

"Love in the Shadows" From THE BILLIONAIRE'S MATCHMAKER

Whatever Jenny had been expecting based on her brief tour so far, it wasn't the dark, almost gothic atmosphere that greeted her. Heavy velvet curtains covered the windows, killing any trace of the sun. In fact, the only interior light at all came from a pair of laptops that sat atop a gigantic desk. Oddly enough, the monitors pointed outward. Jenny could see the squiggly lines of the screensaver. The angle turned everything else into colorless shadows.

Behind the desk stood the biggest shadow of them all: Nicholas Bonaparte.

Jenny jumped as the door shut behind her, locking her and Charlie inside. She waited for the shadow to come closer, but Bonaparte stayed where he was, shrouded by darkness. "Cyrus said you wanted to see me." His voice was low and rough like whiskey. Jenny felt another shiver as the sound wrapped around the base of her spine. "He said it was important."

"Um, yes." She swallowed her nerves. Five minutes wasn't a long time; she could handle this. "It's about Charlie. I've been watching him the past month." She looked over at the dog who'd settled in a wing backed chair by unlit fireplace.

"What do you mean, you have been watching him? I left the dog in Gabrielle Wilson's care." He didn't sound pleased with the change.

The last thing Jenny wanted was to get her friend in trouble. "I'm doing her a favor. She recently married, and I thought she and her husband might like some privacy, being newlyweds and all."

"Hmmm." Again, not pleased. "Well, if this is about payment, you need to talk with her. She was paid in advance."

"I know. I'm here for a different reason."

"Which is?"

He sat down. Jenny found it interesting that the expansive desk managed to dwarf everything in the room except his figure. Meaning he was as tall and broad as his silhouette suggested. If standing toe to toe, he'd best her height by a foot or more. Or so she assumed. The glare off the computer screens made it impossible to see his features clearly.

If he was trying to use the shadows to intimidate her, it worked.

"It's about Charlie. Are you aware the dog was never..." She paused, a blush creeping into her cheeks. Under the circumstances, spelling out words felt awkward. Unfortunately, Charlie had a habit of reacting very poorly to words he didn't like. "He was never F-I-X-E-D."

Silence. "Your point?" he asked finally.

“My point is that my Lulu’s pregnant.”

“And when you say Lulu, I assume we’re talking about a dog?”

“My dog. Lulu is my cavalier spaniel. I had planned to breed her.” High school English teachers only made so much and thanks to her misspent youth, she didn’t have a lot in the way of savings. “Now I have to wait another year. In the meantime, there’s the matter of veterinary care for her and the puppies, until they’re placed anyway.” She reached into her satchel and retrieved the paperwork she’d tucked neatly in there earlier. “Here’s the report from Dr. Gideon Roth.” When he didn’t reach out to take them, she dropped the papers on his desk. “I’m sure as a businessman, you can appreciate my predicament. Not only have I lost potential income but I have to pay for the cost of carrying and placing the unplanned litter.”

“And you expect me to compensate you for these costs.”

“It’s only fair, don’t you think?”

“The world is hardly fair, Ms. Travolini.”

Didn’t she know it? If life were fair, she wouldn’t have traveled down the road of her youth, endangering her physical well-being and leaving her self-respect in shatters.

“That may be true, but I’m hoping you will be.”

“I see.” A hand reached for the paperwork, and Jenny caught a glimpse of smooth, tight skin in the dim computer light. “All this says is that your dog is carrying a litter of puppies,” he said after a moment. “Doesn’t say anything about who sired them.”

“Doesn’t have to. Charlie sired them.”
Assuming Charlie’s the only dog she mated with.”

Jenny bristled. He did not just poke that hornet’s nest, did he? “Are you suggesting Lulu’s some kind of doggy whore?” Although she knew it was impossible, she could almost hear his whiskeyed voice in her head. Like dog, like owner....

“What I’m suggesting is that taking Charlie from Ms. Wilson provides you with a convenient way to pay your vet bills.”

Terrific. So he was simply accusing her of trying to scam him. Like that was so much better. “Did you read the bill? Do you really think, if I were trying to extort money, I’d go for such a modest amount?”

“I think the best con artists know to be realistic, especially when first dipping into your wallet. Best not to take what anyone says at face value or believe a source too completely. “I’ll tell you what.” He picked up a pen. “When your dog has her puppies, have the vet do a genetic test. If the bloodline matches, then we can talk reimbursement.” With that, he bowed his head over his paperwork, essentially dismissing her.

Jenny seethed. It was like she was back in Chicago, being tossed aside by another so-called boyfriend who didn't think she was good enough for a real relationship. She felt small and insulted and angry as hell. Only she wasn't twenty years old anymore and she no longer let men take advantage. She'd send Nicholas Bonaparte his genetic test all right, along with the bill for it and Lulu's care—and demand an apology with his reimbursement check.

As she turned to leave, she caught sight of Charlie sitting expectantly in the chair and felt a pang of regret. In spite of the craziness with Lulu, she'd grown fond of the little guy over the past month. He was basically a good dog who, while rambunctious, was also gentle and friendly and wanted nothing but someone to love him. She hated to see him pinning his hopes on the wrong person. How many times had she made the same bad mistake? Ten to one he found his way to Gabby's studio before the week was out.

“No one would blame you if you did, pal.”

“What?”

She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud, but now that she had, she decided to own her words. Someone should let Bonaparte know how neglectful he was being. How badly being tossed aside hurt. “I said, no one would blame him for running away from this place,” she repeated, louder this time. “You do know pets need more than food and water, don't you?”

“That so?”

“Yes.” Bonaparte had unleashed her schoolteacher instincts. Now he would be forced to listen to the lecture. “They need attention and love and nurturing. They need to know they're wanted. It's only when they don't get affection that they turn destructive. They tear up the house.” Or run around from man to man hoping to find love elsewhere. “Did you ever think that maybe the reason Charlie's so out of control is because he wants you to notice him?”

When she finished, Bonaparte sat back in his chair, sending him deeper in the shadows. The movement was so deliberate, Jenny felt a spark of hope that her words sank in.

“Thank you for your insight.”

So much for making her point. He clearly found her insight unwelcome and unnecessary. Jenny gritted her teeth. Poor Charlie. How on earth was she supposed to leave him? This wasn't a home; it was a marble mausoleum. He deserved better than to be stuck here with a grumpy butler and a hardhearted owner.

To hell with returning him today. “You know what?” She scooped the squirming Jack Russell into her arms. “If you want to wait until you get the genetic testing; you can wait for your dog, too. Come on, Charlie. Let's get out of here.”

Can a feisty four-legged matchmaker help four best friends find the romance of their dreams?

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