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***Definite Opinions***

had been chasing the Thomas twins around their house for a half hour, begging them to put on their clothes, when the ga-

I

rage door whined up. Their mother was home.

“Guys, come here,” I shouted as I flung myself onto the car- pet. Five seconds later, I had two tiny bare butts bouncing on my belly. “Gotcha.” I sat up, locked my arms around their squirmy bodies, and shifted them onto my lap. I’d just wiggled a pair of Pull-Ups onto both boys when Mrs. Thomas walked in the door.

She hugged them as she smiled at me. “Were my little men good today?”

“Absolutely adorable.” I took the wad of cash she held out and shoved it into my pocket. “Thanks.”

“Brooke?” She squinted at the calendar hanging on the kitchen wall. “Can you babysit next Saturday morning? Eight to eleven?”

“Sure. See you then.” I kissed the twins on the tops of their heads and left. Once I got home, I locked up my bike in the back- yard and collapsed into my hammock. A nap had just become my top priority. Eyes shut. Swaying in the breeze. Surrounded by the scent of roses.

A screen door slammed, followed by thuds across the deck and the soft swoosh of footsteps on the lawn. Maybe if I pre- tended not to be here, the footsteps would change direction.

“Brooke,” Mom said.

*Guess not*. “I’m hiding.”

“Not very well, since this was the first place I looked.”

I smiled drowsily without opening my eyes. “Are you saying I’m predictable?”

“Completely. How were the boys?”

“Busy. And naked.” I sighed. Loudly. In a way that made it obvious I would rather not be talking.

“It’s time to eat.”

“Now?” It couldn’t be any later than five p.m. I peered at her through half-closed eyes. “What about Jeff?”

“He’s home. We’re having fried chicken.”

Mom rarely fried chicken, even though it was one of my favorites. Too messy and unhealthy, which made today’s choice highly suspicious. “Why?”

“We’re holding a family meeting.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

I rolled from the hammock, my heartbeat jumping into over- drive. “About . . . ?”

“Come and see.” She jogged back to the house, her blonde ponytail bouncing behind her.

A family meeting on a Friday in the middle of June? When

nothing was going on? Mom and I had been a team long enough for me to know this meeting meant something big—and happy— for me.

Fighting off the burn of anticipation, I trailed her into the kitchen. The table looked gorgeous. Lace tablecloth. Roses in a vase. The “company” china. And not only had my only-cooks- from-scratch-under-duress mother made fried chicken, she’d added creamed potatoes and biscuits, too.

Oh, yeah. Something *big.* And there was only one thing it could be.

Jeff was holding Mom’s chair for her. When he was done, I inched around him.

“Hello, Brooke.” He held up his fist.

My stepfather and I had been fist-bumping for the whole time he’d been in my life. I’d hoped after their wedding that he would progress to hugging. But nine months later, I was still waiting. “Hi, Jeff.” I touched my fist to his and slid onto a chair.

It quickly became apparent that the two of them had a conspiracy going to keep me in suspense during the meal. We talked about ordinary stuff, like . . . our jobs. The weather. The Chicago Cubs’s chances of reaching the World Series. And after every topic, Mom and Jeff would smirk at each other and then me. Fine. I could survive on hope for a few more min- utes.

As soon as they put down their forks, I pounced. “Okay, guys . . . ?”

My stepfather’s phone buzzed.

Mom and I exchanged grins. Because of course. The best mo- ments of my life were always interrupted before they happened. Like a hyper dog ruining the cookout for my ninth birthday.

Or the hurricane that canceled my first dance recital. Or the badly placed candle that torched the decorations at Mom’s wed- ding to Jeff. At least tonight, the destruction of property wasn’t involved.

He glanced at the phone and then at my mother. “It’s Mei.” His ex-wife. He would have to answer, although his reluctance to delay the family meeting was kind of sweet.

Mom sniffed. “Go ahead.”

Jeff accepted the call. “Mei, what is it?” He narrowed his eyes, then frowned. Rocketing from his chair, he left the kitchen and disappeared into the den.

“I wonder what she wants,” I said.

“Me, too.” Mom covered the leftover potatoes with a piece of plastic wrap and carried them to the fridge. “Dessert?”

“Should we wait for Jeff?”

“Nope.” She added the *p* with a lot of attitude.

I reached for the biscuits. Might as well clean up, too.

Jeff was gone for ten minutes. Mom and I had already fin- ished our peach cobbler when he returned. After slipping his phone into his pocket, he stood behind his chair, gripping the seat back. He looked uncertain. Hesitant. Two words I’d never thought of for my stepfather before.

My mother rose and crossed to his side. “What’s happened?” “Mei has been having some health problems since she had

her baby.” He shook his head as if dazed. “I’m sorry.”

“The doctors want her to reduce her stress.” Mom and I said in unison, “Natalie.”

He gave a sharp nod.

My stepsister and I chatted online often, and one of her fa-

vorite topics was her baby brother. But she’d never mentioned her mom being sick.

Jeff rubbed a hand over his nearly bald scalp. “Natalie is coming to live with us for a while.”

*What?* I stared at him in disbelief. Natalie would be *living*

here? He’d invited her without checking?

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