did she tell you... I mean, you should know—”

“You’re one of her strays, aren’t you? Had some problems? Trying to get your life back together? And she’s taken you in for a while?”

“Yes.” He *did* know Marion well.

“Have you ever been arrested?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t,” she said.

“And Marion wouldn’t let you stay at her house unless you were clean and sober now, so... Good enough. I don’t need the details. I just need someone to fix my three problems. You’re going to do that for me?”

“Yes, I am,” Audrey agreed.

“Excellent.” He handed her the keys to the apartment, turned and started walking away, still talking to her.

Audrey hurried to follow.

“I’ll leave you to introduce yourself to Ms. Bee. She’s in the kitchen, expecting you. She’ll give you all the details you need,” he said, waiting for her to lock the door behind her.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it,” Audrey said.

“No, thank *you*. You’re going to make my life much easier.”

Audrey nodded.

“The dog should be returning any moment. We hired a dog walker, hoping we could survive the week that way. Yes, here they come.”

Audrey followed him down the stairs and waited as a young woman in shorts and a T-shirt came up the walk, half-dragged by what looked like a long-haired, mostly black-and-white, wiry but overgrown puppy, maybe six months old.

Although having just returned from its morning walk, the dog looked as if it had just gotten out of bed and was ready to run a marathon, looked hopeful that the opportunity might be offered. Its mouth stretched wide, it appeared to be smiling, happy and eager to take on the entire world, and as it got closer, Audrey could see its beautiful coat was shot through with silver.

He was striking looking.

The young woman said, “Hello, Mr. Collier,” and tried to turn over the leash to him, but he waved it off, motioning for her to give it to Audrey.

The dog’s tail whipped back and forth madly. It made a happy, yipping sound, then eased up on its back legs until it was standing practically straight up and rested its paws on Audrey’s thighs, mouth open, tongue lolling out in greeting.

Simon Collier grimaced and said, “Sorry,” then turned his attentions to dismissing the dog walker.

Audrey smiled, looked right into the dog’s eyes as she gently pushed it back and onto all four feet. She knelt on one knee, bringing herself to eye level with Simon Collier’s nemesis.

“Hello, Tink.”

Tink’s grin got even wider. The dog put his overgrown paws on her bent knee and then eased up to lick her cheek excitedly.

Simon made a sound of pure disgust.

“We’re going to be friends,” Audrey whispered to the dog, hoping it was true. Her job depended on it, after all, and the poor baby probably didn’t have any friends at all, except for Peyton Collier.

She stood up. Tink reared up and did a little dance of pure excitement but didn’t jump on Audrey, which she took as a sign of intelligence and eagerness to please.

“That’s nice,” Audrey complimented. “You can dance.”

“You’re not going to change your mind, are you?” Simon asked, as the dog walker turned and left.

“No, but why in the world did you get a border collie?”

“Because my daughter thought it was cute, and the woman who sold it to us claimed it was a smart dog, although I haven’t seen any sign of that. Why?” He looked worried. “Border collies are bad?”

“Not if you want an animal that was bred to herd sheep all day without getting tired,” Audrey informed him.

He froze for a moment. “You’re telling me I need to buy it a herd of sheep to keep it happy?”

Audrey burst out laughing. “No, just that this animal has a great deal of energy, which is why it seems destructive to you. It’s bored, probably extremely bored. It needs something to do.”

Simon frowned. “What does it do besides herd sheep?”

“Exercise. I’ll run with Tink every morning. Maybe in the evening, too, if I have to. The dog will be too tired to cause trouble.”

“That’s all it needs? To be too tired to cause trouble?”

“That should go a long way toward solving your problems with Tink. The good news is the person you bought the dog from is right—dogs of this breed are known for being very intelligent.”

“This one is not,” Simon insisted.

Audrey laughed again, petting the dog, who’d jumped back up and planted its paws on her, wanting to be close and unable to contain its excitement.

“See,” Simon said.

Audrey gave a little push against the dog’s furry chest and said, “Tink, off.”

The dog went down and stood there looking up at her, tail wagging, whole body practically trembling with excitement, but it stayed on all fours.

“Good dog,” Audrey said, wishing she had some kind of treat to offer.

“He most certainly is not,” Simon said.

“So it’s a he?” Audrey sighed and turned from the overeager dog to the all-powerful man. “Well, he is smart enough to know you don’t like him—”

“Then he’s a genius,” Simon quipped.

Audrey fought a grin once again. “And by now Tink probably knows just how to get to you.”

Simon looked incredulous. “You’re trying to tell me I’ve been playing mind games with a dog?”

Audrey just looked at him.

“And you think the little devil is winning, don’t you?” Simon Collier looked as if she might have just called him a whiny, little girl or something equally offensive.

“I’m saying the dog feels the animosity between the two of you, and it’s not helping the situation. Try to be the bigger man here. How about that?” Audrey said, hoping she wouldn’t completely alienate him before she even started the job.

“And how,” he asked, looking not at all pleased, “would the bigger man behave here?”

“He’d realize this is a battle he doesn’t care to fight—”

“You want me to walk away from a fight?” he asked, incredulous again.

“I’m saying that Marion told me you detest wasting time, above all else. Surely you see it’s a complete waste of your time to play mind games with this animal. It’s completely beneath you. Go take over a country or something. Isn’t that more your kind of challenge?”

He looked taken aback and stared at her as if he might be truly seeing her for the first time and found someone worthy of his notice.

Oh, Lord.

Was he furious?

She couldn't tell.

Finally, as snotty as you please, he said, "I don't happen to own any countries."

Then he burst out laughing, and Audrey could breathe again.

"I think we're going to enjoy working together, Audrey. I'll see you Friday evening when I get back into town."

He strode into the garage, got into that sleek, beautiful, black Lexus that looked like a very pretty, fancy toy, whipped it out of the garage and down the driveway and was off.

The dog started crying pitifully and dancing on his hind legs again, obviously feeling he deserved Audrey's complete attention.

Damn, Audrey thought.

What had she gotten herself into?

Simon couldn't get the sight of her out of his head, even though she'd covered herself up from head to toe. Which was a damned shame, he thought, to cover up a body like that.

He picked up his phone as he drove down the road and called Marion.

"You didn't tell me she was gorgeous," he told Marion.

She laughed. "Since when have you needed me or anyone else to tell you a woman is gorgeous?"

Simon put the phone aside and swore softly.

Marion laughed some more.

"I really don't need this right now. I still haven't gotten myself untangled from the last woman I allowed into my life."

"Believe me, you are the last kind of man Audrey Graham wants, which means you're perfectly safe with her."

"And why wouldn't she want me?" he bristled. "I'm a helluva catch."

Any rich man was. Rich, single and under forty made it doubly so. It wasn't his ego talking, simply the facts. There would always be a supply of women who wanted a man with money, and Simon had loads of it.

"I make it a point not to spread tales about other people's business, Simon. You know that. But I'm sure Audrey would be much more comfortable with you knowing that she just got rid of a man like you and doesn't want another one."

"What do you mean, by 'like me'? Sweet tempered and sexy?"

"Oh, yes. Those are exactly the words that come to mind when I think about you," Marion said. "Although, I have to say, you seem to be in a much better mood than usual. Are you feeling all right?"

"It's temporary, I'm sure."

It was the idea of someone taming the monster-dog, making Peyton happy, making Ms. Bee happy and ensuring she didn't quit that was easing all of Simon's headaches.

Or maybe it was just meeting a gorgeous, dark-haired woman with a little attitude who clearly wasn't afraid to go toe-to-toe with him that was causing his good mood.

There weren't a lot of women who'd dare.

Or who could make him laugh as he had with her.

"I just need someone to fix the dog and the yard," he said, maybe to remind himself even more than Marion.

"And that's exactly what I found you," she claimed.

"You wouldn't try to fix me up with her, right? You know better than that."

Ms. Bee probably *was* the only woman alive who could live happily with him. He accepted that, was fine with it.

Life was so much less complicated that way.

“It wouldn’t matter if I was. I told you, she most certainly does not want a man in her life right now.”

Which was a damned shame, Simon thought, though he certainly shouldn’t.

He liked a woman who wasn’t intimidated by him, who could spit fire every now and then.

Especially in his bed.

Audrey still couldn’t believe she’d actually done it!

She’d gotten a job! One that came with a place to live that was tantalizingly near her daughter.

The first step of many toward getting back into her daughter’s life.

Not even meeting the ultrascary Ms. Bee could ruin this day.

And Ms. Bee was ultrascary.

Frosty as a cold north wind, squinty-eyed, rail-thin with a spine as straight as a ruler and if possible, even more adept at firing off orders than her employer.

She’d allowed Audrey entrance into her spotless, cavernous kitchen only long enough to get her social security number and reiterate her hatred of the dog and all that Audrey was expected to do without bothering or causing any additional problems for the man of the house or Ms. Bee.

And Audrey was most definitely not to get any ideas about causing the kind of trouble that involved an unworthy woman trying to get her hands on Simon Collier.

Audrey tried to assure Ms. Bee that she wanted no kind of trouble at all in her life at present. She didn’t think Ms. Bee was convinced.

“Whew,” she said to herself when she finally escaped the confines of the kitchen and was safely in the backyard again.

Good thing she wasn’t here to make friends.

She was headed for her car to leave when Tink, who’d been sleeping under a nearby tree, lifted his head and came bounding toward her as if the dog had experienced more than enough of Ms. Bee and couldn’t bear the thought of Audrey leaving him all alone with her.

He promptly jumped up on Audrey, barking excitedly and trying to lick her face again.

Audrey had to work to put on a somewhat stern face and say, “Off,” while giving the dog a little push until he was on all fours again.

Then she knelt down beside him and scratched his pretty black head.

“I have to go, but it’s only going to be for a little while. I promise. And then I’ll be back, and you and I are going to be buddies,” she told him.

He made a half-crying sound, as if he understood that she was leaving and thought he might convince her to stay.

“Oh, baby,” she said, knowing what it was like to feel all alone in the world and unloved. “I just have to get my clothes and some shoes, a few CDs, some gardening books, maybe some treats for you, and then I’ll be here all the time.”

More crying.

Pathetic crying.

The dog could really turn on the sympathy cries when he wanted to.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” Audrey kissed him on the snout, then stood up to go.

Tink started barking like crazy.

She couldn’t shush him fast enough.

Ms. Bee appeared in the open back door of the house, a scowl on her stern face, clearly ready to rebuke the dog until she saw Audrey and turned her scorn to the adult in the group.

“Oh,” she said. “You’re still here.”

And then she gave a rather theatrical huff, as if it were an insult that Audrey hadn’t left quickly enough, and she stood even straighter, her expression becoming even more annoyed.

“Will you be doing something about that thing or ignoring him until he becomes your responsibility tomorrow?” Ms. Bee asked.

Audrey managed a slight smile and what she hoped was an even tone. “Actually, I thought I’d take him for a walk, that a little more exercise might help him quiet down for a while and...urn... make your day a little more pleasant.”

If it was possible for Ms. Bee to have a pleasant day.

Audrey wasn’t sure it was.

Ms. Bee looked puzzled by the idea of a pleasant day but simply gave another huff, shut the door and disappeared back into the house.

Audrey took a breath, went and got the dog’s leash from a peg on the inside of the garage, clipped it to the dog’s collar and then unlatched the collar holding his link to the electronic fence around the property. All the while Tink danced with excitement, no doubt knowing he was going somewhere and greatly complicating the entire process.

Audrey didn’t even try to correct his behavior at the moment. She just wanted to put some space between herself and Ms. Bee.

She and Tink set off at a brisk walk, which soon became a fast jog. It was that or let the dog pull her along, another bad precedent to set. So Audrey ran, again taking the path of least resistance, telling herself she’d do better tomorrow, when her job started for real.

They ran past the grand, old near-mansions of Simon Collier’s neighborhood and then took a turn down the sidewalk along the main road that led from his neighborhood to Audrey’s old one.

They ran past the entrance without slowing a bit, nerves pushing Audrey on, boundless energy and the allure of freedom pushing the dog. She sensed that Tink didn’t get to run often and that he really liked running.

They got to the ice cream store on the corner of Maple and Vine, a longtime favorite of Audrey’s daughter, and she couldn’t run anymore.

There were a lot of dogs in the neighborhood, and the owner kindly left a big container of water out for thirsty ones. Audrey stopped to catch her breath and let Tink have a drink.

He was so excited to be out and about in unfamiliar territory that he couldn’t quite decide what he wanted more—to satisfy his thirst or properly explore his surroundings.

He’d take a couple of huge, messy laps of water, then lift his head and dance a bit, checking out cars and pedestrians alike, grinning that silly grin of his and looking at Audrey as if he absolutely adored her for freeing him from the confines of the house and the people there who just didn’t understand or appreciate him.

“Aah, you’re just a big, sweet baby,” Audrey said, scratching his head and giving him another kiss.

He jumped up on her again, as if he just couldn’t get close enough to her, and before she could correct him again, an astonished voice to her right yelled, “Mom?”

She turned toward the voice, and there was Andie, holding a chocolate ice cream cone and looking as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, and Andie’s friend Jake Elliott, who’d been there to witness so many of Audrey’s sins.

“What are you doing here?” Andie asked accusingly.

“I...” Oh, she’d tried to figure out how to do this a thousand times, and the truth was that nothing would make it easier. Nothing would make this a welcome change to her daughter, Audrey feared. So she just looked her daughter in the eye and said it. “I’ve taken a job in Highland Park. I’m going to be living there.”

Andie looked horrified. Her pupils got big and round, suddenly swimming in tears, and she took a step back, as if even this distance was much too close.

“You can’t,” Andie whispered, Jake coming protectively to her side in a silent show of support Audrey was glad her daughter had, even if they stood together against her.

“It’s true. I did,” Audrey said, standing her ground.

“How could you do this to me?” Andie asked, shaking her head. “Haven’t you done enough already to ruin my life!”

Audrey didn’t know what she would have said to that, but then she didn’t have to respond, because Tink saved her. He must have felt the tension between her and Andie and decided to make it clear that he was on Audrey’s side.

He started growling at Andie and Jake.

“Tink, no,” Audrey said sternly.

He looked at her as if she might be too dumb to understand he was defending her.

“It’s all right,” Audrey told him. “I’ve got it.”

He quit growling but stood by her side bristling and ready to step in, if need be.

“So, you think you’re going to force yourself back into my life? Just like that?” Andie asked.

No, she simply thought she’d live nearby and hope eventually something would change. That Andie would need her.

“I just took the dog for a walk, Andie. I had no idea you were going to be here. How could I? I haven’t seen you in two months.”

“But here? You had to do it here? Where I live? Well, it’s not going to work,” Andie told her. “I don’t care what you do. It won’t work.”

And then she stalked away. Jake stood there for a moment, looking as though he wanted to say something, but in the end just shook his head and walked away without a word.

Tink pitched a fit, barking for all he was worth, chasing away the enemy.

“No,” Audrey tried to explain to him. “That’s my baby. My little girl.”

She stood there watching as Andie got into her car and drove away, and then she sank down onto a bench in front of the ice cream store, shaking, the dog practically in her lap and making that fussing, crying sound, not understanding what was wrong but wanting to help in any way he could.

Chapter Three

Andie was still shaking when she pulled into the driveway at her family house, which she now shared with her father. Jake had tried to calm her down all the way home, but it didn't work. He'd wanted to come home with her and talk some more, but she wouldn't let him. Not that he could really do anything anyway.

She was too furious for that.

Plus, it was better to handle things like this on her own. It wasn't as if she could really count on anybody to help, anyway.

Her life.

Her problems.

It was safer that way.

Still, after everything her mother had done last fall, everything the entire neighborhood was still talking about and probably would be for years, her mother dared show her face here?

And planned to live nearby?

Andie couldn't believe it!

She got out of the car and slammed the door, then swiped away angry tears. Her father's car wasn't in the driveway, which meant he wasn't home, as usual, but judging by the other car in the garage, his embarrassingly young, snotty, blond girlfriend was.

Great!

If only her parents had held things together for two more years, she'd have been gone to college, and it wouldn't have really mattered. As it was, Andie couldn't wait to escape from both of them. How she'd make it through another year and a half living with her father and Barbie—that's what Andie called her because she was like a Barbie doll come to life—and her mother now living nearby...

Well, that just sounded like seven different kinds of torture.

Andie went inside through the garage door, not quite slamming it but shutting it none too gently, and stalked through the house.

She was nearly to her room before she came face-to-face with the new love of her father's life. They nearly collided in the hallway, Barbie wearing a robe, slippers and some kind of green gunk on her face.

She gave a huff of displeasure, stopping short just before Andie plowed on by. "I thought you were Richard," she said.

"At this hour? You're kidding, right? When was the last time he made it home before dark? I mean, it's not easy, making enough money for all the things you need. Your new car, and your home-spa days, Barbie."

Barbie gave her one of those sickeningly sweet smiles that seemed to say, *You won't get rid of me that easily. Or maybe, I'll outlast you. Just wait and see.*

Andie told herself she didn't care. She went on to her room, fell back onto her bed and pulled out her phone to call her father.

"Please, be there. Please," she whispered. "Just this once."

She got his secretary, of course, who was actually willing to grant Andie an audience with her own father. *This time.*

"Dad!" Andie groaned as he came on the line. "The most awful thing happened just now. I ran into mom at the ice cream place. She said she's going to be living in Highland Park!"

He laughed. "Andie, there's no way your mother could afford to live there. Unless..."

Unless she'd found another man to support her.

He didn't have to say it.

Andie knew it better than he did.

Highland Park was as fancy a neighborhood as any in town.

“She claims she got a job,” Andie told him.

“Doing what? She’s not trained to do anything.”

“I know,” Andie said.

Which meant... what? That her mother had lied to her? That was nothing new. She’d told any number of lies last fall.

“I can’t have her back here,” Andie said. “Everything was finally starting to quiet down, and I just can’t go through all that again. Will you just call her and tell her to go away, please? Tell her if she really loves me to stay away.”

“I... Hang on, Andie. I’ve got a call on the other line I’ve been waiting for. I have to take this—”

“Dad, please!”

“I’m sorry—”

“No. Just call her. Promise me, you will. Please—”

And then he was gone.

Andie clicked off her phone, barely managing to resist the urge to throw it across the room.

Of course, he had an important call.

This was only her life, her mother about to ruin it once again, and he had a call. No big surprise there. She was lucky if she could get five minutes of his time in a day, maybe even a week. He’d come back to live in the house these past few months, but he wasn’t really here. Not any more than he had been before her parents separated, she realized.

He breezed in, breezed out, did his own thing, and now he had Barbie to entertain in what little time he did spend here.

She really was all alone.

Audrey didn’t have many things of her own to pack.

She’d left her own home three months ago with nothing but the contents of one suitcase and an overnight bag and arrived at Marion’s two months ago with the same things. In her time here, she’d accumulated no more than what would fit in two boxes, and they were already in her car. She zipped up the suitcase and looked longingly around the tiny guest cottage of Marion’s feeling something akin to sheer panic.

“Now, now,” Marion said, coming up to her and putting an arm around her waist. “None of that. It’s time, and you’re going to be fine.”

“I’m glad someone thinks so.” Audrey leaned her head down on top of Marion’s.

The woman was maybe five feet tall but a dynamo nonetheless.

“How can I ever thank you,” Audrey began, choking up.

“No. I mean it. Don’t. This is a happy house. I told you that when you moved in, and it’s certainly not going to change now that you’re moving out. I have adored having you. I will be rooting for you all the way. You’re certainly welcome to call and come visit. In fact, I’ll be hurt if you don’t. But it’s time to push you out of the nest, my dear. On with your life. I’m very wise about these things, you know? And I’m always right. You’re ready.”

Audrey stood up, nodded and worked hard not to cry.

“I didn’t think anyone in the world would have given me another chance, except you—”

“No. I mean it. Don’t. If you want to pay me back, you find someone else to help get back on their feet. That’s the thanks I’m interested in.”

“All right. I will,” she promised, looking around longingly at the pretty iron bed with the pink flowery quilt, the lace curtains, tiny sitting area and a kitchenette the size of a broom closet. Her sanctuary in her time of need. “I’m going to miss this place, too. So much.”

Marion beamed at her. “You’re ready to go, my dear. And you never told me. What did you think of Simon?”

“Well, he’s not sixty and balding.”

Marion whole body shook because she laughed so hard. “How in the world did you get the impression Simon Collier was sixty and balding?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you talked about how successful he is and that the man is rich. I just assumed he wasn’t. . .”.

Ridiculously attractive ?

Audrey hoped she wasn’t blushing just thinking about it.

Honestly.

“How old is he?” she asked, because it was the first question that occurred to her, and she didn’t want to even talk about how good the man looked.

“I don’t know. I’ve known him forever. Since he was practically a boy.”

“And has he always been so . . .demanding?”

“Yes.” Marion nodded. “And always known what he wants and how to get it. In business, I mean.”

Audrey felt a little flutter of panic. “Marion, you’re not trying to fix me up with Simon Collier, are you?”

“No. Of course not—”

“Because a man is the last thing I want or need in my life.”

“I know,” Marion said with an odd look in her eyes that made Audrey nervous. “Now, is this all you brought?”

Audrey nodded, picking up the overnight bag and the handle of her rolling suitcase.

When they got outside, Marion shut the door and said, “Don’t look back. Only forward. It’s the only way to get to where you want to go.”

And Audrey was ready to cry again. “I saw Andie today.”

“Really?” She knew how much this meant to Audrey.

Audrey started down the little path that led around the side of the house and to her car out front, with Marion following. “A few blocks from Simon’s. She was furious when I told her I’d be living and working nearby.”

“Well, you knew she’d likely be upset about that. It’s not a surprise, and it’s not a setback. It just proves you were right in thinking if you could be close, you’d run into your daughter. Give it time. You’ll wear her down.”

“Oh, I hope so. I don’t know what else to do.”

Marion rolled her eyes, then grinned. “She’s a teenage girl. They change their minds every thirty seconds, and they find drama in the smallest of things.”

“It was no small thing that I did.”

“I know, but you’re still her mother. A girl her age needs her mother, and it’s never too soon to learn how important forgiveness is,” Marion insisted. “I’m right about this. And I’m right about you, too. Try to believe me, if you can’t believe in yourself just yet.”

“I will,” Audrey promised.

She got to the car, hefted the suitcase into the backseat, then the shoulder bag. Her cell phone rang.

“It’s Richard.” Audrey made a face when she saw the number.

“Don’t let him bully you. The man is certainly not blameless in all this.”

Audrey took a breath and answered, “Hello, Richard.”

“What kind of nonsense is this I hear about you moving to Highland Park, Audrey?” He was bellowing, so Marion heard every word, too.

“It’s true. I’ll be living there. I have a job.”

He laughed. “And I can just imagine what you could do to earn your keep in a place like Highland Park.”

Audrey saw red but held her tongue. The conversation wasn't anything unexpected. Andie didn't want her there. She wanted Richard to ask her not to come back.

She listened as long as she could stand to, then simply said, "Tell her I'm sorry, but I'm staying."

Richard called her selfish, irresponsible and a bad mother. He was still yelling when she hung up on him.

Marion stood in front of her, looking sad and angry and yet calm as could be. Put Marion in the midst of the worst of emotional storms, and she'd look just like this, as if she was saying to you, *Okay, let's think about how you can handle this without doing anything stupid.*

"You heard him. Andie begged him to tell me to go away."

Marion nodded, wise and confident in a way Audrey thought she could never, ever be again, if she ever had been that sure of herself in her life.

"The surprise is that Richard actually took the time to listen to her and then did what she asked," she told Marion.

"I was thinking the same thing myself," Marion said, putting a hand over Audrey's and holding on to her. "And I'll tell you a little secret, just because it might make you feel a bit better. If you ever wanted him to, Simon could crush your ex-husband with his little pinkie. Businesswise, I mean. If the urge to have Richard destroyed just happened to overtake you and couldn't be resisted."

Audrey laughed, liking the idea of anyone being able to crush Richard.

"If our daughter wasn't headed to college in a year and a half, I'd consider it," Audrey said, trying to hang on to her resolve to do this. "What do I do now?"

"You trust yourself, Audrey. Trust that you know what you're doing, what's important to you. Your daughter. And that you're working to make things right with her."

Audrey leaned down and hugged Marion. "How did you get to be so smart?"

"I made a ton of spectacular mistakes of my own. The trick is learning from them, which you've done." Marion let her go, giving her a big grin. "Now, go get your daughter back."

Audrey found Simon Collier's house quiet and dark as she pulled into the driveway and parked at the bottom of the steps that led to her quarters. She was unloading the first box when the front door opened. Ms. Bee looked out, and Tink barked like crazy.

"Early, I see," Ms. Bee said, as if she were both surprised and, possibly, actually pleased by that particular trait—someone arriving early for work.

"You can let the dog out. I'll take charge of him now," Audrey told her.

In two seconds flat, Tink shot out the door and across the distance between them, complete joy on his face, as if he were thrilled that she'd returned.

Audrey put the box down and knelt to greet him. He put his front paws on her thighs and practically hurled himself at her chest. She laughed and put her arms around him as he snuggled against her for a moment, then reached up and breathed warm puppy breath on her. Next thing she knew, it felt as if he was trying to wash her entire face with his slightly raspy tongue.

"Okay, okay," Audrey said. "Thank you, but—"

And then she started to cry.

Tink drew back, likely tasting her tears. Puzzled, he cocked his head to one side and then started making his crying sound, too.

"I'm fine," Audrey tried to reassure him. "Or, I will be. I just don't remember the last time anyone was this happy to see me. You're very sweet. A little rambunctious, but sweet."

She fluffed his pretty silvery-black fur and just sat there and soaked up all that happiness that seemed to radiate from him toward her.

Dogs loved lavishly, extravagantly, without holding anything back.

She'd forgotten that in the last few years since her family's last dog died.

When no one else loved you, a dog still would, which Tink proved by licking her cheek some more.

“Okay.” She pushed him back gently. “This is going to be hard for you to understand, but a lot of people don’t appreciate doggy kisses, Tink. Why don’t you come upstairs with me and check out my new place, okay? We’ll find you someplace to sleep, and tomorrow we’ll go for a nice, long run.”

Twenty minutes later, all her things were in. It was quiet, peaceful even, and the little apartment was all hers. She’d never lived any place that was entirely hers, having gone from her mother’s house to a tiny apartment she’d shared with a girlfriend to Richard’s apartment, then Marion’s cottage.

She was scared but excited.

Curled up on one end of the overstuffed sofa, the dog practically in her lap, she soaked up the quiet, the comfort of the warmth and weight of the dog, and fell asleep without ever making it to her new bed.

Chapter Four

Audrey woke early to messy, doggy kisses, opened her eyes and found herself stretched out on the sofa, the dog next to her licking her face.

“Ugh,” she groaned, having slept on her side on a couch that wasn’t exactly uncomfortable but just not so great on her neck.

Tink gave his little cry, then grinned at her, practically bouncing with excitement as he looked at her as if to say, *You’re still here!*

Audrey sighed and looked outside to see that it was daylight, but just barely.

“I guess we might as well start our day,” she told Tink. “Give me just a minute and we’ll go running. I promise.”

He slipped off the couch and bounded for the door. She let him out so he could take care of his business, then quickly brushed her teeth, put on her sweats and running shoes and headed for the door.

Tink was waiting for her on the other side of it, grinning like crazy.

“Okay,” Audrey said. “Let’s find out what it takes to wear you out.”

He danced along beside her as she went down the stairs, nearly tripping her twice because he was staying so close, then was beside himself with excitement while she struggled to get his regular collar with the receiver for the electronic fence off and put on a leash and collar they’d use for their run.

He was really puzzled by Audrey’s stretching routine, watching every move with his head cocked to the right, then the left, as if he was trying to understand. She bent over and found him sniffing her hair and trying to lick her face, until she laughed out loud and gently pushed him away.

He came right back.

“Okay, we have a lot to work on,” she told him, mentally making a list. “First, we’re going to run.”

She took off at an easy jog, down the street that took her farther into Simon’s neighborhood, not nearly brave enough to step back into her own. It was cool but not cold with the sun shining down through the trees. They passed a few other joggers, a few other dogs.

Tink, looking as if he could run all day, was just thrilled to be out.

Audrey kept going, waiting for that feeling. People called it a runner’s high, but Audrey didn’t need a high. She wanted to get to the point where she wasn’t thinking about anything at all. To where the need to breathe—and the sound of her own heart thumping strongly, the breeze on her face and the rhythm of her feet hitting the sidewalk—was simply all there was.

It was like reaching a place in her head that no one else could get to, a place where she was perfectly safe from everything, even her own thoughts, her doubts, her fears.

Some people might call it an emptiness and not understand.

But it wasn’t. It was peace.

If she ran far enough and got tired enough, she could finally be at peace.

She found it that morning and didn’t want to let it go, so she ran some more, ran until she got a nasty cramp and had to stop. She collapsed on a bench in front of the ice cream store, Tink limping on the sidewalk at her feet, tongue lolling out, his breathing as fast as hers. Audrey grabbed her calf, groaning as she tried to stretch it without standing up, because her other leg felt like jelly. Tink roused himself enough to make it to the water dish and start lapping, making a huge mess in his enthusiasm for it.

People were starting to make it out onto the streets now. A couple of kids walking to school stopped to pet Tink. Audrey thought she saw a woman she knew from the PTA at Andie’s school but couldn’t tell for sure.

Her cramp finally easing, she stood up gingerly to test it out, see if they could continue on now, then winced as she took a few steps.

“We really outdid ourselves this morning,” she told Tink, who stretched out on the sidewalk looking as if he could happily go to sleep right where he was.

She’d worn a pedometer to keep track of their mileage but hadn’t stopped to look at it until she’d already gone too far.

“I think we’ll have to limp home,” she told the dog. “So, I hope you’re as tired as I am.”

He got wearily to his feet, as if to show that he was.

Trying not to make the muscles in her leg any madder than they already were, she moved slowly and hadn’t gone fifty feet when a car, an old Buick, pulled to the curb beside her and stopped.

A teenage boy, one of three in the car, got out.

Andie’s friend, Jake, Audrey realized.

“Mrs. Graham? Are you all right?”

“Just a cramp, Jake. We’ll be fine.”

He hesitated, then said, “You’re really living around here?”

“Yes, I am,” she said.

“You want to get in? We could make room and take you home.”

“Jake,” the driver called out. “We’ve got to get to school.”

“It’s just a few blocks. We have time,” he told his friend, then looked back at Audrey. “Really. We do.”

She suspected he wanted to talk to her more than anything else and agreed. Jake climbed into the backseat, and she got in front with the dog beside her, sitting on the floor by her feet. Jake introduced her as Andie’s mother, which had his friend, the driver, doing a double take but saying nothing. Audrey gave him directions and thanked them all for the ride.

Jake whistled as they pulled into the driveway of Simon Collier’s house. “Wow. You live here?”

“I’m working here,” Audrey told him as she got out of the car.

Jake got out, too, saying, “She’s really upset that you’re back.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that, but I have to try to make things right between us, Jake.”

He nodded. “I don’t know if she’ll forgive you or not, but...she’s really not very happy living with her father and his girlfriend.”

“I didn’t think she would be,” Audrey said. “But thank you for telling me and for being her friend. And I’m really sorry about all the trouble I caused for you last fall. I had no right to draw you into my mess.”

She’d gotten drunk at a party one night and made a huge scene. Andie, in trying to get her home, called Jake to come and get them both. Jake, who hadn’t even had a license back then, ended up wrecking his uncle’s car early that morning while trying to get an unconscious Audrey to the hospital. Audrey still considered it a miracle none of them had been seriously hurt in the accident.

“My uncle says I made my own choices, and they were all bad. Not in trying to help Andie, but in understanding what I could and couldn’t do. Understanding when I needed help myself.”

“But I’m the one whose behavior put you in a position to have to make those choices that got you into trouble. And for that, I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “I know. We got your letter.”

“Well,” Audrey said. “Thanks for the ride. If you or Andie needs anything, I’m living right there, above the garage. You can come by anytime.”

Not that she thought he would. Still, she was here. She wasn’t leaving.

Jake got in the car and Audrey watched them drive off; then, with her leg muscles still cramped tight, she limped across the driveway toward her apartment.

Audrey was sitting under a tree in the front yard, studying the house, the placement of the big trees and shrubs, the existing planting beds, the fence to one side that belonged to the neighbors, thinking of what to do with what was already there and what to add to it, when her phone rang.

Tink roused himself from his spot sprawled out in the grass beside her, but only long enough to lift his head, see that it was nothing but her cell phone ringing, then gave a contented, tired groan and sank back down into the grass.

Audrey was still laughing at him for how tired and complacent he'd been today, since their run, when she picked up the phone and said, "Hello."

"Don't tell me you're actually enjoying this job," Simon Collier asked, with astonishment in his voice.

She felt a little tickle of something run through her.

Pleasure?

At the sound of his voice?

Surely not.

Please, not.

"Is it impossible for you to believe I could be enjoying myself?" she asked, hoping that little fizzle of something didn't come through in her voice.

"I would think it's at least highly improbable, given the tasks involved. Namely, dealing with a certain unruly creature," he said.

"I was laughing at the dog," she told him.

"That I can believe. I think it has the IQ of a shrub."

No way Audrey was going to risk another conversation with him about the dog's intelligence and their battle for control. She feared she'd come too close to insulting Simon on that topic already.

"I was laughing because he's funny and because he's been good all day," she explained.

"Impossible. What did you do, drug him? Because I've heard there are vets who are willing to prescribe things like that, to certain highly troubled canines. I considered trying to find one."

"Don't you dare even think of drugging this dog," she said, rolling her eyes, knowing he was baiting her and still rising to it.

"So, what kind of miracle did you perform to make him...good?"

"I took him for a run this morning and wore him out," she said. "He's been too tired to do much of anything since then."

"I find that very difficult to believe," Simon insisted, then was silent as Audrey heard an announcement of a plane boarding in the background. "That's my flight. I'll need to go. I just wanted to check in with you and make sure you didn't hurt yourself. Or that the dog didn't hurt you."

"No, I'm fine."

"Ms. Bee said you could hardly walk this morning when you got back to the house after exercising him. That you had to get a ride back?"

"Oh, it was nothing. I got a little carried away, and we ran too far. But it was me, not Tink, who did it. I just had a cramp."

"You're sure. Because I won't have that dog hurting anyone—"

So, he was worried about her? Or just looking for an excuse to get rid of the dog?

"Simon, he's just a little rambunctious. That's all. Not a bad dog. And he's smart, but he's not the one who knows how far I can run without cramping up or the one who should keep track of how far we've gone. I am."

"All right. If you say so."

"I do."

"So, how's my yard?"

"Tink and I are studying it as we speak. Or actually, he's lying in the grass half asleep and I'm studying the yard. It looks as if the trees haven't been trimmed in years—"

"You want to cut down those huge trees? I like my trees. Big, lush, green, remember? That's what I want. Surely you can see that the trees are big, lush and green."

“Yes, I see that. But they also have some dead branches in them, and some are dangling over the house. You would be greatly inconvenienced if one of those limbs fell through your roof one day.”

“All right. Yes. You’re right. Just don’t cut them down.”

“I just want them shaped up, like a pretty, big, frame of greenery around the house and the yard.”

“All right. Do it.”

“It means a lot of noise and disruption. Crew of workers, a big truck, limbs being cut and falling to the ground. Limbs being ground up into mulch.”

“Then have it done while I’m not there,” he said. “Just check with Ms. Bee. She always has my schedule.”

“All right,” she assured him.

“And take care of yourself,” he said, almost like he was concerned.

“I will.” Then, without really thinking, she added, “See you Friday.”

As if she was looking forward to it or something. Audrey winced.

He didn’t seem to pay any attention, just said goodbye and hung up.

He’d be home on Friday.

She would not look forward to it, and she would not care.

Simon got to the gate and found out that despite the announcement he’d heard only moments before, his plane was not boarding. *How annoying.*

Traveling had only gotten worse in the past few years, but this trip had seemed particularly irksome. Delay after delay. Frustration on top of frustration. He found himself just wanting to be at his own office in the city and at his own home, rather than forced to wait to be allowed to board a plane or to take off on a runway or to get into a hotel room.

His phone rang, and he looked at the Caller ID display.

Ms. Bee.

He clicked the phone to answer. “Yes, Ms. Bee.”

“Now she’s just sitting there in the grass in the front yard, staring at everything. Her and that animal.”

Simon wished he was there to see it, the dog miraculously still and quiet, lounging in the grass, and Audrey, probably sitting cross-legged in the shade of one of his enormous trees she planned to tame, bits of sunshine filtering through the new spring leaves. And Ms. Bee, spying on her through one of the front windows, a scowl on Ms. Bee’s face.

He had a feeling he’d enjoy the sight.

“What’s wrong with that? She’s not allowed to sit in the grass?”

“It’s just...odd. Did you ever find out exactly what she did to be taken in by that criminal-loving woman you like so much?”

“Criminal-loving?” Simon laughed. Ms. Bee had a talent for making people she disapproved of sound positively evil, and while she’d never admit it to his face, she was highly protective of Simon and especially of Peyton. “You’ve known Marion for years. And in all those years, I think she’s had only one lover who could properly be classified a criminal, and even then he didn’t commit a felony, just a few misdemeanors.”

“Marion Givens has a talent for finding trouble, and you know it. And now she’s gone and convinced you to hire a woman who seems to be casing your house—”

“Casing the joint? You think she’s going to rob us?”

“It looks that way,” Ms. Bee claimed.

“She’s planning to have some trees trimmed, then landscape the yard, remember? Surely you understand how reasonable it seems—no, necessary—to thoroughly study the yard first. We want her to do a proper job, after all.”

Ms. Bee gave a huff to show she still disapproved, then said, “I think she’s bewitched that animal.”

At which point, Simon threw his head back and laughed.

“I don’t see any other explanation for how he’s behaving.”

“You believe in witchcraft, Ms. Bee?”

“Of course not, you wretched man. You know what I mean. She couldn’t just snap her fingers and make him behave, although that’s exactly what he’s been doing since she got here. So how would you explain it?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care, as long as it works.”

“Well, I don’t trust that woman,” Ms. Bee said. “And I can’t believe you do, either.”

“What, are you afraid she’s going to bewitch me, too?” Simon asked.

As if any woman could after his first experience with matrimony.

Although, he was afraid he’d like to see Audrey try to bewitch him. Simon shook his head, thinking he could get himself into serious trouble here.

“You like her,” Ms. Bee said accusingly, then launched into a condemnation of the entire male species and their lack of reasoning and willpower where a pretty woman was concerned.

More mother and sometimes boss than anything else, she was the only woman in the world who’d dare talk to Simon that way.

“I’ll try to keep my head screwed on tight in all my dealings with Audrey. I promise.”

“And I’m going to keep my eye on her,” Ms. Bee promised.

“Fair enough,” Simon said, still amused when he hung up the phone.

Surely he didn’t need Ms. Bee’s protection.

Surely he wasn’t that far gone.

He’d had only one brief encounter with Audrey, over a job and the dog.

He couldn’t be smitten yet, and besides he was not a man who became *smitten*. He was someone she should be half scared to even talk to, just because he had a reputation for being that way in business. It saved him from so much useless chitchat, saved him so much time and often boredom.

And yet he’d called Audrey at the first excuse he was given, and here he was, anxious to be home rather than out here doing his job, expanding his empire and his already impressive bank account. The way he kept score on his life, because...

Well, because there was no other way to keep score, nothing else really in his life except Peyton.

He wondered how most people kept score.

How did Peyton?

How would Audrey?

He was sure it wasn’t a bank account with either one of them.

He endured another thirty-six mostly unproductive hours on the road and then said to hell with it and came home a day early.

Because he wasn’t getting anything done.

Not for any other reason.

He pulled into the driveway sometime after midnight and left the car outside on the far side of the garage, not wanting to wake Audrey or, more likely, the dog, who would then wake Audrey. He knew from Ms. Bee’s spying reports either that the dog got Audrey up at the crack of dawn or that Audrey got up then and the dog appreciated it, ready to run for a few miles with her.

Either way, they didn’t need to be awakened at this hour.

He slipped into the house, took a quick shower and crawled into bed, grateful that it was his own, thinking he might actually sleep in the next day. It wasn’t as if the world would come to an end if he did, and it would probably save him from biting someone’s head off from lack of sleep.

He punched his pillow a few times, getting it just right, closed his eyes and dropped off in seconds.

And woke to...

It sounded like a bomb dropped on top of his house!

Simon shot upright in bed, heart pounding.

Surely he'd imagined that.

Because the house was still standing.

Nothing was falling on his head. He didn't hear anything, in fact.

Shaking his head to try to clear it, he eased back down and had nearly dropped back off to sleep when he heard a huge crash right outside his window.

"What the hell?" he muttered, grabbing the pajama bottoms he kept in his bedside table for those nights when Peyton was here.

He stepped into them as he ran for the stairs and then the front door.

Who in the world would bomb Highland Park?

Simon came roaring out of the house to find a bunch of guys in hard hats, a couple of huge, roaring machines and his yard certainly looking as if it had been bombed, with tree branches everywhere. Not quite six-thirty in the damned morning, and someone had bombed his yard!

He stalked toward the nearest guy in a hard hat, ready to raise hell, when he heard Audrey shouting his name, saw her coming at him at a dead-run. She grabbed him hard and tugged him back the way she'd come. He could see her lips moving but couldn't quite tell what she was saying.

"What in holy hell is going on?" he roared. He'd have liked to say something much worse but was trying to clean up his language because of Peyton.

"Get over here!" Audrey screamed.

He heard it again, that bombing sound, as a huge limb crashed to the ground behind him, just missing him. He turned around and just looked at it, mouth hanging open. They'd nearly killed him in his own front yard!

"What the hell are they doing dropping limbs like that when there are people around?"

"They're trimming your trees," she yelled back. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here! It's my house! I thought somebody had started bombing the neighborhood!"

"Bomb the neighborhood?" she repeated, making it sound absolutely ridiculous, which he knew it likely was. Still...

"That's what it sounded like when it woke me up," he said, still yelling. "They could have killed me!"

"I know. I saw. I'm the one who got you out of the way," Audrey said.

One of the hard hat guys came running over to them then, looking as if someone had taken a few years off his life.

"What the hell is going on?" he yelled at Audrey.

Simon stepped in, intending to stop that right there. He might raise his voice every now and then, but he wasn't going to stand by while anybody else talked to her that way and if that made him a hypocrite, well...fine!

Audrey must have known what was coming, because she stepped between them and put up a hand to stop Simon from getting any closer.

The next thing he knew, she had her palm pressed flat against his bare chest.

And that stopped him cold.

Chapter Five

Audrey felt as if she'd been burned.

No, scared half to death and then burned. Burned in a not altogether bad way, but certainly not good, either.

She kept her hand on his bare chest just long enough to stop him, along with a look in her eyes she'd used on her daughter when she was two and stubborn as could be. Then she turned back to the head of the tree crew and told him she'd take care of Simon.

"Tell him to stay the hell out of the work zone," the guy said, then added. "There's no one else on the property now, right?"

Audrey heard Simon growl a bit. She turned back to him. "Please tell me your daughter isn't here?"

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