



The Devil You Know

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Chapter 1 — Dock of the Bay

“Can you smell that?”

“I can’t smell a thing with this miserable cold,” came the muffled reply from behind his left shoulder. “Honestly, Henry. How can you live in this state? It’s too cold, too wet, and it snows too much.”

Henry glanced back at his mother. She was huddled inside her ankle-length fox fur coat, something he was fairly certain the PETA people would not appreciate, a matching hat on her head, and leather gloves covering her hands. The only actual part of her he could see were her eyes and cheekbones. He supposed that explained why he could barely hear her. She hadn’t even stepped foot off the beach, preferring to keep her feet firmly planted on the ground rather than on the “questionable workmanship”—her words, not his—of the boat dock that overlooked Sequim Bay at the back of his house. The dock had been there longer than he had been alive and was probably just as sturdy today as it had been the day it was built. He seriously

doubted the workmanship was in question, no matter what his mother thought.

“Mom, you were born and raised in New York. It is colder, wetter, and snowier there than it is here in Washington. Besides, the weather has been a bit more brutal this winter than usual.”

Judith Darrow scoffed. “Just my luck.”

“Would you like me to call my French chef to come over and make you some hot tea and honey?”

She brightened at that. “You have a French chef?” The excitement in her voice made him smile and he almost felt bad about messing with her. Almost.

“No, Mom, I don’t have a French chef. I was teasing.”

Her glare was hot enough to burn. “I cannot believe you just lied to your mother.”

“I didn’t lie,” he pointed out. “I was teasing.”

“There’s a difference?”

Apparently not as far as she was concerned.

“You’re as bad as your father.”

“Dad lies to you?” That was surprising.

“Not if he knows what’s good for him.”

He chuckled, then wisely decided to change the subject. “You really can’t smell that?”

“I told you, I can’t smell anything.”

She sounded just miserable enough for him to feel sorry for her. “All right, Mom. Come on. We’ll go inside and I’ll make you some hot tea and honey.”

“With a dash of brandy?”

“Of course.”

He held out his arm and she looped hers through it, smiling up at him for the first time in almost a week.

As he led her toward the house, the wind suddenly shifted to blow in across the water and the smell coming from the dock area nearly made him gag. He’d never smelled a dead animal before but if he had, he imagined it would smell just like this. As soon as he got a minute, he would call Animal Control and have them check near the dock to see what they could find.

“Henry,” his mother said, taking a seat at the island in the kitchen, “I really wish you would consider coming home.”

“I am home, Mom.” They’d had this conversation many times, both over the phone and in person, since he had moved here five years ago. His answer never changed.

“I mean home, Henry. Your father and I miss having you there.”

“Mom, I’m thirty-two years old. Don’t you think I’m old enough to be on my own?”

“You’re old enough to be married and have children” she muttered.

He wasn’t going there. Besides, he had plenty of time to make such a momentous decision.

The kettle began to whistle and once his

mother had a cup of hot tea and honey, with a dash of brandy, of course, sitting on the countertop in front of her, she was a bit more pleasant. That is until she decided to bring up the topic of his extended family.

“You know, your cousin, Brendan, is getting married in September. You will, of course, come home for the wedding.”

Henry poured himself a cup of tea, added a couple of dashes of brandy because he had a feeling he was going to need it for this conversation, and set the kettle back on the stove. “Fall is a busy time of year, Mom. I’m not sure I can get away.”

“Henry.”

He gritted his teeth, hating when she used that tone of voice with him. It meant a lecture on his family duties wasn’t far behind.

“Brendan has been like a brother to you.”

Brendan had at least ten years on him—if he was like a brother, he was a much older brother.

“And this is the last time he’ll be getting married.”

Which is exactly what he said just before each of his three prior marriages. Henry was no longer buying it.

“Your aunt will be heartbroken if you are not there.”

Doubtful. She might feel slighted that he did not show her the proper respect by attending but he found it hard to believe she would be heartbroken.

“I’ll see what I can do, Mom, but I can’t make any promises.”

Actually, he would have promised just about anything at this point to keep her from continuing her efforts to persuade him but it was in his best interests if she wasn’t aware of that fact.

His mother finished her tea then rose to

her feet. “I think I’ll lie down before dinner.” She came around the corner of the counter and tilted her head toward him. He dutifully gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then she wandered up the stairs toward the spare bedroom.

He watched her go, shaking his head. He was an adult, owned his own home, paid his taxes, ran a multi-million dollar company, and his mother still treated him like a kid. He knew he should have gone fishing with his dad. At least he could have enjoyed the peace and quiet for a few hours.

Speaking of peace and quiet, his was shattered when the shrill whistle of his phone alerted him that he had an incoming call. He had to have a loud, obnoxious ringtone in order to hear it, sort of, above the sound of the machinery that ran nearly non-stop at his lumber mill. He glanced at the caller ID before swiping his finger across the screen.

“Ryan. Am I glad to hear a friendly voice.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“You know what I mean.” He took another drink of his tea, grimaced, added some more brandy, then tried it again. Much better. He didn’t really care for tea, anyway.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. How’s the visit with your parents going?”

“What do you think?”

His right-hand man chuckled. “That good, huh? Want me to pretend there’s a crisis that only you can handle to get you away from the house?”

He wondered if it made him a bad person for actually considering it. Probably. “No, it’s okay. My dad’s out fishing and my mom went upstairs to take a nap.” He heard the sound of a truck pulling into the curved drive in front of the house. “Or my dad was fishing. Sounds like he’s home now.”

“All right, dude. I’ll let you go. Just wanted to see if you were enjoying your time away from work.”

“As much as I can be, I guess.” Henry sighed. He wasn’t truly happy unless he was in the midst of whatever was going on down at the mill. He supposed that made him a workaholic. No wonder he wasn’t married. He almost groaned. If it wasn’t bad enough that his mother nagged him about his marital status, or lack of one, every chance she got, she was now putting ideas in his head. The last thing he needed was to start nagging himself. He liked his life just as it was, thank you very much.

“Thanks for the offer to save me,” he told Ryan.

“Hey, that’s why you pay me the big bucks, right?”

“That’s why? I thought it was because you know the place better than I do.”

“Well, that, too. Have fun. Hasta.”

“Thanks.” The line disconnected. He set the phone on the counter and met his dad as he was coming inside, a bucket in one hand, fishingpoles in the other. Peering into the bucket, he frowned. “That’s it?”

“It’s too late in the day to catch the good fish,” his father explained.

“Then why did you go?” The look his father gave him told him everything he needed to know. His father fished in order to spend time alone without his mother needing his constant attention. “Right.”

“You should take up fishing, son. You might need it someday.”

He laughed.

His father took the fish in the kitchen and Henry holed up in his office, figuring his father would find him eventually. It was about time for their quarterly budget meeting where he showed his father how

much money he was making and his father made sure he wasn't running the business that his parents had given him the money to buy straight into the ground. The meetings were always unpleasant but his father was a fair and reasonable man and if Henry usually felt as though he'd been raked over the coals afterwards, at least his father came away feeling that his investment was being put to good use.

Thinking of fish and budget meetings made him remember something else equally unpleasant that he needed to take care of. He picked up the phone and called Animal Control. The woman who answered promised to send someone out the next morning sometime between 8am and 12 noon. When he tried to convince her that there might be something dead under the dock and it would probably be a good idea to get someone out sooner, preferably right now, she responded by saying, "If it's dead, Mr. Darrow, it doesn't care if we can't get out there until tomorrow."

What kind of attitude was that? "It stinks," he pointed out.

"Keep the windows closed. Will there be anything else?"

"No." He should have had his mother call, he thought. They probably would have had someone out in ten minutes just to get her off the phone. He disconnected the call and dragged his hand down his face.

When his father searched him out a short time later, Henry had already compiled all the reports he needed and had his arguments ready to prove to his father that he was doing a good job keeping his head above water. By the time his mother joined them, his father was smiling. That was always a good sign. He could breathe for three more months until the next meeting.

Since his father had caught a few fish, he decided to cook them on the grill but as soon as he stepped outside, he clapped his hand over his nose. "Henry, what is that smell?"

"I think something died under the dock," he told his father. "I called Animal Control but they can't get someone out here until tomorrow morning."

"Well, we certainly can't cook out here. Let's go into town."

He didn't really want to go into town but he would if that was what his parents wanted. They found an Italian restaurant off the main street that wasn't crowded. He'd never even noticed the place before. Apparently, he needed to get out more often.

The waitress who took their order was very pretty—beautiful, in fact. She was in her late twenties, had curly dark brown hair and warm brown eyes. He'd always been a sucker for warm brown eyes. The nametag on the front of her uniform said Annaliese. Even her name was beautiful.

He found himself following her with his eyes and every time she caught him looking, she gave him a shy smile and he would hurriedly look away, not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable or embarrass himself. By the time they were ready to leave, he wished he hadn't come here with his parents. It would be awkward to ask for her phone number in front of them. He would have to come back another time, soon, so he could talk to her alone.

Rather than wait for her to come back to pick up their check, he excused himself and made his way to the front counter. Annaliese was helping the younger couple in front of him and as soon as they walked away, he stepped forward. Her cheeks

turned a pretty shade of pink and she seemed to be having trouble meeting his eyes. He'd had women act shy around him before, but it was easy to see it was all an act. He had a feeling that Annaliese was not acting but was genuinely the quiet, reserved type.

He handed her the check. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

She gazed at him for a moment beneath her lashes as she waited for the machine to approve his credit card. Then she set the receipt on the counter and handed him a pen.

"No, everything is fine. How was your dinner?"

"Very good," he said, signing the paper. "I didn't even know your restaurant was here." Reaching into his wallet, he took out three times what a tip would normally be and handed it to her.

"Well, we are tucked away in the corner. I guess it wouldn't be too hard to miss us." Counting the money, she finally looked up at him with a frown. "This is too much for a tip," she pointed out.

He just smiled and put his wallet away. "I'll have to come back again. The service here is excellent."

Her smile set her eyes alight. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one."

His mother was waving at him, trying to get his attention. He held up one finger, letting her know he would be right there. "Thank you for everything."

"Thank you."

Reluctantly, he went to collect his parents and led them out to his truck parked in the lot in front of the restaurant. Before closing the door, he glanced back one last time. Annaliese was still standing at the counter,

watching him. He smiled and winked. She blushed again and he chuckled to himself, feeling more relaxed than he had in a week.