

Designing Destiny

Chapter Seven

October 2023

"Good morning, Fern. Look at you staying hydrated! I do hope you had a lovely weekend?"

Destiny's voice was musical as ever, drawing Fern up straight in her chair and sending inexplicable little thrills up and down her spine. She glanced up from her desk, clutching softly at her coffee, and found herself gazing up into her colleague's grey eyes and calm smile. Destiny looked... well, like Destiny. But more than that. Today she looked especially... strong? Radiant? More... alive, somehow?

"I, um- yeah! Thanks. Yeah, it was, um... pretty good." Her hands clenched around her warm coffee cup, trying to ignore the flashes of memories that sparked through her brain. Memories of nervously slipping through grocery store aisles yesterday morning. An incriminating package in her bottom drawer. The sensation of thickened cotton between her legs... pressing ever so gently and comfortingly against her sensitive-

"Pretty good? We'll take that, won't we?" Destiny's laugh was soft, and Fern found herself blushing and nodding along. Thank god Destiny couldn't read her mind! "I must confess," her pink-haired colleague continued, a wry smile on her lips. "I don't know what a sweet young girl like you gets up to on the weekend – you know, when you're not tied down to this desk. Dancing at the club until midnight, I wonder? Training for a half-marathon, perhaps? Maybe perfecting your jujitsu skills at the local dojo?"

"Uh- no! No, I mean, well-" Under the kindly assault, Fern was left stuttering, groping for the words to reply to such wild suggestions. But before she could find them, Destiny gave a little chuckle and wave of her hand. "Aww, relax! I'm just teasing, darling. It's not my business what you do on your own, is it?"

Then, she leaned closer – and years later, Fern would recollect that she saw a flicker of red in her sparkling grey eyes. "That reminds me, actually. Since you and I are working so closely, Fern, I think it would be lovely to get to... well, to know each other a bit better. You wouldn't happen to be free tonight after work, would you? You see, there's this lovely new Japanese place..."

"Um, uh, tonight?" Fern shifted in her seat, startled not only by the offer but by the strangely eager emotion welling within her. These kinds of after-work things had never been her thing. After all,

she only had to think back to the latest, disastrous dinner with Laura, Shane, and Amanda. But somehow this... this didn't sound so bad.

"Yes... tonight. Is that good for you?"

Fern shivered once more, her spine atingle with inexplicable delight. "Umm... yeah? Yes, I- I think so?" "Oh, lovely!" Destiny beamed, and Fern gulped and nodded, trying to ignore the sensation of her heart suddenly hammering in her chest with unnatural speed. "Well, then – let's do it! I'll get us a table and send you the address, okay?"

Then, lapsing back into her cool professionally as if nothing had happened, Destiny straightened... brushed a stray thread from her shoulder... and glanced toward the conference room. "Well, then. Why don't you and I get up to speed on Woodridge before the project meeting?"

Uh-oh. She should have known she wasn't elegant enough for this kind of thing.

Fern's eyes darted about – from the immaculate menu, to the large glass of water and ornate chopsticks before her, and finally across the table to her seated colleague. Destiny sat there, calmly smiling in her matchless elegance, looking exactly as much at home and at ease as she did in her office. And as Fern's gaze met hers, her smile broadened into a gentle expression of polite benevolence.

"I'm so glad you could join me here, Fern. I take it this is your first time here?"

"Uh, yeah," Fern nodded, and she shifted awkwardly in place. "I, well... I don't eat out much." "A lovely habit to have," Destiny opined, sipping smoothly at her water. "You must enjoy making your own food, then?" Oh, crap. How... how to respond without making herself sound like an absolute loser?

"Well, um, not too much," Fern admitted, fighting back a grimace at the thought of her latest supper: store-bought mac and cheese and chicken tenders. "It's nothing special, really. I should cook more, to be honest." "Well, of course – me too!" Destiny chuckled, glancing down in temperate admiration at the menu before her. "Though I don't think either of us has the skills or ingredients to make *this* kind of cuisine. Speaking of... do you have thoughts about what you'd like?"

Fern shrugged and hesitantly said that no, she didn't – in so doing trying to hide the fact that she hadn't the slightest idea what *omakase* or *karaage* or *uni* might mean. "What's good here? You, um, you've been here before?"

"Oh! Only once," Destiny responded, with a tilt of her pink hair. "So I certainly can't say I know the menu. However... let's see. Do you have any allergies? Any preferences when it comes to sushi?"

No. No, she didn't. And so it was that, once the officious waiter approached, even before Fern could open her mouth Destiny smoothly broke in. "Konbanwa. Osusume wa nandesuka?"

Leaving Fern sitting there, feeling less like an uncultured swine and more like a little girl whose mother was taking care of her.

Not that such a feeling was bad, she later rationalized. And neither was the food. Unfamiliar, yes. Full of strange flavors and unexpected textures and startlingly spicy mouthfuls. But overall, quite wonderful.

Though it wasn't exactly possible to hide her self-conscious blushes when, after struggling with the infuriatingly slippery chopsticks minute after increasingly uncomfortable minute, a few words from Destiny to the waiter magically produced a fork just for her. "It's fine! Like anything, it takes practice," Destiny had simply smiled into her embarrassment. And so Fern had blushed once more... and gratefully slipped the blessedly familiar utensil into her mouth.

But in the end, it ended up being a much more memorable experience than any work dinner she'd ever had. Some might have said it was the venue. Others might have said the food. Fern, however... well she already knew it was all because of the company.

They talked of many things during the leisurely meal. Destiny was no inquisitor, of course. But somehow, between every other mouthful, it seemed that Fern ended up confessing more and more of her life. Yes, she lived by herself. No, she didn't have any pets. She loved cats, but her big sister had been allergic. Yes, she'd majored in English in college. Oh, yes, she loved Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters, and...

It was a feeling unlike anything she'd ever experienced before: sitting there, and later walking sedately through the darkness beside this calm and confident woman. Being listened to, and gently questioned, by someone who was genuinely interested in her as a person... well, it was wonderful. Even when she'd slipped back into her colleague's car and they'd headed back to the office parking

lot, the warm tingles that swept over her at being so close to this mysterious woman... well, they didn't feel so surprising. They just blended into a fuzzy glow of quiet, simmering excitement – and of thoughts that maybe, just maybe... the two of them...?

"See you tomorrow, Fern." Those final musical words were echoing in her mind as she drove, still atingle and strangely happy, back to her little apartment. Destiny was... something else. So amazing. So cool! So very, very nice. And oddly enough, she no longer found it so hard to believe that her mind had used Destiny's voice in that weird recurring nightmare she had.

Oh, but of course: Destiny was nothing at all like that terrifyingly powerful figure she saw in the inky blackness of her dreams. She was far too sweet to do anything like- like command Fern's very body to obey her every word. But still... in such a weird, dreamworld fantasy, it actually made sense that Destiny would be so powerful. She'd undeniably be the type of person to be in charge – to decide – to order others about...

It was once Fern was home and preparing for bed that it all began unraveling: her euphoria, her warm glow, her eager thoughts of Destiny. She was an idiot if she thought Destiny would ever see her as anything more than a friend. If she needed confirmation... well, all she needed to do was tug open that bottom drawer and gaze ruefully down at that package of Goodnites. Those were for *her* – Fern. It was time to put another one on, to stay protected, just like last night. Her hand reached down... began tugging one out of the pack and then, in a fit of impatient energy, withdrew and slammed the drawer shut.

No. No! She wasn't going to let herself become so pathetic. No way she was just going to *accept* that she wet the bed. She hadn't drunk that much tonight. She would use the toilet right now, then go to sleep in pajamas and panties like any other normal woman would. Like Destiny surely would. And in the morning, she'd wake up clean, and dry...

and blessedly, wonderfully normal.

Hopefully?

(To be continued)