

Taking the Stage

By

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Prologue

“She’s not just actor crazy! She’s beyond psycho-diva-drama-queen crazy! She’s the kind of crazy that has an actual diagnosis. It comes with pills, twenty-four-hour watches, and small padded rooms. That bitch practically took my head off!”

Joseph stood next to the door, blocking escape by the ranting bundle bouncing around his office. He’d wrangled her into it after he came up on a scene right out of a movie—two beautiful women in the throes of an anything but beautiful cat fight. It was rounded out with co-stars and deck hands pulling the two of them apart.

“Don’t you stand there like I’m overreacting, because you know that I’m not. This has been coming for weeks! I blame you.”

“Excuse me?”

Joseph knew Roby’s feelings on just about everything, but he was still more than curious to see where she was going with this particular proclamation. She often had a poker face, but never a poker mouth, facts that usually led to heated discussions, and often her to a heated backside. This was not a new argument. He knew what she wanted. It was what she’d wanted since the first week Kat showed up. Roby wanted her gone. So, in that regard, he supposed she was right that it was his fault, because he had zero intent of sending their lead actress packing.

“She’s been hateful since that first meeting in your office. I can only hope conflicts were all she gave you in that closed-door meeting.”

“You’re tap dancing on the line, Roby.” Joseph moved from the door and closer to the middle of the room. “You think this is easy? She’s what’s holding this production together. This show doesn’t work without a lead actress, and frankly, she-wolf behavior aside, she’s the best we could do after Michelle left. This is the week before tech, for God’s sake! What do you expect me to do?”

“Fire her ass!”

Roby was yelling again, moving toward an emotional meltdown. She wasn’t a fan of meltdowns, but now and again her mind and body seemed to go there as a tension release. She was clutching the tiny, solid metal, engraved Tony replica on the edge of his desk with the urge

to hurl it more than a passing feeling. Suddenly Joseph was in front of her with his hand around her wrist. He was not causing pain, but was certainly letting her know that whatever thought she had about what to do with that little desk decoration should be reconsidered.

“You know that’s not going to happen, and it’s completely unrealistic.”

“She attacked me. You weren’t there!”

“Baby, I’m not saying I don’t believe you, but we need to resolve this. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here, but I am now.”

Roby’s body relaxed a little, and she tipped forward, falling onto his chest. Feeling her collapse, Joseph let out a breath he didn’t realize he was even holding. Never letting her out of his grasp, he walked around to his chair and brought her down on his lap. As she leaned into his chest, he could hear her muffled words.

“You said you’d always be there.”

He kissed the top of her head. There was plenty to deal with, but for now he wanted to make sure she was completely wound down. He needed to focus his energies on making sure she felt he was making her the priority. Being there for her was his only concern in the moment. Warming her tail and dealing with her temper could wait for the next one. Hopefully, he could get things back on track with the diva and his love during the lunch break.

Leaning back, Joseph rubbed her shoulder and thought about what caused and could solve this train wreck.

Chapter One

There was a part of Robyn Rose that adored her sisters. The part that sat listening to them arguing about her like she was invisible wasn't one of them. She was sitting in her tiny living/dining room, immensely grateful that she'd left the monster dining room table with her lying, cheating ex-husband. That was the label she used every time she spoke or even thought about him. Thinking about him was probably why she didn't hear her older sister questioning her. Undoubtedly it was the same question she'd been waiting on a response to for the last few minutes.

"Roby! Roby, do you think you could check back in to us for a few minutes? Why did you take the smallest unit this place had to offer, again?"

Standing in a total freeze and looking her right in the eye Roby finally responded. "Which question do you want me to answer first, Merry?"

"Is that your attempt at humor?" her big sister asked with her hand perched on her hip in mirror fashion. Being the oldest, she was often accused of being too serious.

"Yup. I got that in the divorce, too," joked Roby, sitting back down.

She caught their baby sister's eye, and they struggled to contain their laughter. Sometimes Merry-Linn could be too much of the big sister, and it was up to them to lighten her up. Even she cracked a smile as she crossed the room, such as it was, to sit next to the sister who was her first baby.

Reaching out to take her hand, Merry had to agree. "I guess that's probably true. Kyle could be an uptight, humorless little fellow at times? Seriously, hon, I can't understand your choices at all. I support them, but I don't get them."

"That sounds very supportive, Mer. For the twentieth time, I took this unit because it's what I can afford right now. How much do you think I was making as an elementary school teacher? Trust me when I tell you it was more than I'll be making as an unemployed elementary school teacher. This place is plenty for me, and it's what I can maintain on my savings until I book a gig."

"Fine. Then here's a better question. Why did you let the cheat keep everything?"

“Kyle didn’t keep everything.”

“That’s right. You took that behemoth bed of yours. You know you’re not going to be able to move around the room to make it.”

“Yeah, but he won’t be able to move around it fucking his whore, either. That makes me sleep a little better every night. Besides, let him deal with the cost of replacing it. Why should I make the next love of my life squeeze into some tiny bed, which will be all I can afford for a long time?”

Heyther called out from the kitchen. “Temper and language, Roby. Your unborn nephew doesn’t need to be assaulted with auntie Roby’s potty mouth.”

“Whatever!”

“So, you have this replacement picked out already?” Heyther asked.

“No!”

Both Merry-Linn and Roby answered. Their reasons were different, but neither wanted to think of Roby in a new relationship just yet. Merry-Linn got up, squeezing her sister’s hand one last time, and went back to unpacking the books that would eventually take up the little bit of space left in the room.

Roby had always been a little rebellious, a lot hot tempered, and some might say flaky when it came to her personal life, but this move and quitting her job seemed reckless, even for her. Of course, Merry never wanted her to be subjected to living a lie of a marriage with that cheating douche-bag of an ex-brother-in-law, but she didn’t want her to throw away her future, either. Divorce didn’t have to equal unemployment, but that was a battle Merry lost months ago.

Roby showed up on her doorstep six months before completely hollowed out. Seeing your husband with his twenty-two year old teacher splayed across his desk with his head and hands shoulder deep under her skirt was certain to throw you off a tad. It took Merry, her husband, and their usually happy to avoid conflict baby sister to persuade their stubborn sibling to at least finish out the school year. Roby’s plan was to leave her teaching post at that week’s end, just to avoid seeing him at the next district area meeting. They all understood how seeing your soon to be ex and his hot piece of tail might make for an awkward afternoon. The only thing Merry understood more was that up and quitting your job in the middle of the school year could lead to nothing good career wise or financially. They’d argued back and forth, finally agreeing that Robyn would remain employed at least through May, when school got out. She would stop

chairing the committees that required attendance at meetings away from her own school site, and finish out the year in her classroom, focused on her students. The hardest thing was knowing that everyone else knew what happened. The district wasn't that small, but even the reserved scene Roby caused didn't go unnoticed. Worst still was getting the sad-eye-head-shake from her co-workers.

In May, Roby's renewal contract to her principal was returned unsigned. As she packed up her classroom, a sense of relief washed over her. She had considered applying to teach in another district or out of the country, but when it came right down to it, she just didn't want to teach anymore. It was a career that, in the end, had taken too much from her. Robyn closed her door for the last time, having made peace with her decision. Giving back to others was finally going to take a back seat to giving to herself.

"Book a gig? Well, you've got the lingo down, for sure."

"Way to come full circle, Hey."

Heyther was still unpacking dishes in the open kitchen. Only the detached breakfast bar separated the rooms.

"Where do you find local theatre jobs, Roby?"

She wasn't about to lie to them, but the reality was it was much harder than she'd been letting on.

"There are a few local websites that cater to the technical jobs. I'm still in touch with most of my friends from when I used to do shows, and I put the word out that I was looking again. I'm even having lunch with Sean and Jerry next week."

The long and short of it was that Sean was the contact, and Roby was prepared to take whatever he had to offer.

Roby turned back to the frenetic, moving blur on the other side of the room. "That means you can stop worrying about me ending up on skid row, Mer."

"Now, Heyther, did I ever once mention skid row?"

"No, not unless that's what you named your guest bedroom."

The silent return wasn't lost on Heyther. Maybe it was too soon for jokes about the doubt they both had regarding Roby's plans.

Merry-Linn glared back at her baby sister. That wasn't something she'd wanted Roby to know. Sure, she may have mentioned the fact that she was concerned that their sister's latest trip

into the realm of the starving artist was going to lead to financial ruin and Roby eventually taking up a permanent post in her guest bedroom, but the comment was still out of context, and she knew how Robyn would take it.

Slamming down the books she was holding, Roby screamed. “Damn it! Are you kidding me, Mer? This is how you talk about me behind my back. Is this what kept you and Peter up at night? I don’t need this crap from you again. If you can’t support me, then—”

“Then what? I’m your sister, your big sister, who has been looking out for you for the last sixteen years. I get to worry. I get to express concern. I get to love you enough to care about your future. You, little sister, can deal with it.”

“You guys, please don’t argue. I’m sorry I said anything. I was just joking, Roby, honest. We weren’t talking behind your back. Not the way you’re thinking.”

“So, there’s a less hurtful way than the one I’m thinking.”

Heyther squealed a cuss word as she nearly lost the grip on a salad bowl on her way out of the kitchen.

“Now who has the potty mouth? You better not let Ethan hear you using that language.” Roby raised her brow, making sure Merry didn’t see. “How about you don’t break up one of the few valuable things I own,” Roby added.

“Sorry. I saved the dish.” Heyther came around to the other side of the bar. There was brief contemplation on hopping up on the bar stool, but the idea was promptly abandoned. She leaned back against it, instead. “We weren’t being hurtful. It’s a hard life you’re going after, and we were talking. That’s all. You can’t be mad about that, Roby. You two talked for weeks when I told you I was marrying Ethan.”

“That was different.” Roby pointed a finger at her seven-month pregnant sister.

“How?”

“We were—” Both of her sisters looked at her.

“Worried,” they said in unison.

Heyther, the hugger and forever peacekeeper, stepped around boxes to give Roby a squeeze. “Exactly. So are we, but we love you, and we support you the same way you guys supported me.”

“You were barely twenty-one. He was a widower who’s ten years your senior, and he had a six-year-old daughter. Let’s not forget you introduced him to us at your graduation party as one of your professors. We had reason to worry.”

Merry added, “Hell, I remember us thinking the man had somehow drugged you into saying yes. My point is, Robyn Renee Rose, that we’re sisters. The worry and talking about each other’s lives go with the territory. Now, can we be done with this exhausting conversation and the unpacking? My blood sugar is dangerously low. I need food, woman.”

Robyn kept up the glare a few more seconds before giving in. “I thought the pregnant woman was supposed to be the one who was always hungry.”

They might as well eat, because the worry wouldn’t change, and neither would their opinions on her choices. Merry always won when she pulled the big sister card. No matter what she said or did, her sister would worry about her. If she weren’t married with kids and getting a steady paycheck twice a week, hell even if she was, Mer would worry.

“You’re going to leave my new home in a shamble like this. I thought you two planned to help out.” Roby looked at her watch. “For more than three hours.”

“It’s been that long. No wonder I’m starved. I’m calling it quitting time. We eat and then we have to get home to our children, and you, missy, have to find a job. Let’s go!”

If it weren’t for the age difference, they could have passed for triplets. Not one was above five feet five inches tall. Roby stood, as always, smack in the middle at five-four. In the hair department, she was the standout, with her jet black box braids hanging long down her back. Her natural hair was a deep chocolate brown, like her sisters’, but she wanted a physical change to go with all the emotional ones she was experiencing. As it turned out, the black and the braids really grew on her. Mostly, she wore it back in a ponytail, but on the rare occasion she had to get fancy, she could do a marvel of things with the versatile hair.

Roby looked fantastic for twenty-seven, and certainly hadn’t let things go to a point where her husband should’ve been looking elsewhere. Shaving five years off her stated age wouldn’t give anyone pause, because she literally looked ten years younger. It had made getting into bars and clubs a constant challenge. The curves she was in a constant battle with made men do a double take and spend most of their conversations staring at her chest. Her Grams would joke that her boobs never needed training. They came in ready to work. That was because she

went to bed one night as an undershirt-wearing fifth grader, and woke up a sixth grade B-cup. It was unexpected and unnerving.

The girls shook their heads, grabbed purses, and raced to the door like they did when they were kids, to see who'd get to ride shotgun in Merry's car. When the three Rose sisters got together, no matter their age, they reverted to practiced childhood roles and behaviors.