

*Ana's Friday night fun*

In high-definition technicolor, globs of whipped cream slithered down the candidate's artificially bronzed cheek. The stretched skin of his facelift froze his usual stiff smile with horror. The cream dripped off a movie hero chin onto a Harvard-maroon tie.

Gleefully, I clicked the remote control to go back and watch again as the fat chocolate cream pie splatted squarely on Senator Rose's patrician nose. Aides rushed to hurry him off camera, but not before I caught a glimpse of the snarl curling his lip to reveal his capped incisors. I'd seen his high school yearbook—even his teeth were fake these days.

I happily clicked to the beginning of the clip again. Whoever was behind the pie-throwing clown disguise had a good throwing arm and fabulous timing. I watched Rose descend the stairs on a wave of mob enthusiasm after a gun control rally. The female clown with a bright red smile stepped out of the crowd as if to hand him her county-fair prize-winning confection.

*Splat.* I giggled happily and punched the clicker again. I couldn't get enough of the smug smile turning to cursing snarl. "I love TiVo," I said in contentment, rubbing my bare toes over a long masculine leg.

Graham was probably the reason for my unusual contentment, but I wasn't ready to let him know that. I wasn't prepared to acknowledge it myself. Six months from bitter enemies to lovers was moving much too fast. I could handle friends with benefits, though.

Graham crushed his muscular thigh over mine, trapping my teasing toes. Then he took my toy away.

"If there were no TV news, we wouldn't have to worry about the state of the nation," I complained as he switched from my fun recording to boring live TV.

"You're the reason I'm in bed instead of at my desk," he said in his low, spine-tingling baritone. "Want me to go back to my computers?"

"The house is blessedly empty," I pointed out, as I had an hour ago, right after I'd packed EG off to her father's. Graham had been quick to comprehend the message. He was smart like that.

My nine-year-old sister had been invited to a sleepover with her half-sister. The two were worse than magnesium and water, and I expected a report of a neutron bomb in the

vicinity of Senator Tex's Georgetown home at any moment. I grabbed the momentary respite in the best way I knew how.

"Having all your family out of sight is what worries me," Graham said, proving his thoughts followed mine. He switched to his favorite news channel.

Graham bears a strong resemblance to the late Christopher Reeves as Superman, except for the puckered red scar from his temple to his eye. His thick black hair had been artfully styled to conceal the worst of the injury, except he sported bedhead at the moment, thanks to me.

He'd once been an up-and-coming politician, a presidential aide, and his pretty face would have assured that he'd go far. 9/11 had ended that, in so many ways that I had yet to uncover the depth of the damage—another reason I was wary of a relationship. The man did brooding and dangerous better than any movie super-villain.

Not that I couldn't keep up with him in eccentric territory. I'm Anastasia Devlin, granddaughter of the late multimillionaire, Rathbone Maximillian. I'm learning I have a lot in common with that wily old man I'd barely known. Unfortunately, I probably inherited the worst deviousness from his daughter, my mother, Magda, as did my many half-siblings.

So admittedly, Graham had a point about worrying over an empty house. When my tribe was loose upon the world, anarchy was obliged to happen.

"My family is not currently under my control. I bear no responsibility for what they do under the influence of others." I tried to sound dignified, but I was tickling the hairs on his broad chest.

Graham might be an agoraphobic hermit, but that didn't mean he didn't work out. He had muscles on top of muscles, built through sheer frustration in his private gym.

"You are looking for distraction because you *can't* control them, hence the remote control." He zoomed up the image on the enormous flat screen on his bedroom wall. We live in the same house, but we maintain separate quarters. We both like our privacy too well.

"You do not qualify as a psychologist." I grimaced as Senator Rose, no longer covered in the prior day's pie, strode down the stairs accompanied by his Evil Minion, also known as his campaign manager, Harvey Scion.

The TV announcer was reporting the defeat of a landmark health-care bill that the

Senate, led by Rose, had worked hard to kill. Rose, as usual, looked smug and triumphant. Scion, as owner of a pharmaceutical company who would have been adversely affected by the bill, simply looked his usual dour self. Politics as usual, yawn.

I leaned over to hit the mute button and solemnly intoned as if I were Rose, "Far better that poor people go without medical treatment and die so our taxes don't have to support their uselessness into eternity."

Graham snorted and wrenched the clicker back, holding it out of my reach. "Solves over-population," he countered cynically.

I never knew when he meant that crap. I kicked him, just in case. "Privileged prick," I muttered. "Really, the pigs ought to be made to wallow in the same sty with the rest of us if they're going to represent us. Let them know how we really feel."

"You're not poor anymore," Graham had to observe.

Caught by an image on the enormous screen, I ignored him. "That's Nick." I tried to snatch the remote but Graham held it so I'd have to climb on top of him to reach it.

At some other time, I might have, but I wanted to know what my brother was doing in the same vicinity of the man I hated with all my heart and soul, for excellent reasons, none of them political. Nick worked for the British embassy. He had no interest in health care reform.

"He's with the whistle-blower who wanted to present his paper on pharmaceutical company collusion to Congress before they voted. Rose stalled it in committee." Leave it to Graham to know everyone and everything.

I studied the whistleblower as he tried to escape the rush of TV cameras and microphones shoved in his direction. He was a scruffy but not bad-looking geek in a rumpled suit.

I wasn't a news fanatic and despised politics, but even I'd heard the rumors about the report revealing massive fraud and collusion between the drug and insurance industries. Jaded as I am, I figured collusion was nothing new. Drug lords got to be drug lords by physical and financial coercion in every corner of the world I'd ever lived in. Big Pharm might hide behind corporate legality, but only because they had more lawyers than the gangsters on the corner or the Afghans in their fields.

"What does the whistle-blower have to do with Nick?"

Graham gave me an odd look but didn't reply. That meant he knew something I didn't, which irritated me. A few of the more intelligent reporters abandoned Rose to delay the whistle-blower, whose name was apparently Guy Withers, *Guy* to rhyme with "me." Leave it to my gay brother to find a fancified Frenchman to pal with. Guy was just Nick's type—

Which was when I rolled my eyes. Nick had mentioned him in passing. I'd thought the name sounded familiar. Guy was probably a Brit, not a Frenchman, hence the involvement of the Brit embassy and my half-brother. Drug lords were international these days. And if Guy were as gay as Nick—I'd tease Nick to his dying day. Gay Guy—almost as good as EG, our baby sister Elizabeth Georgiana, the Evil Genius. We could call him GG for short.

The camera returned to Rose expounding on the benefits of private health care, apparently under the impression that the underemployed would choose health insurance over groceries and rent. Since our family had barely managed roofs over our heads until recently, I'd learned basic Band-Aids and Neosporin and then simply terrified everyone into staying healthy. Only recently had I coerced EG's father into covering her under his family plan, so I didn't have to threaten her into avoiding dangerous playgrounds.

As Nick and Guy continued down the concrete stairs and off screen, I grew restless. It was a Friday night. I didn't have any interesting cases to work on. I'd either have to get up and find something to eat—or arouse Graham to another round of hide the sausage.

A thunderous roar and shouts from the TV pumped my pulse into overdrive. I jerked my attention back to the screen and saw smoke billowing from behind Rose and his cohorts.

Graham cursed and rolled out of bed, hitting the ground running.

On the screen, Rose and his aides scurried off in a phalanx of police and bodyguards. Rose had refused to pay for Secret Service protection at this early stage of his presidential race. My guess was that he wanted no official record of his private meetings with his cadre of money-sucking vampires and two-legged wolves.

My mind was still in stun mode. My family was supposed to be safe here. People did not bomb the United States. That was for other countries.

9/11 had proved otherwise.

*Nick and his friend had gone off in the direction of that smoke swirling up the steps.*

My heart stopped. I took back my promise to tease Nick until the day he died. As

children, we had survived the ruined streets of Sarajevo together. Surely he had not come this far, finally found safety and satisfaction, only to be killed by bad gas pipes.

Because it had to be gas pipes, right? DC was one of the most guarded cities in the universe. There had been no airplane this time.

Graham tugged on his black jeans and talked into one of his many phones.

I needed my phone. I flung back the covers, yanking my unbound braid into order as I fled for the hidden stairway in Graham's office. I nearly broke my leg running naked down the steep dark steps to the secret door in my grandfather's old bedroom.

I'd been contemplating moving my things into this dim tomb, but inertia had left everything untouched, just as it had been for the last six months. I'd been sleeping in the connecting office and storing my clothes in file cabinets.

I made silent promises to any deity listening as I grabbed the phone from my grandfather's immense oak desk and hit Nick's name.

"We're safe," was his curt response before I said a word.

I nearly expired of relief that he was alive, but I couldn't stop shaking. Nick didn't do frightened, he got angry. He was definitely not happy.

"Use the burner," he ordered and cut me off.

*He was in trouble.* Frantically, I scrambled through drawers looking for the burner phone we'd acquired during a bad episode involving our twin half-siblings before Christmas. I found it in the top drawer.

Nick's number was programmed into everything I owned. Closest to me in age, he'd been my right-hand man since birth. We'd been inseparable for years, even when his father had sent him off to school, and I was left behind. Communication was what we did.

Fear roiled inside my head as I waited for him to answer. I put the phone on speaker and began digging for clothes and a rubber band to contain my braid.

"We need a safe house," he said, when he finally responded. That he knew I could come up with such a thing spoke of my relationship to Graham and not necessarily Nick's confidence in me. "Guy's car was in that garage. We were supposed to be in that car, but we were running late and had only reached the entrance."

I could point out that he was being overly suspicious, that he wasn't the center of the universe, and with corroding infrastructure, gas pipes exploded all the time. But he was

there and I wasn't and I had to trust his assessment, which didn't make me any happier.

"I'm on it. Are you in a safe place now?"

"Back alley, heading for the Metro. It will take time for them to sift through the garage debris to determine that we aren't buried under there." He sounded on top of the situation, but Nick hated skullduggery. He could do it with finesse, just as he could rob a casino of a quarter million bucks with card sharpening. But my tall, handsome, brother came from a long line of British lords, and even if he was illegitimate, he'd been influenced by his family and was all about gracious living and charm. He hated the ugly side of life.

I conjured up the earlier TV image of Nick and Guy on the stairs wearing suits and nothing warmer. It had been unseasonably mild for January, hence Nick's abandoning of his usual cashmere overcoat. He'd regret that now that the sun was going down.

"Put your coats and ties in your briefcases," I ordered, because Nick liked stylish clothes that stood out, and he'd gone soft these last years. He would never think to disguise himself. "See if you can find a place to grab sweatshirts and caps. Better yet, buy windbreakers. You'll freeze."

"Will do," he said curtly. "We'll take the first train that arrives and wait for you to call back."

I didn't want to believe anyone would intentionally harm my cosmopolitan half-brother. Why would they? He was a harmless embassy wonk. The whistle-blower had failed to stop the defeat of the health care bill. He was irrelevant now. It had to be a gas leak.

Graham would know. He had contacts in the offices of every bureaucrat and civil servant in DC, maybe the world. The *don't ask, don't tell* policy worked well when it came to where Graham got his information, but I needed his help now.

I'm short and don't fit well into jeans, so I don't own any. I dragged on my usual denim dress and draped a heavy fisherman's sweater I'd been given for Christmas over it. With my long black braid in some control, I tugged on leggings and boots and ran back upstairs.

Graham was back in his office with multiple monitors flashing scenes from every security camera in the vicinity of the explosion. "Suspected car bomb," he said before I even asked. The man had eyes in the back of his head. "It took out a gas pipe. The garage is wasted."

"Nick's okay," I gasped. "He and Guy need a safe place."

Without questioning, Graham grabbed a piece of paper off his desk and handed it over his shoulder.

That he had a safe house ready said more than I wanted to hear. He suspected Nick was a target of foul play as well.