

ALEX

Friday, June 27th. No match today. I missed playing, but plenty of things needed my attention before tonight, and I had been running errands all day. Avery and Travis were coming in town for a wedding shower hosted by some of their married friends. The party was on Saturday evening, so Sly and I were taking them to dinner tonight.

When I walked in the house, I called out, "Izzy, baby. Mama's home." No pitter-patter of canine paws. "Izzy?" Usually she greeted me in the kitchen within seconds of opening the door. "Izzy?" I called out again. Maybe she was out back playing. I walked on the deck but didn't see her. I called out a few times but nothing. I decided she must be curled up napping in her favorite spot -- the back corner of Avery's closet which is piled high with college t-shirts that she just can't bring herself to discard. I decided to check my email before searching further for Izzy.

In my inbox, there was a big red flag by another email from Noah Hargrove. I had never responded to his first email. The latest mail simply said, "*Why are you ignoring me :(*" Typical Noah.

I really wasn't ignoring him. I just didn't know how to respond. His offer tempted me, but I had avoided discussing it with Sly. He seemed so preoccupied lately that I never found a good time to discuss it with him. Plus, I knew that Noah was not one of his favorite people. Sly has never said that, but I can tell. And the feeling seemed mutual. Noah was always polite to Sly, but their interaction felt forced. There was no warmth between those two though neither spoke ill of the other. Maybe tonight at dinner with Avery and Travis would be a good time to bring it up. They could serve as buffers and offer feedback.

Noah and I went way back -- almost to the womb. Noah was my first cousin. My mother, Bridget, had a twin sister, Brenda, and the Baker twins gave birth to their first and only children on the same day - April 15, 1963. Around our hometown of Hartford, Alabama, Noah and I were known as the Tax Twins. Of course, we weren't twins, but everybody said we might as well be. We were inseparable. No sibling could have been any closer. Hell, we even got in trouble at the same time. Our moms sent us both to what we called Baker Boot Camp the summer before our senior year. Baker Boot Camp was at MawMaw and PawPaw Baker's house on Compass Lake. Talk about a

backwoods swamp. Snakes and gators were our closet friends. Memories of that summer still made me shudder, but Baker Boot Camp did little to curb our rebellious natures. I smiled remembering all the shit Noah and I did that summer. It's a wonder we escaped with our sanity and limbs intact.

I looked at the email and hit reply.

Hello, my other half...notice I did not say "better half". Much to your dismay, Sly still holds that title. You know Avery's wedding is 8 weeks from this Saturday, so your skinny ass better be here several days before. And you can stay at the house as long as you don't bring your "bimbo of the month". :):)

As for your question, I'm pondering, thus the delay in answering your email. I'm intrigued but still mulling it over. It might be the perfect adventure to lull me out of the depression that will certainly engulf me once Avery is married and off to start her life with Travis in Italy. (Poor things, such a dismal spot to start a marriage..haha).

Anyway, precious, I'll write you back next week and let you know where I stand. I do admit, I think it would be exciting and so much fun to get to spend more time with you again. We were "something" at 17...imagine what kind of trouble we could cause at 51!

*Love you and can't wait to see you soon.
XXXXXXOOOOOOO*

I hit the send button and went to the fridge to get a Coke. I thought I heard a faint whimper and remembered Izzy. I headed upstairs. “Izzy?” I cooed as I entered Avery’s room. I pulled back the partially open closet door and about peed in my pants.

“What have you done, girl?” There she lay on her side with seven of the strangest looking pups snuggled against her belly. “Izzy!” I cried as I bent down. “You didn’t get fat after all. You little tramp. As MawMaw Baker used to say, ‘if you play, you gonna pay’.”

I patted her head, and she licked my hand. “May I?” I asked as I gently picked up a pup. He was so warm and cuddly, but as I gazed upon his tiny face I muttered, “Lawdy, who’s your daddy? That’s a face only a mother could love.” Izzy barked as if I had offended her. I

laughed and went to get a box big enough to serve as a kennel and plenty of newspaper to provide lining for multiple potty adventures.

After I got Izzy and her babies settled, I showered, put on my robe, dried my hair and put on my makeup. Now for the hard part -- finding clothes that fit. I decided if I wore jeans and a long, dressy, and most importantly, loose fitting, top, I might not look so fat. I had only one pair of jeans with possibility.

As I stood before the full length mirror in my bedroom in my bra and undies, I wanted to hurl. My belly looked like a wave pool, and my thighs were tattooed with cellulite and varicose veins that reminded me of country roads peppered with potholes. "How the hell did this happen," I whispered aloud.

I grunted and started to pull on my jeans. I was thrilled that they made it past my hips with only minor yanking, wiggling and groaning. But I lost the wind in my sails when I tried to zip them. "Holy shit, I'm a cow." I sucked in as much as possible and managed to zip them all the way. It was painful. I couldn't imagine sitting down for dinner. Surely the waistband would sever my torso in half. A boa constrictor wrapped around my waist would be more comfortable.

I needed to stretch this instrument of torture. I sucked in again and buttoned the waist. I squatted up and down three times and felt the waist suddenly loosen as the button broke free and rocketed straight into the mirror where it imbedded itself like a dagger in the center. Dismayed, I watched cracks radiate in every direction. "Mother fucker!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

"Mom! Mom!" Avery was in the house obviously taking the stairs at a sprint. I quickly put on my top just as Avery burst into the room. "Are you okay?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, honey. I'm fine. Just having trouble in the wardrobe department."

Avery spotted the cracked mirror. "What happened here?" she asked as her eyes fixated on the imbedded button.

"Don't ask," I answered emphatically and exited the room.

At the foot of the stairs stood Travis Titman, Avery's future husband. Those dark eyes looked full of concern for his future mother-in-law. Gosh, I loved that sweet boy. "Did my foul mouth scare you, honey?" I said as I embraced him. "I was having a serious wardrobe malfunction and lost my temper. All is well," I said as I patted his cheeks. "Go ahead and take your bags upstairs. You know you are technically in the guest room, but I'm no dumb-ass."

"Mother!" Avery reprimanded.

"Hey, you may not want to sneak your betrothed into your room anyway. You're already sharing it. It may be too crowded."

"What?" Avery asked, crinkling her nose.

I laughed. "Just go on upstairs and see for yourself."

Avery and Travis bolted up the stairs and within thirty seconds, I heard them both oooing and ahing over the puppies. "We leave for dinner in an hour," I called up. "Be ready. We're meeting your dad at Hot 'n Hot, and you know how grumpy he gets if we're late."

At 6:30 pm on the dot, Avery, Travis and I entered the Hot 'n Hot Fish Club. Sly sat at the bar slinging back a Newcastle. Avery wrapped her arms around her dad. His face lit up like a Christmas tree. Avery was such a daddy's girl. That always made me smile. Sly stood, shook Travis's hand affectionately, and gave me a peck on the cheek.

The hostess seated us, and Sly ordered a bottle of cabernet for the table. We were all salivating over the menu when suddenly Avery said, "Mom. Who do you think the dad is?"

"Excuse me," Sly interjected.

Avery looked at me with wide eyes. "Dad doesn't know?"

"Baby, I barely knew an hour before you got home."

"Knew what, ladies?" Sly demanded.

"Izzy had babies today," I said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Babies?" Sly blurted out.

"Yes, honey. There are seven pups in Avery's closet."

"No way!"

"I know. Here we are only eight weeks away from getting rid of Avery, and now we have seven new babies in the house."

"Hurtful!" Avery exclaimed. I winked at her.

"Those puppies are really strange looking." Travis joined the conversation. "Honestly, they're so unattractive it might be hard to give them away."

"How did this happen?" Sly seemed perplexed. "The yard is fenced, and she doesn't dig out."

"No, but the fence is only four feet high and that's not much for a big dog to jump over."

"Well, there is a leash law. It shouldn't be too difficult to figure out who the scoundrel is."

"I don't know who the father is, babe, but based on his offspring, there's no denying the fact that he's not a looker. There's no accounting for taste. I married you, didn't I?"

Travis and Avery failed to suppress their giggles. Unflappable, Sly spouted back, "I'll have you know, missy, that I've still got it. On more than one occasion, I've caught the eye of some young thing about Avery's age."

"Gross, Dad. That makes my skin crawl. When have you been out trolling for girls young enough to be your daughter?"

"Come on, Avery. Don't give your old man grief. Every now and then I have to entertain clients, generally all men, and I just notice at bars that, on occasion, some younger women are drawn to me."

"You take your clients bar hopping, Sly, while you leave me at home alone?" I was totally kidding but had to mess with him.

"No, honey," Sly defended. "You know I take clients to excellent restaurants, like this, and they all have nice bars."

Travis spoke up. "How did the conversation go from solving the mystery of Izzy's mate to this?"

Avery put her arm around Travis. "That's the Anderson way, honey. Conversations always bounce around like crazy. And it's worse when the extended family is together. Wait 'til you meet Uncle Noah."

Perfect lead in for me. "Speaking of Noah," I began, "we've exchanged a couple of emails this week."

Avery looked alarmed. "He isn't bailing on the wedding, is he?"

"No, sweetie. He'll be here in full party mode."

"So, what crazy adventure is Noah up to these days?" Sly couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Actually, he wants me to work with him again." Avery looked excited, while Sly looked alarmed. "He's doing a National Geographic article covering a remote area of Arizona. He wants me as his photographer. He would write the article, and I would edit."

"That's awesome, Mom. It'll be like old times. When do you get started?"

"Well, I haven't agreed, but if I did, I would leave three days after the wedding."

"Dad, isn't that fabulous?"

Sly didn't seem to share Avery's enthusiasm. "How long would you be gone?"

"Just four days. I'm thinking it might help ease the post wedding blues."

"I think it's a great idea, Mom."

"What about dear old dad?" Sly whined. "What about my post wedding blues?"

Avery squeezed Sly's arm. "Oh, you'll be fine. A day on the golf course, and you'll be good as new. Get on board, Dad. This would be really good for Mom."

"Well, it's just one project. Go for it. Have a blast," Sly conceded. "It's not like you're going back to work full time."

I didn't bother to share the rest of the email. Noah wanted me to work with him on several more projects, and I really liked the idea.

Sly switched topics. "So, what's left on the wedding to-do list?"

"Nothing really. I think we've got it all under control. Except I'm still on the fence about having someone sing during the service."

"Really?" Sly asked. "You know I'd be happy to sing at your wedding."

Avery and I both broke into hysterics. "You, Dad? Sing? Like, in front of people -- who are alive?"

"Is he that bad?" Travis asked.

Avery and I lost it again. "Travis, honey," I began, "Sly gets an A for enthusiasm and an F for talent."

"That's harsh, honey. You're just jealous because your pipes aren't as pure as mine."

"Yeah, right. I'm jealous of your croaking."

"Thanks for the offer, Dad, but I think I'll stick with instrumentalists."

By the time we left Hot 'n Hot and got home, it was 10:30 pm. Sly and I said goodnight and retired to our room. About twenty minutes later, there was a light tap on the door. "Hey. Are you awake?" whispered Travis.

I opened the door. "Yes. We were both reading. What do you need, sweetie?"

"Thought you guys might want to see this," he said as he motioned for us to follow. "But we have to be very quiet."

He led us to Avery's room. There on the bed, Avery lay on her side curled up in the shape of a C with Izzy and her babies cuddled inside the curve. All were sound asleep.

"Priceless," I whispered and asked Sly to get my camera. Travis leaned against the doorframe smiling as he gazed upon his future wife, eyes filled with wonder and joy. I knew my daughter would have a husband who cherished her.