



*Sometimes Murphy Wins*

*By*

*Cassidy McKay*



Mardi Gras Publishing, LLC  
29100 N. Main St. #93  
Daphne, AL 36526

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EBook ISBN 0-9787262-1-9

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## ***Dedications***

*To my wonderful husband, Harold, without whose support of my dreams and delicious pumpkin dessert, I never would have gotten this far. Yours is next, and I'll be the first stalker-fan in line at your book signings. Mush, Sweetie! (Yes, I think I'll keep you).*

*To my kids – the mother's curse \*does\* work. You'll see... but I love you anyway, and will laugh and cry with you when you experience adulthood and parenthood yourselves.*

*My dear friends Trista and Pat, you encouraged me, cried with me, celebrated with me, and then pushed me when I ran the other way and needed a kick in the pants. Also, CJ, who dragged me kicking and screaming into the e-book world and encourages all those who even think of writing... this Bud's for all of you!*

*My editor, Robin, thank you for your invaluable support, kudos, and awesome editing skills that helped mold Murphy into an acceptable manuscript and beat his nasty tricks back long enough to send it in!*

*A special thank you to Mardi Gras Publishing... you took an insecure, budding want-to-be author and turned her into a beast. It's all your fault! Thank you for your trust in me.*

## Prologue

*"Do you really think we should?" the kindly voice whispered to her long-dead sister. They watched the lone woman at the bar quietly sip her drink.*

*People walked by without noticing the two elderly sisters, oblivious to the fact that what some people might call ghosts were quietly observing them. If one happened to pass too close to the sisters, a shiver of foreboding would pass through them, as if the cold hand of Fate grasped their fragile lives in her fickle hand.*

*"I don't see that we have any choice, we can't leave her like this. After all, she's family!" Josie whispered back, seeing yet another man turned away with a shake of the girl's head.*

*"But you know what the rules are, Fina. We'll get in trouble again, remember what happened the last several times we tried to interfere in our mortal family's lives? Besides, we've been dead a long time. This one is independent and seems to be doing alright for herself."*

*"But she has no love, Josie. She's the last of the family line, and she has no love. How can anyone live like that? She is just existing. If she doesn't find love, our family line is kaput. Finito. Done. Then what happens? How will we ever find our eternal rest?" Fina pleaded her case to her invisible sister.*

*"We're not supposed to help mortals, even family. And don't forget Murphy. He's been interfering with our family for as far back as I can remember. He's a troublemaker, that's for certain."*

*"I don't care, Josie. She's family and she deserves our help, no matter what the cost to ourselves. Maybe Murphy will stay out of it this time."*

*Josephine straightened and planted herself firmly on her sister's side. "You're right, she's family. It's our duty to help her find her true love. We'll do it." They faded out of sight to begin their campaign.*

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*Another presence in the room shook his corporeal head at the busybody sisters. Murphy also faded away, already plotting his counter-attacks to negate the sisters' well-meaning interference in their family's lives. They'd never learn. After the rejection of his attentions when they were all living, he'd made it his pleasure to interfere with their family through the ages – it was his reason for hanging around and not passing over. His slightly sinister laugh as he faded caused several of the bar patrons to look around uneasily.*

***Murphy's Law: Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.***

## Chapter 1

“Hey, didn’t I see you in my dreams last night?” said a deep voice next to Trina’s shoulder. The dark-haired man pulled up a stool at the bar and flashed a smirky grin at her, obviously thinking he had made a solid pick up. While fairly good looking, his lack of originality shot him down faster than a watermelon shooter at a frat party.

“Not unless you were dreaming of ferocious man-eating dogs devouring men with horrible pick up lines,” she replied, looking him up and down, then turning away in dismissal. The man slunk away, muttering something about “frigid bitches.”

For the last half-hour, Trina Sackette sat at the bar, nursing her drink. Her friends Shannon and Julie deserted her earlier in the evening when a pair of good-looking men glanced their way.... her friends definitely weren’t shy!

She felt someone watching her intently. She looked around the dimly lit bar, but saw nobody that seemed to be looking her direction. The feeling persisted, but she took another drink of her beer and ignored it. There were always strange things happening in this town.

She wove her way through the mass of humanity in the bar, towards where she remembered the restrooms were. As she passed by the wall going towards the Ladies room door, an odd shiver shot through her body. The intense cold left her gasping as goose bumps broke out on her arms. Someone must have walked over her grave, she thought.

Little did she know how close she was to being right.

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Trina glanced into one of the noisome bathroom stalls, backing out again very quickly. Some things just were not meant to be tackled by the ordinary woman without weapons. Instead, she washed her hands, applying the cold water on her cheeks and the back of her neck.

*God, it’s hot in the bar! And those men... sheesh, couldn’t they come up with any new pick up lines?*

Trina pulled some paper towels out of the holder, and scraped what felt like sandpaper over her face to dry it. At least there were paper towels. Most of these joints never seemed to refill them, so sandpaper seemed better than no paper at all.

She tossed her towels in the overflowing plastic trashcan near the swinging gray metal door. As she pushed the heavy door open, the hot, humid air blasted her face like a furnace, undoing what little cooling off she had just accomplished. The pounding beat of the music throbbed in her head, and she opened her purse to look for some aspirin. Her friends had better come back soon, or she would just take a taxi home.

"Excuse me, are you Trina Sackette?" A man stood close to her left side—too close for her comfort. Trina backed up against the bathroom door, ready to run if need be. She looked up and saw a nice-looking blonde-haired man, dressed casually, looking her, smiling a friendly smile.

"I could be, why?"

"A sweet little old lady asked me to come over and talk with you. She thought we might have something in common," he told her, looking back over his shoulder to where Trina earlier felt the odd chill in the air. "Well, she was there, I guess she left. Is she a relative of yours? She said her name was Josie."

*Well, this was different. At least it was a new line. But this guy saw imaginary people...and even named them. Maybe he's just a few French fries short of a happy meal.*

"No, I don't know anyone named Josie. But yes, I'm Trina. Who are you?" she took a closer look as she craned her neck to look up at him. "Did Shannon or Julie send you over to me? If they did, you can just turn right around and leave, I don't need a pity date," she stated firmly.

"HEY TRINA!" a red-haired man called to her from her right side. She turned in that direction, not recognizing the person. He walked over and slung his arm around her waist, pulling her slightly away from the blonde man she had been talking with.

Stepping quickly away, she glared at him. "Who are you, and what do you think you're doing?"

“What, you don’t remember me? Your Aunt Fina sent me over...at least I got the impression she was a relative of some sort. She was standing over there.” He pointed at the same odd place the other man had. “Well, what do you know? She isn’t there now.”

“Trina, do you know this man?” the blonde man asked her.

“No, and I don’t know you, either. I don’t know these women, aunts, or relatives that you two are blabbering about. I think you’d both better just leave me alone. I’m waiting for my friends,” she answered with a disgusted look as she tried to ignore the miscreants.

“No, you’re waiting for *me*, baby cakes,” a rather sinister voice piped up. A very large man with long black hair, a leather vest covered in patches and pins, old and ripped jeans, and tattoos covering his arms eyed her evilly.

“You have *that* wrong, Mister.” Trina backed up, opening the bathroom door and looking for an escape route.

“Hey, she’s mine! I saw her first!” the blonde man said pettily.

“No way, her aunt sent me to her, she’s *mine!*” the red-haired man whined.

“Her *father* sent me over to rescue her from you jerks!” the last, big one yelled. Trina looked at him in shock. Her father had been dead for years.

“*Who* sent you over here?” she shrieked.

“Your dad -- Murphy. He’s standing over there by the bar.” The man pointed to an empty place at the bar. “Well, he *was* there. Kind of an old guy, with gray hair. A little creepy, but hey, who am I to throw stones?”

The blonde man pushed him angrily, tipping him dangerously close to Trina and the bathroom door. She stepped back, avoiding contact with the odorous and loud man. He flew back upright, decking the blonde with one heavy-handed punch.

“HEY! You can’t do that!” the redhead butted in. He got slammed back against the wall, ready to come out with both fists flying. The tattooed man outweighed his opponent by at least 80 pounds, mostly muscle and meanness. The redhead looked at him again, and then turned to run as fast as he could. He was big and tough when it came to bullying women smaller than him, but when a very large and very threatening man called his bluff, he ran like a scared puppy dog with his tail between his legs.

Unfortunately, like most puppy dogs when running, he didn't watch where he was going, and ran over several bar patrons who took offense at being run over. They tossed him back at the tattooed man, who promptly knocked over a large fake tree into their table. He followed, and then backhanded the redhead, knocking him out cold.

Several of the newly tree-decorated bar patrons swarmed the leather-clad behemoth, climbing over each other and throwing beer bottles in his direction, hitting other patrons. One of the tossed bottles (she never saw which direction it actually came from) hit Trina right in the mouth, making her front tooth hurt and bleed! It was definitely past time to leave this place.

Trina quickly grabbed her sweater and ran out the front door, the sounds of a full-fledged bar fight following her out into the street while she held her hand over her still sore mouth, tasting the metallic tang of blood. The shrill scream of police sirens echoed through the mist-filled town, and Murphy's silent laughter lay unheard beneath all of the chaos, as he congratulated himself on thwarting the elderly busybody sisters.

## Chapter 2

Jarett Marlin settled into his new apartment with pleasure. His furniture fit just right in the living room, and the kitchen seemed nicely equipped for a man who enjoyed cooking as much as he did. The sliding glass patio door opened onto a lush private garden, one of the perks of being the live-in manager of the complex.

While he was newly hired, he certainly was not new to the job. He'd managed larger places than this, and with several very smart investments, he had done quite well for himself. Although he never let on, that some people would consider him rich. He enjoyed living quietly and helping people out. So he kept his job managing apartments, and laid low.

He stretched his tall frame, hearing bones creak and groan that hadn't before when he played football in college. Age seemed to be creeping slowly up on him, loudly pointing out that he hadn't been as gentle on his body as he should have been. At 35, he kept in shape by working out with his home gym station a couple of days a week, and running.

His dark brown hair was silvered lightly at the temples with a dusting of gray, something he didn't have the inclination to try to cover and appear younger. Wide shoulders, a trim waist, and long, strong legs completed the package that many women tried to obtain. Dimples that rarely appeared bracketed each side of his mouth, and a trim but full moustache danced on top of firm lips. Dark brown eyes twinkled with devilment, and lashes that a girl would kill for framed them in their dark lengths. Jarett walked around his house barefoot most of the time, and his family used to tease him about being part Hobbit – furry toes and all.

He was a serious man, but had a sense of humor underneath the surface that most people never got to see. 'Soft as a marshmallow inside', his mom used to say, as he would bring home one stray, neglected animal after the next. He did have a soft spot for strays, he would admit that. Before his mother died, he'd brought home a few stray women that weren't quite as accepted by Mom as his animals had been.

Jarett sat down on the couch, patting his knee as Smudge jumped up and started purring loudly. He absently petted the black and white cat, laughing quietly at the high squeak the cat let out when he stopped.

“What’s the matter, boy? Did I stop petting you when you weren’t ready yet?” Smudge wound his way around on Jarett’s lap, plopping down at an odd angle and flipping over onto his back, legs spread wide, and arms stretching to grab onto the sofa arm. Jarett laughed as he started petting him again, then set him aside when the phone rang.

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“Oh my Goth!”

Trina looked at the tooth in her hand in disbelief. She stumbled into the bathroom to look in the mirror, and her normal face stared back at her... at least until she opened her mouth. The crown on the front tooth that she’d put on years ago sat innocently in her hand, and just a tiny little stub sat in her mouth where the crown had been. No wonder her mouth hurt so much after she’d been hit with that beer bottle last night! Never again would she let Shannon and Julie talk her into going out to one of their favorite haunts, just to desert her again. This was the last straw.

She looked again into the mirror, back and forth, and tried to fit the crown back in. It wouldn’t stay. There was NO way that she could go into work like this! And with her dentist on vacation until next week... Trina shook her head in disgust, and set the crown on the counter by the sink, then looked for the phone to call in sick to work. What a way for such a busy week to begin!

“Thannon, I can’t come into work today,” she lisped to her co-worker Shannon at the Cimarron Hills Resort. Spittle sprayed the phone, and her head shook in misery. “No, I’m really thsick, it must have been the cold air lassssth night, after you and Julie leftth me there. I don’t think I’ll be able to come in for at leassssth a couple daysth.” Trina groaned and sniffed a little to make herself sound a little sicker. “Uh huh, ok, I’ll try. Thankssss Thannon, I will.”

She hung up the phone, grumbling at the lisp that persisted, despite her attempts to speak normally. *For goodness sake, it’s only a small space; you wouldn’t think that a crown falling out would make that much difference in a person’s speech.* At the Resort,

speaking is what she did -- all day long. As the Executive Secretary to the owner of the resort, she fielded phone calls, made appointments, and handled sales calls as a regular part of her job. Everything that she did reflected on both the Resort and the owner. She prided herself in making things run smoothly, staying behind the scenes.

Wandering back into the bathroom, Trina again stared at her new dental look, and wondered why this happened now, in April, instead of in October when she could make good use of her new look for Halloween!

Brushing her shoulder-length curly auburn hair, she assessed the person staring back at her in the mirror. Large hazel eyes with dark lashes made mascara an unnecessary commodity, and a nicely shaped face set off the dimple in her left cheek quite well. Her lips were full and her mouth looked perfectly acceptable, until she opened it and the gap glared at her.

"Argh!" she growled, slamming her hairbrush back on the counter. A faint tinkle sounded in the sink as she turned away to stomp into the bedroom to get dressed. Slowly, Trina turned back, her gaze going quickly to her brush, thinking she'd broken part of it off. No, the brush looked fine.

Trina ran her tongue where her missing tooth usually sat, and a cold feeling of dread dropped like a rock into her stomach. Lifting up the brush from the counter, the feeling got worse. No tooth. Flinging items off the counter, she frantically looked everywhere that it could have fallen. Not by the toilet, the lid was closed, so definitely not in it ... the curtain remained closed on the bathtub, and it wasn't on the floor next to it. Ditto underneath all the counters, and even though she got on her hands and knees and put her face on the floor to look from a different angle. It was nowhere to be found.

Trina opened the cupboard doors under the sink, and moved everything out from under there, setting things on the floor beside and behind her. She flung the cans and bottles of 'instant beauty', 'wrinkle-be-gone', 'gee-your-hair-smells-like-Hawaii', 'wear-me-and-instantly-attract -every-male-around', and of course, the ever popular 'spray this on your hair and a hurricane will leave you looking fresh and unmoved'. She silently set aside the 'insert this odd-looking torpedo thing and Noah's flood will be absorbed with no leakage or odor' box.

She grasped the connectors to the little "U" at the bottom of the sink, meant to catch whatever you mistakenly dropped in the sink (hopefully that included teeth), and she twisted as hard as she could. Nothing. Getting a better grip, she tried again, gritting her teeth (what was left of them), and pushing her feet against the wall to stabilize herself. Still nothing. The wall creaked alarmingly where her feet were, but the pipes hadn't even squeaked.

*Now what?* Trina thought, and remembered the apartment complex recently hired an on-site manager. Maybe he or she had a wrench or something that she could borrow. She called the number she kept on hand for the management company, who promised to send the new manager up to her apartment to help her out. While she waited, she wrestled with the pipe until her hands and face were red, sweaty, and dirty from the rust on the pipes. She conceded defeat only when someone knocked on the door.

She fastened her ratty old terry cloth robe more securely, and wiped the sweat from her face (depositing a beautiful coating of gooey rust). Trina then ran her fingers through her hair, trying to tame the unruly mess, tastefully and unknowingly adding gooey, rusty highlights to it, as she ran to answer the front door. "Who ith it?" she sprayed on the door before opening it. Never hurt to be safety conscious.

"Management," a deep male voice answered. Trina opened the door slightly to look out before she opened the chain, keeping it locked securely against intruders. Expecting an old man, or even an old woman, the sight of the luscious hunk of male flesh looming outside of her door just about dropped her to her knees.

Trina slowly closed the door, and she rested her head against the cold piece of wood. *Oh God, no... why now?* She thumped her head softly against the door in frustration, as she heard the new manager... the gorgeous new manager... shift his weight outside the door.

"Ma'am? You called for management, you have a plumbing problem?" he asked her through the closed door.

She took a deep breath, unlocked the chain guarding what was left of her pride, and slowly opened the door, stepping aside to let him in to walk all over her dignity. She tried to subtly rearrange her robe to look more presentable, only to fail miserably.

"I'm Jarett Marlin, and you are...?"

The tall, handsome god standing before Trina had a name. His chuckle broke into her hot, sweaty daydreams. He held his hand out to shake hers, staring bemusedly at her, a funny little grin on his face.

"Um... Trina. Trina Thhhsackette," she watched spittle fly out and land on his hand that she had grasped for a friendly handshake. Mortified, she blushed beet red as she held her other hand over her mouth.

"I'm tho thorry," she said behind her hand.

"Nice to meet you," he said with a friendly smile, probably thinking what an odd bird she seemed. "I'm your new resident manager; I live down in 3C."

He looked at her rather strangely; purposely rubbing next to his nose as if he were trying to remove something on his face, then stared pointedly at her dazed face.

Trina stared back. *This* person lived in her apartment building? She rubbed her thighs together, trying to stand in a somewhat sexier pose, and looked deeply into his amused eyes, trying to subtly seduce him with her oozing sex appeal. *Yea right*, she thought. *Secretaries don't have sex appeal, at least this one doesn't.*

He coughed and covered his mouth with his hand, unsuccessfully trying to cover a laugh. "Uh, Ma'am, you have a little something on your face, right here," he reached to her face to wipe the smudge of rust off next to her nose. Right where he'd been rubbing his own face!

"Oh God, I'm... uh... will you pleath excuthe me?"

She rushed to her bedroom, looked in the mirror over her dresser, and saw what a horrible mess she was. It figures, the man of her dreams (or at least her x-rated dreams) comes to her door, and she looks like a thrift-store Medusa, with rust on her face and in her hair. Here she'd been trying to look sexy! No wonder he was laughing at her, he'd just been trying to let her know nicely that she had something on her face.

"Is everything ok in there, Ma'am?" he called through the closed bedroom door.

"Yeth, I'll be out in juth a minute!" Trina looked quickly around, flinging her ratty old robe off and grabbing a t-shirt and jeans. She scrubbed her face on her robe, trying to get the rest of the rust off, desperately wishing for a brush.

“Do you want me to look at the plumbing, Ma’am? If you can just tell me where it is, I won’t bother you,” he called through the door again, sounding a little frustrated, as well as amused.

“The bathroom. I dropped sthomething down the sink, and I can’t undo the catch thingy under it.”

“OK,” he replied as his voice drifted away from the door.

Trina grabbed a cloth scrunchie, twisting her hair up into it, making it look somewhat under control. She opened the door, looking carefully out into the hallway stepping out since the coast looked clear.

Spying a very large pair of tennis shoes sticking out into the hallway from the bathroom, her mind instantly thought of the old saying about men having big feet. A clanging sound echoed from inside, dragging her mind back up from the gutter. She remembered tossing all of her cans and bottles out onto the floor from under the sink; he must think she’s a horrible housekeeper.

She looked in the door of the bathroom, and saw a very rounded, very muscled ass jiggling as he wrenched at the connection under the sink. He stopped to remove the sharp corner of a crushed box from underneath his shoulder. Looking at it, he handed it to her without saying a word.

Trina took the box, which had been both full and fully intact when she’d set it aside on the floor. Of course, it *had* to be the tampons. Super-Plus size, deodorized, and capitalized. Could this day get any worse? Talk about Murphy’s Law, she must have run the world’s biggest red light and Officer Murphy was after her with a vengeance!

“So what is it we’re looking for here, Ma’am?” Jarett asked her.

“Uh,” she said, trying to keep her lips over her missing tooth. She noticed Jarett staring at her, looking like he approved of the change in appearance. His gaze slid slowly down, stopping at her breasts. She felt her nipples peak, pointing straight at him, which he obviously noticed. He adjusted his legs to cover his growing erection. She had forgotten to put a bra on; she’d been in such a hurry to just get anything on.

He continued his minute inspection, his eyes lighting up as he traveled down over her curving waist and hips, eyeing her jeans appreciatively. He didn’t seem turned off at

all by her generous curves. Obviously, she wasn't a stick-thin model. Most men nowadays seemed to be looking for thin women.

Jarett cleared his throat, looking back up at her face, somewhat embarrassed.

"Oh, ah, I..." she stammered. "I lost my tootshh," she said, spittle flying again. Embarrassed, she covered her mouth as he quickly smothered a laugh, looking at her face again.

"A *tooth*? How can you lose a tooth in a sink?" he asked incredulously.

"I just did, okay? Can you find it or not?"

"OK, OK, don't get your panties in a bunch, lady. Most people don't put their teeth on the bathroom sink until they're in their 80's, is all."

"Is it a crown, okay? It came off! Can you find it in there? I couldn't get the elbow thing off!" She asked indignantly, forgetting to cover her lips in her anger.

Amusement lit up Jarett's face as he saw her predicament. While she *was* very nice looking with her mouth closed, when she opened it, she could be the poster child for the Wicked Witch of the West contest. And the lisp, he didn't know if it was because of the tooth (although he suspected that it might be), he seemed to find it charmingly hilarious, as spittle flew everywhere when she wasn't paying attention.

"Are you going to lay there and laugh at me, or are you going to help me find my toothshh?" She angrily pointed her dented tampon box at him, shaking it violently. When a slew of battered tampons flew out, her mouth dropped open in shock.

He dodged the tampon rain, loudly bursting out laughing, finally. He'd held it in as long as he could, but really, how much can a man be expected to take?

She flew out the door, taking her now empty tampon box with her, leaving the rest littering the bathroom floor like spent ammunition.

## Chapter 3

“Ma’am?” Jarett called from the bathroom after a while, when she didn’t return. “Hello? Are you still here?” He pulled off his soaking shirt, and grabbed a towel off the rack to dry off with, getting ready to go look for the strange lady.

“Ms. Thackette? He called louder.

Trina groaned in despair, remembering her spittle-laden rendition of her name. He wasn’t going to go away. She walked back into the bathroom, stopping at the sight of 6’3” of tanned, thickly muscled drool-bait. Claspings her hands tightly at her waist to keep them off that gorgeous chest and attacking him, she slowly raised her eyes to his amused and quite interested ones. Obviously, he’d seen her checking him out and approved.

He grinned at her and flexed, laughing as she blushed furiously. “Ms. Thackette, I couldn’t find your tooth in there. Apparently it washed down the drain with the water. I’m, uh, sorry, but it looks like you’ll have to get a new one.”

“Oh no... my dentist is out of town!” she despaired quietly.

“I can give you the number of my dentist, if you’d like. He’s very good, and has an after-hours emergency service that can contact him. I’m sure they can probably do something for you, at least temporarily, until your Dentist gets back.”

He laid his hand gently on her shoulder to comfort her, as she looked so distraught. The contact seemed almost electric. It shook both of them badly, and Trina gasped as she shot a quick look at his face when she felt the warmth of his hand. The lust shining through his eyes almost burned a hole through her clothes. It had been so long since she’d dated, and the feelings that rushed through her startled her with their fierceness. *Maybe it’s time to relieve the dry spell*, Trina thought wickedly. And what better cloud to drench herself with, than the furry one standing right in front of her...

Jarett moved his hand slowly down her arm, his touch firm and hot, as he watched for her reaction. While he hadn’t come up here to seduce a tenant, Trina definitely intrigued him, touching places inside of him that hadn’t seen the light of day for a long time.

“It’s Thackette. Trina Thackette. With an Esthhhh.”

“Huh?” he looked back up at her dazedly.

“My name. It’s not Thackette, it stharths with an Esthhhh,” she emphasized wetly. She quietly wiped off the spots she had left on his chest, lingering when the springy dark hair curled around her fingers.

He grasped her hand, holding it to his chest firmly, bending to touch her lips gently with his. She felt his heart thundering strongly as he fit his body against hers, pressing her up against the bathroom wall as he deepened his kiss, and completely overwhelming her, when she didn’t resist.

Trina moaned as his tongue slipped into her mouth. He raised his hands to cup her head, threading his fingers through her hair, holding her in place as he wove his sensual magic around her. She ran her hands around his wide chest, and looped her hands around his neck, fingering the soft hair at the nape of his neck, grabbing hold to gently suck his lower lip between her teeth and nibble on him; a veritable feast for the starving.

He started running his hands down her back, spreading his large hands apart and running his thumbs across the sensitive sides of her breasts. He traveled down her sides, grasping those luscious hips he’d checked out earlier in his hands and tightening his grip. His groan showed his appreciation. Skinny just wasn’t his thing, he liked real curves on a woman, and Trina had plenty of curves for him to practice driving on.

Trina’s face flushed as she felt herself get wet and ready for his possession. She moved her hands slowly down from his hair, across his very broad shoulders and back. Dipping down below the waist of his jeans, she grabbed that perfect ass she’d admired, as she dug her fingers in to stake her claim. God, it felt just as good as it looked—firm with muscle, but rounded enough to grab onto and pull him right into her, which she did with a moan.

Jarett startled some at her possessive grip on his butt, groaning as Trina forcefully pulled on him to push against the front seam of her jeans. He grabbed her ass, lifting her to fit against him as he pressed his hard cock into her pussy, grinding and shoving her against the wall, exciting and enticing, even though they were both still fully clothed. He plucked at her hard nipples with one hand; then lifted her shirt to expose all that generous Mother Nature gave her.

He couldn't remember the last time he had been this turned on, or this hard. The sexy woman before him seemed to want everything he could give her and more. Right now! He ground his cock into her again, feeling her dampness, and throbbing even harder as he tried his best to pleasure her through the firm cotton jeans.

"Yesth, oh YESTH! Right there, thasth good, yea!" she sprayed at him in passion.

He stopped and looked at her, her eyes closed in passion, her breath coming hard and fast through her open lips, right through the gap in her teeth. And he burst out laughing.

Trina's head cleared immediately, the cold reality of his laughter chasing any passionate thoughts away. "Let me down!" she said, trying to restrain her embarrassed anger.

"I'm thorry! Uh, sorry! It's just that... I'm... you... Oh god, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..." he scrambled to apologize for his blunder.

"JUSTH LET ME DOWN!" she yelled at him.

"I'm really sorry; I didn't mean to embarrass you. I normally don't do things like this, especially just after I meet someone, but..." she cut him off as he slid her abruptly down the wall.

"You need to leave. NOW." She pointed the way to the front door. As if he didn't already know the way, all of the apartment floor plans were exactly the same.

Jarett shook his head, wondering at the contrariness of women -- redheads in particular as he left, closing the front door quietly behind him.

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*Murphy nodded to himself, feeling every bit the voyeur and enjoying it as much as he did when alive. This man would definitely throw a wrench into the sisters' plans; he was definitely NOT what they wanted for their sweet little relative.*

## Chapter 4

*“Josie, quickly! Who else can we set her up with? This Jarrett person is entirely unsuitable! He’s too... too...” Fina said with growing frustration.*

*“Too manly? Too forceful? Too ... Fina, why didn’t they make them like that when we were alive?” Josephine sighed, recalling the way Jarrett had Trina up against the wall, then quickly came to her senses. This was just not right.*

*“We need to find someone who has money and status in the community. Someone who can keep her in the style our family should be kept in. She has to find her true love!” Fina sniffed sadly. “But who?”*

*“How about that businessman that came around her office the other day? The handsome one? He looks quite successful, and he’s new in town. Maybe he is lonely, sister.”*

*“You’re right!” Fina exclaimed. “He’s suave, mannered, debonair, looks like he’s rich... he’s perfect!”*

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Thomas Bentler arrived at the Cimarron Hills Resort office promptly at 8 AM, when a tall, thin woman with straight dark hair opened the doors. She dressed professionally, but the maroon streaks in her hair looked as if the wild woman underneath the sedate clothes was screaming to get out.

“Trina Sackette?” he asked her.

“No, I’m sorry, Trina isn’t in today, she is sick. Can I help you?” she asked with very apparent interest.

“And you are?” he asked her, returning the long and sultry look that she’d just given him.

*This guy was good!* “I’m interested and single. I’m Shannon, dear. Shannon Taylor. And who might you be?” she batted her lashes at him, ready to take him behind her desk for a quick tumble.

“I’m Thomas Bentler, Ms. Taylor. Do you know when Ms. Sackette is due to return?”

Shannon’s knees shook as his deep voice and killer eyes worked their magic on her. Forget ducking behind the desk, she would do him right here on the front counter!

He looked like a man who liked to take charge, and she'd be happy to let him, at least until she took over.

"Uh, no. Like I said, she's sick. Probably won't be in for a couple more days. Do you want me to have her call you when she comes in? I'll need your phone number. Your home phone number." Shannon scrambled for a pen and paper, sighing with disappointment as he headed back towards the door to the lobby.

"No, I'll check back in a couple of days. Thank you, Ms. Taylor."

The door closed behind him, and Shannon thanked every god ever worshipped in the universe that some far-sighted individual made the door going into the lobby out of glass.

She watched his fine ass saunter across the resort lobby and out the front doors. Something as nice as that ought to be framed and hung on a wall, she thought with a smile. Her bedroom wall.

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Trina got in for an emergency appointment with a dentist she found in the phone book. While he wasn't her normal dentist, he seemed pretty good. They put a temporary plastic cap on her front tooth with little hassle or fanfare.

"How long until the regular crown comes in?" she asked the dental assistant.

"It should be about three to four weeks. In the meantime, you have to remember that you can't do *anything* with that temporary on. You can't bite into anything, not even a hotdog or hamburger. Don't bite with it, and don't mess with it, or it will come right off and you'll be toothless again.

"So it's milkshakes and gelatin for the next three weeks?" Trina asked sarcastically.

"Just watch what you do. You were lucky a patient cancelled their appointment today, I can't guarantee there will be a convenient opening if your tooth falls out again," the assistant answered seriously.

"OK, I'll be careful. Thank you for fitting me in today. Since it's not Halloween, going back to work like this just wasn't quite the thing."

The assistant laughed as Trina left the office to go back home. Luckily, she could go back to the office in the morning, and not miss too much work.

It was going to be a long month...

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Trina avoided going past the new manager's apartment when she returned, instead parking on the other side of the parking lot and walking clear around the building to get to her place. What a disaster their first meeting had been! If she never saw that man again, she would consider herself lucky.

What in the world possessed her to jump his bones like that? Granted, it's been quite awhile since her last relationship, but doing something like that is definitely out of character for her. She never did anything that impulsive. 'Quiet, behind-the-scenes Trina' was her normal, everyday persona. That wild wanton must have been someone else. Maybe she had been temporarily possessed. Yes, that's it; she'd been possessed and could blame it on someone else! It must have been Shannon's alter ego who'd jumped into Trina's body.

*Murphy decided to twist Fate again and intervene... the sisters didn't like Jarett; they considered him 'unsuitable', so maybe he should toss Trina to him again.*

Trina turned the corner of the apartment building. She ran straight into a very large, very hard chest. One she was more familiar with than she would like to admit, and that she had been desperately trying to forget.

"Hey Trina, I'm glad to see you again," Jarett said with a smile.

"Uh, hi," She looked everywhere but at him, embarrassed beyond belief.

He took her chin gently in his hand and tilted her head up to look at him.

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened earlier, Trina. I normally don't do things like that. Neither with my tenants, nor with women I've just met. I'm really sorry I laughed; it's just that seeing your smile like that, without your tooth, it just caught me off guard. I didn't mean to insult you." He seemed sincere to Trina, but she just wasn't ready for this.

"I don't do those things, either. Ever. That was not like me; I don't know what came over me." She turned to go down the hallway to her apartment, quickly moving away from him. "But it won't happen again."

"Trina?" he called after her, before she had gone more than a few steps. "Can we start over? I'd really like to take you to dinner sometime," he asked her quietly.

"I don't think so. I'm sorry," she answered before she could change her mind. She turned quickly to leave and banged her shin on a cement planter that had been there for at least the last ten years. The tears instantly came to her eyes -- that hurt!

"Are you okay?" he yelled after her.

Trina waved her hand back at him as she limped down the hallway towards her apartment. Could this week get any worse?

*Murphy snickered and decided to answer her question with a resounding 'yes'.*

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Jarett looked at his answering machine yet again, hoping that Trina would have called while he was out, or at any time over the past couple of days. But yet again, nothing. She intrigued him beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. Yes, she was annoying, hot-tempered, and stubborn. She was also beautiful, exhilarating, smart, and quick to rise to passion.

He shifted himself to ease the tightness of his jeans. The picture in his mind of Trina up against the wall, head thrown back, with her face drawn tight and flushed with desire was hot enough to drive a monk to attack a hole in the wall.

God, there must to be some way to get through to her. Whatever he had to do to convince her to go out with him and at least give them another chance would definitely be worth it.

He decided to pursue what he saw as a worthy adversary, and went to talk with her neighbors to see what kind of things she might be interested in, and to formulate a plan.

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Trina went back to work at the Resort. Her temporary tooth cap seemed firm enough, and at least allowed her to speak with some normality. Shannon asked her if she were feeling better, and Trina nodded absently as she walked to her desk.

Paperwork was piled up on her desk, placed there by the owner, Thad Chanery. He did much of his work in the evenings, leaving anything that needed done during the day on her desk. The system worked out well for them for the last several years. Trina knew what he needed done, and usually finished it before he even asked for it. She liked being efficient at her job. If it made someone else's job easier, she felt she'd done well.

Thad paid her very well also, as valuable employees were hard to find, and even harder to hold onto.

“Trina?” Shannon interrupted her as she organized the pile of paperwork to start digging into it.

“Hi Shannon, what do you need?” she asked, smiling, as she stopped shuffling the papers like a massive deck of cards.

“There’s someone up front asking for you, and he’s cute!” Shannon giggled like a schoolgirl. Although the receptionist was in her mid-twenties, something, or someone, obviously set her hormones into overdrive, for her to act like this at work.

“Do you know who it is? Did they tell you their name?” Trina asked, standing abruptly and knocking her chair over. She turned around to set it back upright, determinedly ignoring Shannon’s evil snicker.

“No, I didn’t ask. But I think it’s someone you need to go talk to right away,” Shannon laughed again, an evil twinkle in her eye.

Trina wondered if Jarett somehow found out where she worked and came in to bother her again. He would definitely be studly enough to set off the ever-ready Shannon, so it was very possible that he occupied the front office. All Shannon ever seemed to talk about were men and sex.

But what happened at her apartment was a mistake; surely he realized that by now. Trina set off towards the reception area of the office to set him straight, hoping that if it were Jarett who had come to see her, she could set him straight nicely. But she was also angry at his effrontery at the same time.

The man standing at the counter looked Trina over appreciatively. His bright smile lit up his face. He straightened up as she approached, his hands held behind his back. Cute, yes. Charming, yes. But he wasn’t Jarett. This man just couldn’t compare. Trina’s hopes deflated abruptly as she saw him. Shannon hovered in the background, being nosy as usual and trying to eavesdrop to find out about this new and handsome guy.

“Are you Trina Sackette?” he asked her loudly.

She nodded as she arrived at the counter, wondering if she was going to be served papers. “Yes, I’m Trina. May I help you?” she asked him, wondering what was going on.

She knew all of the normal distributors, and he wasn't dressed like the usual salesmen who came in all the time.

"I'm your singing telegram, Ma'am!" he announced proudly. He cleared his throat and burst into song, with a country-western twang:

"I'm so sorry I was wrong,  
to treat you like I did.  
This ain't just a silly song,  
Sung by another big kid.  
You brighten up my day,  
And liven up my night.  
Please give me another way,  
To make my mistake right."

Trina waited through the entire song, embarrassed beyond belief, really only hearing the words in the first part and the last that the singer emphasized strongly. At the end, with a flourish, he pulled a large bouquet of wildflowers out from behind his back and knelt, presenting her with the bundle.

A loud round of clapping sounded from Shannon behind her, as well as from out in the lobby where resort patrons gathered for the singing show. Obviously, he had left the door open behind him to show off his considerable vocal talent.

She blushed and took the bouquet, looking for a card. She couldn't figure out who would have done something like this. The man coughed quietly as he held his hand out with a card in it.

"Thank you, that was absolutely wonderful. I don't know what to say." She told the man quietly.

"I've been told to ask you to read the card and then give me your answer, Ma'am," he said politely as he waited.

She opened the card, which said simply, "Forgive me, and dine with me tonight. Jarrett." A frown appeared on her face, remembering her unexpected passion and subsequent embarrassment.

She shook her head and told the man "I'm sorry, but the answer is no."

He nodded and left the building. Several of the patrons shook their heads sadly and muttered among themselves as the crowd dispersed.

Shannon asked her quietly what the note said, and who had sent it, watching the disappointment wash over her friend's face.

"A man I have no intentions of seeing again," she told her with a sigh.

"Sheesh, Trina. If a man ever did anything like that for me, I'd be in his bed in half a heartbeat! What did this guy do to you?" Shannon asked, astounded.

In the two years she had worked with Trina, she had never seen her date... anyone. She worked late whenever asked to, even taking her work home with her, and seemed almost obsessively dedicated to her job. But she never even talked about dating or men, other than generally. While Shannon knew that Trina liked men, she never saw her express any interest in dating them.

"It doesn't matter, Shannon. It happened, it's over, and it won't happen again," she stated firmly.

"What, did you go to bed with the guy?" Shannon asked with disbelief in her voice.

"Yeah, right! Bed? We never even made it *close* to the bed," Trina scoffed as she walked quickly back into her office, mumbling something about bathroom walls.

Shannon stared after her, stunned into an unusual silence.

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*"Sister, this is not good."*

*"But she said 'no', Fina. Isn't that what we want?" asked Josie.*

*"Yes, but there's something about him. She's intrigued by him, and that's not a good thing. We simply must get her together with her true love... as soon as we find him. And quickly, before she is distracted by pure lust. He's just not suitable. He doesn't have a good enough job, or enough money. He is just a manager, for goodness sake!"*

*Josie quietly thought that Jarett certainly had something to lust over, but agreed with her sister that they should keep looking. She had always been the smarter one, and of course, she knew best. She'd always been there for her in her time of need, so Josie would support her, even if her heart wondered if what they were doing was right.*

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“Is Ms. Sackette back yet?”

Shannon jumped a mile high, startled from reading a hot, sexy romance novel at her desk. Her face flushed with both embarrassment and arousal, which the gorgeous man in front of her did nothing to alleviate. She quickly set the novel aside, out of sight of both the man and the front counter, and rose to her feet to come to the front.

“Yes, Mr. Bentler, she returned today. I can see if she’s not busy if you’d like to wait?” she offered.

“I will, thank you,” he sat down on the couch in front of the reception counter, making himself comfortable. Shannon almost envied the leather couch.

Shannon raced back to Trina’s office, knocking softly before opening the door to slip in, shutting the door partly behind her. Trina worked industriously on the computer, totally absorbed in her work, not even noticing the receptionist come in. Shannon waited until Trina looked up, as she finally realized that someone was in the room and waiting.

“Trina, there’s another man here for you!” she laughed excitedly. “He came here the other day when you were gone, but I told him you weren’t here then, and now he’s come back!”

“I don’t want to go out with him!” Trina raised her voice, which easily carried through the partially open door and out to the reception area.

“Shhhhh! He’ll hear you!” Shannon whispered loudly to her, looking back towards the door and moving to close it.

“I don’t care if he hears, and I’ll go out and tell him straight to his face!” Trina yelled through the door, pushing past Shannon and heading out to the reception room. “Don’t you understand ‘NO’ when you hear it? What part of NO isn’t in your vocabulary, Mister...?” Trina stumbled to a stop when she realized it wasn’t Jarett standing there waiting for her.

“I’m SO sorry! I thought you were somebody else,” Trina apologized, blushing furiously as she thought about what she had said. What a mess. Hopefully this man wasn’t a potential customer.

“Obviously!” the man grinned. “I sure hope that whoever it is doesn’t come around here anytime soon...or if he does, that he creeps in quietly, bearing flowers and gifts!”

"I apologize, Sir. What can I help you with? I'm Trina Sackette," she said, straightening her shoulders and holding her hand out to shake his, in a professional manner.

"I'm Thomas Bentler, Ms. Sackette. A relative of yours referred me to you, an Aunt Fina, I believe, is her name? Sweet woman, about this tall," he held his hand out at about five feet tall next to him.

"I don't have an aunt by that name, Mr. Bentler, but I'll be happy to help you, what is it you need?"

"Can we speak alone?" he said in a deep, sexy voice, glancing at the very interested Shannon who leaned over her desk in an obvious attempt to hear every word spoken.

"Yes, please come into my office."

He closed the door quietly behind them, effectively shutting out prying ears and eyes.

"Actually, Ms. Sackette... Trina, I've come to ask a favor. I'm new to the area, and I need someone who is very familiar with both the businesses and the area to show me around. You were recommended as the best person for both."

"But I told you, Mr. Bentler, I don't have an Aunt Fina. I don't have any living relatives at all!" she protested.

"OK, but you're still probably the best person to help me out. That is, if you're not engaged, married, or otherwise occupied? I promise you, I'm a stand-up guy, and we'll go to some really nice parties and gatherings. It'll be fun, if you'll help me out."

He looked at her with pleading puppy-dog eyes. She could never resist puppies. A strange voice in the back of her mind... an elderly female voice... whispered that this is just what she needs to forget that madman, Jarett. He was no good for her, but this man...

"Well, how long are you thinking of? And what would this entail? Exactly what type of business are you in, Mr. Bentler?" she asked, looking him over a little closer. He certainly wasn't difficult to look at, and it *would* get her away from Jarett and her strange attraction to him. It was definitely time for her to get out more, judging from her frenzied reaction to Jarett's kisses.

"I'm an independent office supplier. You know—office supplies, temporary office equipment rentals, that kind of thing. It would be for a couple of weeks, at the most. I could go from door to door, but I've found that meeting business owners in a different setting usually sets up a better business relationship.

You know many of the business owners in the area, and I need to meet them, in order for my business here to be successful. We'd go out, have some fun and laughs, and I'd certainly be willing to pay for any expenses that we might incur."

"When and where did you want to start this? And I reserve the right to discontinue it at any time, right? If I don't feel comfortable, or I want to leave, you'll supply cab fare?"

"Of course, you can always choose that option. Anytime you would like to start is fine with me; the sooner the better. If you'd like to meet me for lunch later on, we could discuss this further?" he smiled at her.

"We can meet for lunch in the restaurant around the corner, Mr. Bentler. We'll discuss what you need in more depth," Trina noticed his eyes darken as she mentioned 'in more depth'—men! "Then we'll decide what to do from then on, how does that sound to you?"

"First of all, you should call me Thom, not Mr. Bentler. And lunch is on me, remember. How about we meet at noon, at the Café around the corner? We can also go out tonight, if that works out for you. I hear there is a big business party over at the old Times building. May I pick you up at 7 o'clock?" he asked with a charming smile.

"Oh yes, my boss is going to that. There are supposed to be a few hundred influential business owners there, so it would probably be a good place for you to start meeting people. I know many of the people who are going to be there."

Trina wrote down her address and walked him back out to the reception area.

Shannon almost fell over her desk in shock when the man told Trina with a wink, that he would pick her up at her place at seven, a sexy dress would be great, and not to forget lunch at the café.

Trina laughed, and nodded, as she turned back towards her office, with Shannon tripping after her, asking question after question.

"What's going on, Trina? You haven't dated since I've known you, *in two years*, and now you have *two* men coming on to you? One is about the most romantic guy I've ever

heard of, although I haven't seen him yet, and the other could be the cover model for any one of my erotic romance books! Tell me your secret!" Shannon begged.

Trina smiled as she said, "I don't have any secrets, Shannon, none at all. It's all Greek to me."

## Chapter 5

*Murphy fumed after seeing the man leave Trina's office. This was not what he had planned. He had known the sisters set this man up to go out with Trina, hoping they would hit it off. But he seemed just a little too perfect. There must be some dirt he could dig up on him, or some way to turn Trina off of him. The sisters must not succeed this time. Murphy set to work...*

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*The two sisters silently whispered otherworldly suggestions into Trina's ear as she got ready to go out that night. 'No, that dress is too dowdy.' 'That one is too old-fashioned.' 'The shoes with spiked heels, not the low heels.' 'Yes, that's the dress – the dark blue one!' It clung to every rounded curve, slit way up the side, and dipped way down in back. It practically screamed elegance; it was sexy as hell, and guaranteed to knock a guy off his feet.*

It was perfect, Trina agreed with the voices in her head.

She showered, rubbing fragrant, moisturizing oil all over herself, then placed her hair up in an elegant knot, with twisting tendrils escaping their confinement, just as she felt a revitalizing freedom by going out tonight. She felt as though something momentous might happen.

A charming and handsome man, a large, fun party with lots of influential people, food, drinks, music and dancing...what could go wrong?

*What, indeed?*

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Thom arrived at Trina's apartment at exactly at 7 o'clock. He knocked on her door, presenting her with a bouquet of beautiful roses. She promptly started sneezing after taking them – allergies didn't take into account dreamy men. His sincere compliments on her outfit and beauty made Trina feel like Cinderella going to the ball.

He held the apartment door open for her, and gallantly handed her into his car, a large, dark sedan. It had heated leather seats, and just screamed class. She was seriously impressed; the man must do very well in his business! Soft classical music welcomed her into the luxurious depths as she settled in with a sigh of pure indulgence.

The sisters both smiled as they watched Trina leave in the big car.

"She looks like a princess," sighed Fina.

Josie nodded with a knowing grin. "Let's just leave nature to take its course now, Fina."

"Surely she'll fall in love with this one, he's just perfect!"

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*Murphy laughed silently... perfect is as perfect does, and their 'perfect man' has a secret...*

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Thom and Trina arrived at the party in style. She introduced him as a 'friend' to whoever came up to say hello. Trina knew just about everyone at the party, which Thom took full advantage of. They circulated, mingled, chatted, and drank. Thom kept Trina well supplied with alcohol, which flowed freely at these events. She felt pampered and attractive, as he stayed very close to her, attentive to her every need. He kept his hand at the small of her back, touching her whenever he could. Trina seemed distracted by all of the people at the party. He took advantage and touched her quite often.

He whispered into her ear frequently, asking questions about the partygoers and her boss most of all. The noise in the room seemed pretty overwhelming, so his whispering made sense... although most people would just speak louder. It also let him get even closer to her, brushing her breasts quite by accident in the process. Trina noticed it a few times, but as it always happened in the process of him doing something innocuous, she ignored it, although it happened more frequently than she would have liked.

When the music started up for dancing, a few of the more adventurous couples ventured out onto the dance floor. Most people just watched from the sidelines, talking business. Thom did not seem very interested in talking business with the owners that were present, but stayed close to Trina, again asking her questions about the business at the resort and how things were run. Although this seemed rather odd to Trina, she ignored it as the alcohol sang through her veins, and the attractive man on her arm charmed her completely.

She asked him to dance, hoping to get him out among the business people like he wanted, and to avoid more questions. She felt uncomfortable talking about herself and her job. The music changed as they made their way onto the dance floor, and a slow song came on. Trina remembered this song, one she'd loved when she was in high school. She swayed along with the music, closing her eyes in delight when her favorite parts played.

Thom pulled her close, twirling her in his arms to the music, laughing at her surprised look that he could dance. Smiling, she moved to the beat, grinning like a fool, enjoying her handsome escort, closing her eyes and enjoying the fantasy. She did not notice him dancing her over to the terrace doorway. The cool air blowing on her bare shoulders made her stop swaying and open her eyes, looking around in surprise. A delighted shiver ran down her back. The romance of the moon shining through the trees and the fragrant breeze was just what she needed right now.

Thom gazed down at Trina, drinking in her flirty, tousled hair and the attractive flush left on her cheeks from the exertion of the dance. The moonlight glinted in his hair, casting his face in shadow. The faint gleam in his eyes warned Trina that he wasn't quite as innocent as he might seem. He angled his head down towards her, tilting slightly and parting his lips just a little, ready to capture his prey and devour her.

She glanced up at him; breathlessly waiting for what she felt sure would be the perfect kiss. Her eyes closed, trembling lashes resting on her cheeks, as her lips parted to meet his. Her breath hitched, waiting...

*Murphy sat in the shadows of the terrace, invisible to mortal eyes, and grinned evilly, wiggling his fingers at the couple, then disappearing without a sound.*

"Trina, you seem like a nice lady," Thom stated firmly, grasping her arms and setting her back from him. She startled and closed her mouth, which had stayed slightly open, while her eyes fluttered back open in shock. The blood drained from her face when she realized she must have totally misread his intentions.

"I brought you to this party to get information on your boss and the leading business people in the area here. We thought he might be involved in money laundering, and you seemed to know everything that goes on with his business. After further investigation, we've decided that he isn't involved in it, but that some of the other businesses still

might be. I needed to get into this party to get closer to some of the people who might be involved.”

“What? What are you talking about? And who is ‘we’? Who are *you*?” She stared at him like he’d just zipped his human suit off and an alien speaking another language stood in his place.

“I’m a detective with the local police department,” he explained patiently. “Your boss has been under investigation, and as a result, you have been also. You’ve been under surveillance for a couple of weeks now.”

“But why? Mr. Chanery hasn’t done anything! Why this elaborate setup, why lie to me?” Trina sniffed as the situation hit her. Here she thought she had been about to tongue wrestle with this town’s version of Mr. Romance himself in the moonlight, and now she finds out it is just a great big, stinking hoax.

“Trina, we know you’re not involved. I needed you to get into this party. We needed to find out which other business owners might be involved, and this seemed our best chance to find that out. I’m sorry to have lied to you, but there was no other way.”

“I want to go home now. Unless I’m under arrest, that is,” Trina said stubbornly.

“I’ll have an undercover car come to get you,” he said quietly.

“No, I’d rather take a taxi. I think I’ve had enough undercover work for this lifetime.”

Trina walked away, head hanging low and shuffling her feet. Ten minutes ago, she had been floating on air, not even noticing her direction. The same misdirection hazed around her now, but her feet felt like they had sunk two feet deep into the floor and she was wading through cement.

## Chapter 6

Trina got out of the cab at the curb in front of her apartment, and closed the door quietly. The detective already paid the driver, so she didn't have to worry about counting out change in her dejected condition. She walked slowly, almost aimlessly up the sidewalk, not noticing the sprinklers on that were soaking her beautiful dress.

Jarett saw her through the window, and debated staying inside, leaving her to her misery. He'd seen the man she had left with—but obviously, things did not go as planned. His heart ached at her obvious misery. He opened his door as she walked up to the building.

She never even looked up at the sound of the door opening. As Jarett gently touched her arm, she slowly turned to look at him. Her mascara, so carefully applied earlier, now ran in wide rivulets down her face, leaving her looking like a miserable zebra. Jarett softly ran his thumbs over her cheeks, taking some of the black marks away. Sobbing, she turned her face into his hand.

He took her in his arms, wrapping himself around her like a warm, comforting blanket on a cold winter's morning. Leading her into his apartment, he sat her down on the couch where he'd been reading a book before she came in. The fire crackled in the fireplace, and soft music played in the background. He pulled a soft blanket off the back of the couch, and wrapped her up in it, sitting beside her and just holding her until her shuddering sobs slowed down to an occasional hiccup. He continued rubbing her back for a while, rocking her slowly side to side with the music.

"He lied to me," she sobbed quietly, finally looking up at him.

"The man you went out with tonight?" Jarett asked.

"Yes, he even said a relative of mine sent him, and that I could help him. But he lied! He wasn't interested in me, he wanted information on my boss... he is really a detective with the police department."

"Let me know his name and exactly what he did. I'm in pretty good with the PD here, my dad was on the force for years, and I still have contacts. There's no reason you should have been involved in anything like that, Trina, and they know better."

She poured her heart out to him. Quietly he quietly held her, listening until she finished.

“Do you want me to walk you back to your apartment, Trina?”

“I don’t really want to be alone right now. Do you mind if I stay awhile, Jarett?”

“No, I don’t mind. You can stay as long as you need to.” He stood up to walk into the kitchen. “Would you like a glass of wine? Water? Soda? Milk?”

“Soda would be fine, thank you. Anything, really.”

Jarett poured them both a soda, carrying them out to the living room, setting them on coasters on the coffee table. He returned with a bowl of chips and dip, setting them within easy reach.

“Want to watch a movie on TV? That’s all I had planned tonight, other than reading a book.”

“TV is good, I’m sorry if I interrupted your book tonight. I really appreciate you letting me stay, though.”

“It’s my pleasure, I’m glad I could help,” he replied with a sincere smile.

They turned on the television to one of the old movie channels, and an old, favorite musical came on that soon saw them both laughing, crying and singing along with it. It was a movie that touched both of them deeply; the story of a town that time forgot, which only reappeared once every hundred years.

The main character faced the choice of staying with the woman he loved, or staying in the world he that belonged in. Trina held her breath every time that she saw the movie, again wondering what choice he would make. Even though she knew the ending, the magic of the story made her wonder every time she watched it if it would change.

Her sighs as the movie ended were muffled in Jarett’s side. She’d snuggled into him, as much for comfort, as for warmth and his companionship. He pulled her in closer, hugging her to him, as he sighed also at the ending of the dream the movie provided.

“I love that movie. The songs stay with me for days afterwards, and I imagine what it would be like to fade away with the town, to only appear again once every hundred years. What would have changed in the world, and what would still be the same. It makes me wonder...” she smiled sadly.

“I sing the songs too... but quietly, of course. Manly men usually don’t go around singing songs from musicals—unless they want to turn in their ‘guy cards’, that is!” he laughed.

She playfully punched him in the arm, and then yawned. “I think it’s time for me to go home.”

He smiled as he took her glass into the kitchen, then grabbed the small afghan off the back of the couch to wrap it warmly around her shoulders. They walked the short distance to her apartment. He took the keys from her hand to unlock the door. Gently, he led her to her bedroom, laid her down on the bed, and removed her shoes, one at a time. He pulled the soft blankets over her as she rolled to her side, sighing in complete exhaustion.

He kissed her gently on the cheek, and ran his fingers through her tousled hair, removing the clips holding it up. He smiled at her sleepy groan of contentment, and then let himself out of her apartment, locking her door as he left.

## Chapter 7

Trina gradually woke, realizing as she did that she still wore her gown from last night. Her memories of the disastrous party dropped in uninvited. How could she have been so stupid? Obviously, men who looked like Thomas Bentler weren't interested in girls who looked like her. She should know that by now.

She got dressed and ready for work, then dragged herself into the office, feeling somewhat down, but not as bad as she would have felt if Jarett hadn't taken her in and taken her mind off her latest disaster. Sometimes it just takes a genuinely nice person, doing a random act of kindness, to remind us that not all of humanity should be flushed down the toilet.

Shannon practically attacked Trina as she walked in the door to work.

"*Tell me!* What happened? Where did you go? What did you do?" she slavered, wanting the juicy details.

"Nothing happened. He was a jerk, and he wasn't what he seemed at all. I left early."

Shannon's mouth dropped. "Oh god, I'm so sorry, Trina. He seemed so nice."

"Yes, didn't he?" Trina replied as she started working in her office.

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A subdued knock on her door forced Trina to look up from her paperwork. Shannon appeared with a small smile on her face, producing a miniature rose bush tied with a green ribbon, and a little card. She handed it over to Trina.

"Shannon, you didn't have to get me this!"

"I didn't. Someone just delivered it for you."

Trina opened the card. 'Thinking of you. Don't vanish for the next 100 years! – Jarett'

She smiled at the reminder of the movie they'd watched the night before. She tucked the card into her purse, tackling the pile of work on her desk with a new vengeance, and a smile on her face.

Shannon decided to leave this one alone.

\*\*\*

*“Sister, that man is getting in the way of all of our plans! We can’t let her confuse wicked lust with finding her true love!” Fina said worriedly.*

*“Are you sure that Murphy hasn’t found out about this? Remember what happened last time! This has all the earmarks of one of his ‘interferences’.” Josie wondered.*

*“No, I don’t think so. Ever since we’ve watched her, she’s been rather clumsy and has her own problems. That’s one of the reasons we decided to help her, isn’t it? After all, she’s thirty and not married. That’s just about unheard of in our family.”*

*“Well, that’s true. But how can we know if he’s discovered us? I wish Murphy would just leave us alone! Hasn’t enough time passed for him to forgive us?” Josie complained.*

*“Can you ever think he’d truly forgive what we did to him, Sister?” Fina asked quietly.*

*“I suppose not, Fina,” she answered.*

*“Besides, you know as well as I do that since Murphy is higher in rank than us, unless he decides to make himself visible to us, there’s no way of knowing he’s there.”*

*“What a damned nuisance he’s become!”*

*“I agree, he has. But we also must remember that he has his own reasons to be angry with our family, Sister,” Fina counseled sagely. Josie nodded, hanging her head.*

*“I do, however, have another man in mind for our Trina. He’s rich, too! I found him on the Internet,” Fina grinned.*

\*\*\*

Trina spent the next few days doing nothing but working, and spending time catching up on her reading list at home. She took long baths, and pampered herself to feel better. Imagine, to be picked up by such a handsome man, only to be told you’re just the ticket into Cinderella’s ball, instead of Cinderella herself.

But feeling sorry for herself just wasn’t Trina’s style, so she pulled her spirits back up to her chin like an ancient pair of saggy pantyhose. The Police Department’s interest in her boss fizzled out to nothing; they had obviously gotten their information from an incorrect source. Trina’s job was secure, so nothing came of the incident other than her feelings getting crushed beneath a very large, very charming and very expensive, but heavy shoe.

\*\*\*

Trina checked her e-mail on Thursday night, it had been awhile since she'd been able to do so, or had the inclination.

Over three hundred messages awaited her attention. As she read through them quickly, she realized that her ass was too large (advertisements for diet pills), her penis was too small, her penis couldn't get up, her breasts were too small, and age mysteriously crawled all over her face and body in highly detectable traces of wrinkles, cellulite, age spots, and varicose veins.

She had also won a gazillion dollars, and several people in other countries were coming into large amounts of untraceable money but were unable to claim it, so she'd been chosen as the lucky person picked to retrieve it for them, and she could keep the majority of the profit.

A couple of e-mails were from friends, both professional and from school, just catching up, or passing along jokes.

An instant message popped up while she laughed over a joke a friend sent her.

"Hello Trina, how are you?" the message said.

"Fine," she replied, not recognizing the name on the IM – The Midnight Marauder. "Who are you?"

"Sam." The message popped up in reply.

"Do I know you?"

"Not yet, but you will."

Trina looked around her, checking to make sure she'd remembered to lock the door and close the windows. This seemed kind of creepy. She clicked on the screen name of the instant messaging program, and the information profile of the sender came up. Samuel Midnight, 33 years old, website designer. Lives in the same state, but no city named. A small, fuzzy picture showed a dark-haired man in front of a computer. It was difficult to see any more details.

"Your aunt gave me your information to contact you. She said you were single and might be looking to go out with someone."

"I don't have an aunt, sorry," she replied, shaking her head. Who were these supposed "aunts" that kept trying to set her up with people? This was getting a little

ridiculous. “You must have me mistaken with someone else.” Trina tried to remember any elderly people in the apartment complex who might have decided she was a bit old to be on the shelf, but couldn’t think of any whom she knew well enough to have invited that kind of attention.

“You’re not married, are you?” his message asked with a little smiley with a question mark over its’ head.

“No, I’m not married, but...” Trina accidentally hit the enter button, sending the message before she finished. Another IM window popped up.

“Hey sexy!” the new window told her. *What in the world?* She never received IM’s from anyone but her friends; this was highly unusual.

“Who is this? Do I know you?” Trina replied to the new person. She looked at the screen name, but didn’t know anyone who went by the name of JarMan35.

“It’s Jarett!” the window informed her. “I noticed your messenger online and decided to IM you. I did a search for your name online just in case you used this service. I hope you don’t mind.”

She smiled at the message, remembering the miniature rosebush he’d sent her.

“I don’t mind. Thank you for the roses that you sent me, they’re beautiful,” she replied to his message. She didn’t tell him that they were gracing her back porch railing. Her allergies didn’t allow her to invite the bush into the house.

“They look nice on your back porch, Trina. I did notice that it’s pretty bare back there when I did some maintenance along the back of the property. You didn’t like them?” Damn! She’d forgotten for a moment that he managed the apartment complex.

“I do, really I do! But I’m afraid I’m really allergic to roses. I love them, but they don’t love me!” she replied back to the message.

“Why don’t we go out tomorrow night?” another window popped up, asking.

“Yes, I’d like that. What would you like to do? Would you like to go see a movie?” Trina sent the reply quickly as the timer went off on the oven—time to check her dinner.

She set the timer for ten more minutes, as the chicken wasn’t done yet, and sat back down at her computer. She brought up a message window and asked Jarett what time he wanted to go out tomorrow night, if a movie was ok, and where?

After a long pause, a reply came from Jarett. "Pardon me? Are you asking if I'd like to go out tomorrow night? If so, the answer is definitely yes."

Trina puzzled over his ignorance, she had just replied to his invitation. After thinking about it a moment, another window popped up.

"That's *great!* I'll meet you at the Grand Theater in town at 7:30 tomorrow night, you can pick the movie." Trina almost hit her jaw on the keyboard... the message came from The Midnight Marauder. *Oh no! She'd sent the reply to the wrong man.*

A message from Jarett informed her that he would meet her at the Grand Theater at 7:30 tomorrow night. He was on his way out, but would see her then. His computer went offline, according to the messenger.

Her computer had been possessed. There was no other possible explanation. How could she have made two dates on one night, at the same time, without meaning to make any?

Another message popped up from The Midnight Marauder. "I'll find you at the theater, no description is necessary."

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*The sisters nodded to one another; she'd like this one. He owned his own business designing websites and the article online said he'd been counted among the wealthiest newcomers on the designer scene. They hadn't noticed the messages from the other person; they'd just been concentrating on the ones from Sam. They popped out of existence, their job done for the night.*

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Trina typed her reply in another window to the Midnight Marauder, Sam. "I'm sorry, there has been a mistake, I can't..."

The power went out on the entire block.

*Compliments of Murphy.*

## Chapter 8

Trina tried all day long to get hold of Jarett, both by phone, e-mail, even leaving a note on his door for him to call her. She heard nothing, and dreaded the evening. After work, she showered and dressed, and tried knocking on his door one last time.

Nobody came to the door.

She finally went to the theater to try and find Jarett there, somewhat forgetting about The Midnight Marauder. She felt more concerned about finding Jarett, as she had never met Sam and no idea if he would even show.

“Trina?”

She turned around and saw Sam.

He was tall, very tall. And while his picture on the Internet looked fuzzy, this man was all sharp, protruding angles. His body looked emaciated, almost to the point that he seemed like a walking skeleton. His long, very stringy black hair hung in lank, listless chunks around his shoulders, and the multitude of piercings through various parts of his face made her wonder if he sprang a leak whenever he drank a glass of water.

Black clothes, a leather vest, and overlarge black boots completed the outfit, although they looked less like clothing than part of his persona. They smelled like he lived in them. She doubted he'd bathed in a long time.

Obviously, the picture on the Internet was taken a very long time ago. Yet, it wasn't his appearance that put her off, the man simply exuded evil. Deeply embedded evil that didn't show on the surface, but pooled, rotted, and seeped from the depths of the soul.

She shivered after shaking his hand in greeting, and it definitely wasn't from cold.

“I'm Sam, it's very nice to meet you,” he said in a perfectly normal voice. Friendly, not too high, nor too low in volume. He seemed perfectly fine, she must have been imagining what she'd felt before.

“Thank you, it's nice to meet you also. Although I still don't know how you got my information. I don't have any aunts.”

He shrugged, the leather vest squeaking in protest. “I'd never met her before; she seemed like a nice lady who gave me your e-mail address and IM screen name. She did it over e-mail; I guess she seen the article about me in Money magazine. I've made

quite a name for myself in website design, and she contacted me. So I figured, why not? I haven't gotten out for awhile."

He smiled at her, and yawned, seeming tired. The multiple posts pierced through his tongue gave her pause. She fleetingly wondered if food slalom raced through those posts to make it to the back of his mouth. His prominent Adam's apple moved up and down the stretched column of his throat, and he kept looking around nervously, his eyes constantly moving.

He made her uneasy. Something about him just didn't click right. He may be famous, he may be wealthy, but she didn't want to go into that dark theater with him or anywhere afterwards, either.

Trina started to make an excuse as to why she needed to leave, when he suddenly grabbed her upper arm.

He said in a somewhat loud, strained voice, "Are you ready to go in, Dear?" He looked quickly behind him, as he pasted a strange smile on his face, pulling his jacket unobtrusively closer to his body. She saw the glint of metal inside the jacket, and a large black handle. She'd seen hunting knives like that before; the blade itself looked to be about six inches long. What had she gotten herself into?

She glanced quickly behind him, and saw a pair of uniformed police officers getting out of their police car in front of the theater. They were staring intently at Sam. The radio from the car blared numbers and codes almost incoherently, and a female voice distorted by radio waves gave out information on a huge riot on the other side of the county, requesting any available units.

Sam's grip tightened painfully on her arm as he dragged her towards the theater box office. "Don't say a word. I know you've seen what I have, so I suggest that you play along nicely with whatever I do."

Trina looked desperately around, noticing two small children near them in line. The blonde little girl looked about two years old, clasping her mother's hand while sucking her thumb. She and her older brother, who looked to be about four, stood in line with their mother, impatiently waiting to see the new release of the children's movie that had the theater lobby so crowded.

Sam saw the direction she glanced, and gestured towards the children. "Look normal, unless you want someone *e/se* to get hurt, too."

Trina gulped and nodded, feeling that overwhelming evil reaching through his grasping fingers. She would never doubt her intuition again.

"*Honey!*" she heard some man calling. "Honey! I'm glad you waited for me!" The voice came closer to the theater. "And how nice of your brother to wait with you!" The man's voice sounded somewhat familiar, and then he sounded as if he were right behind her. She was afraid to look back, in case Sam took it as an aggressive move.

Someone gripped her other hand firmly, and she found herself forcefully ripped from the vicious clasp of the evil that threatened her. Deep, masculine laughter rained down around her as she was swept into a passionate embrace, with the man's body now positioned between her and Sam, several feet away.

"Oh Darling, I missed you so much! I promise I'll never go on a business trip that long again!" Firm lips covered her mouth in a mind-blowing kiss that swept not only conscious thought from her head, but sent passion roaring through her tightly-strung body that only moments before faced the imminent threat of death.

*Jarett had come.*

## Chapter 9

The tenseness in Jarett's body drew Trina out of her sensual trance. Shouting and the sounds of fighting came from behind him as he turned quickly and ran with her, drawing her out of harm's way and shouting for everyone to run for their lives!

She glanced behind him, just in time to see the second officer launch himself in a flying tackle towards Sam as he ran from the first officer he had been fighting with. The first officer lay on the ground moaning, holding his bleeding stomach. His face went white with shock as he collapsed.

Jarett yelled, pushing her towards the police car as fast as she could run. "Call for help! Get on the radio and call for backup! Tell them an officer is down and where we are. Hurry Trina, HURRY!"

Trina ran full-tilt for the police car, grabbing the radio and pushing the button, "HELP! There's an officer down at the Grand Theater on Main Street. He's hurt and bleeding, I think he's been stabbed by a knife. The other officer is fighting the man, and they need backup!"

The Dispatcher sounded calm on the other end of the radio, professional even though one of her own had been injured and another threatened. "Ma'am, officers are on the way right now. How many people are the officers fighting, and are there any weapons other than a knife?"

"Just one man, his name is Sam Midnight. He calls himself 'The Midnight Marauder' on the Internet." Trina's body started shivering uncontrollably as she started realizing how close she'd come to disaster.

"Ma'am," the Dispatcher's voice came over the radio again. "The police cars are still at least five minutes away; they're coming from the other side of town. Is there anyone there who can help the officers?"

Trina looked out the front window, seeing the second officer and Jarett still fighting with Sam. Both of them looked worn out, but Sam looked strangely invigorated, more alive than he'd seemed the entire time she had been standing with him, as if the acts of violence refreshed or enlivened him in some way. While he held the knife in his left

hand, he obviously enjoyed physically hitting his opponents with his right hand, as well as slashing towards them with the large hunting knife.

The ungodly grin on his face as he smashed his fist into the officer's face scared Trina more than the sight of the knife had earlier. She saw that the officer's weapon was missing from his holster, probably lost in the fight. It was also obvious that he hadn't used it when they first confronted Sam; due to the danger to innocent bystanders... the outside lobby had been crowded with small children. But now the way was clear.

Trina looked around desperately for some type of help. The second officer also lay on the cement. She saw Jarett rising shakily from the ground, bleeding steadily from several wounds, getting ready to take on Sam yet again.

"Yes," she answered the Dispatcher. "There's someone here who can help."

\*\*\*

The racking of a shotgun round into the chamber shocked Sam into backing away. The officer he had been fighting laid unmoving on the ground several feet away, a pool of blood spreading slowly around his body.

"Hey now, what are you doing with that?" Sam asked, again in a normal voice, as if he had not just stabbed two police officers.

"I'm getting ready to shoot your sorry ass and send you straight to hell where you belong," a strong voice replied.

"But it's all a misunderstanding. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I just wanted to see a movie, and all of a sudden, everyone jumped me. It's purely self defense," he wheedled, slowing moving towards where he last saw the officer's handgun.

"Stop right there. Drop the knife and kick it away."

Sam stopped and lowered the knife, crouching in a predatory stance; he prepared to charge. The second he started running towards his opponent, the shotgun calmly blew his face off, plastering it on the wall behind him. His body dropped to the ground, and the knife clattered away. Death was instant.

Trina took the opportunity to run to the downed officer and quickly grabbed his handcuffs. She set the shotgun down next to him, going back quickly to place the cuffs on Sam's body, his hands pulled behind his back. She'd watched too many fictional police shows on television to trust that he wasn't playing possum...even with his face

blown off. Vampires came back to life, didn't they? Although she hadn't seen any fangs, this guy most certainly wasn't normal.

Trina saw that Jarett looked mostly banged up and had been knocked out, but she couldn't see any life-threatening injuries. He started stirring when she had first held the shotgun on Sam. But her main concern right now remained with the officers; they seemed the most seriously wounded. She could still hear the first moaning faintly, but the second one, whose cuffs she'd grabbed, wasn't making any noise at all. She glanced around for someone to help her give the men medical care, but the theater patrons and passersby had scattered to the four winds and were nowhere to be seen.

She went back to the second officer, and felt for a pulse or breathing, without moving him. He was lying mostly on his stomach and she couldn't feel anything. Carefully, she turned him onto his back, supporting his head and neck. She needn't have bothered trying to support him to prevent further injury. His lifeless eyes stared into the great unknown beyond. She closed his eyes with her hand. His silver-colored nametag read Burnett. He had died trying to save innocent lives, including hers.

She rose quickly, looking over at Jarett, who waved her towards the other officer. "I'll be ok, go help him Trina, he looks like he's hurt badly."

She ran, stripping off her loose over shirt as she saw the blood seeping through the wounded officer's hands covering his stomach.

"Sir, help is on the way, let me see what I can do until they get here," she told him softly, ignoring the salty tears running down her face. He gasped in pain as she moved his hand gently out of the way so that she could see his injuries. Quickly, she opened his uniform shirt, undoing the Velcro straps holding his bulletproof vest on. The officer passed out, his blood quickly turning his undershirt crimson.

Deep slash marks on the bulletproof vest showed that it had held up to the worst of the knife attack, but it couldn't protect where it did not cover. A well-worn photograph dropped out of the chest pocket in the vest, where one of the knife slices ripped it open. It showed the officer, who was smiling, and had his arm around a very pregnant woman with a small boy standing in front of them. It was obviously his family, which he kept close to his heart every time he walked into his dangerous job.

A large, deep slash sliced across his stomach, and looked to be bleeding heavily. Trina took her over shirt, pressing it directly on the wound, keeping steady pressure to help control the bleeding. The scuffling sound next to her drew her eyes to Jarett's as he stiffly sat down next to her, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. "How is he?" he asked, stifling a groan as he settled up against the wall.

"He's hurt pretty bad. I'm trying to control the bleeding, but the ambulance better get here quickly," she said quietly, in case the officer regained consciousness. They could hear very faint sirens far off in the distance.

"How did you know? Jarett, how did you know what was going on?" she asked him incredulously.

"Haven't you heard on the news about the serial rapist and murderer that has been plaguing the state?" he asked her quietly.

"Well, no, not really. I haven't had much of a chance to listen to the radio, and I don't watch much television. Usually just movies, if I do. Why?"

"They've been after the Midnight Marauder for months now. Out of eight victims, only one escaped and lived long enough to give his description. I'm assuming these officers just happened to be driving by when they saw him with you. With his looks, it would be difficult to pass himself off as someone else. The TV and radio have been broadcasting his description for weeks, trying to catch him. I'm surprised he came out in public, the way everyone has been looking for him.

"I was walking over from the parking lot down the street to meet you, and saw the cops looking at him. Then I saw you with him. You looked scared to death, and he looked mean as hell. It was obvious that you weren't with him voluntarily, Trina. I saw the officers pulling their guns, and then put them away because there were too many people. I couldn't just stand there and watch that guy hurt you, I had to do something." His hand tightened on her shoulder.

She took her free hand and covered his hand, briefly squeezing. "Jarett, there's no way I could even begin to adequately thank you. You saved my life."

"And then you saved mine. And probably his, too," he nodded to the unconscious officer. "You're one gutsy woman, Trina."

Two ambulances, along with six police cars squealed into the theater parking lot, followed by several more cars shortly afterwards. The time between Trina's call over the radio and their arrival hadn't been very long, although it seemed a lifetime to those waiting for help. The paramedics loaded up both the wounded officer and Jarett, rushing them to the hospital.

Several other officers took charge of the scene, blocking off the area with crime scene tape, and interviewing anyone who may have seen what happened. They took pictures, marked where everything was, covering the bodies of the slain police officer, as well as Sam, with a cover to shield them from the myriad of reporters and tabloid press that arrived as soon as they heard something about the Midnight Marauder being captured.

\*\*\*

*The sisters decided to pop in to check on how Trina's date was going with the rich businessman that they'd found online, after seeing him in an article in a magazine. The sisters and their kind were able to solidify into human form in order to interact with the real world, which enabled them to talk with people and interact in other ways when necessary. Sometimes it was fun!*

*While Sam Midnight usually shunned most interviews, the interviewers mentioned that he seemed pretty decent. The picture in the article showed him dressed casually, but clean, and looking very presentable. It was an older article, but they'd been able to find him anyway.*

*When the sisters popped in and found the complete chaos of a murder scene, their shock turned into complete dismay as they located Trina, and overheard her telling the detectives what happened.*

*If they hadn't been dead already, the shock would have killed them. What had they done to their only living descendant? In trying to help her find true love, they'd only succeeded in helping her find true evil, and almost joining them in the afterlife.*

## Chapter 10

By the time Trina made it to the hospital to check on Jarett, it was well after midnight. She stumbled with exhaustion as she walked into the Emergency Room, checking in with the ER staff to see about Jarett's condition. An orderly showed her back to a curtained area of the ER, where Jarett sat alone for the moment. Most of the noise and staff were gathered in the far corner of the Emergency Room, where several uniformed police officers were looking worried. Trina assumed this is where the injured officer was being treated.

Jarett smiled when he saw her, and opened his arms. Trina practically fell into them, the tears gathering in her eyes. When he wrapped his arms around her, she felt like she'd come home. The comfort she had needed all night during the investigation and questioning welcomed her right here in Jarett's arms.

"Are you ok?" she asked, finally pulling away with a sigh, and looking him over thoroughly. He lay in the hospital bed wearing blue jeans. His bloodstained shirt lay over the back of the chair, cut in several places and looked beyond repair. Her eyes quickly traveled over his muscled chest, noting the bandages taped here and there, but nothing that looked particularly dangerous.

"I'm fine, a couple of stitches, and lots of bruises. I've gotten worse from fighting with my brothers growing up," Jarett comforted her. "I'm just waiting for them to bring my release paperwork to sign, and then they said I can go home."

"Thank God, I don't know what I'd have done without you coming when you did, Jarett. I..." Jarett cut her off with a shake of his head.

"You more than repaid me by saving my ass later on, Trina. Please, let's just let this go; we have our lives to go on with."

A nurse came in with the paperwork that Jarett had been waiting for. After receiving his discharge instructions, medication, and signing the papers, he was free to go. As they left the curtained area, one of the officers on the other side of the ER spotted them and stopped them with a gesture. Trina groaned, she'd been through enough interrogations tonight to last a lifetime.

"Are you Trina Sackette?" the officer asked. Trina nodded her head, stealing herself for a very long night. She stared in shock when the officer shook her hand with heartfelt

gratitude. "Thank you. Thank you both," he said with a tremble in his voice, shaking Jarett's hand too. "The doctor's say Jim will live, and make a full recovery."

"Jim? Is that the officer's name?" Trina asked, looking towards the corner. What looked to be the officer's wife came out, tears of happiness streaming down her face. It was the same woman Trina had seen in the picture held close to the officer's heart in his vest pocket. She looked up, and seeing Trina and Jarett, smiled the most grateful smile Trina could ever remember seeing, as another officer led her away towards the waiting room. The door opened, and Trina saw an older woman, obviously the woman's mother, holding a small baby and holding the hand of the little boy that was also in the photograph.

A hand on her shoulder turned her attention away from the swinging door to the ER, and she saw Thom Bentler, the detective who had taken her to the business party and deceived her. Her sudden frown obviously betrayed her annoyance at seeing him here. He pulled her into a very tight, almost uncomfortable embrace, lifting her off the ground. He then turned to pump Jarett's hand up and down enthusiastically. "I can't thank both of you enough for what you did. There's no way we could get to the scene any sooner, and they'd *both* be dead if not for you."

Trina's mouth dropped open as she stared at him. What happened to the suave, polished businessman she had met and gone out with, who then turned into the all-business, taciturn detective? This man was neither. He looked like a concerned and much-relieved family member. Which is just what he turned out to be.

"Jim is my brother. We went through the Police Academy together, trained together, and live down the street from each other. I don't know what I'd do without him," he turned back to look at the corner area where family and friends surrounded Jim. "We have our chaplain and friends with Officer Burnett's family at his home right now. I know you did everything you could, but please know that he died doing what he loved." He smiled a sad smile, and sighed. "It's something every officer and their family face every time they go out on the job."

He surreptitiously wiped away a tear as he looked at the couple before him. "If there's anything I can do for either of you... Anything, ever, please, just let me know." He turned to Trina, again taking her hand in his.

"I'm sorry for deceiving you. It's part of the job, but that doesn't mean I liked doing it. You're a great lady, and obviously very gutsy, too. There's not many people out there, man or woman that could do what you did. You should be very proud of yourself."

Taking a quick look at Jarett watching them -- in particular where his hand held Trina's, he smiled widely. Dropping Trina's hand, he placed a hand on Jarett's shoulder. "Take care of her man; she's some kind of woman." The men seemed to reach some type of unheard understanding, one that Trina couldn't see or hear, but the men definitely understood. A terse nod from Jarett ended the conversation as the detective went back to his brother.

At last, Jarett led Trina out the doors of the Emergency Room, through the lobby, and outside into the crisp, cold night. The nearly full moon brightened the parking lot almost to the point of daylight, making finding her car easy. Jarett's car remained in the theater lot.

"Do you need to get your car tonight, Jarett?" Trina asked quietly as he settled into the passenger seat of her car with a groan. The look he gave her curled her toes, and without a word, she started the car, heading back to the apartments. Neither mentioned his car again.

She pulled into the parking lot, and Jarett opened his door, getting out with some difficulty. Apparently, the beating he'd taken during the fight finally settled into a throbbing pain. Luckily, the hospital gave him some pain pills in anticipation, even though he had told them he was fine and didn't need any. Obviously, they were used to macho men.

Trina held his hand, walking slowly with him and carrying his bag. He unlocked the door to his apartment, pulling her in after him when she tried to hand him his bag of things from the hospital and go to her own apartment. "I need you, Trina," he said simply.

She came in, settled him on the couch with his cat purring on his lap, and went into his kitchen. She poured him something to drink, and got one of his pain pills for him to take. Obviously he needed them, whether he would admit it or not. She sat next to him, handing him his drink and his pill. When he started sputtering that he didn't need it, she glared at him without saying a word until he took it. She lit the fire in the fireplace, which

he'd already laid in the grate earlier. Then she sat down again beside him, as he turned the stereo on with the remote that sat on the side table beside the couch.

He set his glass down on the coffee table, and took her hand in his, sitting there and rubbing his thumb gently over the back of her hand absently. They listened to the soft Celtic music that drifted through the room, a soothing and melodic background to the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. Neither felt the need to talk. What they had experienced today forever tossed them beyond the trembling, shifting waves of first dates. They were bonded in a way most people never got to know, except in times of adversity or war. When people were tested in extraordinary circumstances, either the bonds of relationship held strongly, in ways that strengthened them, or the bonds were torn asunder, rarely able to be repaired.

Jarett drew Trina's hand into his own, drawing her onto his lap, taking her mouth firmly as he settled her into his embrace. She melted under his ardor, flames licking deeply into her, as deeply as fear had grasped its thorny talons into her soul earlier. Jarett's tender loving soothed the harsh wounds, leaving nothing but desire. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling closer and entwining her tongue with his. The heat rose exponentially between them, feasted on their desires and left them panting for more.

All playfulness had been put aside. When faced with death, sometimes there was nothing left in the aftermath but to celebrate life. Trina grabbed blindly at Jarett's clothing, pulling off any part of it that she could reach, desperate to touch him, to reassure herself of his strength, virility, and most of all, life.

Jarett pulled her hands aside, kissing her tenderly as he held her hands at her side and placed her back on the couch next to him. "I want to continue this in the bedroom. Our first time deserves to be someplace special." He took her hand and brought her into the master bedroom.

A large bed dominated the room; a dark brown silk comforter covered dark patterned sheets. The bed was made up, with several masculine pillows tossed artfully on top. He laid Trina down on the cover, taking her clothing off slowly and gazing into her eyes as he set each piece aside. When nothing remained on Trina but her panties, he removed the rest of his clothes, standing there long enough for her to gaze her fill.

He seemed perfect in Trina's eyes. The bandages did nothing to detract from his muscular body. Wide shoulders tapered into strong arms that could forcefully protect a woman, or sweep her gently off her feet and pleasure her intensely. A deep, wide chest furred with dark curling hair tapered into a trim waist, with what Trina called a 'goody line' leading the way south to the nest of hair surrounding his erection. Large and thick, it throbbed in time with his heartbeat. His heavy sac hung below, between well-muscled thighs. His legs were long and strong, and carried him onto the bed, covering Trina as he rubbed himself fully over her body, snatching her last remaining bits of sanity away.

The hair on his chest abraded her tightened nipples, catching and wrapping themselves around each other, pulling lightly as he slid to the side in order to bring a leg up to settle between her thighs. Trina gasped as his hand ran up her side, and cupped her breast in his large palm. Two of his roughened fingers drew her swollen nipples between them, deepening her flush and pulling tingling strings of lust that led directly into her womb. He kissed her strongly, taking charge of their passion, and in this instance, she gladly let him. Her hands threaded through his soft, curling hair, pulling his head down to her nipples that ached for his talented tongue.

Jarett licked her, his tongue alternately rough, then soft, as he circled her nipples and breasts, holding each up in turn, as he traded off between them, thumbing her tight buds to keep her passion piqued. When he finally drew her fully into his mouth, Trina arched her back and bit back a loud moan as he lightly nipped her. "No, don't hold back. Let me hear you, Trina. I *need* to hear you, all of you. Tonight I want you to hold nothing back from me."

The feelings rushing through Trina felt as if molten lava lit her emotions and lust on fire in a smoldering pool of desire that only Jarett could quench. He drew his strong hands down her sides, reaching around behind her and grabbing her cheeks firmly, pulling her into him as he pulled her panties down around her feet, tossing them across the room. Rolling onto his back, he pulled her over on top of him, never once breaking the kiss that held them together.

He ran his hands over her back, rubbing and pulling, grabbing her ass and then settling her onto him. His throbbing penis lay between her passion-swollen lips, and he moved her slightly, pushing himself so that he rubbed against her erect clit, sliding in the

wetness her excitement created. Trina gasped and jumped, rubbing herself against him as they caressed each other. She sat up, shaking her hair back from her head, as the auburn curls tumbled down her back. Jarett reached for her, feeling her breasts and pulling at her nipples, grinding himself into her as she undulated against him. She surrounded his hands with hers, pulling harder at her nipples, and showing him what she liked. What she needed. What she must have.

She reached underneath herself and grasped him firmly. She wanted him, now. No matter that her fingers wouldn't close around his thickness. He was uncut, and as she pulled back towards the base of him, his foreskin peeled back from the head and the glistening drop of precum on the tip shone in the light filtering in from the living room. Moving down, Trina tasted him. Gently at first, she tickled her tongue across the head of his penis, then slid around, licking underneath the sensitive head. He groaned loudly, thrusting himself closer to her mouth, as his hands wrapped gently in her hair, more in excited wonder than in any type of control.

Trina grasped his large sac in her hand, gently rolling the orbs inside. With her other hand, she grabbed his staff underneath where she worked with her tongue, her saliva easing the slide as she pumped him and hungrily fed him into her mouth. Deeper, farther, faster, she fought to overcome the obvious size limitations to pull him into her throat. By the time she reached the base, she looked up at him, squeezing her juicy thighs together at the sight that greeted her eyes.

Jarett's head was thrown back, his teeth clenched and the column of his throat stood in sharp relief, as he tensed every muscle in order not to come immediately. She had taken all of him. The edge that he'd almost flown over with complete abandon slowly slid back within reach; he didn't want to come in her mouth. Not this time. His muscles trembled with the effort of holding back, and Trina gently released him from the prison of her mouth when she saw how close he was to losing control.

Almost forcefully, Jarett flipped her over; it was her turn to burn. Grasping her legs behind each knee, he drew first one leg and then the other up so that they tented up on the bed. He started kissing one knee, licking and nibbling his way down towards her molten core. She squirmed as he got closer. He danced with the fire, drawing further away and then back, and close enough to get burned again.

He was a master.

Then the master got too close. He grasped her hips in his hands, and licked her firmly, the juices that she'd been gathering and secreting suddenly gushing into his mouth as he separated her with his tongue. He lapped up all that he could get, rubbing the sides of her most intimate parts with his tongue, thrusting, and parrying in his effort to win the fight and conquer her glory. His tongue firmly licked up to her swollen clit; it stood at attention and saluted, ready to tousele.

Jarett ran his fingers up her legs and inserted one large finger up inside of her as he finally paid homage to her clit. Wrapping around it, he licked and circled, as he eased another finger into her. When his thrusting stopped, he hooked his fingers up inside of her, then sucked hard on her clit, as his fingers rubbed a spot inside of her that made her explode.

Trina's legs stiffened and her ass shot up off the bed, trembling uncontrollably as the heat inside of her lost control and flowed over Jarett's mouth and hand. Her loud cries of completion were music to his ears. Slowly, he drew his fingers out, not wanting to over stimulate her. He settled on top of her, his bulk comforting and warm as she came down from the peaks of the mountain, only to feel him nudging at the entrance, wanting in. He kissed her deeply, and she tasted her spent passion on his lips, the passion that he so expertly brought to the foreground.

Jarett looked at her then, pausing. "Do you want to take this any further, Trina? It's up to you. You can stop me now if you want to." He trembled with the need to push himself forcefully up inside of her, making her his own. Yet he held back, waiting for her acquiescence.

Trina melted. She reached behind him, drawing her legs up along his sides, and grabbed his firmly muscled ass. She pulled him quickly inside of her, gasping at the sudden stretching and fullness that she hadn't expected. She knew he was big, bigger than any man she'd been with, but this feeling was almost impossible to describe. Jarett's deep growl as she pulled him into her sounded muffled as he buried his face in her neck. He kissed, bit, and sucked at her, slowly pressing into her, sure that she couldn't take him all.

He moved slowly out, and the emptiness pulled Trina to thrust her hips back up at him. “No, please,” she cried. He pushed back in, again slowly, trying to give her time to get used to his size. She was so tight; there was no way.

*“Damn it, Jarett! Give it to me! I’m not some wilting flower, I want it all! Now, and you’d better do it hard, oh god, I’m so close again, please! Don’t hold back!”* Jarett looked shocked, but he’d told her he didn’t want her to hold back, and the passion that flushed her face lent truth to her pleas. He drew back and rammed into her hard. Her eyes flew open as he pulled her legs up higher on either side of him, grasping her hips as he settled onto his knees for leverage and started pounding into her, hard and fast. Trina’s grunts of passion escaped her open mouth, and the flush of her face spread onto her chest, pinpointing her nipples and spreading quickly to her pussy. She reached between them, rubbing her clit as his groan started from the depths of his chest. His cock thickened inside of her, ready to explode. The extra stretching of his excitement pushed her over the edge, as she screamed and her muscles grasped at his cock, milking his seed and pulling him over the edge to follow her into oblivion.

Jarett settled next to her, pulling her into his arms as she moved her satiated body next to his, both soon falling asleep from pure exhaustion, while touching every place they were able to. Just before the last bit of consciousness fled for the night, Jarett reached down and pulled the comforter over them both, keeping the cool night air at bay.

## Chapter 11

*The sisters mulled over their complete and utter failure. While there'd always been rules for those who chose to remain after death, the sisters conveniently chose to ignore the ones they didn't quite agree with. Not meddling in the lives of their descendants had always been one of the rules that didn't make sense to them. Unfortunately, for Trina, the sisters now knew why the rules were in place, and why they were so strictly enforced.*

*"Fina?" Josie asked quietly as they sat in the mists.*

*"Yes, Josie?"*

*"Did Murphy do it? I know we interfered again where we weren't supposed to. I knew we shouldn't have done it, but even we have never messed up this badly before. Was it Murphy?"*

*"No, sister. I know Murphy has a justified grudge against us, but not even he would go that far—he wouldn't have put Trina in danger of losing her life or being used in that way. There's no way he'd hurt someone like that. Not even someone from our family."*

*"Do you think he still hurts? After all this time?" Josie asked.*

*"What we did to him was wrong. And we never told him why. Wouldn't you still be mad, dear?" Fina asked sadly.*

*"I suppose I would. But we had good reason..." Josie said brokenly.*

*"Isn't there always a reason for bad things to happen? Whether we like it or not, we hurt that man."*

*"But I was pregnant, Fina! And the baby wasn't his! I couldn't do that to him, it would have broken his heart to find me having someone else's child," Josie cried.*

*"Was it better for him not to know you were raped by his brother, Josie? When we just disappeared suddenly, a week before you were to marry him, what was he supposed to do, or to think? Do you think that didn't break his heart? He's carried the grudge against our family into the afterlife. Don't you think it would have been better to have given him the truth from the start, and let him be the judge of what he wanted?" Fina pleaded with her sister, finally able to talk about the subject that had been forbidden even after their deaths.*

*“Oh Fina!” Josie sobbed. “I was always the loudest one of us. The proudest and the strongest. But when push came to shove, you were stronger and wiser. You supported me in my decision to leave; even when you knew it was wrong. We all knew Murphy’s brother was bad... we just didn’t know how bad he could really be, until... until...”*

*“Until he ran the carriage off the road and down into the ravine and killed us, you mean. After he’d found out about his baby that you’d given up,” Fina replied. “But the true misery is that his brother never knew what happened to you. They never did find the carriage after it burst into flames from the lanterns, there was just nothing left. And Murphy lived all those years afterwards, bitter and alone, and hating us.”*

*“If I could take it back, I would, Fina. I’d take it back and tell him the truth. Now I know what I should have done then. What I couldn’t make myself do then.” Josie replied. She looked at Fina, finally noticing the strange look on her sister’s face through the mists as she stared at something behind Josie.*

*“Why didn’t you tell me, Josie?” Murphy asked quietly.*

*She gasped and turned quickly; her moment of truth had finally come, after all this time.*

*“I couldn’t. I knew you loved your brother. Even with all of his faults, you still loved him, and I couldn’t take that away from you. It was always one of the things that I admired most about you, Murphy, your ability to love your family, even in the most trying of circumstances.” Josie sighed. “I didn’t want you to know I carried his child – a child conceived in hate and fear. The baby was a girl, I left her with a wonderful, but childless couple that I’d found through a church in the town we hid in.”*

*“Josie,” Murphy placed his hand alongside her face, caressing her in a way he hadn’t touched anyone since she left him. “Family is forever, and they will always be yours, through the good and the bad. Some family you are born with and some are chosen. Some you find later. You were my family, Josie. You were to be my wife, and I chose you to be my family, for better or for worse. I would have been there for you, no matter what happened. Don’t you know that?” He pulled her into his arms as she burst into tears, sobbing how sorry she was that she’d never told him.*

*Fina faded out; her sister having finally faced what kept them here in the first place. She popped in to check on their still-living relative – a far descendant from that ill-fated*

*rape. When Fina found Trina wrapped in Jarett's arms, Fina faced the reality that not even those in the afterlife can direct the heart where it will not go. And while Jarett wasn't quite what they would have chosen for their descendant, she could see the unbreakable bond between them, shimmering brightly in the mists of time.*

*As Murphy, Fina, and Josie prepared to depart the world of the living once and for all, Murphy disclosed to the sisters that Jarett wasn't the poor working man they'd thought him to be all this time. Jarett and Trina were quite well set up financially, for whatever they chose to do with themselves. So Trina didn't end up with whom the sisters thought that she should—she ended up with Murphy's choice for her.*

*But Murphy had one last little surprise, who would be joining Jarett and Trina in about nine months. Murphy faded out, laughing at his last little joke.*

*The sisters took one long, last look at their descendant before they, too, passed over to the other side.*

*Their last conscious thought that they shared was that although sometimes Murphy wins, that's not always a bad thing.*