

## Designing Destiny

### Chapter Six

September 2023

This was getting out of hand, wasn't it?

The world on a quiet Sunday morning was very different from what Fern was used to. Typically she would have stayed tucked away in bed until at least ten: intermittently waking and snuggling deeper and drowsing back off again, until the sunlight simply became too bright to ignore any longer. Then and only then she might have yawned and trotted out with tousled hair to breakfast, not fully waking until a good hour later...

But today? Today was different.

She ducked in through the doorway of her local supermarket, trying to ignore the grainy image of herself flashing across the CCTV monitor. She was a sight, definitely: in nothing more than a sweatshirt and faded pair of sweatpants, her Crocs *thwonk*-ing with every step she took. Her hair was a complete mess, her hungover head pounding, her heart thudding with unnatural speed. She was here, out of bed, on a mission. A mission that she would rather have died than admit to anyone.

A mission caused by the simple truth that the bed she'd exited less than an hour before was – once again – soaked.

Sure, she could dwell on the weird dreams she was having again. She could wonder if the very act of having a few drinks before bed was making it inevitable that she dreamt of drinking, too – not to mention ending up in a puddle of her own pee. She could, and she would... later. For now, though, she had to focus on her goal. Her embarrassing, mortifying goal...

*Where on earth did they keep those Goodnite things?*

Her sweating hands clutched at the plastic shopping basket, her darting gaze filled with the irrelevant blurs of graham crackers and olive oil and tomato sauce as she *thwonked* past. Of course they wouldn't be in here. Maybe down by the pads and tampons? Or... or somewhere else? Near the- the baby stuff?

She spotted them at last: right where she'd feared. Right past the gaily colored boxes screaming

"Pampers" and "Huggies," next to the packs of training pants with grinning toddlers blazoned across their fronts. There they were: Goodnites. "Sleep pants." For girls, or for boys. Pink and purple, or blue...

No. No, she simply couldn't! Her fingers trembled, the very thought of reaching out and taking that pack off the shelf making her stomach churn with anxiety. No *way* she could put that in her basket, and walk around here with it, and – oh, god! – meet the eyes of the cashier as they took it from her and rang it up-

She turned and fled for refuge in the paper goods aisle.

When Fern finally emerged from the supermarket fifteen minutes later with flushed cheeks and still-hammering pulse, she held in one hand a shopping bag. Sure, maybe it didn't contain what she'd come for. But at least she hadn't made the trip here for nothing. With every step, the dry rattle of macaroni and the brittle crinkle of a cold plastic bag reminded her of the comfort food she'd found instead: her favorite mac 'n cheese and a bag of chicken strips, and to top it off, a pint of her favorite ice cream.

As for the real thing she'd come for... well...

"Delivery and Pickup! Shop in the comfort and safety of your own home." The boldly printed words atop the shopping cart rack caught her eye. *Wait... delivery?* So she could- She could just buy them online and have someone drop them off? Well, duh – why hadn't she thought of that before?!

And homeward she hastened: no longer simply to keep her precious ice cream from melting, but to get that order placed ASAP.

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God, it was so easy! Maybe *too* easy for her own good.

She'd only intended to buy a few of those Goodnite things. Not that she genuinely thought she'd need the entire pack – or even more than one or two. It was probably just the stress and the alcohol making these wet beds, after all. Still, she might as well try them out, right?

But after she'd clicked them into her cart, the search algorithm had helpfully suggested a whole wave of related products – from the baby section, of course. Wipes. Swim diapers. Formula. And

even sippy cups – one of which she couldn't resist clicking on.

It was a Hello Kitty cup, after all! In pink and purple! With the most adorable designs printed all over it! And into her virtual cart it had gone – with hardly a moment's hesitation.

So what, she rationalized to herself as she eyed her order confirmation. So what if it was a little kiddie cup? It was cute! She didn't have to really use it. She could just look at it. And even if she *did* use it, well... no one but her would know. It wasn't like anyone else would ever find out...

Goodness, she didn't even want to imagine that. What on earth would someone as cool and collected and mature as, say, *Destiny* think if they knew what she'd just bought?

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But they *didn't* know. She was safe. And so it was that, once evening had come, any curious passerby bold enough to peer through the cracks in her faded blinds would have seen quite an interesting sight. There Fern sat at her little bar, contentedly watching one of her favorite Austen TV adaptations playing out on her laptop screen. A large bowl of bright yellow macaroni and cheese lay before her, along with a plate of steaming chicken tenders. And beside them both stood an open sippy cup of what appeared to be juice, its lid still lying in readiness to be used.

She munched, contentedly. On her face was an expression of calm and quiet delight. And even when she reached for her cup... then paused... then as if on a whim took the lid and screwed it firmly closed, the expression on her face slid only momentarily into one of self-conscious shame. She brought the cup to her lips, then tipped it upward. And as her gaze swiveled back to the screen and she gulped silently at the sweet contents... well, not even the most cynical witness could have denied that she looked oddly happy.

She was, too. Late that night, after her drama had ended and she'd sighed happily on her way to bed, even the sight of the pink-and-purple package waiting on her bed didn't dispel her happiness. "Might as well," she murmured as she dropped her sweatpants to the floor and shuffled into the bathroom to relieve herself. "Just to be safe."

Though she wasn't quite prepared for the swirl of emotions that caught hold of her when she finally trotted out and tore the package open. They felt so... soft? Weirdly clothlike, and yet, not. Out she slid one, her eyes traveling silently over the flower-strewn length. Well, they were kinda... cute? So different from the one she remembered from all those years ago: that thick white thing, so oddly

comfortable and secure...

And when at last she had slid it up her bare legs and stood sheepishly before the mirror, her eyes filled with a confused mixture of shame, relief, and quiet reflection. How silly she looked. And yet, how right it felt, somehow? It was so very like how she'd felt all those years before: protected and warm and safe, yet so oddly juvenile and embarrassed...

Well, no matter. The Goodnites disappeared beneath her pajama bottoms. She shuffled into her freshly made bed, clean once more. She wriggled down between the covers, acutely aware of a soft, yet clearly audible rustle with every move she made. And then, as she reached over and turned out the light... her hand pulled back. Came to rest on the pillow beside her. Then, in the comforting inky blackness, it slid closer. Closer. Until it was brushing against her parting lips.

Ten minutes later, Fern was asleep: thumb tucked tightly into her mouth, her now protected bum resting comfortably beneath the covers. And the dreams that came that night... well...

Strange to say, they were better than any she'd had in a very, very long time.

*(To be continued!)*