

Spanking Tails

Volume VI

**By
Maren Smith**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Rent-A-Bride

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	17
Chapter Three	30
Chapter Four	47

Our House

Chapter One	60
Chapter Two	74
Chapter Three	88
Chapter Four	102

Holiday Bliss

Chapter One	115
Chapter Two	131

First Impressions

Chapter One	147
Chapter Two	161

Rent-A-Bride

Chapter One

Daniel lay his cards face down on the green felt table. In Texas Hold-Em it was always good to know when to quit, and he had just reached that moment. He smiled as he watched his opponent pull the pot to him, and then Daniel scooted back his chair.

"You're not leaving already, are you?" one of the other men at the table asked.

Daniel did not make the mistake of thinking it was his fond company that would be missed. He tucked his wallet back into his inside jacket pocket. "I'm sure you'll find a wealthy fifth eager to be plucked back to poverty before my chair has cooled. Have a good night, gentlemen."

Instead of leaving the casino, Daniel stopped at the bar to salve the sting of his losses with a dollop of brandy. As he was waiting for his drink, he glanced up at the TV above the bar, catching only the tail end of the news report being broadcast.

He shook his head. "Looks like they found another letter."

Just setting a glass down in front of him, the Bartender nodded and poured a finger's width of brandy into a glass. "Yep. Killed a congressional representative in Missouri. But at least now they think they know something about whoever's sending them."

"What is it?"

"They're not saying too much about it, except that they've found evidence that suggests it's someone in a government position. Some sort of little telltale thing in the stationary. I don't know forensics, but maybe they'll catch the bastard soon."

"A government employee." Daniel shook his head again, snorting with grim disbelief.

"Or an official, maybe." The bartender arched an eyebrow, nodding meaningfully as he wiped down some glasses.

"Damn."

"I know," the bartender agreed, just as grimly. "Just what this world needs, huh? Some lunatic in power waging biological warfare through the U.S. mail."

Daniel sipped at his drink, staring at the TV and shook his head a final time. Then, paying for his brandy and tipping the bartender, he walked out of the Golden Hills Casino into the hot Las Vegas sun.

The strip that hosted the Golden Hills was a fairly quiet one on the outskirts of the busier tourist rows. There were only three gambling hotels on this particular street, a Shell gas station across the road and a lone chapel, Reverend Love's, sandwiched in between the Golden Hills and the Aces High casinos. A loud boisterous laugh pulled his gaze to a young couple, obviously intoxicated and decked out in full wedding regalia, as they staggered up the front steps. Holding onto one another, they disappeared into the church.

Another bachelor bites the dust. Daniel shook his head in sympathy and headed towards the church. Or, more specifically, towards the alley, which separated the Golden Hills from Reverend Love's and led to the back alley where his car was parked. But just as he was drawing abreast of the alley's entrance, a big, white blur shot out of it and smashed right into him, knocking him clean off his feet. A shrill shriek mingled with his low-throated grunt as he toppled over backwards, landing flat on his back on the sidewalk.

The hot sidewalk.

The very hot and very hard, particularly on his back, sidewalk.

A forehead cracked his forehead and a landslide of white, frilly material washed over his head as the

body on his chest slid over the top of him, smothering him in lace and sequins and the somewhat tempting scent of vanilla.

"Aagh!" he said, struggling to get out from under the cloth, batting it out of his face and for a moment revealing a long bare stretch of sun-bronzed thigh.

A very pretty thigh.

A very pretty thigh that culminated, virtually at eye level, into a womanly V that was blocked from his sight only by a slim pair of white panties. He blinked in surprise. "Well hel-lo, beautiful."

The mess of white mesh all around his head began to move as the wearer of those white panties began to fight her way through the cloth to get to him. As the last layer of white was batted away, exposing him once more to the sun, bright green eyes stared down at him in absolute shock.

"Oh my goodness gracious, I'm so terribly sorry!"

Torn between meeting her eyes and meeting her panty line, his natural male proclivities took control and panties won, hands down. More's the pity.

"Not a problem," he said, rather suavely for a man lying on the ground with the hot sidewalk searing through both jacket and shirt to scald his back.

But she wasn't looking at him or even listening at that point. She snapped around to look back down the alley over one bare shoulder and then jumped up to her feet. "Oh my God! Oh my God!"

She ran two steps in one direction, then darted four steps in another, stepping down off the sidewalk as though she intended to cross the street to the gas station without even bothering to check the traffic, light though it was, and then came running back to him. She whined in distress, flapping her hands rapidly up and down like a wedding-gown-clad bird struggling to take flight.

"I've got to hide somewhere! They'll be here any second! I've got to—" She instantly stopped babbling as her eyes fell on Reverend Love's and then she looked at him. Or, more specifically, she looked at the tuxedo he was wearing.

Slowly, his body aching as he moved, Daniel picked himself up off the ground. "They? Who's they?" He didn't like that look in her eyes as she finally raised them to meet his.

"Marry me," she said bluntly.

"What?!" The panties hadn't looked that good! Daniel held up both hands, patting the air between them placatingly, and quickly backed up a step. "Uh, I'm sorry, lady. I really need to go."

"Wait, please!" she begged. "I need you!"

Daniel tried to laugh but the sound stuck in his throat. "Sorry, but I'm not that kind of guy."

"What kind of guy?"

"The marrying kind." He nodded his head toward the chapel, then saluted with two fingers. "Have a nice day."

He pointedly walked around her and into the mouth of the alley, heading for his car. The bright, cherry-red convertible that was the only love of his life.

"They're going to kill me," she suddenly said, clasping her hands in front of her pleadingly. Her mop of bright red curls blew about her face and neck as a slight breeze picked up around them.

He stopped and stared at her. "I'm sorry, does this sort of thing work for you? You just run up and down the street in a wedding gown, proposing to strange men?"

A flash of irritation crossed her face. "I'm a seamstress," she explained. "I made this dress. I was just checking my work when they broke into my shop and started threatening me."

Daniel nodded, not believing a word of it. "I've got to go," he told her, and turned to do just that.

"Please," the redhead begged, clasping her hands in supplication. "Please just... just help me."

What was it about damsels in distress that just went straight past his head, pierced his heart and turned him into the world's biggest dope? Daniel stopped where he was, frowning at the sidewalk before closing his eyes with a sigh and turning around.

She was a lovely woman, somewhere in her early thirties with a mop of untidy red curls that made her look like a punked-out Little Orphan Annie in a sleeveless, strapless, thoroughly sequined white wedding dress. And here he was in a tuxedo. And here they were standing in front of a church that specialized in impromptu weddings.

He may as well have been born with a huge 'Sucker' sign tattooed on his forehead. He gave her a look that said as much. "They're going to kill you?"

She blinked rapidly to keep back the tears in her eyes. She looked up and down the strip, and then sidled up to him. "Please, I need your help. If they find me, believe me, they will kill me. Please."

"Who's they?"

"It's a very long and complicated story," she hedged.

He smiled. "Not nearly long enough or complicated enough to get me into the church without first hearing it."

From somewhere in the parking lot all the way down on the far side of the alley, there was an odd sound. The woman jumped, and although he wasn't sure he believed her excuse for wanting to get him into Reverend Love's, there was no denying that her face turned as white as her gown.

"It's them," she whispered.

He turned to look down the empty alley, half shrouded in shadow from the tall buildings, the concrete down at the opposite end rippling in the

heat of the sun. For a brief moment, she clutched his arm with a trembling hand and then whirled around, her white skirts flying out behind her as she dashed up the chapel steps.

"I don't love you, and I'm not getting married," Daniel called after her.

"I don't love you, either!" she snapped back, casting him barely more than an irritated glance as she flung open the door and disappeared inside.

Yeah, sure someone was going to kill her, he thought.

Catching the glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eyes, he turned to look back down the alley. Two men in dark suits and sunglasses were coming from the parking lot towards him. They paused to poke behind boxes and when the taller of the two stopped to look in the casino's dumpster, the breeze caught his coat and Daniel glimpsed the unmistakable glint of a gun sticking out of a holster.

Sucker he might be, but he wasn't a total fool.

Daniel ducked out of the entrance of the alley before they noticed him. He didn't think twice about following Orphan Annie up the chapel steps.

A gust of air conditioning hit him like a wall when he pulled the door open and walked inside. Several overstuffed white couches were spaced throughout the entry alcove. There was an unmanned register by the door, a drinking fountain on one wall, and some of the most hideous gold carpet underneath his feet. A line of soon-to-be married couples waited behind the chapel's double doors and the sign hanging upon them, which read 'Please wait. The Minister shall be with you shortly.'

With two couples ahead of her, Little Orphan Annie brought up the end of the line. She looked very forlorn, right up until he took his place beside her. He held out his hand. "The name's Daniel."

She looked from his hand to him, and then glanced at one of the windows behind them.

Reluctantly, she lay her smaller hand into his. "Gwen."

"Nice to meet you, Gwen." He heaved a heavy sigh. "Let's get married."

"Are they out there?" she asked as he took off his tuxedo jacket and slung it over her shoulders.

"Two guys in dark suits?"

"Did one have fat cheeks?" She turned into his chest, as he draped a protective-seeming arm across her shoulders, and peeked out the front chapel window.

"I didn't notice," Daniel confessed. "One was taller and the other about your height."

"That's them. They're going to kill me," she whispered, covering her mouth with one hand. "They're going to kill me."

"It's all right." Daniel pasted his best rendition of an 'I love you' smile on his face as the groom in line ahead of him turned to give them a look. "In-laws," Daniel told them and patted her shoulder, tucking her under his arm and pulling her close to his chest.

"What was I thinking?" she squeaked, throwing up her hands. "I can't do this! I don't know why I thought I could."

"It's all right." He bent to press a kiss on top of her head and whispered. "We'll pretend to get married long enough to sneak right out the back door."

"How do you know there's a back door?"

"Carpentry put me through college. I know a little something about buildings and fire codes."

Stiffening suddenly, Gwen gasped and would have turned away, but Daniel quickly pulled her into his side and bent to press another kiss on the top of her vanilla-scented head. Without turning around, he slid his eyes to a picture of Elvis on the wall. Reflected there in the protective glass cover, was the shadowy image of the tall man, hands framing his face as he peered inside Reverend Love's.

"Relax, baby," Daniel told her. "If they can't see your face, they might not recognize you."

As he watched the ominous reflection in the glass picture frame, the drunken couple in front of them began to argue.

"Don't want to wear thissh," the woman declared, and pulled her veil off her head. With it, came her full head of long, dark hair. The woman was as bald as a cantaloupe with a rose tattoo on the back of her scalp. "Can't breathe through thissh thing."

Her companion with the two gold eyebrow loops and nose ring that was connected to his earring via a thin gold chain, took one look at her bare pate and began to laugh.

The woman took one look at the hair attached to her veil and let out a shriek. "Rat!" She dropped both veil and hair on the floor and stomped on them.

Fat Cheeks pressed his hands up to the window next to his companion. Shading his eyes, he too peered into the alcove.

Gwen pressed her head to Daniel's shoulder, wrapping her arm around his waist in a convincingly lovely fashion, but her voice was a squeak of barely contained panic. Or maybe it was excitement. "What do we do?"

"Wait," Daniel whispered. "Maybe they'll keep going."

After two long, tense minutes, sure enough, the men moved on. Setting Gwen aside, Daniel walked over to the window and checked down the street. The tall one had disappeared, but Fat Cheeks was still in plain sight, turning in a slow circle as he constantly swept his eyes up and down the strip, searching...

"One's waiting on the sidewalk," he whispered as he returned to her side. She had picked up the veil and wrapped it around her head, covering her

tell-tale red hair. "I think the other went into the Aces High."

Adjusting the veil, she turned to him. "How do I look?"

"Like a rent a bride," he said without thinking. The veil covered her red hair, and although it didn't quite match the rest of her gown, she could just as well have been a model out of a magazine. Slender and small, her skin soft and lightly tanned, and smelling of vanilla; she was damn near perfect. And despite the veil, she looked very, very distinguishable. "Maybe they'll keep going," he said hopefully.

"No." Sucking her bottom lip between her teeth, Gwen began to chew on it. "They'll come back. They're not stupid, unfortunately. They know I have to be either in the gas station, the casinos or in here. They'll come back. They'll find me." Her voice turned into a flat monotone. "I didn't expect them to find me. Not so soon. I probably shouldn't have threatened Deep Voice."

"Deep Voice?" Daniel arched an eyebrow.

"Their boss."

"When we get out of here," he told her, "you are going to tell me what's going on."

"I don't think I know you that well."

"You know me well enough to marry me."

She looked depressed all over again. "Only under duress."

He patted her hand, trying to think of something comforting to say, but nothing was coming to mind and her fingers beneath his felt like ice. Just as he wrapped his arm back around her, a door opened. He glanced over his shoulder and for an instant his heart stopped in his chest. The armed men had just walked inside Reverend Love's.

Gwen's whole body went as stiff as a board, and she didn't protest in the slightest when he turned his back to the goons, caught her face in his hands

and covered her mouth with his own. He'd kissed a lot of women, but never quite like this. It wasn't even erotic, not for either of them. His eyes stared down into her wide ones, his mouth moved over hers, running on seductive autopilot while he listened to the sounds of the men moving through the alcove.

Suddenly, up ahead of them, the chapel's double doors swung open and a newly wedded couple skipped their way, hugging, kissing, and laughing to the door.

Another woman, presumably the administrator, walked out into the alcove. "Next?" she called cheerfully, and stepped aside to allow the next couple in line into the chapel. She started to close the door, but stopped when her gaze fell onto the couple directly in front of Daniel and Gwen. Her pink painted mouth turned down in a stern frown and she came back out into the alcove.

"Pardon me," she told them. "But we can't possibly see you two today."

Swaying, they were so drunk, the couple looked at her uncomprehendingly. The man reached into his trouser's pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I have a li-a lishensh."

The administrator folded her arms. "I'm sorry. You'll just have to come back tomorrow... when you're sober. Reverend Love's does not unite couples who are not in total control of their senses."

The drunk man snorted. "We-I-I, maybe we w-won get mared here," he told the administrator, as he shoved his license back into his pocket.

"That is entirely your choice," the administrator said, non-argumentatively.

The man grabbed his bald-headed bride-to-be by the arm and backed right up into Daniel and Gwen. "S'cuse me," he told them primly.

"Not a problem," Daniel said as they pushed past him and stalked towards the door. When he

turned to look at Gwen, she was holding the drunk man's folded up marriage license.

Daniel's jaw dropped, but he quickly snapped his mouth shut when the administrator nodded to them. "I'll be with you folks in a moment."

"Take your time." Daniel managed a smile in her direction, all the while glancing back at the two men walking through the alcove towards them. Tall was looking at the Elvis pictures on the wall, but Fat Cheeks was looking straight at them.

"You just picked that man's pocket!" he accused her.

"I had to," she whispered back. "We'll look suspicious without a license."

Apparently, Fat Cheeks thought they looked suspicious anyway. He was coming closer, his eyes narrowing as he sized up Gwen in her wedding dress. Despite the veil and Daniel's jacket, something about her must have struck a cord of recognition in him.

"Hold my hand," Daniel told her, taking a firm hold on hers. "Look at me as if you're madly in love."

Madly in love. She was a damsel in distress—very much the rent-a-bride that he'd called her. If he had to, he'd marry her under a pick-pocketed license, get her safely away from here, and probably drop her on the doorstep of the nearest local police station. Madly in love—an emotion that he had personally never experienced in his life—didn't really figure into any of this. But with a woman's life hanging on the success of his acting abilities, he was pretty sure he could fake it.

Behind the closed double doors, organ music swelled. Daniel cleared his throat, pulling Gwen as close as humanly possible without actually being inside her dress with her, and tried to contain his nervousness as Fat Cheeks walked around behind them.

"You boys getting married?" Daniel asked, turning to pin Fat Cheeks with a look that showed clearly that he was fully aware of being snuck up upon.

"Are you?" Fat Cheeks returned. He nodded towards Gwen. "Let's see her face."

Daniel shook his head, turning to face the men and tucking Gwen neatly behind his back. "It's bad luck for a groom to see his bride before the wedding."

"It could be even worse luck not to." Fat Cheeks beckoned with one stubby finger. "Pass her over here."

"Over my dead body," Daniel heard himself say. With a little thought, he could probably have chosen wiser words.

For the first time, Fat Cheeks smiled and brushed the edge of his jacket aside to reveal the pistol holstered to his side. "I can do that."

Oh, sh—

The double doors swung open and the newly married couple came dancing out into the alcove. Laughing, the bride flung her bouquet directly at Gwen, who caught it.

"Next," the administrator said cheerfully.

Daniel grabbed Gwen's arm and hustled her into the chapel. Fat Cheeks and his tall companion tried to muscle their way past the administrator, but she stopped them with an outstretched hand. "Are these your witnesses?" she asked.

"Never seen them before in my life," Daniel replied.

"Then I'm sorry," she told the goons, "but you'll both have to wait out here."

As the administrator closed the door, Fat Cheeks locked eyes with Daniel and patted the hidden gun. "I'll be right here," he said.

Damn.

Daniel swung around, rubbing a hand over his mouth and down his chin, his eyes sweeping the room. The neon red glow of an exit sign could be seen past the alter beyond the minister, an Elvis Presley look-alike in a white sequined suit and a red cape, who stood holding the bible tucked under one arm while he spritzed breath freshener down his throat. He grinned when he saw Daniel's look, struck a pose and said, "Hello there."

"License?" the administrator asked, holding out her hand.

Gwen handed it over and the administrator took it from her hand. "Loretta Banks and Bartholomew Watts," she called to Elvis, who gave her a solemn 'OK' gesture. She turned back to them with a smile. "Would you folks like me to play the 'Wedding March' or 'Stairway To Heaven'?"

Perking, Gwen turned to look at him. "Oh, can we have the Wedding March please? I've always wanted that played at my wedding!"

Her sudden excitement had him giving her a double take. "Sure, whatever." Daniel looked from Elvis to the doors behind them. They couldn't go out the front. They'd be shot before they reached the sidewalk. If he said something to Elvis and his administrator, the police would be called, but he had no idea what kind of trouble Gwen was in, and since she hadn't said anything that left him unsure as to whether he should either. He could just grab Gwen by the arm and shoot out the back door like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. But then the administrator would likely open the chapel doors and then the hounds of hell really would be not just nipping but shooting at them.

He had a lot of choices, and he didn't like any of them.

While the administrator was busy selecting the music for his nuptial ceremony, Daniel reached over and flipped the lock on the door. He had absolutely

no delusions that if Tall and Fat Cheeks really wanted to, they could break into the chapel. But at the moment, it was all he could think of to do.

Chapter Two

The strains of the Wedding March began to play as Daniel took hold of Gwen's arm and rushed with her down the aisle toward Elvis. His eyes stayed locked on the exit door until he was close enough to see for sure that it wasn't chained.

"Whoa, there!" Elvis laughed, holding up one hand like a traffic cop to stop them as they all but ran to the pulpit at a breakneck pace. "Hang on there, son. Where's the fire?"

No fire, just a couple of guns in the lobby behind them, Daniel thought, but managed to paste a smile on his face. "Dentist appointment," he made a point of checking his wristwatch. "I'm twenty minutes late. Hey, honey." He turned his smile on Gwen and tried not to sound too much like a jerk. "What say we do this another day?"

He heard a lock turn and a creak as the administrator went out the front door. In her absence, Fat Cheeks stuck his head inside.

"On second thought—" He looped his arm through Gwen's and pulled her close. "Today works for me after all."

"Well then," Elvis held out his hand. "The price of wedded bliss, my son, is fifty dollars for the economy package, which entails the music and the vows; seventy-five dollars, for which the bride may select a bridal bouquet from the display," he gestured to a glass display case behind his podium, "and for a hundred and fifty dollars—"

"Fifty's good." Daniel reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "I have, uh..." He pulled two twenties and a five out of his wallet. Beyond that, all he had was lint. "Uh..." He reached into his pocket. "I've got forty-five dollars left, three slot machine tokens and... uh... fifty-three cents... Honey?" He looked at Gwen.

She shrugged. "I guess I left my money in my other dress."

Elvis gave them both a dry look. "Economy it is." He took both the cash and the tokens, although he did leave Daniel with his last fifty-three cents. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together to celebrate the union of this man and this woman..."

Daniel glanced over his shoulder to see Fat Cheeks still standing in the open doorway. He pulled his coat open to reveal the gun again, but the threat was cut short by the return of the administrator, who promptly closed the door on him again.

In the silence that followed, Daniel suddenly realized Elvis had stopped speaking and was looking at him expectantly.

"I do," he quickly said.

Elvis smirked. "I asked your name, son."

"Oh... uh, Bartholomew Wake."

"Watts," Gwen quickly corrected.

Daniel looked at her. "What?"

"No, Watts."

"Oh yeah. Right," Daniel said. He turned back to Elvis. "Watts."

Elvis blinked. "Are we sure, son?"

Daniel smiled weakly. "Yes, sir... Mr. King, sir. Bartholomew Watts."

"Okay." Clearing his throat, Elvis asked, "Do you, Bartholomew Watts, take this lovely little lady to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Daniel glanced back over his shoulder, glimpsing the goons through the window as they walked across the parking lot. "Uh... yeah, I do."

Elvis struck a pose and pointed at Gwen. "All right, honey. Time for the big question here. Do you..."

"Laurie," she said, glancing worriedly over her shoulder at the door.

"Loretta," Daniel corrected.

Elvis rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "Do you take your hunka hunka burning love, Bart—" he looked at Daniel, "Are we still Bart?—here, to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Gwen glanced back over her shoulder at the door. Daniel followed the line of her gaze in time to see a dark shadow move to block the light that spilled across the dirty gold carpet of the threshold. Gwen snapped back around to Elvis and most earnestly said, "Yes. Yes, I do. I love him. Love him with all my heart, in fact. Can we please step this up a notch or two? And is that back door there unlocked?"

Elvis lost his pose. "You two kids do understand the gravity attached to this ceremony? This is for life, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," Daniel assured him, still looking back at the shadow of the goons that lay in wait for them just outside. "It's just the dental pain, that's all. Late for my appointment." He looked at his watch again. "Now thirty minutes late. I realize this is a happy day and all, but would I be too out of line if I asked if we could wrap this up right quick?"

Obligingly, Elvis flung both hands in the air, "By the power vested in me by this wondrous state of Nevada, I do declare you husband and wife. I don't say this anywhere near as often as I should, but this time I mean it: I don't give the two of you a year. Enjoy it while it lasts."

And just like that, Daniel Kilmer, AKA Bartholomew Watts, confirmed bachelor of thirty six years found himself married—sort of—to a perfect stranger.

"You may now kiss the bride," Elvis told them, rolling his eyes and turning away.

Kiss? Daniel blinked first at Elvis and then down at Gwen, who returned his wide-eyed stare with one of her own. He was pretty sure Gwen wasn't some naive young miss—not with those soft, kissable lips,

sweetly blushing cheeks and sparkling green eyes—and at thirty-six years of age, Daniel considered himself thoroughly indoctrinated in the art of kissing women. Kissing them on dates, kissing them in their homes and on the way to their bedrooms, kissing them thoroughly and completely in their beds. But this was the first time that he'd ever kissed a woman while standing at the alter after just being proclaimed man and wife.

Another bachelor had bit the dust.

And all he'd wanted to do was keep from getting shot.

Slowly, Gwen lifted her veil back over her face and rose up on her tiptoes. She lay one hand upon his shoulder and cupped his nape with her other, pulling him down as she lifted her chin. With only a hair's-breadth of distance between them, she hesitated. The scent of vanilla teased his senses and virgin alter-kisser or not, he lowered his mouth to meet hers. Her lips were warm and pliant, trembling just a little as they parted, releasing a soft sigh into his mouth.

His palms began to sweat. Tentatively, he touched her waist, not quite sure if he pulled her closer or if she just leaned that way. Her soft breasts, encased behind an armory of sequins, brushed his chest, and there was no helping it but that he had to kiss her again. Deeper this time, parting her lips with a caress of his tongue. He didn't know her from Abigail, but she tasted as good as she felt.

Elvis cleared his throat. A few seconds later, he cleared his throat again, and Daniel snapped back to himself. He came up for air, but didn't let go of Gwen, which was probably for the best because she swayed unsteadily on her feet, blinking up at him with dazed eyes.

Her blushing lips parted, a motion Daniel echoed in anticipation of tasting her sweet mouth again.

Something thumped against the chapel door, sending an echoing pang through his gut.

"Time to go," he said, taking hold of Gwen's arm and steering her for the rear exit.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," the administrator called, but Daniel didn't bother to correct her. He shoved the door open and thrust Gwen out into the wall of blazing white heat that rippled the outside air. It was so bright, he had to squint as he stumbled into the alley between the chapel and the Aces' High Casino.

"This way," he told Gwen, taking hold of her hand and running with her to the parking lot. On the way, they passed a wino, leaning against a dark green dumpster. He saluted them with his paperbag-clad bottle of gin. "Cong-hic!-ratsu-u-lashions." He hefted the bottle in their honor and took a deep draw to their future happiness.

Daniel would have been happy just to have a future.

"Wait!" Gwen cried breathlessly, holding a hand to her side.

But Daniel didn't wait. Not until they reached his car. He wrenched open the passenger door, picked her up and all but tossed her into the passenger seat. "Buckle up!"

"Wait a minute!" she started to get up out of the seat, but a sudden loud crack announced when the chapel rear door flew open, hard and fast enough to send it crashing into the adobe wall of the desert church.

"Here they come!" Daniel spun back around to slam the car door shut, but suddenly Gwen wasn't sitting in the passenger seat anymore. She was standing next to him. "What are you doing? Get in! We've got to go!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

Sorry? It was the look in her eyes that froze him. She did, indeed, look very, very apologetic.

And then she raised her arm. In her hand, she held the tire iron that he usually kept between the driver and passenger seats.

He saw her strike, but never really felt the blow. His one clear thought before the entire world went black was: the ungrateful wench, she'd hit him!

Daniel could smell the ocean and hear the shrill screams of the seagulls somewhere above him. Opening his eyes, however, was like trying to stop the world from spinning. And he really, really wanted the world to stop spinning... or at least to stop rocking. The perpetual motion was killing his head.

It wasn't doing his stomach a lot of good, either.

He groaned and tried again to open his eyes. They felt gummed shut. He raised his hands to his face, rubbing until he could peel his eyelids apart. The sky was cloudless and a deep, deep sapphire blue above him... past the white flapping sails of the boat he was apparently lying on.

He raised his head, twisting to look at the bed of cushions he was sprawled across and then across the wooden deck.

"Where am I?" Daniel struggled to push himself upright. His head was pounding and his mouth tasted like a well-used Dr. Scholl's shoe insert. He licked his dry lips, but could get very little moisture to come. Raising a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, he looked at Gwen, still in her wedding dress but with the addition of a captain's hat jauntily perched at an angle on her head.

"Uh, hi," she hazarded a smile. "Awake already, are you?"

Daniel turned his face into the salty sea breeze that ruffled his dark hair and looked out at the endless miles of ocean all around them. He turned his head to look the other way. More endless miles

of ocean. He closed his eyes, counted slowly to ten and opened them again. Nope. Still ocean.

He turned his head to glare at Gwen. Had it been anyone else but her he'd have been more surprised and perhaps even a smidgen less angry.

"Where," he bit out as he climbed unsteadily to his feet, "have you taken me?"

"Uh," a decisively worried look crossed her face as he staggered towards her. "Hang on, I'll check." Ducking around the helm to keep it between them, she relinquished control of the ship to him. She held up a staying finger, patting at the air as if to halt his threatening approach, she then ducked back to the rear of the ship, bending over the side. "We're on the... the Mischievous Minx."

Of course they were.

"Is this your ship?" he growled.

"No, uh... I borrowed it."

His eyes narrowed. "With or without the owners permission?"

Gwen winced slightly. "Culpability being what it is, you probably don't want me to answer that. They do say possession is nine-tenths of the law, though."

The ocean waves rocked the boat, bringing his attention back to his throbbing head. Groaning, he cupped his hands over his temples and his fingers touched a tender bump. "You hit me in the head," he accused.

She held up her hands again. "I know, and I feel so badly about it, too. Especially after you went out of your way to help me and marry me and..."

"You stole a boat," he growled as she came back to take the helm again, "and you hit me in the head!"

"But... I had to. They were chasing us."

"Tall and Fat Cheeks?"

"Yes. The tall one is Russ and Fat Cheeks is Bubby, by the way."

"Why?"

"Well... I can't exactly tell you that. Just take it on faith that I've done all this for a very, very good reason. And it's not stealing if you don't mean to keep it. As soon as we get to where we're going, you can drop me off and take the boat back to California. The owner will probably never even miss it."

"California?" Daniel asked, his voice rising. "How did I get to California? No, wait! I don't want to know!" He began to laugh, a dark and unpleasant sound. "Oh, I can see it all now. The only reason you want me to take the boat back is so you can live out the remainder of your life on crab and coconuts while I get thrown in jail for piracy! You know what, I can't take the boat back anyway. I don't know how to sail! That's not something I learned growing up in the desert!" He ran both hands through his hair, his eyes cutting across the water as he turned a full circle, looking all around them. He winced as he touched the lump on the top of his head. "Ow!" He looked at her again, his eyes narrowed and his train of thought jumping all the way back to square one. "And you. You hit me."

She tried to smile, but it was more of a grimace. "I said I was sorry. I was afraid if I let you drive then you wouldn't take me all the way to California and I had no other way to get there. And then when you started to wake up, I gave you a roofie because I was so sure that you'd never let me steal a boat if you'd been conscious. And I couldn't leave you in your car at the docks because Russ and Bubby have seen your face and they might have caught up with you before you woke up and if they recognized you then all sorts of terrible things might have happened. And I just don't think I could forgive myself if you died before I got the rest of this sorted out."

"Awfully decent of you," he growled, although his expression didn't match his words. "You gave me what?"

"A roofie. It's, uh..." she traced her fingers along the top of the wheel, not quite meeting his eyes. "Well, uh, it's a date-rape drug."

His expression turned darkly dangerous. "You gave me... a date-rape drug?"

"I had to keep you sleeping."

"And you hit me in the head." He took a single ominous step towards her.

She looked at his feet, measured the distance between them, and then met his eyes again. Her smile turned apologetically nervous. "I needed your car."

"You stole a boat and made me accessory to the crime." He took another step.

She cringed. "It sounds so bad when you say it like that."

"You have kidnapped me, absconding with me to places entirely unknown, and for what? I suggest you tell me. At this point, I really want to know." He took another step, bringing her to within easy reach. "I deserve to know."

She looked at him, her mouth thinning slightly. "I can't tell you. I don't know you well enough to."

"Take me back," he ordered.

"I can't. We've only got another hour or so to go and then we'll be there."

"Take me back now!" he repeated, his tone growing louder. "I have work on Monday. If I'm not there I could lose my job!"

She winced.

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

"I'm very sorry," she hedged.

Daniel braced his hands on his hips and, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, repeated, "What?"

"It's Wednesday." She templed her fingers, tapping them nervously together.

"What?!" He stopped being angry then. He just stopped. It was strange, really. To feel himself shaking and yet not feel the anger that went along with his body's physical response to it.

She smiled meekly. "Say something?"

"I liked my job. It took me six months to get it."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry," he echoed flatly. Her arms were in his hands before he quite realized what he was doing. 'Don't do it,' his brain told him, but it was already too late. Dragging her over to the side of the boat, he braced his foot up on the short rail of the boat side and, in one jerky motion, lifted her clean off her feet and tossed her face-down over his thigh.

Gwen let out a startled squeak of a scream.

'Don't!' his brain tried again, but his hand was already speeding its way to her backside.

Men got put in jail for this.

Thank God for the lawlessness of the high seas.

He walloped her bottom with all the force of his arm. Unfortunately, the fluff of her wedding dress cushioned the first hardy smack, but Daniel knew of a real quick and easy way around that. With one hand pinning her bent over his thigh, he caught hold of the bottom of her skirts and jerked them up over her back and out of his way.

She let out a shrill gasp as her multitude of lacy underskirts spilled down over her back, blanketing her head and leaving her tail utterly, beautifully bare. All those flouncing white ruffles framed her suntanned, and soon to be thoroughly tanned, heart-shaped bottom in a way that was practically breathtaking. If he weren't so angry, Daniel thought, this was the sort of sight that could easily distract a less purposeful man.

She'd gone all out with this wedding outfit, even going so far as to wear garters and stockings and white, lacy panties, cut up high on the thigh, which only served to outline the plump curves of her bottom.

"What are you doing?" she cried. She kicked her feet and beat her hands against his leg, swinging her elbows back in an effort to catch his ribs. "Let me go right now!"

He countered her frantic struggles by taking firm hold of the back of her underwear and giving her the mother of all wedgies. He yanked that cloth right up between her clenching bottom cheeks, baring them both quite effectively and causing her to stiffen like a two-by-four over his leg.

"Ow! What are you doing?!" This time she shouted it and snapped her hands back, flailing to get her skirts back down where they were supposed to be to cover herself from view. "Stop it! Let go of me! You can't do this!"

But since the only other living thing there was a lone seagull flying overhead, and since the bird seemed disinclined to intervene, Daniel swung his hand down with a mighty, echoing clap that flattened both her bottom cheeks and left them wobbling from the impact.

Gwen screamed bloody murder; Daniel couldn't blame her, either. He spanked her hard, and damn if it didn't feel good! Both physically as well as mentally and emotionally. Even knowing he was wrong to do it, every ounce of frustration was poured into slapping her little bottom, turning the golden brown curves of her bucking and thrashing hips to a bright cherry-red hue, a color that would have matched his Corvette, wherever the hell she'd left it.

The spanking was even satisfying visually. He must be a cad, and he knew he ought to feel ashamed, but the very sight of her as she waggled

her backside up and down and side to side in an effort to evade the furious justice of his hand was... stimulating. Appealing. Even just a little bit arousing.

That was a shocking realization, that. And it paused him, hand held high above the beet-red blushing of her cringing buttocks, trembling and wobbling as she kicked and scissored her legs in hurt, wagging her hips from side to side as if she could throw off the burning heat he'd ignited under her skin.

"Let me up!" she sobbed.

His arm wavered; his hand still itched to continue smacking. Unfortunately, there was an obnoxious voice in his head that kept whispering that she had probably had enough and that anything more would likely be abuse. Equally unfortunate was the fact that he was accustomed to listening to that voice, and so he let her up.

Gwen grabbed the back of her gown, jerking the many layers down to cover her backside as she scrambled to back away. "You—!" she gasped hoarsely. "Y-you—!"

Her mouth worked to form all sorts of words, but he was pretty certain even without hearing them that he knew what she was going to say. He folded his arms across his chest and glared at her. "You're damn right me! And you deserved every lick of that!"

Holding her bottom with both hands, she glared hotly back at him through tear-filled eyes and a mop of curly-red unbrushed Little Orphan Annie hair that hung over her eyes. She swiped the errant locks out of her face, all the better to seethe at him more clearly. The apples of her cheeks were red from embarrassment and the tip of her nose was red from crying. "That," she said, her voice trembling with emotion, "was assault."

"As opposed to hitting me in the head with a tire iron?" Daniel snapped. "Now, you're going to tell me exactly what's going on or I am going to put you back over my knee for a dose twice as long and as hard as what you just got. And I'm warning you right now, there had damn well better be a very good reason for why you dragged me into this!"

Gwen scowled fiercely, her eyes narrowing. "There's not," she said, low and throaty. "Let me renovate the situation."

She took two mighty steps forward and shoved him with both hands.

The back of Daniel's legs hit the side of the boat, tipping him off balance. His arms wind-milled wildly, but he lost his balance anyway. At the very last second, before he went over the side, Daniel managed to snag hold of her dress and pulled her with him.

They both hit the water with a gigantic splash, and the Mischievous Minx sailed merrily on without them.

Chapter Three

Panting and coughing, bedraggled and waterlogged, Gwen and Daniel helped each other out of the ocean and up onto the white sandy beach of a South Pacific Island. Daniel staggered just beyond the reach of the tide before falling face first down on the sand.

"It's a g-good thing f-for you," he panted, "that we actually d-did come to an-an island."

Gwen didn't make it that much farther than he did before she too collapsed in the hot sand. Her breasts heaved as she gasped for air, clumps of seaweed sticking out of her dress and her hair. She looked like a colorized bride of the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

"I t-told you y-you should tru-trust m-me," she panted back.

"Trust you?" he said incredulously. He glared balefully. "You threw me over the side of the boat! You're damned lucky right now that I can't raise my arms."

"You got what you deserved," she snapped. "I didn't ask you to spank me. Even now my bottom feels like I've been seriously sunburned!"

"Good," he growled.

Gwen gave him a nasty look and then tried to collect herself. "Arguing isn't going to help us."

"Do you even know where we are?"

"I might."

Rolling his head to look at her, Daniel flopped his hands in as close to a shrug as he could accomplish without moving his shoulders. "Are we anywhere close to civilization? A phone, maybe? A fire? I'm not too proud to send up smoke signals."

Gwen winced slightly as she dug the seaweed out of the bodice of her wedding gown and pulled out a folded up piece of paper. "Most of the islands

out here are too small to be inhabited, so don't hold your breath on finding a working phone. And since I don't think spankers," she gave him another nasty look, "are allowed in the Boy Scouts, your fire-making skills might not be good enough to even make smoke, much less send signals."

"Har-dee har har," he deadpanned, but his eyes stayed locked on her chest.

Gwen narrowed her eyes at him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm wondering if you've got a Snickers stuffed down there in between the twins." When she frowned at him, Daniel shrugged. "What? We've been swimming since noon. I'm hungry!"

"I will thank you to leave my twins out of all future conversations." She gave him one last lingering glare, then unfolded the paper and looked at it. Her eyes widened. "Oh no," she said.

"What?" He was starting to sound like a broken record.

"Oh no!" Gwen cried. "The ink ran!"

"What is that?" If Daniel could have moved without pain, he'd have reached for the paper, although he doubted if Gwen would have let him see it. She was huffing and puffing, alternately blowing on and then waving the paper in the air in an effort to dry it.

Daniel rose painfully onto his elbows, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What is that?" he asked again.

She looked at him for the first time, a decisively guilty wince creeping into her eyes. "Nothing," she said, tucking the paper behind her back. She was still for half a second before her hand resumed its flapping.

"Let me see that," Daniel demanded.

"No." She turned sideways away from him.

"Let me see it right now," he growled.

"Or what, you limp noodle? You can't even sit up. You—" Gwen broke off with a squeak as Daniel rolled onto his stomach and heaved himself onto his knees. It hurt like hell and he groaned loudly the whole time, but he did it anyway, his dark eyes flashing ominously and locked on her.

She tried to crawl out of his reach but he grabbed her foot and pulled her back to him.

"You're getting sand in my dress!" she shouted.

"I'll spank it back out again," he said.

She squeaked and rolled onto her back to keep him from it, and Daniel grabbed the note out of her hands. The dismay faded from her expression to be replaced by a sulky frown. "That's mine, and I don't think I know you well enough to want you looking at it."

"What the hell is this?" Daniel demanded, staring at the paper with equal parts disbelief and anger. Even with the ink smeared and running, what he saw written on that paper looked a lot like... "Is this a treasure map? Tell me we're not here to dig up buried treasure! X marks the spot? I've been kidnapped for a pirate map?"

"Don't be silly," Gwen said, reaching out lightning fast to snatch the map back out of his hand. "There's no such thing as pirates."

"Oh yeah? Then what does that X stand for?"

"Well, it doesn't stand for buried treasure." She shoved him off her and sat up. "If we actually made it to the right island, then there's supposed to be an old government research facility on one side."

"So there will be a phone." Daniel brightened considerably. His smile faded, though, when he saw her shake her head.

"The facility was abandoned over forty years ago," she said. "This whole island is restricted. No one is allowed within two nautical miles of the perimeter. We're not going to find anyone here and, in all likelihood, the phone lines will have long since

been torn apart by all the annual hurricanes." Her nervous smile countered his fearsome scowl. "B-b-but there might a radio communications beacon on the top of the cliffs. If we sabotaged it, eventually someone might come to repair it."

"And if there isn't one?" Daniel was almost afraid to ask.

"Well, then, um..." she cleared her throat and scratched her eyebrow. "I guess it's a good thing we're married, Bartholomew, because we'll be living on this island for quite a while."

Daniel glared at her. "I didn't spank you anywhere near long enough."

Heaving herself onto her feet, she sniffed and looked down her nose at him. "Go ahead, keep on threatening me. See if I tell you where that beacon is. It's not as if the island is so small that you can simply walk up the hill and spot it in the trees."

Daniel growled at her, but then glanced past her to the overgrown jungle line that separated the beach from the rest of the island. He made a face, and then did something even harder... he apologized.

"I'm—sorry for losing my patience." He cleared his throat. "And my temper."

"And?" she coached.

He didn't have patience enough for that. "And if you keep rubbing it in, I'll spank you again."

She wisely let it drop. "Apology accepted." She hobbled over to him and held out her hand. "Come on. I'll help you up." As he reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, she patted his shoulder. "Who knows, so long as you keep your hands to yourself, we might even wind up friends."

He wanted to strangle her. Instead, he made himself nod and smile and kept his itching, twitchy hands firmly at his sides while she turned and staggered slowly up the beach towards the giant

palm trees that began the rainforest jungle. Shaking his head at himself, he limped stiffly after her.

The forest was lush and tropical, with no signs of a path or any kind of human habitation. Monkeys ran about in the treetops, swinging and jumping from branch to branch, acknowledging their passing with shrieks and hooting cries. Birds of all persuasions cackled and called and took instant flight as they pushed their way through the lush ferns and crawling vines. Even with the heat of the day, their clothes took a good hour to dry, and they wandered the whole time, the jungle turning into long steep hills, and scratched almost continuously because the evaporating saltwater made their skin itch.

"Are we just walking aimlessly?" Daniel suddenly asked, struggling to climb up a short, steep hill. "Or are we headed someplace in particular?"

Using a thick growth of vines to pull herself up the steep incline, Gwen barely glanced back at him over her shoulder. Having lost her shoes in their oceanic swim, every now and then he could see the tips of her dirty pink toes peeking out from under the hem of her equally dirty wedding gown. "We're headed for someplace in particular."

"Where?"

Panting, she heaved herself up another half a foot, then paused to look back down at him. "That depends on where we are, really." She looked about them. They were high enough up the mountainous hill to see through the sporadic trees that surrounded them, over the top of the forest that spread out like a thick green blanket, and out to the white sandy beach. "If this Neetikki Island, where I think we are, Hawaii lies about three days that way, and we are smack in the middle of absolutely by

golly nowhere, with nothing on this island but us and the beacon and the research station."

Daniel frowned. "And if this isn't Neetikki?"

"Well, then God knows where the hell we are, in which case I don't suppose it matters which way we go since I've no idea what's on any of these islands except for Neetikki."

Daniel was not amused. "For the sake of argument, let's just say this is Neetikki. Where are we going?"

"North," she told him. "Towards the station I told you about."

Holding onto vines to help maintain his balance on the steep hill, Daniel closed his eyes, pained.

"What's the matter?"

Daniel pointed to their left. "North is that way."

Gwen followed his finger skeptically, and then looked ahead of where she was headed. Then she looked up at the sun. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Daniel said patiently. "I'm sure."

She looked at him dubiously, but made the necessary course correction.

"I don't think you have any idea where we're going," he said, shaking his head. He seemed to do that a lot when it came to her.

"Of course, I know," Gwen said, sniffing proudly. "I just don't know where North is."

As they neared the top of the hill, the sporadic trees gave way to a small clearing and the entire island stretched out before them.

"There it is," Gwen said, pointing down at the barest glimpses of a man made structure, with crumbling walls that now and again broke through the canopy of green trees in the valley below. She tossed him a careless grin back over her shoulder. "I told you I knew where we were going."

The sight of the ruin must have renewed her strength, for she started down the hill all but skipping as she went.

Daniel was slightly more cautious, particularly when he saw... "Smoke. I thought you said the island was uninhabited."

Whether his words registered with her before or after she neared the bottom of the hill and saw the evidence of the campfire for herself, Daniel didn't know, but Gwen suddenly stopped running and hit the ground. Her eyes were very wide by the time he caught up with her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Pirates," she whispered and reached up to grab hold of the waist of his pants, yanking him down on the ground beside her.

"Pirates?" he echoed incredulously. He lifted his head to see over the top of the bush that hid them and caught glimpses of a camp in front of the ruined government building. There were two Asian looking men in front of the fire and at least three others lounging in one of several tents scattered among the trees. "As in 'Yo ho ho, me hearties'? That kind of pirates? You said there weren't any!"

"I guess I was wrong." She tightened her mouth, unable to tear her gaze from the encampment that blocked the path between her and the building.

He tapped her arm, whispering as he pointed back the way they'd come, "Forget it, let's go find that beacon."

But Gwen didn't move. Instead, she reached into her bodice and pulled out the map.

"Gwen," he hissed. "Don't be an idiot! Come on."

"No," she hissed back, her beady eyes locked on the pirates. "I'm going in."

"Who do you think you are?" he demanded in a whisper. "Rambo? Maybe it's the saltwater in my eyes, but those look like guns down there. What could there possibly be in there worth risking your life?"

"None of your business!"

His eyes widened, and he came crawling back to her. Catching the front of her sequined bodice in his hand, he jerked her close and hissed, "Now you see here, woman! You made it my business when you kidnapped me, knocked me off a boat and put me on this misbegotten island! Now, I'm all done playing with you! Come here! And I do mean come here right god damn now!"

With one last furious look, he let go of her dress and, turning on his belly, began crawling back up the hill the way they'd come. He didn't look back, but after a moment, he heard the soft confirming rustle of leaves as she grudgingly followed suit.

"Over here," Daniel told her, snapping his fingers and pointing at the ground directly in front of him. "Now!"

It was a gesture that immediately raised the hackles on the back of her neck. Gwen ground her fists into her hips and glared right back at him, but he was quite a bit better at it than she was. He must have been in the habit of practicing.

They had put two hills and a lot of jungle between themselves and the pirates, and if there weren't too many of them wandering around the rest of the island, with any luck they wouldn't be interrupted. Particularly not when he stood there with fingers twitching in that not so much fidgety as it was vaguely ominous way that she was coming to associate with bad things happening to her backside.

"I don't think I like your tone," she told him, but as far as tension breakers went, that comment didn't quite cut it.

Daniel arched both eyebrows. "Because of you, I'm trapped on an island with armed oceanic criminals, and you have the nerve to tell me that? I

don't like being left in the dark! You came here deliberately, now I want to know why!"

She folded her arms across her chest. "Maybe you should just go sit on the beach. I can do this by myself."

His look went from dark to dangerous. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Gwen made a shooing motion at him with one hand and the map. "Go sit somewhere. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She turned around and started back towards the hill.

Daniel's look went from dark to dangerous, and because her back was turned she missed the telltale sign of eminent eruption. She didn't even realize he was coming after her until he'd grabbed her arm.

"I only thought I was finished before," he growled.

"Stop it! Let go!" Gwen squirmed to get out of his grasp, but he dragged her over to a fallen log and sat down. "Whoa, wait! Time out!"

She braced her legs against him, but he was stronger, and his grip on her wrist didn't weaken. He pulled until he dragged her off balance, and she fell facedown across his thighs.

"But I have to go!" she yelled as her skirts were tossed up over her back, flopping down to cover her head in a frilly shield of dirty white.

"Why?" Daniel demanded.

"Because there's something in that building I have to get. And if I don't, someone else will!"

"What?" he asked.

Tossed over his lap, bottom up in a very humiliating pose, Gwen made a single meek attempt to right herself, but he only lay a heavy arm across her back and held her even more firmly down.

"What?" he asked again.

"I can't tell you when all the blood is rushing to my head like this. Maybe if I were sitting up...?"

He moved, and she smiled, thinking she'd won. Right up until he caught hold of her panties and skinned them clean off her hips and down the backs of her legs.

She squealed, snapping her feet up in an effort to cover her bottom, but with only the slightest shift in position, he scissored her legs between his own, catching her across the backs of the knees and locking her feet firmly down.

"All right, all right!" she shouted, her whole body stiffening in anticipation of the first stinging smack.

She could feel the heat of his glare burning into the back of her head as he growled, "Start talking."

Gwen chewed on her bottom lip, catching her hands beneath her chin as she fidgeted with her fingers. "Well, I... I don't know where to start."

He walloped her bottom with a single solid spank, raising an instant red palm print crowned by four firm fingers and a slightly outstretched thumb, and won an instantly blurted confession.

"My grandfather's being blackmailed!"

Daniel narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What does that have to do with you, me, that building and a bunch of pirates?"

Gwen didn't answer. She snapped a hand back instead, fingers splayed in an attempt to cover her backside.

Daniel caught her by the wrist, pinning it behind her. He then gave her another smarting swat. "How hard do you want to make this, Gwen?"

She squirming, breathing hard as she burst into a defiant flurry of struggling that ended in a shouted curse when his hand cracked even harder than before across her bare and vulnerable bottom. Huffing and puffing, she stopped fighting and glared at the ground.

"The..." she scowled. "There's evidence in that building."

"What kind of evidence?"

"The implicating kind," she snapped. "What kind do you think?"

He gave her three rapid, stinging attitude-adjusting smacks.

"Ow!" she cried, squirming and bucking her bottom, her toes digging uselessly into the ground since she couldn't kick. Softer, under her breath, she added, "Owowow! That hurts!"

"What kind of evidence?" Daniel patiently repeated.

"The sort that could ruin his life. I don't really know any more than that; I didn't ask." Gwen scowled at his foot, and then heaved back one elbow and rammed it into his side. She erupted into a whole new batch of struggles, which he cheerfully countered by blistering her backside. He turned the entire surface of her bottom lobster red, spanking rapidly until she gave up and submitted with a loud wail. "OW! Okay, okay!"

"I can do this all day," he told her, and she acknowledged that cheerful fact with a half-sobbed moan. "So why don't you just tell me what's going on?"

"I don't know you!" she wailed.

"Honey, you should have thought of that before you married me."

He blistered her backside with a hailstorm of swats that left her squealing through gritting teeth, fighting hard to keep from howling and begging, until her entire bottom felt as if she were sitting on white-hot fire coals.

Unable to bear any more, she cried out, "My grandfather worked to manufacture chemical and biological agents for the government in the forties! He hated it! He quit the business a long time ago,

but someone found out and now they're blackmailing him!"

Mercifully, Daniel's hand stopped whacking her bottom. Although his arm remained threateningly high above her, the respite was painfully, achingly, burningly heavenly.

"Okay, maybe you should start from the beginning," Daniel finally said.

Sniffing, Gwen tried to catch her breath. "The letters... they're from the same man who's blackmailing my grandfather."

"What letters?"

"The ones that are killing people."

"Your grandfather is the government official?"

"He's a government official, a judge. He's being framed. If he doesn't pay the blackmailer, the blackmailer has threatened to implicate him in the letters. He'll lose his job, his reputation and his life."

"How?"

Batting her dress back over her head, she glared back at him. "My grandfather and four other men were commissioned to make the chemical that the blackmailer is using to kill people. If he doesn't pay two million dollars, then his connection to the chemical is going to be made public, and he'll be blamed for the letters. My grandfather has just been appointed a judge in the Supreme Court. He can't afford even a hinted suggestion that he's connected with any of this, or he'll lose his job. But he doesn't have the money, and he didn't send those letters." Still breathing heavily, she arched her eyebrows hopefully. "May I please get up now?"

"No." Daniel dropped his hand to rest it on her bare bottom. "That still doesn't explain why you're here."

For a full minute, Gwen didn't say anything, not until he patted her smarting bottom, and then she let out a pent in breath. "Just before the letters started, someone broke into my grandfather's

house. They ransacked the place. We think they were looking for something that might connect my grandfather with this island."

"But there wasn't any," Daniel guessed.

"No. It's all here."

"So you think the blackmailer doesn't actually have any information. He knows your grandfather made the stuff, but he doesn't have the tangible proof to force payment."

"Before they shut this facility down, and my grandfather left, he took all the paperwork associated with him, his notes, everything, and put them in a hiding place. If the blackmailer hasn't already, then he'll come here to find it. If I don't get it first, my grandfather will have to pay the money or risk losing everything." She twisted her head back, trying to see past all the ruffles of her tossed up skirts. "I have to look. I can't have come this far without at least looking."

Daniel unscissored his legs around hers, and then reluctantly let go of her all together. Catching hold of the back of her dress, he helped her back to her feet. Gwen caught the back of her dress, gingerly holding her tender buttocks, but too sore even to want to rub. She winced a slight smile as he frowned. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to go back to the beach and wait. Or... or even if you hid somewhere until I was done." His frown got even darker, and she tentatively cleared her throat. "But I could use your help. Please, Daniel. Just help me get that information."

With a growl, he bowed over, burying his face in his hands, and sighed. "You're going to get us both killed."

They lay side by side in the bushes, staring through the foliage at the pirates' camp. Beyond that was the remains of the government building,

crumbling and broken from past hurricane weather and partially overgrown by an ambitious jungle.

"Think," Gwen whispered, her green eyes narrowing. "There has to be a way past them so we can get inside."

"How?" Daniel demanded and tried to force a little reality into her James Bond, Mission Impossible, Mary Poppins world. "You are a seamstress. I am a pastry chef. Tell me, which of those skills stand the best chance of helping us out?"

"Maybe we can bribe them."

"I've got fifty-three cents in my pocket. How much do you have?"

"Maybe I could distract them, then. Then you could run inside, get the documents and we could meet back on the beach after the pirates give up chasing me."

He turned to stare at her as if she'd grown a second head. "I'm sorry. Maybe I should explain to you a few fundamental truths about pirates. Unlike the story book versions, those romantic rascally characters who fall in love with beautiful damsels in distress and marry them, real pirates are much more apt to take a damsel in distress and distress her further. Can you say, assault and/or murder?"

She rolled her eyes. "I know that," she whispered. "I am very well aware of what will happen if they get a hold of me, which is why I plan to run very fast."

He looked down their bodies at her bare feet. "Not without shoes, you won't."

"Fine," she huffed. "Would you like to come up with something better?"

He glared at her, then at the pirates, and then down at their clothes. "Take off your dress," he said, sitting up just far enough to wriggle out of his own jacket.

Her eyes widened, and then her cheeks blushed. "What? Now? Not to put a dampener on the mood or anything, but I hardly think this is the right place or time..."

He stopped undressing long enough to give her a withering look. "I don't want to make love to you," he snapped. "I want to wear your dress."

"Oh," she said, looking vaguely disappointed, an expression that stopped him halfway through unbuttoning his shirt. Making love to her was an option? Daniel gave himself a firm mental shake as her disappointment gave way to a whole different expression. One that included a slight flicker of disgust. "O-o-h. You know, I think that's the sort of personal information that would have been good to know before we got married."

"I can run faster than you can," he explained, exasperated. "And they'll pursue me more recklessly if they think they're chasing a woman. I also don't know what papers to look for in that building, and you do."

"You don't need to explain," she said, rolling her back to him. "To each his own, I always say. Unlace me, please."

They scooted far enough uphill to change clothes without being spotted or overheard. Daniel kept his pants on, rolling the hems up to his knees so they wouldn't be seen once he'd slithered into the dress. His shirt he relinquished to Gwen. Even dirty, wet, hot and sweaty, she looked far better in it than he ever could.

Comparatively, she looked a lot better in the wedding dress, too. If it weren't for the fact that the bodice was mostly elastic, he never would have been able to squeeze his hairy chest into it. They didn't even try to lace up the back.

"I'll see you on the beach," Gwen told him.

"Right," Daniel said, tying his shoes tightly in anticipation of a very long, very hard, and hopefully very successful run.

"You might want to stay in the jungle, if you can," Gwen added, chewing on her bottom lip. "You know, the more trees there are, the less the likelihood that they'll be able to get you in a clear line of sight."

He nodded, looking back over his shoulder and up the hill for a quick flight path out and away from the camp. "Right." When he felt a hesitant touch on his shoulder, he glanced back around to look at her.

Gwen was really chewing her lip now, and her green eyes were earnest and serious. "Don't get shot."

She was worried about him. If he weren't about to put himself in danger, that might have made him feel better.

"I'll try not to," he promised.

"Okay." Nodding, Gwen looked at him a moment more, and then darted in to give him a quick peck on the cheek. "For luck," she explained.

Daniel blinked twice, the place where her lips had brushed his face tingling from the touch. Almost without thinking, he reached out to catch the front of her-his-shirt and pulled her right back to him. He returned the lucky kiss, although with a good deal more enthusiasm, drinking the taste of her into his mouth and relishing the soft little sounds that she made as she went pliant in his embrace.

"Don't take too long in there," he told her, as he reluctantly pulled away. Her eyes were closed and her fingers were trembling as she touched her blushing lips; he could easily have kissed her all over again. Shaking his head, knowing this was entirely the wrong time and place for this, he forced himself to shift far enough away that she was out of his reach. "You'd better go find a place to hide."

Slowly, Gwen opened her eyes. She nodded and, her mouth trembling, she gave him one last backwards look before she crawled up onto her bare feet, the tails of his shirt just barely covering her delicious bottom from view, and disappeared in the underbrush.

Entirely the wrong place for this, Daniel told himself. He flopped onto his back, wanting to give her several minutes to get situated, definitely needing a few himself just to get back into the right frame of mind. Frame of mind? He raised his head, looking down at the suspicious bulge tenting the front of the wedding gown.

"Down, boy," he told himself. Great, just what he needed the pirates to see: a hairy man in a wedding dress, running through the trees with a woody. A few days ago he had been an ordinary man, happily on vacation in Vegas and gambling away his paycheck, and now look at him. Stranded on a deserted island, about to attract the attention of a motley band of well-armed pirates, and all to save a damsel in distress.

What was he thinking? He was the damsel in distress!

How did he get himself into this?

Chapter Four

There were a total of five men in the pirate camp, and all five of them took off after Daniel when he jumped up out of the brush like a nuptially-minded Whack-A-Mole. When Daniel took off running, Gwen stayed, crouched low in the bushes that hid her until the last of them disappeared over the top of the hill. Then she ran for the doorless entry to the ruined building, her heart pounding all the way.

There wasn't much left of the research facility. Forty years and dozens of hurricanes had reduced it to a few stubborn walls and a lot of crumbling rubble, most of which was slowly being reclaimed by the jungle.

Pulling the smeared map out of her bra, she opened the ink- and water-stained paper and tried to make sense of the watery blue blotches. Nearly all the directions her grandfather had provided were virtually washed away. But she could make out some of the floor plan and part of the 'x' that marked where he'd had the foresight to stash the paperwork on those projects that he'd believed, even back then, would come back to haunt him.

A cracking stick made her jump, and she darted deeper into the mostly destroyed building, her heart pounding all the way. She tried her best not to scream when, ducking behind a partial wall, she laid her steadying hand right on the back of a vine-green snake. It promptly moved, and so did she, directly to another wall where she writhed under a really good case of the willies and squirmed, her whole body crawling as if covered in hundreds of slithering snakes.

It took her almost a full minute before she realized the set of walls she was looking at matched some of the blurred squiggles that her grandfather

had drawn for her. She pulled out her map again and looked at it. That meant the kitchen was right down the hall and beyond that the lab that her grandfather had shared with a half a dozen other scientists. She ducked under a fallen tree and ran all the way there.

If one could overlook the leaves, grass, flowering vines, fruit-bearing trees and the bats currently feeding upon them, then her grandfather's old lab looked almost as if it were habitable. In this part of the building, the walls were all still standing and even the door hung straight on its hinges. There was no window, however, and it would have been too dark for her to see had the roof not been completely ripped away by some past hurricane.

Broken bits of lighting fixtures poked her feet as she carefully picked her way across the old and overgrown tile floor heading for the cabinets. Shattered glass from test vials and beakers lay scattered everywhere, and bits and pieces of medical-looking equipment lay jumbled in one corner. Gwen had to move an overturned chair in order to get to the one her grandfather had indicated on his map with an 'x', which sent the lizard hiding beneath it scrambling for new cover. As she set it to one side, her eyes fell on the heavy safe-like door of the containment room. Whatever diseases had once been created in this place were now well and truly gone, but she still couldn't help but shudder a little at the thought of the biological warfare that was once spawned at her gentle grandfather's hand.

Kneeling down in front of the cupboards, she shoved and forced opened the broken, sliding door. There was nothing but a hopeful spider centered in its web inside, but the false back wall was still firmly in place.

Wrinkling her nose, she reached in past the sticky webbing and gave the back a good, hard

shove. It popped out, just as her grandfather had said it would, and fell a bare inch to one side. Gwen pushed it out of her way, brushing off the spider as it crawled onto her shoulder.

The satchel was right where he'd said it would be, weathered, the leather cracked with age and moldy. But when she pulled it out, and opened the flap, the papers inside were as new as the day her grandfather had shoved them into hiding—albeit a bit musty smelling (or was it the satchel?)—for having survived forty years in a wall.

Two quick firecracker-like pops in the not-so-very-distant distance jerked Gwen's head up. Daniel! She caught her breath, listening intently as a third shot rang out, this one sounding closer.

Slinging the satchel over her neck and shoulder, she hurried out of the lab and ran down the crumbling hall towards the nearest outside wall. She darted across the empty pirate's camp and scrambled with her hands as much as her feet to get back up the hill. She moved as if the pirates were hot on her heels instead of Daniel's. More or less, that even turned out to be true. She had only just scrambled halfway down the other side of the hill when she heard a loud crash through the underbrush just down hill.

Gwen jumped, snapping around, but instead of men with guns, it was a very hot, sweaty and dirty Daniel who broke out of the brush, holding the front of his skirts up around his waist to keep it out of his way, but only until he saw her. He grabbed her arm, jerking her along after him and yelling, "Run!"

A pop followed by a sharp whistle that whizzed past her ear was all the encouragement that Gwen needed. She fled through the tropical jungle, one hand flung up to protect her face from the branches whipping back at her from Daniel's passing. The satchel flopped against her back and side as she ducked and dodged the trees, quickly becoming

winded as the terrain steepened. A painful stitch tightened in her side, but Daniel didn't slow even a little bit. He pulled her up the hill, running South and back toward the beach, ducking and dodging the jutting rock formations and thick clusters of trees in an effort to lose their pursuers.

The crashing behind them became more and more distant, and Gwen felt a burst of renewed energy as she realized they were actually going to succeed in evading the pirates...

And then they reached the cliff.

The jungle gave no indication that it was about to stop, and they nearly went right off the top of the hill before Daniel must have noticed there was blue sky and ocean peeking back at him through the shrubs right up ahead and he stopped running.

Gwen was a little slower. She didn't realize the ground had suddenly ended until she crashed into Daniel, shoving them both through the vines and palm branches and nearly toppling them straight off the crumbling cliffside and into the ocean far, far below them.

Daniel grabbed a tree with one hand and her with the other, panting and swearing as he stared down at the frothy waves and rocks jutting up sharply out of the ocean.

Gwen bent nearly in half, grabbing her own knees as she sucked great breathes into her lungs. She hadn't had to run as long as Daniel had and already she was facing exhaustion. "Now..." she gasped breathlessly, "Now what?"

Daniel followed the ragged line of both the cliff and the ocean. "Boat," he suddenly said.

"What?" Gwen stepped closer to the edge, looking down at the water. "Where?"

He grabbed her arm again. "This way!"

Gwen had neither the breath nor the time to groan before she was once again dodging through

the underbrush, tripping on vines and broken sticks as she forced her heavy legs to move.

"Here!" Daniel panted, as he pulled her a little ways out of the jungle onto a jutting triangle of rock and grass. "This is the best place."

"The b-best place f-for what?" she gasped.

He turned to look at her.

"What?" she panted, uncomprehendingly.

"Here," he said, reaching for the satchel. "You might want to let me carry the weight of this."

Only with supreme reluctance did she hand over the evidence that could potentially ruin her grandfather's life, but the relief from the weight of it was instantaneous. She hadn't realized how heavy the satchel was until Daniel slung it over his own head and shoulder.

"Thanks." She grinned. "I could run a mile or two more now."

He shook his head. "We're not going to run any more." He nodded his head down at the water. "We're going to go for that boat."

The boat was anchored in an island marina. Most likely the pirates' vessel, it wasn't the prettiest ship she'd ever seen but it floated and would probably be fast and, more importantly, it seemed to be unmanned, although it was still too far away to tell for sure.

"Okay," she said and then started to mentally map a path down the cliff to the marina. "We're still going to have to run down there, though."

Daniel reached up to cup her face, and Gwen started all over. She looked up at him, her toes curling in the dirt as he bent to capture her mouth beneath his in a kiss that was both gentle and hungry.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her mouth.

"Sorry," she whispered, confused. Her lips throbbed just a little, feeling warm and ravaged

from his kiss. She could even taste him in her mouth. "For kissing me?"

Behind them came the sound of crashing as the pirates ducked through the underbrush, coming dangerously closer to where they were.

Daniel glanced behind her, but then faced her again and his eyes softened. He shook his head. "No, honey. For this."

He picked her up and threw her off the cliff.

Gwen screamed all the way down, only remembering at the last instant to suck in a sharp breath and fill her lungs with air before she hit the water. A bare second later, she felt the crash as Daniel splashed down next to her, the waves parting as he sliced past her, his heavier weight causing him to sink deeper into the sea.

Gwen broke the surface sputtering and coughing, swiping the saltwater from her stinging eyes. Something big brushed her leg and she gasped, shoving backwards through the water as Daniel burst up out of the ocean, sucking loudly for oxygen.

"Damn!" he gasped. "I forgot how cold the water is!" He heard a shout and looked up just as the shadowy heads of their pursuers peeked over the top of the cliff, looking down at them. "Move!" he told Gwen and started swimming for the ship.

Gwen let out a shriek an instant before she heard the first firecracker-like pops of the rifles. Bullets whistled past her head, the splashes as they hit the water all around her and Daniel lost in the bigger splashes of their arms and legs as they pushed for the anchored boat. When the bullets abruptly stopped, she wasn't at all comforted. That only meant one thing: they were coming down off the cliff in a mad-dash race to see who would reach the pirates' vessel first.

Gwen wasn't a strong swimmer; Daniel was much better. Even in a wedding dress that dragged

through the water and a satchel of important papers slung across his chest, he pulled ahead of her with strong, steady strokes of his bulging arms and legs, and it was all Gwen could do not to be left too far behind.

But the hundred feet that still separated her from the boat could well have been the mile that it felt like when she heard shouts from the shore. Her limbs were burning and heavy as stone paddles, but she was too scared to let herself stop. She forced herself to keep going until she saw Daniel heaving himself up over the side of the boat. He flopped like a landed fish in the bottom of the boat, chest heaving as he breathed, sucking great lung-fulls of air right up until an armed man came up onto the deck.

The two men saw one another at almost the same time, and Gwen let out a scream as she saw the pirate sentry unholster his gun and aim it right for Daniel's head. Her scream, however, startled the pirate, who turned to look out across the water directly at her.

But that half second of distraction was all the time that Daniel required. Although she knew his arms had to be aching and at least as exhausted as her own, he rolled onto his knees. He grabbed onto the gun with one hand, his other fist slamming into the pirate's chin with force enough to rock the other man's head back on his shoulders. Daniel hit him twice more in rapid succession, knocking the pirate, limbs flailing wildly, overboard.

Daniel promptly fell to his knees on the deck, half flopping over the rail as he waved for Gwen to hurry up. When the pirate resurfaced, however, Daniel wasted no time in turning the man's confiscated gun back on him. "Swim for shore," he told him.

The pirate didn't argue. He swam for the beach rather than risk being shot, and Daniel tossed a rope out to help pull Gwen into the boat.

"Can you sail this thing?" he asked as she collapsed in a sopping wet heap on the floor at his feet.

"Yes!" she gasped, then winced. "Oh my God, my arms are killing me!"

Shots fired from the shore dropped them both as flat to the bottom of the boat as they could lie. Daniel lifted his head just far enough to see over the railing. The pirates had launched a rubber raft from the beach into the tide and were piling into it. All but one grabbed up oars to paddle like mad for their ship; the one who abstained from the manual labor had the gun. He took pot shots at them, winging the railing not far from Daniel's head and pelting the side of the ship with bullets.

Dropping back on the deck, Daniel crawled Rambo-style on his belly for the stern. "If we're going to get out of here, this is the time!"

While he cast off and got the engine going, Gwen manned the wheel and they both did so lying as flat on the deck as they could lie until the boat pulled far enough away from the pirates to be out of rifle-range.

"How do I look?" Gwen asked, combing her fingers through her hair and making an attempt to brush some of the worst dirty spots from her torn and bedraggled wedding gown.

Beautiful. Daniel looked away from her and focused his attention instead on Ellis harbor as they sailed into it. "Like a war-torn rent-a-bride."

She smiled at him. "I'm sure you'll be glad to get back home, change out of those clothes, slip into underwear without the sand..."

"See if I still have a job," he half smiled, glancing back at her. "Get back to a normal life. One that does not involve goons hell bent on killing me, pirates, weddings..."

"Nose-dives off cliffs," she added helpfully.

"Secret government facilities on abandoned islands."

She wrinkled her nose. "Grand theft auto is when you steal a car. What is it called when you steal a boat?"

He held up two fingers. "Two boats. We've stolen two now."

"Yes, but we took this one from the pirates, who were trying to kill us. So that doesn't count." She grinned at him, her green eyes sparkling brightly.

He had to work hard not to answer her smile with one of his own. "You need spanking," he told her sternly. "And lots of it."

She blinked at him in surprise, but then decided he was probably joking and attempted a small laugh. Still, there was a slightly nervous curiosity that glittered in her eyes as she edged sideways away from him.

"What are we going to do with those?" he asked, pointing to the satchel.

Gwen smiled at him. "Open it up."

He snorted and didn't move. "Two days ago if I sat too close to it you threatened to knock me overboard again. Now you want me to open it?" He studied her face, his eyes narrowing. "It's empty, isn't it?"

"I set the papers on fire and threw them in the ocean," she said with a smile. "That way, if Bubby and Russ catch up to us in the harbor, my grandfather will still be safe. With the evidence gone, no one can hurt him now."

"We can still be killed," Daniel pointed out.

Her smile faded slightly. "Oh yeah... that's right. We can."

"And whoever's blackmailing him can still start rumors," Daniel added.

"But that's all he can do. Without solid proof to back his claims, the rumors will remain empty and dissolve away without becoming a career-damaging full-blown scandal."

"What was on the papers?" he couldn't help but ask.

She shrugged. "To tell you the truth, I didn't even want to look. He's my grandfather. I love him. Regardless of what he did, once upon a time in his youth."

Daniel nodded, leaning his hip against the railing to watch the approaching shore as Gwen slowly guided the ship towards land. They navigated carefully through the harbor and left the vessel tied to an empty part of the docks. Before they disembarked, Gwen taped a polite little note to the wheel:

'Dear Port Authorities,

I am a little pirate vessel. You will find my masters stranded on Neetikki Island. Will someone please rescue them and put them in jail? They tried to kill the two very nice people who sailed me here. Thank you.'

Dry land felt oddly still under Daniel's feet as they walked out of Ellis Harbor. They stopped at a bait shop just long enough to buy a soda with Daniel's remaining fifty-three cents and for Gwen to place a collect phone call to her grandfather.

"He's going to send a taxi to get me," she said when she hung up the phone. "Everything's going to be fine."

Daniel nodded. He looked at her, for a moment wishing they were still stranded back on that island—maybe without the pirates this time—just so he could have a good excuse for being with her a little while longer.

She looked at him with the same forlorn expression, though she quickly tried to mask it with a smile. "I'll walk you to your car."

"I'll wait until the taxi comes for you," he said as they walked side by side away from the wharf towards the parking lot.

The surrounding town was turn-of-the-century old, the building fronts having all the architectural earmarks of an old west town. Here and there, newer brick buildings were sprinkled in amidst the old and there was even a three-story parking garage across the street from the jetty, empty now but just waiting for the hordes of summertime beach-goers to arrive.

There was a very small unpaved parking area in front of the jetty, inhabited only by a rental minivan and a metal car frame propped up on cinder blocks.

"Oh dear," Gwen said, and stopped when she saw it. She looked around the parking lot. "I, uh..." she took two hesitant steps forward and looked at the frame again. "I think I left the car parked right here."

Daniel stared at the frame, just big enough to have quite possibly belonged to his '58 cherry red convertible, and instantly felt sick to his stomach. "My—my car?"

Gwen touched two fingers to her bottom lip, turning in a half circle as she swept a worried gaze over the beach. She pointed down at the docks in the jetty. "There were two men crabbing down there. I told them you were drunk and they helped me carry you down to the boat. Um..." she turned back to the frame, sprayed here and there with graffiti, and then her eyes traveled up to his. "Oh dear," she said again.

"My car," he said faintly. He held up his hands, creeping slowly towards his baby. The baby he had lovingly restored to full cherry red grandeur over a period of twelve years. The baby he loved almost

more than life itself. "You—" he looked back at her. "You left my car parked on the street? He looked around them. "There's a parking garage right across the damned road, Gwen! Why didn't you put it in there?"

"I'm sorry." She wrung her hands. "I-I didn't think about it. I probably should have put the top up, huh?"

Daniel looked at her. It was not a good look.

Gwen backed up a step. "It—It was an accident, Daniel. I-I-I'm sorry! Don't you have insurance?"

"I built that car from original parts." He scowled darkly. "I restored it from a broken down junkyard heap into the beautiful machine that you hijacked out of Vegas... with me in it! How the hell is insurance going to replace that?"

She backed up another step as he took an ominous one towards her. She held up her hands, warding him off. "Don't lose your temper, Daniel. I promise I'll help you build another one just like it.. No! Better even! I swear!"

He began to stalk towards her, his hand twitching in a way that was entirely reminiscent of how he'd treated her on the Mischievous Minx. She reached a hand back to touch her bottom and swallowed hard. She darted a quick look around her but the only place for her to run was back down to the docks where she could either steal another boat or hop in the ocean.

"I really like you," she blurted out, hoping to soothe his temper before it became a physically uncomfortable—for her—outburst. "Please don't beat me."

"I'm not going to beat you," he said bluntly.

"You're not?" She stopped backing away, a little of the tension leaking from her shoulders as she blinked at him. "Promise?"

"I promise. I won't beat you." He took another step closer. "I'm going to spank the hell out of you."

He leapt at her.

"Eep!" Gwen tried to run but she barely made it to the beach before he caught her, grabbing her around the waist and lifting her clean up off the sand. "NO!" she shouted, squirming and kicking as he carried her to a wash of tree-trunk-sized driftwood, haphazardly left to dry in the sun somewhat beyond the reach of high tide.

"Don't you dare!" she shouted, flailing her hands and feet as he sat down and dumped her unceremoniously across his lap. "HELP!"

Her screams attracted the attention of a beachcombing dog, who barked, and a pair of Japanese tourists, who took their picture both before and during and after the fury of his palm meted out its full measure of justice across the seat of her flaming hot backside. He turned her nether cheeks the color of a raging sunburn and then dumped her back on her feet.

With tears racing down her face, Gwen grabbed up a fistful of sand and flung it at him wildly. Daniel managed to shield his eyes, but he came up off the log coughing and spitting sand. She got another two vindictive throws in before turning and racing down the beach with Daniel right behind her, the Japanese tourists talking excitedly and taking pictures all the way.

They cheered when Daniel caught her around the waist, tumbling her down into the sand and wrestling her onto her back. Straddling her waist, he pinned her hands above her head and waited for her to calm down. The rushing ocean wave did a marvelous job of that. She gasped shrilly, her eyes and mouth gaping as the icy water washed around them.

Daniel jerked her head and shoulders up far enough to keep her from being covered by the frothy wave, and they looked at one another.

"You like me, huh?" he said with a slightly smile.

Bottom smarting and now soaking wet as well, Gwen wasn't anywhere near ready to make up. "It was a temporary sickness. I got over it."

"Like the common cold, I mutate," he told her. "You're cursed to fall under my spell over and over again for the rest of your life."

She looked at his lips, her own parting moistly. "Elvis did say 'Til death do you part,' didn't he?"

Daniel chuckled. "That he did."

The ocean wave rushed in to cover them again, except that this time it didn't feel quite so shockingly cold. This time, between the conquering kiss of his mouth on hers and the pulsating heat of her wounded bottom nestled in the sand, Gwen had no trouble keeping warm.

Our House

Chapter One

There were boxes stacked chest high along the walls and scattered down the hallway. They were waist high in the middle of the kitchen and living room, and as high as the ceiling in an eight foot square section of the bedroom Letty Rogers had claimed to be her own. Nearly every square of available floor space was cluttered with either sealed, half unpacked, or empty boxes stacked one on top of the other, and articles of furniture that were placed randomly and without reason throughout the old house. But of course, that was to be expected when one was just moving in.

The house, although new to her, was truly anything but new. It had been built in the 1880s by the original founders of the small town of Podunk, Oregon, population three hundred and twelve, a tiny little dot on the map not far from Interstate Five.

In its day, the house had been a veritable mansion. There were three levels in all, two indoor lavatories, complete with old fashioned claw-foot cast iron tubs—and one modified corner shower stall in the downstairs bathroom—six bedrooms, a massive kitchen, a dining room with an open arched doorway and a living room large enough to almost get lost in.

Built on a hilltop, it overlooked a large sprawling pasture, dotted with a few cows, some isolated country homes and a lot of evergreen trees. In the distance, the faded blue line of the ocean could barely be distinguished. There was an old rose garden just off the back porch, a weathered shed that looked like a chicken coop and a wine cellar that could only be accessed through the outside storm doors. The overgrown vineyard could be

accessed through a backyard gate, if one could get the rusty-hinges to move, but what few grape plants remained were choked with tall grass and weeds.

Once upon a time, this had been an enviable estate, the grandest in all of Podunk. But after the last owner, who had turned the back field into a vineyard and the storm cellar into a winery, died back in the fifties, the house had stood empty and the passage of time had not been kind. The natural grandeur of the home had faded, the years and the weather having peeled away most of what was once pristine white paint and which was now a tarnished gray. The warped and rippled gingerbread wainscoting combined with the sagging roof had worked together to saddle the house with the unfortunate title of 'Fixer Upper' by the real estate agent who had sold it to Letty.

But at least it was clean. There wasn't so much as a leaf on the floor or a speck of dust on the light fixtures or the few furnishings that the old home had come with. Even the ancient rugs in the bedrooms looked freshly beaten, and there wasn't the slightest evidence of mice. Chalk it up to an over-eager Real Estate Agent anxious to make a sale, but shoot! If he was willing to clean the place up, the least she could do was buy it.

And to be honest, Letty didn't mind fixer uppers. A carpenter by trade, that kind of house was just her style... and just about what she could afford since her divorce had become final last month. She was now on her own for the first time in all her forty-three years. Her brown hair was streaked with gray now, there were lines at the corners of her eyes, and she was minus half of everything that she used to call her own, but that didn't mean she couldn't start anew.

"Bastard," Letty said, dropping another box on the kitchen table and jerking the flaps open angrily. "Two timing, two faced, cock—"

Don't say it, a voice inside her head warned.

"Sucker," she finished vindictively, and then she froze because in that instant the atmosphere in the entire house seemed to shift around her, like the slithering and coiling of an angry snake. The lead-glass light fixture flickered. Indeed, the lights throughout the house flickered, and the ceiling rafters creaked and groaned.

Letty raised her head to eye the ceiling warily. "Don't you dare fall down before I get my tools unpacked. I swear to God, you're the first thing I'm planning to fix."

Gradually, the creaking faded and the lights became stable again. Letty heaved a sigh and wiped her suddenly damp palms off on the seat of her jeans. Though she knew without a doubt that she was alone, she couldn't help feeling a slightly unnerved prickling at the back of her neck. A chill stole up her spine, raising the tiny hairs on her neck and her arms. She shivered, turning in a full circle, as she looked around the unfamiliar house—her house now—not once, but twice. Finally, her eyes settled on the wide open drapes of the living room window.

"Shit," she muttered and picked her way around the stacks of boxes to it. She caught the edges of the drapes and snapped them both together, covering the window. "Give the overactive imagination a break, Letty. There's nobody out there."

She went back to her unpacking, and slowly her unease began to fade. It was an old house, an unfamiliar town, and a new start. A girl's mind was bound to start acting up. Especially after losing everything she'd ever held dear in all her life.

Which brought her thoughts back to her darling ex-husband.

Which brought back the swearing. If she was imagining things, then it was all John's fault and calling him every evil name she could think of made her feel infinitely better. Comforted, in a way. It was kind of like exorcizing demons. Ever since she'd found out about the affairs—not just Trixie, but the whole, long line of women and one-night-stands that had turned John's 'until death do us part' into 'you're smothering the hell out of me'—the highlight of her days had revolved around discovering new and increasingly inventive ways to curse him.

As she stood in the dining room, carefully unwrapping her mother's fine china from the protective leaves of a Sunday newspaper and gently stacking them on the table, under her breath she muttered, "If there is a God in heaven, may John's peter catch the plague and fall off. That's exactly what that son of a bitch deserves!"

The lightbulb in the lead glass fixture above her head exploded with a pop that nearly had Letty jumping out of her skin. The kitchen went dark. Thank God for the light in the living room, otherwise she would have disgraced herself entirely by screaming. Or wetting her pants. At her age, personal disgrace knew no boundaries... and she needed to go to the bathroom already.

Clutching her chest, she stared up at the black fixture, wondering which of her many boxes held the light bulbs. "Damn it. I don't think I have any."

The entire house shuddered and groaned and Letty grabbed the table as she heard a very distinct voice say, "You are making me angry, Letty."

Someone was in the house with her. Someone with a very masculine and low voice, one that seemed to rumble out of nowhere directly in front of her where she saw only empty air.

And then the light in the living room went out and the house was cast into total darkness.

Letty totally panicked. She jumped backwards, flattening herself against the dining room wall, screaming, "JOHN!" before she remembered she was divorced and completely on her own. "Crap! Oh crapcrapcrap!"

She dropped to her knees, crawling under the table and out the other side, and ran into the kitchen. Now what? She danced around in circles because she had no idea which box held the knives, and without any lights it was too dark to read her scrawling chicken-scratch handwriting. She jumped up and down, darting first in one direction and then another, flapping her hands in the air in her panic before her gaze skimmed across the familiar shadowy shape of a box knife lying on the counter by the sink.

She had no idea the broom was between her and the counter until she tripped over it. Letty fell to the floor, but on the way down, her wildly flailing arms hit the counter and the box knife seemingly jumped right into her hand. She kicked over a box, breaking something glass and fragile inside of it, as she scrambled to get back on her feet. She hoped it was something other than her mother's china plates. Hugging the box knife to her chest, she strained to peer through the darkness for the owner of that voice.

Unless the owner of that voice was packed in cardboard along with the rest of her belongings, then nothing else in the living room was immediately volunteering itself to be human.

"Hello?" she called softly. She held her breath as she listened, but everything was utterly silent. Extending the tiny two-inch blade to its fullest length, she wielded it threateningly at the blackness. "I am armed and—and dangerous! I-If

you come anywhere near me, I'll—I'll defend myself!"

There was still nothing. Not a whisper, not a sound. But that man's voice hadn't been her imagination. Someone had to be out there. Someone who knew her name, knew she lived here, and quite likely knew she was utterly alone. Her brain made the jump to the next logical conclusion and anger surged over her momentary lapse into fear.

"John," she seethed. Knife held firmly in hand, she headed for the living room. "I swear to God, I am going to Lorena Bobbitt your ass!"

A bump came from the direction of the front door. Letty snapped around, peering through the darkness, but she could see nothing ominous, threatening... moving.

"John?" she called out, a little more hesitatingly. "I-Is that you?"

There was no answer, and her legs moved of their own accord, carrying her towards the front door. Parting the curtains, she peeked out the side window, attracting the attention of a tabby cat sitting on the front porch rail. It mewed, immediately standing up, and rubbed against the porch post in a plaintive appeal for petting.

Swallowing hard, the knife held ready, Letty reached up to turn the lock. "John?"

She opened the door, poking her head outside and half heartedly expecting to see her ex-husband, maybe hiding in some bushes or even down on his knees—flowers would have been a nice touch—playing one of his infamously in poor-taste practical jokes. But there was no one. Only a slight breeze that rustled the bushes and swayed the drooping limbs of the willow tree by the picket fence. Two kids played a block or so down the street under the lights of a city lamp, but their faint laughing and

shrieking couldn't have in any way been mistaken for the deep threatening tones of a full-grown man.

Letty glanced one way and then the other. Her eyebrows drew down in puzzlement and she frowned. Turning, she walked back inside, behind the cussed cat, who walked inside ahead of her, tail held high as if it owned the place. No sooner had she crossed the threshold than did the door slam shut without any help from her. She jumped, her heart in her throat, and spun back around, but again there was nothing. "I'm losing my damn mind."

"I have had enough of that language in my house. Woman, you will mind your unruly mouth."

Letty spun around again, but the landing at the top of the stairs was as empty as the entryway. "Who's there? John, if that's you, you're not going to scare me into coming back to you!" Letty swallowed her unease and pasted a scowl over her face. "How did you find me, anyway? What are you even doing in my house? Get your ass out where I can see you!"

The very darkness around her suddenly seemed to slither and rattle with viperous agitation. A chilly breeze gusted past her, and suddenly the voice was right behind her. "You were warned, and several times."

Every hair on her nape standing on end, Letty slowly turned around. She was standing eye-to-eye with a tall dark-haired, dark-eyed man, who was dressed in clothes as dated as the house they were standing in. "Oh shit," she said without thinking.

Even in the darkness, his eyes seemed to flash. A corner of his mouth twisted in a grimace of angry disapproval, and before she could take a startled step back, his hand locked around her wrist like a vise. "I will tolerate no more of your guttersnipe crudity."

He propped one foot up on the bottommost step of the stairs and suddenly her entire world turned upside-down as she found herself upended over his thigh. Letty let out a shriek and accidentally dropped the box knife, which clattered to the hardwood floor in front of the man's feet. This couldn't be happening. There was no way that this could be happening. Except that the flat of the man's hand certainly felt real enough as it cracked down hard across the seat of her denim jeans.

"Oh!" Letty gasped, her expression registering total shock at the force of the impact. Even through her jeans, she felt the smack of his palm like a sharp sting that covered the summit of her left cheek and burrowed down through her skin to permeate the muscle. The second smack was even harder, and it not only jolted her entire body but seemed to knock her free of whatever somnambulistic trance had her lying limply over his leg, accepting this spanking as if she were a disobedient child.

"What do you think you're—ouch!—doing?" she yelled, kicking her legs and waving her arms. "You—ow!—can't spank me! OW! Let go, I said! Get your goddamn hands—OW! OW! OWW!—off me! OW!"

She may as well have been fighting a brick wall for all the good it did her. He ignored her screams, holding her easily pinioned in place with one arm while his other rose and fell steadily, punishing her with a single-minded determination unlike anything that she had ever felt before. No matter how she wiggled and bucked, no matter how vigorously she thrashed—kicking her feet in the air, against the wall and even hitting the door in the process—there was no breaking free of his hold. And his spanking was beginning to really hurt. And not just a little. It was really hurting a lot!

The thickness of her pants wasn't helping. If anything the denim increased the unbearable heat that he was building to bonfire-like degrees all over the seat of her bottom. And the pain kept growing.

"Oh please, stop! STOP! OW!" But he wasn't stopping. What if he never stopped? Letty panicked and tried to roll off his knee, but he only tightened his grip around her and walloped her bottom even harder.

"I have had all that I will tolerate from you!" the man growled, and his iron-hard palm continued its painful tattoo with pitiless single-mindedness. "This is a good Christian household, and I'll not suffer foul speaking hooligans within my walls!"

"Let me go!" she wailed, dashing back one hand to ward off the next painful swat. He only switched targets and began to paddle that tender expanse of flesh where her bottom met her thighs—and more importantly, should she ever take it in her mind to try sitting again, where her bottom couldn't help but meet a chair.

The intensity of being spanked so hard in so tender a place had her bucking her hips and squirming from side to side, but his hand never once missed its burning target. Until with one last resounding crack against her poor belabored bottom, the man caught the scruff of her neck and pulled her back up off his thigh.

"I will take the soap and brush to your mouth if I ever hear such talk from you again!" he told her sternly, giving her a firm shake, and then let her go.

Letty had absolutely no pride left. Not with a bottom that felt hot enough to cook on. She caught her battered nether cheeks in both hands, the pain flared even worse than when he'd been spanking her. Unable to bear the contact, she clasped the sides of her hips instead and stamped her feet, bouncing up and down because she simply hurt too much to hold still.

Grimacing, eyes squeezed tightly shut, she bowed over until she was nearly bent in half and held her hips until the worst of the hurt receded, leaving behind a hot, burning, smarting area that throbbed beneath the rear pockets of her denim jeans.

Raising her head, she glared at her attacker.

He stood with arms crossed over his broad chest, his mouth a thin and still angry line, his eyes flashing down into hers without sympathy or remorse. He gave a quick nod towards the stairs. "Get on up to bed, girl. You're all done for the night."

Letty glared. "You can't tell me what to do!"

"Argue with me and I'll take those inappropriate pants of yours down and add a dose of the brush on top of what you've already had."

"But it's not even six thirty yet! I never go to bed this early."

He took one ominous step towards her and began to roll up his sleeve.

Letty ran all the way upstairs.

Joshua stood in the dining room listening as a battery of scampering footsteps thundered upstairs and fled down the hall. A bedroom door slammed shut, and he tsked. From the sound of it, the woman had taken his room. He tsked again and shook his head, thoroughly irritated. There were boxes everywhere. His house was in complete disarray. Cluttered. He hated that.

Strolling into the dining room, he peaked into the half-unpacked box the woman had been working on. It was full of dishes, as was the box next to it, although the second was full of plates and bowls of a much lower quality than the first. A third box on the floor was even worse. Those dishes weren't stacked so much as they were simply

thrown into the box as if packed in a great hurry. In fact—he made a face—half of them looked dirty.

Joshua tsked again.

The cat rubbed up against his legs, purring, and he bent down to give the animal a scratch behind the ears. He then shooed it on its way. "Go catch mice, Nicodemus."

Wandering into the kitchen, he righted a toppled box and glared at the broken glass of a shattered vase that was scattered across the floor. His floor. His used to be nice and neat floor. He turned a very sour look on the overhead ceiling and frowned, then picked up the broom and neatly swept up the mess. He put the dishes stacked on the table into the appropriate cupboards and then, because he had nothing else to do and because he was so thoroughly irritated, he began to unpack the boxes.

Now and then, he glanced up at the ceiling and shook his head. He'd always known sooner or later he would have to share his house with someone. He shook his head at the ceiling. "Grant me the patience..."

Letty lay in her bedroom on a bed that was nothing more than two double mattresses on the floor. The frame was still in segments and leaned up against the wall. Her clothes were in piles on the floor, and her dresser was against the wall and piled nearly to the ceiling with boxes.

She hugged her pillow and glared mutinously at the wall. "You're forty-three years old, Letty. For crying out loud, you're not going to be put to bed like a toddler!"

She looked at the door, but made no move to get up.

"Who does he think he is, anyway?" she muttered. "I ought to march myself back down

there and throw him out. Whose house is this, after all? Mine, that's whose!"

She still didn't move, other than to reach back and give her bottom a very gentle, if rueful, rub.

"This is ridiculous," she told herself. "You're an adult. He can't treat you like this. You need to march yourself down there and tell him to go away!"

Heavy footsteps began to come up the stairs, and Letty froze. Her eyes widened, and she rolled halfway on to her side to look at the door. Her heart all but stopped in her chest as the sounds of shoes on the bare floorboards continued down the hall, stopping just outside her room.

Slowly, Letty sat up, wincing a little as her bottom brushed the mattress. She eyed the doorknob, half expecting it to start turning at any second, but when minutes passed and nothing happened, she pushed herself up. Nervously rubbing her hands on her thighs and wincing when she accidentally stepped on a squeaky floorboard, she crept as quietly as she could to the door. She hesitated just before gripping the cool porcelain knob, but the need to know was stronger than her unease. After all, if a strange man was going to stand outside her bedroom all night, that was a good piece of information to have before she went to sleep without first pushing something heavy up against the door.

She licked her lips nervously, quietly turning the knob and easing the door open a half an inch. The outer hallway was empty. The living room lights had come back on downstairs, and the reflection of those illuminated enough of the upstairs for her to know there definitely was no one standing where those footsteps had told her someone ought to be.

An icy sensation filtered down through her chest and settled nervously in the pit of her stomach. Maybe she had imagined it. Letty quietly closed the

door, but before she even took her hand off the knob, three sharp knocks rapped against it.

The icy sensation became a full-blown knot of dread. There was no one out in the hall. She had seen that with her own eyes. There was no one out there at all!

Turning the knob, Letty creaked the door open the slightest crack and stared in disbelief at the man who had spanked her. Tall, he had a full head of dark hair, broad shoulders and eyes like a starless midnight sky.

"If I forgot to say so earlier," he said, his voice low and smooth and as creamy as melting butter, "welcome to my house."

Letty slammed the door. She leapt back into bed, diving head first beneath her blankets and pulling them back up over her head. For the first time in years, she even prayed. "Oh God, oh God, oh God! Yea though I walk through the Valley of Death I will fear no Evil..."

Her house was haunted! What was worse, her house was haunted by a ghost that spanked!

Chapter Two

It had been twenty-five years since Letty last stepped foot inside a church. It wasn't even Sunday, but first thing the following morning, that's what Letty decided to do. She went to church.

In a town of only three hundred and twelve—well, thirteen now, counting herself—church was close enough for her to walk to. In fact, there was one about every two blocks. She dressed in her nicest, a green and white floral print knee-length dress with a white knit sweater to stave off the chill of the morning. And as she walked, passing the Presbyterian, Unitarian and Menonite churches, she tried to think of what she could possibly do, once she got to St. Mary's, to help herself. Short of moving into the church, that is. Or moving back home to John. She scowled at the very thought.

Shaking her head and hugging her arms around her shoulders, she stepped off the sidewalk, crossing the dew-soaked grass to the parking lot, and from there into St. Mary's chapel. There were two other people sitting among the pews, not including the priests, and one old woman praying at the candles. Making her way to a forward pew, she made her genuflection before sitting down very gingerly and looked up at the cross. After a minute, her gaze slid back over her shoulder at the confessionals. The light was on.

She squirmed in her seat, wincing a little as her tender nether cheeks protested the pressure being put to them. She didn't really want to go back there, but then she really didn't want to have a haunted house, either. Nor did she want to be the basis for the next Exorcist movie or Amityville Horror.

Sighing heavily, she stood up again. She made her reverence to the cross, and then walked back to

the confessional. She stepped inside somewhat trepedatiously. It had been such a long time, and she couldn't help but feel a little hypocritical as she lowered herself to kneel in contrition. The window between her and the priest slid open, and his shadow fell across the grille.

"Speak," he somberly intoned, "and may God give you the grace to confess your sins fully and with a contrite heart."

Letty took a deep breath, briefly closing her eyes as she tried to summon her strength. Twenty-five years or not, the familiar words rolled off her tongue as if she'd never missed a Sunday. At least, for the most part.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been... shit, I don't know—oh God!" Letty paled as she realized what she'd said. Halfway expecting herself to be smitten on the spot, she stammered, "I didn't mean to say that! I—I mean shit, I'm—I mean, oh Jesus! I did it again! Father, I'm so sorry! I—"

The priest waved his hand. "Calm yourself. It's all right. I understand."

Letty took several deep breaths, her face burning hot as she tried to get control of her tongue. She shifted on her knees, and the slight movement made the battered muscles up the backs of her legs and into her still aching bottom twinge uncomfortably.

"Now," the priest said. "Take a deep breath, and continue when you feel confident that you can."

Even knowing it would hurt, Letty shifted again. If nothing else, the discomfort helped her bite her tongue, and she concentrated hard on what she was saying to keep her language fit for the ears of a man of God. "Father, I—I swear a little, my divorce has just been finalized, and I think very badly of my ex-lying-louse-of-a-husband. I think because of those things, the devil has set his sights on me and,

I don't know how to say this, but... I think I've become... possessed."

She saw the Father's outline through the confessional window turn towards her. "My child, that is not something that should be joked of lightly."

"Which part?"

"Five Hail Marys for the swearing, and we'll tackle your divorce another day. It's the possession part that bothers me."

Letty snorted, a harsh half laugh that had very little to do with amusement. "Believe me, Father, it bothers me too. I only wish I were joking about it. I am in the process of moving into my new house, but there's a—well, a ghost already there. I've never believed in ghosts before, but last night he attacked me."

She could feel her face burning even hotter as he continued to stare at her through the grille.

"A ghost?" the priest echoed.

"Yes," Letty said.

"My child, that is not possible."

"The hell it isn't," she scoffed. "Honest to God, Father. He's in my house."

"How do you know it's a 'he'?"

Letty blinked twice. "Well... because he looked and sounded like a man while he was yelling at me."

"He yelled at you?" the priest asked, turning on his seat to better see her through the grille.

"Well..." Letty looked around the confessional, thinking this was probably not the best place to exaggerate details. "Scolded might be a better way to describe it, Father."

"He scolded you?" the priest said, in tones that had dropped into disbelieving ranges. "For what?"

"For swearing," Letty softly admitted, dropping her head onto her folded hands and trying not to look at him. She held up her fingers a short

distance apart. "I have a small problem with profanity."

"I see," said the priest, neither looking nor sounding particularly surprised. "And then this ghost... he attacked you?"

"Well..." again Letty looked around the confessional. Her face burned even hotter, and she winced a little as she shifted again. "I guess... spanked might be a better word for that, too."

"Lying is a sin, my child, branded onto your immortal soul, weighting it until it sinks without escape into the eternal burning fires of Damnation. This is doubly so when done in a confessional!"

"I'm not lying, Father, I swear I'm not! Do you think I like saying this to you? Do you think it was the highlight of my day to come here and admit all this? It wasn't, I can tell you. I did have better things to do!" She saw the priest's eyes narrow at the same time that she realized what she'd said. Clearing her throat, Letty stammered, "I-I didn't mean better, per say. I know nothing is better than God and the Church. I j-just meant... I mean... Well, you know what I meant! For crying out loud, Father, are you going to help me or not?"

The priest glared at her through the grille.

Letty lowered her voice. "Please, Father. I've got hand-shaped bruises all over my backside. The boxes in my house were all unpacked last night while I was hiding in my bed, too scared to come out from under the covers. The ghost even made me breakfast this morning. Bacon and eggs, and slightly buttered toast. It was very good... in a very spooky sort of way."

"All right," the priest said with a sigh. "I will come to the house and look around. But I warn you, the church does not regard the subject of exorcisms lightly. If this is some sort of practical joke, we will not be pleased."

"Oh, thank you." Letty closed her eyes, letting her head rock back on her shoulders with relief. "Thank you so much. You don't know how grateful you've just made me."

"For your sake, I only hope you're telling the truth," the priest said. Giving her one last stern look, he shut the window.

Letty blinked, slightly taken aback. Climbing up off her knees, she followed the priest out of the booth. "Of course I'm telling the truth. Who would lie about something this crazy?"

"Someone looking for attention," he told her bluntly. "Someone who thought they knew what they were seeing, but for one reason or another, hallucinated the experience."

"Hallucinated?" Letty echoed.

"Excuse me," the priest said, and walked behind the shielding curtains of a private alcove to remove his vestments.

After a stunned moment, Letty followed him. "Now you wait one minute here, buster."

In the middle of removing his stole, the priest looked up at her in surprise. "You can't be back here!"

Letty turned around, caught the hem of her dress and pulled it up over her waist. Catching the elastic leg band of her underwear, she bared her right bottom cheek fully to him.

"What are you doing?" the priest cried.

But Letty didn't cover up. Instead, she demanded, "Does this look like the effects of a hallucination to you? Because I'm telling you, it felt pretty damn real to me!"

There was no immediate answer, and when she glanced back at him, he had turned around completely to keep from looking at her.

"I've got bruises," she said firmly. "Hallucinations do not leave marks."

The priest covered his eyes with one hand. "Please cover yourself."

"I'm not a liar," Letty persisted. "I know what I saw. And you can see it, too, Father. All you have to do is come to my house."

"Are you covered?" the priest asked.

"Yes," she lied, without the slightest twinge of conscience.

He uncovered his eyes and turned around, only to immediately slap his hand back over his eyes again. "You said you didn't lie!" he accused.

"I guess I do after all." Certain that he'd got a good look at the works of her particular 'hallucination,' then and only then did Letty drop her skirt and stand up. "I'll wait for you outside, father."

She stormed out of the alcove, leaving the good priest to finish changing in peace.

"Oh." Father Murphy stopped just outside the picket fence and looked up at the front of her house. "You didn't tell me you'd bought the old Steggell residence."

Pushing open the creaky front gate, Letty stepped onto the old cobble walkway. She looked from him to the house and back again. "Who was Steggell?"

"He immigrated from England about fifty years ago," Father Murphy said, striving to sound brighter than he looked. "This used to be a sheep ranch until he bought the place. He sold off the surrounding land except for the pasture where he planted his grapes. Then he started up a winery in the basement of the house. Well... Steggell's house. That certainly does explain a lot."

"It does?" Letty asked. "What does it explain? Was Steggell a mass murderer? Did he serve a little something extra with his wine? What?"

"Not mass murder," Father Murphy hastened to say. "Per say. At least, he didn't do anything that bad. And, come to think of it, I have heard of homes with bigger skeletons in the closets." He tried to laugh, but it fell somewhat flat. "So to speak."

"That's not comforting, Father."

He drew himself upright, seeming to bolster his courage to take that first step into the yard.

"That's not comforting, either," Letty commented. "When a priest has to work himself up to come to your house, you know you've got problems."

"Odd things have reputedly happened here," Father Murphy told her as he slowly walked towards the house, eyeing it with every reluctant step.

"Full disclosure isn't what it used to be," Letty muttered. "What sort of odd things?"

"Blinking lights, strange noises. Neighborhood children dare one another to see who's brave enough to enter the property on Halloween." Laughing somewhat nervously, the priest climbed the porch steps. "I've never been inside this house before. I confess, I am a little curious to see what your apparition looks like."

Letty was about to follow him when a flicker of movement caught her eyes. The curtains in an upstairs window moved and for a blink or two she could have sworn she glimpsed a face staring back down at her. She frowned. Her cheating bastard of a husband had robbed her of her first home; she was not about to be displaced from her second by a ghost!

Digging her keys out of her pocket, she marched up to the front door. "Do you know who he is?"

"I'm not sure. He might be one of two or three different people."

Letty almost dropped her keys in surprise. "That many people have died in this house?"

"You didn't know?"

"That tears it! I am definitely going to file a report against that real estate agent. 'Square deal' my big toe!" Jamming the key in the lock, she gave it a turn and shoved on the door. It was a little warped and stuck in the threshold until she both pushed and kicked the bottom corner. It creaked when it swung open, and as she walked inside, Letty called wryly back over her shoulder, "Welcome to my haunted home."

Father Murphy stepped over the threshold with barely concealed reluctance. He glanced up the stairs to the second floor and then peeked around the side of the arched doorway into the living room.

Everything she owned was unpacked and put away; the only problem was, Letty didn't know where any of it was. The furniture in the livingroom was all the old and original furnishings: the old settee and footstool, the gold and orange lamps with their dangling tassels, and the elegantly carved cherry-wood end tables, which were, admittedly, much better looking than her own Walmart special, bought-on-the-spur-of-a-moment-because-she-had-to-have-something end tables. She didn't know where her TV was, or her stereo, and the drapes which she had snapped shut the night before were now wide open and tied back.

"See?" she said, walking into the living room with her arms wide open to encompass the room. "I unpacked six boxes; he did all the rest." She turned and walked into the dining room, looking up at the lead glass lamp hanging over the dining table. "He even changed the light bulb he exploded."

"He actually broke the lightbulb?" Father Murphy asked, following at a tentative distance.

"That was just before he attacked me." Letty frowned up at the light. "Come to think of it, he played with the lights every time I cussed. Hm..." Hands resting lightly on her hips, she looked up at

the light through narrowed eyes. "Damn," she said experimentally.

An odd stillness settled over the house, and Father Murphy looked distinctly uneasy. "Is baiting the ghost a good idea, do you think?"

"I said, damn!" Letty repeated, raising her voice.

The lights flickered and the house groaned in response.

Can we not live in peace, a whisper of conscience asked. *Did I not warn you what would happen if you broke the rules of my house?*

Letty's eyes narrowed and she glared up at the ceiling. "Damn! Shit! Mother fu—"

"Now hold on here," the priest protested.

The air around them all but shivered and the house creaked and shifted in ominous complaint.

Father Murphy looked up at the ceiling just as heavy footsteps began to tromp purposefully across the upstairs floor. Both Letty and the priest followed with their eyes the path of the steps until they reached the stairs. Each creaked in turn as if bending to the weight of a corporeal man, but though they should have been able to see someone halfway to the bottom, there was nothing but empty air.

Father Murphy took a healthy step backwards, moving away from the footsteps even as they began to cross the livingroom floor.

"Now, Father," Letty whispered as the air above the moving steps began to shimmer into the dark form of a man.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Father Murphy softly exclaimed, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. He quickly crossed himself.

"Now, Father!" Letty said, stumbling backwards as the man solidified into a very real looking person.

"Now, what?" the priest shrugged, wide eyed and nearly panicked.

"Exorcize him!" Letty began to back around the table, grabbing chairs and flinging them into his path. He simply pushed them neatly back into place at the table and kept right on coming, his dark eyes boring into hers, flashing with determination. As he began to close the distance between them, he extended his right arm and rolled up his long white shirt sleeve.

"I will not tolerate that kind of language in my house," he told her. "I told you that when I allowed you into my home."

"Uh," Letty stumbled into a chair, feeling her way around the table as she tried to flee without taking her eyes off the ghost. "Anytime you want to jump in here, Father, would be a very good time for me."

The front door slammed, and Letty turned around to see the back of Father Murphy running down the walkway and through the gate to the sidewalk. He took off down the road as fast as he could go.

"I don't believe this!" Letty was so stunned that she forgot to run herself. The next thing she knew, the ghost had his hands locked on her shoulders. "Eep!"

"You were given ample warning what would happen if you chose not to obey my rules." He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down, presenting her with a very capable lap. And, as Letty quickly discovered, there was no arguing with ghosts. He toppled her down across his knee with very little effort, despite her stiff legged protests. And he was, quite simply, better at holding her down than she was at getting away.

"You can't do this!" she cried, kicking her legs and pounding her hands against the floor.

She tried to roll off his lap, but he only pinned her thighs between his own and suddenly the hem of her skirt was tossed up over her back. His

plumply rounded, panty-clad target was bared for the palm of his hand. Letty screamed and struggled, but nothing she did mattered. She could just as well have been holding still for all the good her protests did her, because in spite of everything he paddled three shades of red into the upturned summits of her nether cheeks.

Letty stood in the bathroom, shuddering over a bar of Ivory soap. Her whole mouth was alive with the flavor. It was very... soapy. Yes, if ever there was a thing that tasted just like it smelled, Ivory soap was it.

Her bottom was throbbing beneath the folds of her skirt. Letty would have given anything she owned to rub just enough to ease away some of the pulsing hurt, but she didn't dare. She kept her hands laced behind her head, and she stared at the wall just above the towel rack, enduring the foul, awful tasting soap, all the while doing her best not to swallow a drop of it. Saliva was oozing down from the corners of her mouth, but she thought it was much better to drool than it was to ingest.

A hand came around the side of her head and took hold of the cake of soap. "Let go."

Letty had to unstick her teeth out of the white bar. "Ugh!" She shuddered all over. Gagging, she left her mouth hanging open, as if to close it would have been to savor the flavor that seemed to coat her tongue, cheeks, and teeth.

"Now," the ghost behind her intoned. "If you think you can contain your profanity, you may rinse your mouth."

Letty flew to the sink. She began scooping the water into her mouth, swishing and spitting repeatedly. In a frantic effort to remove the lingering taste, she grabbed a washcloth out of the

counter and scrubbed her teeth and tongue. She alternately gagged and spat and scrubbed again.

"I can't believe you did that to me!" she sputtered and rinsed her mouth again. When there was no comment from the ghost, she turned and looked behind her. The bathroom was empty. She spat the water out of her mouth. "Oh, you are not going to leave on that note!"

She shut the water off and wiped her face on the towel. Charging out of the bathroom, she marched into the living room, yelling up at the ceiling, "Hey, you! You get back here right now! You can't treat me like this! I am not a child!"

"Then stop acting like one."

Letty spun around. Looking for all the world like a living, breathing man, the ghost was sitting on the settee, his legs crossed, with one hand resting upon the arm of the couch and the other upon his knee.

Tipping his head slightly to one side, he asked, "Has anyone thought to bring in the newspaper today?"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Letty demanded.

"Language," he snapped. "Or shall I take you back to the bathroom and make a stronger impression on you? I can do that. I saw a lovely wooden backed hairbrush when I was unpacking. I really would rather not go that way, but continue to push me, and we'll both wind up with regrets."

"Are you Steggell?"

He stood up. "Joshua Bennett." He bowed. "At your service."

She pointed at him, her eyes narrowing angrily. "You stay right where you are." She backed out of the living room. "Don't even think about moving!"

Turning, Letty ran upstairs to her room and began to dig through the only boxes in the house that Joshua hadn't yet unpacked. She found her jewelry box and the small silver cross on the thin

gold necklace chain that her mother had given her the day she had graduated from high school. If Father Murphy and the church couldn't help her, by golly she would take care of this problem herself!

She jogged down the stairs, rolling up her own sleeves as she stalked into the livingroom. Marching right up to the ghost, with the chain wrapped around her wrist, she thrust the cross out at him. "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost—"

Joshua looked at the cross. He blinked slowly and then his eyes settled on her again, a glimmer of amusement brightening the dark depths.

"I command you to be gone!" She glared at him, her chest heaving she was so angry. When he didn't move right away, she shook the cross at him again. "I said, I command you to be gone! Go away! Don't ever come back! Leave!"

"You also told me not to move."

"Fine," she growled. "You can move, and then you can go away."

Clasping his hands behind his broad back, Joshua still didn't move. "Why should I go away?"

"Because I've got this." She shook the cross at him.

"Very nice," he said, the amusement in his eyes growing. "I used to wear one of those myself. Now, about the newspaper. I like to keep abreast of current events, so I would prefer if you took on subscription so one could be delivered to the front porch on a daily basis."

Stunned, Letty lowered her arm. "You can't honestly think you belong here."

"Of course, I can. This is my home."

"No," she corrected. "It's mine. I could look again, but I'm pretty sure your name isn't on the mortgage."

"That is because taking care of the mortgage is your job," he said patiently. "My job is to have the

meals upon the table at the appropriate times and to keep a clean and tidy house."

"What do you think you are, a butler?" She looked at his clothes and her hand came up to clasp her forehead. "That's exactly what you are. You're a butler."

Joshua smiled and stepped closer to her. "I suppose this is as good a time as any to explain my rules. Breakfast is at six-thirty weekdays, and eight o'clock on weekends. Lunch is noon, and dinner is six o'clock. Laundry that is not in the hamper will not be washed. And though I will wash, dry and fold, once I place the clothes upon the foot of your bed, you are responsible for putting your own things away. I do not like messes in my house and will expect for you to honor my hard efforts by not creating more of them if you intend to stay here. Do you have any questions?"

Letty stared at him. "If I intend to stay here," she echoed incredulously.

"That is correct." He bowed his head. "Right now, you are officially on probation. I had best start seeing some decent behavior out of you, young lady, or I shall be packing your bags and putting you out on the porch." While she stared, her mouth agape, he issued a courteous half bow. "I'll go get lunch on the table. What would you like? Something Indian, perhaps? I make a mean curry."

Chuckling her under the chin, he then turned and walked into the dining room. Halfway across the floor, he disappeared into thin air, although the clump of his footsteps continued all the way into the kitchen.

Chapter Three

The first thing the next morning, Letty got up and got dressed for church. She put on her second best dress, a blue skirt with a nice white blouse; with a white-knit sweater to stave off the early morning chill. She found a small perfume bottle in one of the boxes and emptied it into the bathroom sink. After rinsing it several times, she put the cap back on it and slipped the bottle into her skirt pocket.

Downstairs, the smell of bacon and eggs and lightly buttered toast followed her to the front door. She glanced back over her shoulder, slipping into ultra sneaky tip-toe mode as she crept past the open living room archway.

"Are you not a breakfast person?"

Startled, Letty snapped around with a shriek a bare half step before she ran smack into the solid wall that was suddenly Joshua.

He held up a glass. "Orange juice?"

Swallowing her heart back into her chest where it belonged, she shook her head. "No." Dropping her eyes to the ground, she tried to skirt around him.

"You should at least have a slice of toast."

"I'm not really hungry," she hedged and again tried to move around him and open the door. She caught hold of the knob, but when she turned and pulled, the door didn't budge. She wilted a little, sighing.

"One piece of toast," he coaxed. "Then you can go about the day being as grumpy as you like."

She looked at the door, then at him. "One piece of toast?"

The very corners of his mouth quirked, and in that moment he looked altogether too handsome for words. Dark, tall, broad shoulders, devastatingly English and proper. Smiling at her.

"Just one," he said.

The corners of her mouth began to turn upwards. "Can I have it when I get back?"

His eyes narrowed slightly, though his smile ever so slightly widened. "Yes. But only just this once."

The door popped open. A soft incredulous laugh bubbled up in her throat and, shaking her head, she walked outside.

With her arms folded across her chest and her head bowed, she followed the same route she had taken the day before. It was another cool, wet morning, gray-skied and damp, and her mind was fully occupied from the very first step. She had to steel herself. It wouldn't do at all for her to start liking her problem now when she was pretty sure she knew exactly how to get rid of it.

She crossed the street, strolling across the grass with long, purposeful steps, passing beyond the cracked parking lot and into St. Mary's church.

"Coward," she told Father Murphy as she passed him on her way down the aisle of pews. Although there wasn't much rancor in her tone, he looked exceedingly guilty.

"I'm very sorry," he whispered as she made her genuflection and sat down in one of the forward pews.

After a brief moment, although she didn't turn around, she heard the bench behind her creaking as he sat down too.

"I know I agreed to go with you, but I really wasn't prepared to actually meet a—a—"

"Ghost?" she suggested mildly.

"Exactly." Father Murphy rubbed his face with both hands. He sighed, and meekly asked, "I blessed the house. Did that help at all?"

"Nope. He spanked me all over again."

Father Murphy winced. "I'm very sorry."

She turned around in the pew and looked at him expectantly. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

Letty shrugged. "Well, what now? What am I supposed to do? I can't live with a ghost. How can anyone constantly watch what they say all the time? I'm a nervous wreck, it's been twelve hours, and I'm still spitting bubbles. And that's not the worst of it, either. He makes me eat breakfast."

Father Murphy blinked in surprise. "He... he can't be all bad then, I suppose."

"No." Letty crossed her legs, bobbing one foot thoughtfully up and down. "You know, I actually think he might have been a butler."

"I have no idea how to help you with this situation. The Church has very strict guidelines regarding this sort of thing. Exorcisms are virtually impossible to obtain. But may I recommend that the next time you go looking to buy a house that has stood empty for the last fifty years, maybe you'll think twice."

She gave him a dark look over her shoulder. "Moving is not an option. I put all my money into this house. "I can't wait another fifty years for an idiot as naive as I was to come along. I'm just going to have to stick it out and find a way to get rid of him."

"Why not find a way to coexist in peace?"

"Live with him? Are you serious!?" At Father Murphy's immediate shushing, Letty lowered her voice. "I am not going to learn to live with a ghost who spansks me at the drop of a hat!"

"More like the drop of a four-letter word," the priest corrected. "Sounds to me as if he's a good Christian ghost. In which case, he'll likely be very good for you."

Giving him another hard look, Letty drawled, "I can't begin to tell you how helpful you have been."

She stood up and stepped out into the aisle. After paying her respects to the cross, she strolled to the back of the church to dip her perfume bottle in the fountain of holy water.

"I'll pretend I didn't see you do that," Father Murphy said as he came up behind her. "Also, I might know of someone you could talk to. Madame Tollini owns a mystic shop in town. She might know something that could help you."

"Maybe after today, I won't need her." Letty pocketed the vial of holy water and patted her skirts with her hand.

The house was still and quiet when Letty returned home. The door opened easily when she smuggled her stolen holy water inside, and the air still smelled of breakfast. Her stomach rumbled, but she knew there would be time enough later on to take care of that once the ghost was dispatched. Of course, then she'd likely have to fix her own breakfast. She didn't much like the idea of that, although she supposed the price of independence was worth any sacrifice.

She wandered into the kitchen, but Joshua had already washed the dishes and placed them in the drainer to dry. Only a single plate remained on the table, with a slice of buttered toast resting upon it.

"Joshua?" she softly called. The house remained still, and she crept upstairs in search of him but the bedrooms were empty. Even her bed had already been made and the remaining unpacked boxes in her room were all put away. Now she had no idea of where anything in her house was.

Walking over to the window, she looked outside. Not yet even ten o'clock, the sun was coming up over the vineyard, setting the sky on fire. But it was the way the roses in the overgrown garden were

moving that caught her eye. The jostling of the branches was unlike a breeze.

Unlocking the window, she pushed it open. "Joshua?"

The ghost appeared like smoke, growing thicker until he was solid, raising his head to look up at her. "Have you eaten your toast?"

"In a moment," she called. "Would you be so good as to come up here, please? There is something I have to show you."

He studied her for a moment, his eyes dark and unreadable. But then he merely nodded and moved towards the house.

Letty dipped her hand into her pocket, withdrawing the holy water and uncapping it. As she heard the heavy steps of the butler coming up the stairs, the faint whiff of French Vanilla perfume wafted into the air. She turned around slowly, hiding the small bottle behind her back as Joshua walked into her bedroom.

"And what is this thing that you would show me that is so much more pressing than your breakfast?"

Letty gazed upon him, a small part of her wishing he would have come up the stairs as the menacing figure she had first met rather than this solicitous one. It would have been easier on her.

He tipped his head. "What is this matter of urgency?"

"Putting you to rest." It was Letty who closed the last of the few feet between them. She flung out her arm, dousing him thoroughly with the holy water, though he became deucedly transparent at the worst possible time. The water drops fell right through him and splashed upon the rugs.

They both stared down between their feet, and when their eyes did again meet, Joshua's were flashing. "Well, I can see my request that you make

no additional messes for me went thoroughly unheeded."

Letty broke from his gaze to stare at the drops and then at the bottle in her hand.

"Never fear," he told her. "I do believe I know how to punish this particular crime."

Her arms and shoulders aching, coughing with nearly every breath, Letty thwacked the rug repeatedly with the cane beater. Two rugs done, two more to go. She couldn't believe she was doing this.

It was better than a sore bottom, her mind said.

A sore bottom was by far easier to bear, her shoulders and back declared.

Glaring at the rug hanging on the line before her, Letty drew back the beater and had at it again. Whack after whack, she beat the dust of the years from the dense weave and coughed on the thick cloud that instantly flew out around her.

"Lemonade?"

Delivering one last whack, Letty paused in the middle of her punishment chore and looked around. Joshua stood a good ten feet behind her, well out of the range of her dust cloud, with a refreshment tray in his hands. Both the ice clinking against the glass and the cool condensation running down the outside worked to make her dry throat contract. She tried to summon the spit to swallow, but couldn't even moisten her mouth. Every ounce of her wanted that nice, tall, cool glass of liquid refreshment.

"Get bent," she told him and went back to beating the rug.

"I beg your pardon?" he politely inquired.

Letty didn't repeat herself. She only gave him a dark look and whaled on the rug until it became dust cloud free. Then came the hard part: rolling it back up and lugging it upstairs again. She glanced

back over her shoulder, but Joshua had gone. He had, however, left the lemonade just in case she changed her mind.

Letty licked her lips. She was really thirsty.

But she wasn't about to drink from the enemy's cup.

She pulled the rug off the line, struggling to fold it in sections without dropping it on the ground. As she wrestled to get the cumbersome bulk balanced over her shoulder and back, her eyes fell on the glass. Her will to resist was buckling. Surely, she could have just a sip or two without raising the white flag of surrender.

Couldn't she?

Oh, who was she kidding? If she was foolish enough to turn this battle into a war, she already knew she was on the losing side. How could she possibly fight a ghost and win? Especially when the tried and true Hollywood methods didn't work?

Lugging the carpet with her, Letty staggered towards the house, pausing just long enough to pick up the glass and drink. The lemonade was very, very good, and she drank it all the way down to the ice. Sighing, she pressed the outside of the glass to her hot forehead and then looked up at the upper windows of her house. Well, this rug wasn't going to drag itself back into the spare bedroom.

Leaving the glass on a kitchen counter, she dragged the folded rug up the stairs to exchange it for the last dirty one, rolled up and waiting for her in the final bedroom.

As Letty was bending down to heave the rug up onto her back, the low somber tones of Joshua rolled up from the stairwell behind her, "If you will settle down and behave yourself, then you may cease your labors."

Every muscle in her body cheered, but Letty was nothing if not determined. She still picked up the rug. "It's too late to suck up to me now, buster."

She groaned as she lifted, pushing up with her aching legs, but the heavy roll came up quick and much easier than the others. In fact, even as her legs straightened, the rug continued to rise until it was completely off her back by at least two inches.

Letty turned around to confront Joshua, who held the rug over one broad shoulder just behind her.

"You are very stubborn," he told her. "It doesn't have to be like this, you know. I am more than willing to share my domicile. But, as I was here first, I do request that you respect the existing rules and boundaries."

Letty glared at him, hands on her hips, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She raised her hand to scratch the bridge of her nose, briefly closing her eyes and shaking her head. "For the past twenty-five years, I have lived under the rule of someone else and look where it got me. This was supposed to be my house. My fresh start. My life. This—" she gestured between them. "This is going to take some getting used to."

Joshua nodded his head. "Granted. However, I would like to point out, that it will take some getting used to on both our parts. Still, I am willing to try to get along."

"Why can't you just—I don't know, go towards the Light or something, huh?"

"I have worked my whole life to have a place of my own," he told her. "I am not going anywhere."

Too tired to even want to keep arguing, Letty said, "I am soo-o going to file a complaint against that real estate agent."

Letty was in town the next day loading the back of her rusty pickup truck with boxes of fresh new shingles when a part of the conversation she'd had with Father Murphy resurfaced in her mind. As she

was driving out of the Home Depot's parking lot, she glimpsed Madame Tollini's Mystic Palm Reader's sign across the street.

Her impromptu decision to pull over in front of the small business was more like a muscle spasm in her arms that forced the steering wheel sharply to the right. She had never, ever before even considered going into a place like this. She hesitated for a long time, the engine of the truck running rough as it idled, and she leaned down to look up at the Madame's windows under the sun visors and over the steering column.

"Yeah, right," she muttered under her breath. "She's going to scam you out of your money, and you won't know anything more than you already do."

Shaking her head, she started to back out of the parking lot, but just as suddenly changed her mind again. She parked, instead, and shut the motor off. Climbing out of the truck and shaking her head all the way, she walked into Madame Mystic's shop.

The overwhelming pungent smell of burning incense hit her first thing when she opened the door, causing the half a dozen bells above her to jingle brightly as she stepped inside. She walked by a huge display of the stuff, along with an assortment of burners, tarot cards, stones, runes and a miniature library of books on everything from Psychic Sex to How to Read Tarot Cards. There were even crystal balls and an assortment of fringed shawls displayed on the walls.

Madame Tollini came out of the back room. A slightly older woman in her fifties, she wore too much blue eye make-up and the clothes of a gypsy. There were two huge gold hoops in her ears and two stud barbells in her right eyebrow. But she smiled, as friendly as anyone in Podunk, and greeted Letty cheerfully. "Good morning."

Letty looked up from the crystal balls. "Hi. Uh, Father Murphy recommended that I come talk to you."

"You're the woman who moved into the Steggell house," the woman said, as she rounded the payout counter.

Letty's eyebrows quirked. "How did you know that?"

"Small town. Everybody knows everything, especially when it comes to the old Steggell place." Madame Tollini leaned towards her, folding her arms on the glass and wrinkling her nose as she smiled. "It has an interesting aura. Almost as interesting as the history, albeit in an admittedly spooky sort of way."

"Now see," Letty said, leaning against the payout counter, "this is just the sort of information that I should have had before I bought the place. What kind of history are we talking about here? Who was Joshua Bennett?"

Madame Tollini looked surprised. "Bennett?"

"That's who he said he was. Joshua Bennett."

"Bennett..." Madame Tollini repeated thoughtfully. "Bennett... Nope, doesn't ring a bell. The original owner, Jeremiah Taylor, shot himself in the head. I know that much. And, of course, that was after he shot his wife and her lover to death in the bedroom. Walked right in on them, from what I understand."

"Was Bennett the lover?"

"You know, actually, I think the man's name was Charles Fentmore, but I might be wrong. And then there was Nancy Taylor, Jeremiah's daughter, who lived there for a number of years until she and her sect of Satanic worshipers were all found stabbed to death in the living room in 1928. There were rumors of human sacrifices, but none of that was ever proven."

Letty almost turned green. "You're kidding me."

"I wish I were, dear. The last owner, Martin Steggell came from Europe. I know that much. He started a winery, which he ran fairly successfully for about twenty-two years. Until the fire."

Fairly sure nothing could surprise her at this point, "Fire?"

"Apparently, his equipment blew up in the basement, killing himself and a servant, I think it was."

"A butler?" Letty asked.

"I really don't know," Madame Tollini told her. "I was a very little girl back when it happened. I do know the house has a very long history of odd occurrences. I remember walking past the place on my way to school and seeing lights come on, even when there was no electricity connected to the house. Several contractors were hired to fix the house up over the years, but the jobs were never completed. Something would panic the workers, and they would leave."

Burying her face in her hands, Letty was trying not to lose her composure to a frustrated groan. "Okay, so how do I get rid of him? How do I put him to rest, so I can live in peace?"

Shrugging with her penciled-in eyebrows, Madame Tollini said, "Well, I don't have a doctorate in paranormal phenomenon or the afterlife, but I would have to say that most ghosts remain in this world because they don't yet realize they are dead. Perhaps if you can convince this Joshua Bennett that he should move on, then he will."

Funny things happened to people without a lot of choices; they tended to grasp at straws. This was definitely a weak and flimsy straw, but Letty wasn't an expert in paranormal phenomenon, either. And really, what point was there in consulting the "experts" if you didn't follow their advice?

Letty arrived home with the materials needed to fix the roof and a week's worth of groceries to fill her fridge. The house had its mask of emptiness when she walked through the front door, but, after putting her shopping bags on the kitchen table, she wandered outside to see the fourth and final rug hanging, clean and airing, on the line. The rose bushes in the garden were trimmed and watered, and there were signs of freshly turned earth and pulled weeds in the vineyard. Joshua had been busy while she was out.

Not all that anxious to disturb him, she turned around to begin putting the groceries away and almost ran smack into his chest. "Da—I mean, geez!" She took a quick step back. "I hate it when you do that."

His dark eyes glittered with what might have been amusement if only he'd crack a smile. "My apologies." He backed up a step and then walked into the kitchen, peering into the grocery bags as he went. "It's too late in the day for pot roast," he told her as he withdrew a package of butcher-wrapped meat. "There are chicken parts thawing in the sink. I had planned to serve them baked with a mustard potato salad, if you have no complaints."

"I can make my own supper." Letty came up behind him to take the bags, but he picked both up and carried them over to the fridge.

"I would not have it said that I do not earn my keep."

"Maybe we should talk some more about this... arrangement we have."

He looked at her before turning to the sink to begin washing the chicken. His tone was painstakingly neutral as he asked, "And what, in particular, did you care to discuss?"

Letty stared at him a moment, before retreating to the kitchen table and sitting down. "Maybe you

should sit down for this. I—I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

He arched a dark brow, but put the chicken down and cleaned his hands. He took a seat opposite her, lowering himself onto the chair and folding his hands in his lap. "I confess, the dramatics intrigue me. What is your news?"

Letty cleared her throat. "I hate to be the one to break this to you... but you're dead. Stone cold. As a doorknob."

"Do tell." His eyes flashed with the somber tickle of amusement that only just trickled down to tug at his mouth.

"The sooner you accept this, the sooner you can," Letty waved with her hands, "move on with your... your afterlife. So, tell me, honestly." She leaned towards him. "Are you lost? Can you see the Light anywhere or do you walk the immortal plane between worlds because something was left undone? Is there anything I can do to help put you to rest?"

"I'm so glad you asked," Joshua told her, and stood up. "Wash your hands. You can make the stuffing."

He went back to the sink, leaving Letty to stare after him, affronted. "Oh, come on! Be serious! I'm trying to help you here!"

"I am being serious," he told her, as he turned on the water to rinse the chicken parts. "If you insist on being ridiculous, then you can expect for me to assign you chores."

"This is my house," she groused, folding her arms across her chest and slouching, thoroughly disgruntled, in her chair. "I don't have to do anything I don't flipping well want to."

"Marvelous thing, these old wooden spoons," Joshua said, nonplused. He reached over to take one out of the utensil crock on the counter. "They're

light, they're handy, and they're very good at those distinct functions: cooking and walloping."

He lay the spoon down on the counter and went back to skinning and rinsing the meat. Letty looked at the spoon for about four seconds before she made up her mind.

"So." She got up to wash her hands. "Do you put raisons in your stuffing?"

Chapter Four

Letty had tears streaming down her face and she nearly fell out of her chair. Her face hurt, her jaw ached, and she had a stitch in her side. Clutching her ribs, she could barely suck in enough air to breathe; she hadn't laughed this hard in years.

"Stop!" she cried, holding onto both the table and her side. "Please... W-wait!"

Joshua showed no mercy. "So there I was," he recounted, "a goblin in one hand, Cinderella in the other, and the pumpkin had just wet its pants. The two pirates were lying on the floor at my feet, clinging to one another and shrieking, and the police officer, who was supposed to have arrested these hoodlums and given them a stern talking to on the evils of trespassing, was dangling from the ceiling with his leg snared in their ghost trap. Of course, he took one look at me and started screaming, and all I could think was, thank God, he'd dropped his gun."

Letty was panting and wheezing and holding her face in a desperate effort to stop laughing. "Oh, that hurts!" she moaned. "That hurts! What did you do?"

"As undignified as it is to admit, I gave the children a proper scare and sent them scampering home in hysterics."

Letty lost the fight against her giggles. "Oh no!" she wailed, and threw back her head and laughed. "They're probably still in therapy!"

"The officer I left hanging there until backup arrived, and they cut him down."

"Did you scare them, too?"

"They left mud tracked from one end of the house to the other, and I had just waxed the floors. You bet I did. In fact," Joshua drawled, a slow smile spreading across his face as he picked up the bottle

of wine to top off her glass. "The police fell all over one another in their haste to flee, and in the panic forgot all about the gun the first officer had dropped. So there I was, chasing after them, waving my arms, trying to get someone to notice the gun. But the more I tried to catch their attention, the faster they ran."

Letty howled with laughter, almost falling out of her chair again.

"Finally, they reached their car, and I had just enough time to throw the gun after them while they were racing away. It smashed through their rear window and fell into the backseat, and they sped off down the road with tires squealing all the way."

Letty slid under the table, eyes squeezed shut, making almost no sound at all she was laughing so hard.

Bending down, he looked at her under the table. His eyebrows arched with amusement. "The next day, they lined the picket fence with nearly a dozen 'No Trespassing' signs, but by then it was too late. I still had to re-mop and wax all the floors. Especially where that blasted little pumpkin went on the rug. He had a heck of a bladder, that one." He watched as she sucked and gasped for breath, trying to stop laughing. "Can you breathe?"

She shook her head and stayed where she was, sprawled under the table, until the last of her giggles came under control. She groaned, holding both her jaw and her side. "Oh, I had too much wine."

"Everyone's entitled to too much every once in a while."

She sighed. "I always wanted to have a pumpkin of my own."

Joshua's eyebrow arched a little higher. "Well, I suppose they're all right, so long as they're from your own patch. It's when you have to deal with

someone else's melons that they get to be annoying."

"John hated pumpkins," Letty said sadly. Her eyes narrowed, and she glared up at the underside of the table. "At least, that's what he said. But, he sure didn't seem to have any problem planting melons in six other patches, while mine stayed pumpkin free! That louse!"

She sniffled, twin tears sliding past her lashes and flowing down her cheeks. Joshua took a napkin and passed it under the table to her. She blew her nose. "Thanks. What about you?"

"What about me?" Joshua replied.

"Why are you still here?"

Tilting his head, he rubbed his hands together and looked away. "My father was a servant, so was his father and all the way back into my ancestry for longer than I ever bothered to trace. I was a servant, and even though it was voluntary and a very well paid position, it was still servitude. I wanted something better for my son. I wanted a house of my own. So I saved my pennies, and one day I learned that my employer had overextended himself financially. When he went looking for an outside backer for his winery, I contacted him anonymously through a third party, and this place became mine."

Watching him through heavy-lidded eyes, Letty smiled. "You got your house."

"Yes." Joshua steeped his fingers, tapping them together. "And when Mr. Steggell found out, he wasn't pleased. I'd known he wouldn't be; there's few things in life as difficult to swallow as being trumped by your own servant. But, I never suspected that he would sabotage the distillery. He meant to destroy the winery and probably did mean to kill me, but I glean a certain satisfaction out of knowing his own death likely came as something of a surprise to him."

Letty's eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. "Did we get drunk on the wine that killed you?"

He smiled again. "No, that was splattered all over the cellar. But the vintage of this bottle was a very good year, too." Joshua passed her the last swallow of wine as she began to laugh again. "Where is he now?"

"Who?"

"The louse."

"Oh, him." She flopped her hands in a half drunken shrug. "When I moved to Podunk, he was living with Rhonda, one of God only knows how many women he cheated on me with. Of course, by then he was cheating on her with Beverly, Christie and that little blonde teller at the bank."

Resting his arms upon his thighs, he studied her somewhat sympathetically. "I see." He took a deep breath, and reached down to take her hand. "Come on. Let's get up off the floor."

"Okay." She let him take her arm and pull her out from under the table. "That was some really good wine. Hey, do I still have legs?"

"Yes. They're there." Joshua picked her up in his arms and started towards the stairs. "Up we go."

"Mush," she said helpfully.

He carried her up to her room, the lights switching on automatically as he crossed the threshold.

"You know, you're not such a scary fellow from this angle," she sighed as he lowered her onto her bed. "Almost kinda handsome in a spectral sort of way."

"Is that so?" He started to take her shoes off, but she rolled over onto her stomach midway through unlacing the first shoe. "Since we are making confessions we shouldn't, I'll say that this is a very good angle for you as well."

"That's okay, I'll probably forget by morning."

"Probably." Joshua shook his head, his customary stoicism giving way to a chuckle. He patted her bottom.

"Hey!" She wiggled, moving her bottom from side to side. "No spanking!"

"Heaven forbid." He pulled her shoes and socks off her feet. Reaching beneath her waist, he unfastened her pants and began to work them down over her hips. Pulling them off her legs, he folded them before dropping them on the floor beside her bed.

"Joshua?" she called. Her eyes were closed, and she sounded half asleep.

"Yes?"

"The bed won't stop spinning."

Joshua reached down, pulling a stray lock from off her cheek and tucking it back behind her ear. "I'll get right on that," he smiled. On impulse, he bent to kiss the top of her head. She snored in gratitude.

The light winked out as he walked out of the room.

Letty just about had to rip up and rebuild the entire roof. Four days into the job, she had removed all the old shingling and the rotten boards from two of the three areas where leaks had gone unpatched for years, and was laying the new shingles when a car pulled up to her house. Letty accidentally whacked her thumb because she was paying more attention to Madame Tollini than she was to the task at hand.

"OW!" Letty jumped to her feet, shaking her hand furiously and stamping her feet it hurt so much. "Gaw—I mean, golly dang it!" Not quite trusting herself, she stuck her thumb in her mouth and stifled the temptation to let loose with a string of obscenities by sucking on it.

"Are you all right?" Madame Tollini called up to her, shielding her eyes with one hand as she looked up into the sun at Letty.

Still furiously sucking her aching thumb, Letty nodded and glowered at the hammer. She smacked the roof three times, venting her rage, and then put it down.

"That was well done," Madame Tollini admired. "I don't think I could have kept a civil tongue if I'd just smashed my hand with a hammer."

You should have my roommate, she thought sourly. Pulling her injured thumb from her mouth, she looked at the already bruising circle under her fingernail and said, "I've given up cussing for Lent."

The Madame grinned. "I see. And how is your ghost problem progressing?"

"It's progressing," Letty said with a shrug. She gave her hand one final shake. "To be honest, I've given up trying to get rid of him. So long as I keep a civil tongue and pick up after myself, he's not that bad, really. And, he's a better cook than I am."

Madame Tollini smiled. "Well, if that's how you feel, who am I to argue? But, there is one last thing we can try to put him to rest."

Two stories up, Letty came down to the edge of the roof. "Oh yeah? What?"

"A séance."

Letty scoffed. "Trust me. You don't need one of those to talk to him."

"No, dear," Madame Tollini said, folding her arms across her chest, her smile widening. "You trust me. I am the professional."

"No, seriously. He's in the garden out back. Just walk around the house, say 'Hey, Joshua' and he'll turn solid. Then, you can talk to him."

"I've done this for years," the Madame told her. "Spirits are never that easy to talk to. They require an experienced medium who knows how to channel the light and dark energies and who can make

herself a vessel through which the spirit can contact the outside world."

"Who is this woman, and what is she doing here?"

Madame Tollini started. Her hand flew up to her chest, and her eyes began to dart around. "Oh, yes..." she gave a soft and slightly nervous laugh, "This, uh... this house definitely has a strong presence. Was... was that... Joshua?"

Letty leaned down carefully, peaking under the eave of the house where she thought she'd heard the voice originating from. "That was him."

Madame Tollini straightened a little and smiled again. "Well, for the price of one séance, my dear, I will guarantee not only to make contact with the spirit—"

The atmosphere on the lawn not three feet from Madame Tollini's left began to ripple and change.

"—but to b-bless—" her eyes grew large and round as she turned her head to watch Joshua appearing beside her, his arms folded across his chest, his mouth frowning grimly. "—the h-house and cleanse it..."

"I think I'm all right with the way things are right now," Letty said.

"As am I," Joshua drawled, thoroughly unamused.

"I see," Madame Tollini said weakly.

Joshua turned to Letty. "Are you still trying to find ways to force me from my house?"

A funny tingling sensation ran down her spinal column and centered on her bottom. Backing away from the edge of the roof, Letty held up both hands and shook her head. "No, sir. Absolutely not. She came here of her own volition."

Joshua turned and gave the Madame another dark look. "I think you should go now."

The Madame swallowed and backed up a step. "Truly, you know, t-this i-is for your own good."

"I could give you something for your own good," Joshua told her cryptically, "but I believe I am showing remarkable restraint by not doing."

The Madame backed up another step, and Letty took pity on her. She waved her hand goodbye. "Thanks for coming over, Madame Tollini. It was nice seeing you again."

"You're right. I should go now." As if permission had been all she was waiting for, the Madame turned around and hurried back to her car. She glanced back as she was climbing into the driver's seat. "You can call me, dear...i-if you ever need..." she looked at Joshua, "...anything."

"I never get to have my friends over," Letty teased as the Madame's car squealed away from the curb.

Joshua looked up at her. He vanished from the grass and reappeared on the roof next to her. "This is my home," he said, his dark eyes boring into hers. "I am not leaving."

"That's fine," she agreed. "But, it's my home, too, and I'm not leaving, either."

They looked at one another; she smiled.

"What do you want for lunch?" Joshua asked.

"Spaghetti. With garlic bread. And meatballs. And a small glass of that yummy wine almost as good as the stuff that killed you."

A corner of his mouth turned upwards. "I'll let you know when it's ready."

He disappeared, and Letty went back to work nailing down the new shingles. Working from the bottom up on a roof that had multiple levels and angles, the physical labor was beginning to take its toll. Although she had spent the morning alternating between kneeling and squatting, her legs and her knees had long since begun to protest both positions, and her right arm was getting tired of wielding the hammer.

Lay one more box, she promised herself, and then we'll take a break until after lunch.

Already finished over the living room, dining and kitchen area, and working her way back towards her bedroom, she was halfway to the roof's peak when the patch of shingles she was reaching for slid a little out of her reach. Tired, she stretched for it and lost her balance. There was nothing to grab onto but the gutters as she fell right off the edge, her hands flailing to catch hold of them and missing.

Letty screamed a second before she hit the ground.

It was her first home. Nineteen years old and ready to start college next week, Marilyn Root carried the last box out of her car and walked, smiling broadly, up the old cobblestone walkway and surveyed her new yard. The front door stuck a little, but her dad had promised to come over first thing in the morning to help with the repairs. There wasn't a lot that needed to be done with the house, though it had sat empty now for almost three years. But even the broken rainspouts that she had noted when she first looked at the house, had since been repaired, and Marilyn chalked it up to an overeager real estate agent anxious to make a sale.

She whistled a tune as she kicked the door closed behind her. Carrying the box through the living room, she put it down on the dining table. Hands on her hips, she took a moment to admire her life's first major accomplishment: she had a house. A huge house. And, she hadn't really paid all that much for it, either. Even for a small town, it had been listed for fifty thousand less than its nearest comparable. Particularly for a house that came as fully furnished as this one did.

A small rattling sound came from the kitchen, startling Marilyn. She turned, looking in through the

open doorway. One of the boxes marked 'New House Dishes' was sitting on the counter by the sink, its flaps wide open, with a pile of silverware lying next to it. Marilyn blinked, her eyebrows beetling as she looked at the dishes. She couldn't remember unpacking that box, but it had been a long day and, excitement or not, she was getting tired.

Shaking her head, she muttered, "The mind's the first to go," and headed into the kitchen to finish emptying the box she had so obviously started. Putting the plates and bowls up in the cupboards, she then broke down the cardboard and carried it out into the living room to start a garbage-bound stack by the door.

As she was returning to the kitchen, she got as far as the doorway before she stopped in confused surprise. There was a second open box, this one full of dish soap and cleaning supplies, some of which were already sitting on the counter.

She held up one hand, pointing at the cleaning supplies. "Now, I know I didn't unpack that."

The lights throughout the bottom floor began to flicker and she turned around, her gaze darting from one bulb to another as if she could see the source. Then another whisper of sound floated down to her ears, this time coming from upstairs. Marilyn turned to face the staircase, her confusion turning to trepidation as the sound became distinctive footsteps, a slow and steady tromping that was heading right for her. Marilyn backed up, her hip bumping into the table, every nerve in her body tensing to catch a glimpse of the intruder that had invaded her new home. But, even when her ears told her the footsteps had reached the livingroom, her eyes saw nothing out of the ordinary at all.

The leaded glass light fixture flickered overhead, and the tiny hairs along Marilyn's neck prickled. Nervously licking her lips, each breath trembling in

her chest, she called out a shaky, "Hello? Who's there, please?"

A flicker of movement from the corner of her eyes startled Marilyn. She jerked around, staring in shock at the woman busily unpacking a box of glass mixing bowls. Marilyn shrieked, startling the woman, who immediately dropped the bowl in her hands. It fell to the floor, shattering.

Blinking at the broken glass at her feet, the woman glared at Marilyn. "Dammit! Look what you made me do!" Eyes widening, the woman suddenly clapped a hand over her own mouth. "I didn't mean to say that."

The heavy footsteps that Marilyn had heard on the stairs came tromping across the floor and a man's voice snapped out, "Upstairs, Letty."

In an instant, the woman in the kitchen vanished and a shiver ran down Marilyn's back as she felt a sudden rush of coolness darting past her. Invisible feet raced across the livingroom and Marilyn heard the woman's voice crying out, "It was an accident! I swear! Oh, Joshua, no please!"

"Go!"

The heavy footsteps chased the lighter ones to the stairs and up to the second floor and after a half second a door slammed shut, muffling the woman, Letty's constant pleading.

Despite her better judgment, Marilyn felt compelled to follow. Just as she reached the top step, she heard the unmistakable sounds of bare skin being slapped and the pleading turned to wails. A spanking. Marilyn stood on the stairs in shock. The female ghost was being spanked.

Her knees trembling with every step, she crept down the darkened hall to the only closed door upstairs. As she reached for the knob, her hand hesitated. The sounds coming from the other side of that door were awful. She could hear kicking upon the floor and the hard, steady smacking of a big

hand meeting bare bottom flesh and from the squeals and protests, dead or not, the poor female ghost wasn't enjoying the experience.

Catching her breath, Marilyn flung open the door. She halfway expected the sounds to dissipate the instant the room was revealed. She halfway expected to suddenly realize she had hallucinated the whole experience. It was a dreadful shock to her system to actually see two ghosts seated upon the edge of the bed. The dark clothed male holding Letty over his lap, her pants around her ankles, her bottom just as bare as Marilyn's ears had told her it would be.

While Letty kicked and cried, struggling to get one hand back to cover her reddening bottom protectively, the man applied his arm with mounting vigor. Marilyn witnessed six full-armed swats before the man looked up and fixed his eyes directly on her. "Unless you desire a turn across my lap, young lady, I recommend that you turn yourself around and leave this room."

Marilyn didn't need to be told twice. Stumbling back out into the hall, she kept going until she collided with the opposite wall. The bedroom door slammed shut all on its own, and the spanking recommenced.

She wasn't hearing this. The sharp smacks and woeful wails intermingled, seeming to be carrying all through the house, and through the worst of it Marilyn stood as if rooted to the floorboards, shaking and unnerved. What should she do? What could she do? Maybe she was asleep, and this was all just one really odd dream.

The spanking suddenly ceased, and only the female ghost's forlorn sobs could be heard. Gradually, even those petered into sniffles, and then into breathy sighs, and then there was only stillness.

Slowly, hesitantly, Marilyn bent down to peek through the old fashioned keyhole. The ghosts were still inside, but now instead of face down over the man's knee, the female was cradled upon his lap. Squinting, Marilyn moved a little closer to the door and a deep voice suddenly snapped out, "Would you like to be next? No girl living under my roof will go peeking in keyholes!"

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed under her breath. "The house is possessed!"

An ominous growl rumbled through the floorboards and the air around her suddenly grew very heavy. Marilyn fell backwards and scrambled across the floor crab-like as the dark-haired, dark-eyed man poked his head and shoulders through the solid bedroom door. He glared sternly down at her. "Consider this your last warning, my girl. If you intend to live in my house, I will expect for you to keep a civil tongue. You will mind your manners, there will be no cursing, and that includes taking the Lord's name in vain."

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed again. Scrambling to her feet, she ran back down the stairs. Grabbing her coat, she fled from her newly purchased house. For the first time since leaving her parents' home, Marilyn ran all the way to church.

Holiday Bliss Chapter One

"Ryan!" Mrs. Debra Billings came out of the passenger unloading zone of the Eugene Airport with her arms thrown open wide. "Oh, my baby!"

Her 'baby' winced first, but then smiled indulgently down at her. At 6'3", he towered a good eight inches over Kasey's head, and she was at least half a foot again taller than her husband's diminutive mother.

His diminutive, irritating, insulting, bulldog of a mother.

As her husband reached out his arm to envelop his mother in a hug, Kasey sized up her arch-nemesis. Debra didn't look like the spawn of Satan, but looks, as Kasey had learned over the years, really could be deceiving.

"Oh my poor baby!" Debra crowed, clasping his face in her wrinkled hands. "Have you been eating?"

Three square meals a day, Kasey thought, but she locked her lips together, not trusting herself to say anything kind.

"You're so pale," Debra continued. She reached up to feel his forehead for fever while Kasey eyed his brown skin, still lightly tanned from working outdoors all summer long. Apparently, Ryan's mother was half-blind, because she only tsked. "No, you don't look good at all. Is she using those recipes I sent her? She can't be if you still look this terrible!"

Ryan's smile dimmed. Catching her by the shoulders, he pulled himself from her embrace. "Mom," he warned. "We talked about this."

"What? What did we talk about? What did I say?" Debra's eyes grew wide and wounded. "I

mention a gift, and you get all offended! Where is she, anyway, that wife of yours?"

Drawing a deep, bracing breath, Kasey then stepped out from behind Ryan's back to lock eyes with her mother-in-law.

Debra's cheerful expression faded and her smile became fixed on Kasey. "Yes," she said, her voice laden with disappointment. "That's the one."

"Hello, Mom," Kasey greeted, managing a slight smile. She even managed to maintain her smile as her mother-in-law swept her from top to toe with the same disappointed stare that she used every year.

"Well," heaving a heavy sigh, Debra patted her son's cheek. "No sense crying over spilled milk."

After seven years, comments like that no longer had the power to hurt Kasey. They did, however, make her mad. Locking her lips together, Kasey snapped around to put two steps distance between herself and the blue-haired monster she called 'Mom.' She slid her hands into her back jeans pockets, trying to affect a casual stance while she glared daggers out across the innocent airport.

"Mom," Ryan said, firmly setting himself between his mother and his wife. "You promised."

"What?" Debra asked, wounded all over again.

She started to shrug, but Ryan stopped her with another, even sharper, "Mom! I mean it, don't! You don't have to like Kasey, but she is my wife, and I am not going to spend another holiday in a war zone. Tell me now if you don't think you can be nice. I'll buy you a ticket on the next plane home."

"All right!" Closing her eyes, Debra raised her hands in surrender. "You win. I'll be nice."

"Kasey?" Ryan called, a note of iron-clad warning in his tone.

"Hey," she protested, as she swiveled back around, locking gazes with her earthly nemesis. "I was being civil. Let's just get—" oh how the

temptation to say, 'the old bat' made her mouth tremble "—Mom's luggage and go home."

Ryan looked from one to the other, and then nodded, tentatively trusting them both to keep their word. "All right then. Which way's the baggage claim?"

"I have such a wonderful surprise for you," Debra declared, linking her arm with Ryan's and leading him off down the hall. "Everything is way too easy these days. Everything is store bought and shake and bake. Not like the good old days when food actually had flavor."

Hands still in her back pockets, Kasey sauntered slowly along behind them, glaring knives in her mother-in-law's back as she listened to Debra's reminiscing of days gone by. And in particular, those by-gone days when she was a little girl—back when dinosaurs roamed the earth and little girls were not only expected to walk five miles to and from school every day, in eight feet of snow, without shoes, but woe be it to she who didn't kill at least one sabre-toothed grizzly bear with her loose-leaf notebook.

"We raised our own turkeys back then," Debra said, nudging Ryan up to the conveyor belt to retrieve her first suitcase. "My mother would always send my brother and I out to kill and pluck it early in the morning, and then all day long—that one, too, dear," she nudged her son and pointed to another bag. "All day long we would smell that mouth-watering aroma wafting through the house. It was wonderful. I do so miss those days. That one, too."

"Mom, you're only going to be here three days," Ryan laughed, reaching for the third bag. "You must have packed all the way down to the kitchen sink!"

"No, no," she shooed at his hands. "Not that one. Good heavens, I should hope I've got better taste than to travel with a bag like that."

Kasey winced as the owner of the bag took it out from under Ryan's hand, and then turned to give Debra a sour look. Kasey smiled at him sympathetically. "Sorry," she told him, as he shouldered past her. "She's old, set in her ways, and hasn't quite figured out yet how to get into heaven."

If Debra heard her, she pretended not to. Ryan, however, gave Kasey a very dark look. Now it was her turn to affect a wounded shrug. "What?"

"Don't," he warned.

That was all he needed to say. She clamped her lips tightly together and her hands behind her back. Bottom tingling, she took a slight step back and muffled a sigh of relief when he turned back to the baggage conveyor.

"Which one did you want again?"

"Quick!" Debra pointed frantically down the moving conveyor. "It's passed us! Grab it, Ryan!"

Ryan darted into the crowd, chasing down the illusive bag. "Which one?"

"The dog carrier!"

Kasey's jaw dropped when her husband snagged the huge grey plastic crate and lifted it off the belt. "You brought a dog?!"

Debra turned around. Without her censoring son at her side, she gave Kasey another head to toe examination. "Don't be silly. I've never owned one of those filthy beasts, and I've no inclination to start now."

"Then what...?" Kasey never got to finish her thought. She didn't have to. When Ryan set the carrier on the floor, she realized exactly what was inside when she heard an ear-piece 'Gobble-gobble-gobble!' from within. "I don't believe this. You brought a turkey?! A LIVE turkey?!"

"Just like the olden days." Debra beamed, although there was a decisively smug glitter to her eyes as she asked, "I'll help you cook it if you don't know how."

"There's nothing wrong with my cooking," Kasey seethed.

"Mom," Ryan groaned. "Just one. Just one holiday, one year, where I don't have to preside over World War Three."

"Gobble-gobble-gobble!" cried the turkey, and everyone gathered around the conveyor took a big step back to stare.

Kasey threw her hands up in the air, but there was no point in arguing any more. She just turned around and headed for the car without another word. Not one. And she continued not to say another word for the duration of the entire two-hour-long ride home. Stuffed in the backseat between the car door and two big suitcases, Kasey sat with her knees practically under her chin because her domineering mother-in-law apparently needed lots of leg room to accommodate her bad ankles. The turkey was in the trunk, where it bellowed its rapid-fire gobbles every time the car hit a pothole in the road. Or a bump. Or a crack, a pebble, a sunbeam splashing across the highway, or maybe just because it felt like it every fifteen seconds.

Neither Ryan nor his demon-spawn mother commented on the turkey's constant need to vocalize, probably because they couldn't hear it over the radio and their own conversation. A conversation which did not include Kasey, mostly because whenever Ryan tried to involve her, she turned her head to the window and pretended not to hear him. If she opened her mouth at this point, she knew, she was likely going to say something—a bunch of somethings even—that Ryan would make sure she regretted in the privacy of their bedroom,

with her pants and panties around her ankles, and her bare bottom bucking desperately under his vigorous assault, later that night.

But even as discretely as she thought she'd kept her pouting, when they pulled into the driveway and Debra got out of the car, Ryan turned to pin her with a knowing look. "Did you not hear us talking to you, or were you ignoring us so you could sulk?"

"I couldn't hear you," she lied. "It was difficult to hear anything over the stupid turkey."

"Uh huh," he said, not believing a word of it, but he didn't push her either.

They got out of the car, and while Kasey struggled to lug the heavy suitcases out of the backseat, Ryan liberated the turkey, carrier and all, from the trunk. "I'm going to put him in the tool shed. Kasey, honey, can you...?"

He let the sentence hang, but Kasey knew what he was after. With a sigh, she picked up the suitcases. "Right this way, Mom."

Without bothering to see if Hell's Angel was following, she trudged up the walkway to the front porch.

"Same room as last time, I suppose," Debra said while Kasey fished her keys from her pocket to open the door.

"It's a very nice guest room," Kasey muttered.

"The bed smells funny." Debra wrinkled her nose. "If the bed smells funny again this year, I want to sleep on the couch."

Kasey grit her teeth but managed to hang onto her smile. "Remember, the bed smelled funny because you spilt your liniment on it."

Debra sniffed and looked away. "I don't recall. And your roses need trimming."

"I'll trim my plants when I'm darn good and ready," Kasey said sweetly, pasting her smile firmly into place. "And if the accommodations aren't to your liking again this year, you are more than

welcome to sleep outside in the tool shed with the turkey." She swung the door open and stepped aside to allow her mother-in-law to pass. "After you."

Debra didn't bother pretending any more. "You are not at all what I would have wanted for my son. I don't like you, and I don't think I ever have."

"Back at you, babe," Kasey returned.

From the back door, they heard Ryan call out, "Are you two getting along?"

"Yes," they both sang out sweetly, their eyes glaring daggers back and forth.

"Good! I'll get dinner ready."

Drawing on her fortitude, Kasey picked up her mother-in-law's suitcases and headed for the stairs. "Right this way," she said, trying for a cheerfulness she certainly didn't feel.

The heavy bags knocked against the wall twice as she struggled to get them up to the second floor, but Debra followed along behind her, not once offering to help. In revenge, when Kasey reached the top step, she stepped aside and let her mother-in-law into the guest room ahead of her. Then she dropped the suitcases in the threshold where Debra would be forced to move them before either closing the door or leaving the room.

"They'd be easier for me to handle if you brought them to the bed."

"This is a do-it-yourself household," Kasey told her. "You want them on the bed? Lug them there yourself."

From right directly behind her, Ryan's soft voice said, "Here, mom. Let me get that for you."

Kasey jumped; Debra blossomed in a huge smile. "Oh, thank you, sweetheart! Between the arthritis and my bad ankles, I just can't manage the heavy things anymore."

"I know," Ryan soothed, pushing past Kasey to pick up the suitcases. Hugging herself, Kasey

quickly averted her eyes, but not before she saw the dark accusation of his expression. Naturally! He would butt into the conversation only when she was being rude. And yet, he was always conspicuously absent when his mother started issuing her snide, little comments.

She tried not to bristle. "I thought you were getting dinner ready."

"You know what they say about children who suddenly play quietly together and how it's not because they're playing nicely. That's the two of you." He glared back at her over his shoulder as he muscled the heavy bags onto Debra's bed.

Kasey stormed back downstairs in a huff. His version of getting dinner ready had obviously been to take the ready-bake rolls out of the fridge, but that was it. That's fine. She'd pretty much known she was going to be doing all the cooking again this year anyway. And since this was the eve of Thanksgiving, nobody would expect dinner to be a fancy affair. So, fried chicken from a box, ready-bake rolls and store-bought potato salad were what she had on the menu.

Once the chicken and rolls were in the oven, she spiced up the potato salad—adding pickles, onions, mustard and deviled eggs—all while going over and over in her mind every miserable holiday that she'd ever had to endure with Debra. Years of being needled and picked at built like a volcano inside her. According to Debra, nothing she'd ever done was right for Ryan. Nothing she did could ever be good enough for Mama's Special Boy. Kasey couldn't wait for Debra to go home again. Only two and a half days left before she picked up her bags and got back on that plane for Tulsa. Only fifty-four more hours, thirty-six minutes, and twelve seconds left to go.

Eleven... ten... nine...

She heard footsteps coming down the carpeted stairs back in the hall. Only one set, with strong and sure steps. Ryan. Which meant the Wicked Witch of Middle America must still be upstairs, nursing her bad ankles and pretending that the wounds she'd suffered from Kasey's razor-sharp tongue were mortal ones.

Fifty-four hours, thirty-five minutes and fifty-nine seconds left to go. Fifty-eight... fifty-seven...

Ryan came into the kitchen, his mouth set in a hard, flat, angry line and his brown eyes flashing.

She glared right back at him. "Did you get Beelzebub's doppelganger settled in for the night?"

Ryan's hand snapped up and he pointed at her. "You are one word away from a trip out to the shed and a long, serious attitude adjustment."

"She started it!" Kasey snapped back, bristling.

"I am tired of doing this!" he said. "Every year we do this; it's always the same. Over and over and over again. All I want is one holiday—One!—where I'm not left to feel like a referee in a boxing ring!"

"Then stop inviting Queen Bitch—" she raised her voice, fully hoping Debra was eavesdropping, and glared at the ceiling, "—to stay with us!"

It was in the next split second that Kasey realized what her biggest problem was. Surprisingly, it wasn't that she had an evil mother-in-law. Nor that she had a husband who spanked. No, her biggest problem was that she talked too cussed much. In retrospect, she could even narrow down which of those words had been the 'one word' too many, which had Ryan slapping first the kitchen table and then gritting his teeth and heading straight for her.

Kasey backed all the way up to the sink, losing every shred of attitude as she threw up her hands to stop him. "Wait a minute! How is this my fault?!"

Rolling up his right sleeve, he didn't bother to answer but grabbed the wooden spoon—the big one that had absolutely nothing to do with cooking—out of the crock by the stove.

The only reason Kasey didn't scream was because she knew her mother-in-law was quite possibly lurking at the top of the stairs, her hawk's ears cocked to listen in. Kasey did, however, do her darnedest to duck past Ryan, making a mad dash for the living room. She knew if she could only get the coffee table between them, then she might have half a chance at talking her way out of a well-roasted hiney.

Unfortunately, she never made it to the living room. Ryan caught her at the stove, and in one smooth jerk, had her yanked over and wrapped around his hip. Kasey let out one startled shriek, but then bit her lips, clapping both hands over her mouth as that awful spoon went to work.

Ryan peppered the whole of her backside with rapid-fire pops and smacks. The spoon hurt like the devil and positively set the seat of her pants on fire, but Kasey refused to make a sound. She had watery eyes and a runny nose and tooth marks on her lips and her fingers, but she never made a peep. Not until her husband jerked her upright and, spoon still clasped tightly in his right hand, his eyes blazing, practically daring her to disobey, he said, "Any other smart ass comments you'd like to make?"

Kasey grabbed her aching bottom with both hands, but kept her teeth locked tightly together. If looks could kill, he'd be a shriveled-up, charred lump of agony on the kitchen linoleum, but sadly Ryan continued to live and breathe. He slammed the spoon back in the crock.

"Good," he snapped and squared off against her again. He was angry; his shoulders and chest seeming impossibly broad and strong, and he was

breathing hard. "Now you're going to listen to me. I hope this time you pay attention because this is the very last time I'm going to say this. God knows, my mother isn't the easiest woman to get along with, but she is still my mother, and I love her. But in all our years together I haven't had one holiday—not one—that the two of you haven't ruined with your petty fighting, bickering, and insults. You promised that this would be my year. You promised. Now I expect you to live up to your promise. Now, if I have to say one more word to you about this, then not only will I send Mom home again, but I swear to God you won't sit until Christmas. Now, do you understand me?"

Kasey swallowed hard, clearing the anger from her mouth before she dared open it. "Yes."

"Yes, what?" he bit out.

"Yes, sir."

He gave her one last backwards glare and then marched himself back out of the kitchen. Kasey heard a tell-tale scramble of footsteps on the second floor as Debra shot back into the guest room when she heard Ryan marching towards the stairs.

"Don't even bother!" he called up to her, taking the steps two at a time. "I want to talk to you, too!"

When Kasey heard Debra's door slam, then open and slam again as Ryan charged in after her anyway, she grabbed that horrible wooden spoon. Racing to the back door, she flung that spoon out across the lawn as far as her arm would let her. Then it was her turn to slam doors, and she took full advantage of it, grabbing the seat of her jeans before the last reverberations faded into the walls and windows. Shoulders slumped; she rubbed her bottom.

Two seconds later, as Ryan gave his mother the same lecture, Kasey sprinted frantically across the back lawn and all but dove headfirst into the

rhododendrons in search of that spoon. As awful as it was, she had it back in the stove-side crock before her husband came tromping back downstairs.

"Did you say something?" he growled, when he came back through the kitchen on his way to the living room.

"No, sir." She shook her head for good measure, and then took her hands off her bottom because already she could hear Debra following not far behind him. Sauntering past the kitchen, when Beezlebub's eyes met Kasey's, her mother-in-law smirked. Kasey turned her back, clamping her mouth shut so tightly that she could practically feel her teeth cracking under the pressure. Her hands shook, but she only finished making their supper and then set the table.

Barely more than two days left to go. Only two. And then Debra would be back on a plane, and she would still be sitting down. She could suffer anything for two miserable days.

"You definitely aren't using the recipes I sent you," Debra said, poking at her potato salad. "And the chicken is dry. Isn't your chicken dry, sweetheart? How can you eat dry chicken like this? My recipe is so much better."

"Mom," Ryan groaned.

"What?" Debra cried. "This kitchen is like a tomb. Don't you two have conversation at suppertime? You used to talk to Sandra all the time."

Ryan buried his head in his hands. "Mom...!"

Kasey touched the back of his hand as she stood up. "It's okay. Water off a duck's back. I'm not going to let it bother me."

"Where are you going?" he asked, when she picked up her half-eaten plate.

"Someone has to feed and water the turkey. It may as well be me."

"If you need help killing it tomorrow morning," Debra called after her, "I'll be more than willing to give you some pointers. You do have a sharp axe, don't you, dear?"

"All the better to hack you into pieces with," Kasey muttered under her breath.

"What?" both Ryan and his mother called after her.

"Nothing." She fetched a bowl from the kitchen, and with her half-eaten supper plate in the other hand, she went out to the tool shed. "Hello, you rotten bird."

The turkey erupted into gobbles, effectively stopping her tantrum. Wilting, she headed back out to fill the water bowl from the garden hose. But when she tried to slip it and the plate of leftovers into the carrier, the turkey made its escape.

"Oh, drat!" Kasey jumped backwards when a fury of flapping wings and scratching feet flew at her. She scrambled to shut the tool shed door, but fortunately the fast-moving bird was more interested in hiding itself behind the lawn mower than darting outside. With tomorrow's main course still safely contained inside the tool shed, Kasey relaxed a little. Then she frowned. "Oh, drat," she said again. Now what was she supposed to do?

She ducked down, peering through the darkness, the interior of the tool shed being lit only by what little yard light filtered through the single window. She could barely make out the white and black feathers of the turkey, cowering in the corner behind the mower's litter bag.

Outside, she heard Ryan calling to her from the back door. "Hey honey, everything okay out there?"

"Yes," she yelled back. "I'm fine." Lowering her voice, she muttered under her breath, "I just let the flipping turkey out, that's all."

The turkey warbled and peeked back at her around the side of the litter bag.

Frowning, Kasey tried to stalk it behind the lawnmower. "Here, turkey, turkey, turkey."

It poked its head out to look at her, but when she ducked down to grab it, it abandoned the lawnmower and dashed behind the shovels instead, knocking over both the leaf and garden rakes before disappearing behind a stack of boxes in the corner.

Grabbing wildly for it, Kasey tripped and fell. Her hand landed smack into her plate of potato salad. "UGH!"

Disgusted, she shook off the worst of the muck and then, for lack of something else to use, wiped off her fingers on her jeans. Her mounting frustration got the best of her. Kicking her feet on the floor, she erupted in curses and hit the lawnmower bag.

From right outside the door, she heard Ryan asking, "Honey, are you okay?"

Wilting, Kasey rolled her eyes at herself. "Don't come in! I let the blasted turkey out!"

"Do you want some help?"

"No!" she snapped, harsher than she really meant to. Stifling a sigh, she gentled her tone. "No, I'm fine. Just... just give me a minute, okay? I'm not so useless that I can't catch a damn turkey."

The door rattled a little as her husband leaned against it. "Look, Kas. I came out here to apologize. Not for spanking you. You deserved every lick of that. But because I don't want to spend the next couple of days fighting with you, okay? Can't we just bury the hatchet and please have a good holiday?"

Kasey's shoulders slumped. She could feel her bottom lip start to tremble, and she really had to bite it hard to keep from melting into a puddle of futile tears. She knew she should agree with him. She didn't want to ruin her holidays with constant arguments, either. But her wounded pride kept her quiet until Ryan gave up.

"Fine," he sighed. "You don't want me here, so I'm going back inside. But we're going to talk about this later."

She heard his swishing footsteps retreating back through the grass and then a minute later the back door shut. Not hard enough to be considered a slam, but definitely with a hint of tempered force.

The first hot tear coursed down Kasey's cheek. She wasn't going to cry, she told herself sternly. Debra wasn't worth shedding one, stupid tear over! But the hot sting intensified in her eyes and everything she looked at blurred. She sniffled, and then just gave up as one salty drop after another spilled over her lashes and fell down her face into her lap. Crossing her legs, she buried her hands in her lap.

The turkey trilled a low warble an instant before its black and white feathered head poked into her range of vision. Kasey raised her head to find that the bird had crawled out of hiding and was now less than two feet away. If she reached, she probably could have caught it.

She pointed to the pet carrier instead, "Get your downy butt back in there."

The turkey crawled into her lap instead, making itself at home in the nest of her crossed legs. It trilled in contentment and picked at the smeared bits of potato salad on her pants.

"Stupid bird," she grumbled, lowering her hand to give it a hesitant scratch on the head. It raised its feathers with another agreeable coo. "Buddy, you just made a big mistake. The only good turkey

is a dead one, roasted to perfection and smothered in cranberry jelly."

And yet she continued to pet it, even going so far as to pick up her plate of leftovers and offer it to him there in her lap.

"Stupid bird," she said one last time as it cleaned the last of the food from her plate. Picking it up, she stuffed the reluctant turkey back into the pet carrier. Then she closed the door firmly before shifting onto her knees and climbing wearily to her feet. Giving the turkey only one last look, she walked out of the tool shed. "Good night, Buddy."

Buddy purred after her.

"You're going to be good with yams and gravy," she said, and locked the shed door.

Chapter Two

In order for Buddy to be ready for their mid-afternoon supper, Kasey figured she'd need to get him into the oven by eight in the morning. So she set her alarm for six. Hopefully, that would give her plenty of time to kill it, gut and pluck it, get it dressed and into the pan to cook. And yet, when six o'clock rolled around Thanksgiving Day, more than anything in the world she wished she could've just hit the snooze and slept in until noon.

She didn't want to kill Buddy.

"Its name is not Buddy, it's Supper," she snapped out loud, startling both herself and Ryan, who sat bolt upright but only half awake.

"Whazat?"

"Nothing," she said, pushing the covers aside and getting up. "Go back to sleep."

Ryan looked blearily at her, and then gave the room a cursory glance but saw no intruders, breathed deeply but smelled no smoke. He grunted, and then flopped backwards onto his pillows, rolled over and was snoring again in seconds.

Gathering her clothes as quietly as she could, she crept into the bathroom to dress and then snuck from the room. Blast! The demon spawn was already awake. Debra's door was wide open, and the rumpled bed was missing its nightly occupant.

"Just a few hours without Debra," she muttered as she trudged downstairs. "Am I asking so flipping much?"

Her mother-in-law was sitting on the couch, watching the morning news with a bowl of cereal in her lap. When Kasey marched out of the hall towards the kitchen without even glancing up, she asked, "Do you want some help killing the bird?"

Kasey headed straight for the back door. "No."

"Good." Debra popped another spoonful of cereal into her mouth and then changed the channel on the TV. "Just make sure to keep it a clean kill. I promised that little girl that her pet wouldn't ever know a moment's suffering."

With one foot over the threshold, Kasey stopped. "What?"

Turning her head, Debra gave Kasey a slow smile. "That little girl was afraid her daddy would cook her precious pet up for supper, so I offered to take him to a nice farm where he'd live out the rest of his days in happiness and comfort."

Kasey's jaw dropped. "You lied to a little girl?"

"He's tame as a kitten and fat as the dickens. He's going to be good eating."

"Does Hell know you're missing? Can it function without you there?!" Unable to believe her ears, Kasey slammed out the back door. Poor Buddy had been a little girl's pet! "His name is not Buddy," she snapped to herself. "It's Cranberries, or Goodwith Gravy, or Yummy Goodstuff."

The dew in the grass completely soaked her sneakers by the time she was halfway to the tool shed. The weather was chilly and slightly foggy. The perfect day for an execution, she thought and then stood with her hand on the lock while she tried to gear herself up to murder a child's pet.

Turkeys expected to get eaten at Thanksgiving, she finally decided, pushing open the heavy door. Like giant Shmoos, they practically loved it.

"Gobble-gobble-gobble!" Buddy greeted when she walked into the tool shed. It ran right up to the carrier's door, pacing excitedly back and forth as it waited for her to let it out.

For a moment, Kasey just stood there, looking at it. Turkeys are dumb; she reminded herself, and good with cranberry sauce. Don't forget the cranberry sauce.

Still reluctant, she reached down to open the carrier. A small part of her was almost hoping Buddy would panic and run when she reached for it, but that little girl had trained him well, for he offered absolutely no resistance to being picked up. He'd probably spent his entire life until now attending backyard tea parties, getting dressed up in doll clothes and carted around like royalty in a baby carriage. She looked at Buddy, and Buddy looked back at her, cooing with contentment in her arms.

"Oh come on," she wheedled. "Don't look at me like that. You knew this was coming."

The feathers felt so soft beneath her fingers, and the bird trilled at her with such trust. She couldn't do it. She just couldn't.

Apparently, it was a good thing that she hadn't put the thawing turkey back into the freezer yesterday.

Putting Buddy back in the carrier, she quickly shut the door. "You'd better be very quiet," she warned and headed back to the house, already shaking her head at herself. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

Fortunately, the spawn of Satan was no longer sitting in front of the TV when she got back to the house. The now-empty bowl of cereal was on the coffee table, and a soft thump in the direction of the ceiling told her Debra was again upstairs in her room.

Sneaking past the hallway, she glanced once up the stairs, listening intently as she wondered how long she had before someone came down, and then hurried on to the kitchen. She got the freshly thawed turkey from the fridge, unwrapped and then stuffed it into the oven just as fast as she knew how. Darting back and forth from the counters to the sink, she quickly cleaned up and threw away every shred of evidence that a store-bought turkey

had ever been in their house to begin with. The plastic wrapper she stuffed all the way down into the very bottom of the garbage, covering it with half a roll of wadded up paper towels.

Debra came back into the kitchen just as she was admiring her handiwork with a critical eye. "Finished already? That was fast."

Kasey straightened with a jerk and spun around. Hoping she didn't look as guilty as she thought she did, she said, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be? You're not the only broad in this house to ever butcher an animal."

Turning her back on her mother-in-law, she went to wash her hands and then get started on the rest of the meal. Traditionally, the only meal to be had on Thanksgiving was the one in which the turkey was served, and that generally happened around three in the afternoon. However, one could hardly go all day without nibbling on at least a little something, and Kasey prided herself on making one heck of a snack tray. There was a variety of sandwich meats and cheeses, chips and crackers, fruits and vegetables, all of it artfully arranged on a three-foot silver platter her grandmother had given her years before. By the time Ryan made it downstairs, she was just setting the tray in the middle of the table, and the smell of roasting turkey was beginning to waft throughout the house.

"Now, that's a nice spread," he said, stealing a handful of black and green olives even as he kissed her good morning. Then he lifted his head to look at the kitchen, breathing deeply. "Smells like heaven. Are you doing okay?"

"Sure." Kasey headed back into the kitchen to start on the pies. "Why wouldn't I be? Because of last night?"

"Because you've never had to kill our supper before."

"You didn't have a problem grilling up the venison steaks off that deer you shot last fall."

"True." He popped the olives into his mouth and went on to steal a handful of carrot sticks. "But then, I didn't feed and water the deer before I shot it, either."

Good point.

"I'm still fine." Kasey washed and dried her hands, and kept her face carefully averted lest he see a glimmer of the guilt she knew must be creeping through her eyes as she lied. She vigorously attacked a graham-cracker pie crust, molding it into the glass pan, and hoped Ryan's mischief-sensing radar didn't work on holidays.

She could practically hear the blip-blip-blip of his normally suspicious nature waking up as he stood in the doorway, chewing on a carrot stick and watching her. "You want to talk about it?"

"It was a turkey, not my best friend in the whole world." She did her best to sound more exasperated than suspiciously awkward as she chuckled. "Come on, I've got a lot of work to do. Isn't there a game on or something?"

He turned to glance at the TV in the living room, and Kasey took advantage of his distraction to glance past him. Sitting on the sofa, Debra was staring back at her, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She glanced out the window behind her in the direction of the tool shed at exactly the same moment that Kasey could have sworn she heard a distant and very muted "Gobble-gobble-gobble!"

Debra turned to look at her again, like a hyena searching Kasey's gazelle-brown eyes for signs of weakness.

"Okay," Ryan finally conceded. "You're fine." He came to kiss her on the cheek. "Give me a bellow if you need a hand."

"Thanks, but someone needs to keep our guest entertained." She gave him a smile. "Guess which of the two of us is better suited for that."

He gave her a fond pat on the rump, then went out to commandeer control of the remote from his mother. Eyeing the tool shed through the kitchen window, Kasey quickly finished making her pies. Pumpkin, pecan and mincemeat for Debra—though how anybody in the world could stand the stuff, Kasey didn't know. Once those were in the oven along with the imposter turkey, she checked her watch. She had some time now.

"Gobble-gobble-gobble!"

She'd better feed Buddy before someone who didn't have the heightened senses of a guilty woman heard him, too.

Still feeling Debra's eyes on her back, Kasey tried to gather breakfast for Buddy without attracting attention. When she made the turkey stuffing, she filled one pocket with raisins and cornbread crumbs. When she made the salad, she filled her other pocket with spinach leaves and shredded carrots. Then she called her husband back into the kitchen. "Do you mind keeping an eye on things here? I'd like to clean up the tool shed before it starts to stink."

She could have bit her tongue though when she saw his expression suddenly freeze with a doe-in-the-headlights, trying-oh-so-hard-not-to-hurt-the-wife's-feelings, but what-do-you-mean-you-killed-the-turkey-in-MY-tool shed look.

"I'll do it," he said, painstaking neutral.

"No, no!" Kasey smiled, grabbing a garbage bag and hoping she didn't sound as guilty to him as she did to her own ears. "My mess, I'll clean it. Let it not be said I can't pick up after myself. Besides, I need to get out of the kitchen for a while."

"You want me to fix anything?"

"Uh..." she looked around the kitchen, making a mental tally of what needed or could be done at this point in the cooking process. "You could do the fruit salad, if you want."

"One fruit salad, coming right up."

He was whistling when she slipped out the back door and headed once more for the tool shed. This time there was a definitely audible "Gobble-gobble-gobble!" as she trekked across the grass. She actually had to wait a few seconds for him to grow quiet before she dared open the door.

"You're supposed to be quiet!" she scolded him as she ducked quickly inside. Glancing back at the house, she searched the windows to see if anyone was watching her—so far, so good—before shutting the door behind her.

Buddy trilled when he saw her, warbling his greeting as he paced excitedly up and down in front of the grate of the pet carrier. She opened the door only a crack to avoid another escape and promptly emptied her pockets.

"Now hush!" she whispered, hoping to lead by example, although the turkey completely ignored her in favor of stuffing its craw. She spent a few moments petting the downy softness of his back and the beautiful tail feathers, before hurrying back to the house. But when she returned to the kitchen, Debra was fixing her traditional fruit salad, and Ryan was sprawled out on the sofa in front of the TV.

"I thought you were going to help me," she whispered in his ear, so as not to be overheard by the eavesdropping demoness in the next room.

"Mom said she was feeling useless. What's so wrong with letting her help?"

Kasey wilted. A woman's home was her kitchen, but she was committed to doing all she could to prevent this Thanksgiving from turning into World War Three.

Ryan sighed and started to get up. "I'll chase her out of your domain."

"No," Kasey said, throwing up her hands in surrender. "I... I'll make it work. We'll do some girl bonding, or... or something."

Or something turned out to be their standing side-by-side in the kitchen for the next four hours, neither saying much of anything aside from, "Please pass the salt." Or, "Ryan used to date a girl named Sandra Bevins. Nice girl, and she definitely knew how to cook. Occasionally, she even used seasonings other than salt." Or, "You've thrown Sandra Bevins in my face for seven years. I swear, you mention that girl one more time, and I'll smother you in your own fruit salad." Which invariably led to Ryan's calling out from the living room, "You two getting along okay?" And then the lie, sung out in sweet unison, "Yes!"

Who knew four hours of being trapped in the kitchen with the spawn of Satan could feel so much like for-flipping-ever. While the turkey slow-roasted into a wonderful-smelling and mouth-wateringly succulent hunk of meat, Kasey began taking little trips into the pantry. Just to get away. Just to keep from jumping on Debra, knocking her to the ground, and choking the evil bat half to death right there on the linoleum. It was really too bad that murder for Thanksgiving generally became jail by Christmas. Although by the time dinner was ready for the table, the tradeoff wasn't seeming quite so bad to Kasey.

The imposter turkey was placed on the dining table at a quarter to three. And while it looked positively wonderful when everyone finally got to take their seats, it wasn't until Kasey took that first mouth-watering bite of stuffing that she realized something was horribly wrong. Her mouth puckered and every table manner that she'd ever

learned went straight out the window as she spat half-chewed food right back out on her plate.

Vinegar!

"Ugh!" She grabbed her water and ran to the kitchen sink, swishing and spitting one mouth-full after another to get the sour nastiness off her tongue. Not two-steps behind her came Debra, who had tried the mashed potatoes. For the first time since meeting, they stood amicably side-by-side, swishing and spitting until, gasping and so furious that she was almost crying, Kasey cried out, "What did you do to my dinner, you horrible, evil old woman!"

Debra shot around to stare at her, her eyes flying open wide. "Me?! You're the one who doesn't know how to cook! I knew I should have done everything myself!"

At the table, Ryan touched his tongue to a spoonful of everything in turn. Making a face, he threw his fork down in disgust. A half second later, he snatched his napkin from his lap and threw it on the floor in an even greater display of temper. He glared through the kitchen at his mother.

"You mean, hateful old hag!" Kasey cried, scrubbing at her tongue with a sheet of paper towel.

"Me? You're the one trying to poison my son! You're a miserable excuse for a wife, and you always have b—"

Kasey slapped her, a knee-jerk gut reaction without any thought at all behind it. One second she was scrubbing out her mouth, and in the next her fingers were stinging, Debra had fallen back against the sink and the side of her face was reddening with a bright pink handprint. Both of them stared at one another, jaws agape in absolute shock.

Ryan jumped up from the table, "Kasey!"

Debra covered her wounded cheek with her hand. In a low, trembling voice, she hissed, "How dare you!"

Kasey looked first at her throbbing fingers and then at her mother-in-law. She had never hit anybody before in her life, but damn if it hadn't felt good! She drew back her hand to hit Debra again, but this time Ryan was across the floor fast enough to catch her by the arm.

"Get upstairs!" he ordered her, but neither Kasey nor his mother took their eyes off one another. Not until he turned Kasey physically and pushed her from the kitchen. "I mean it, go!"

He didn't let go of her until she took that first reluctant step to obey on her own. She even managed to get all the way up to her room with the door closed before she burst into tears.

"This is the woman you chose to marry," Debra said, shaking her head and tenderly probing her bright red cheek.

"Well, I hope now you can see how unfit she is. Fortunately for you, Sandra's divorced now and still asks after you."

"Don't!" Ryan interrupted sharply and with so much anger that it actually silenced her. "Kasey didn't do this. She's not that spiteful."

Stretching a hand out toward the table, Debra said, "But you tasted the—"

"I said, don't!" he snapped again, and this time Debra shut her mouth with a snap. Staring at her with furious disbelief, he couldn't help but laugh. "This was beneath you, mom. I don't even know what to say."

Her eyes grew wide and wounded. "You can't honestly believe that I would—"

He held up his hand. "If you lie to me, I swear to God, mom!" Ryan quickly shut his mouth and

took a deep breath. It took effort not to finish his threat, but he effectively bit it off. "You hated Sandra when I dated her. You hated Marcie, and Jenny, and Becca, and every woman I ever dated. I love Kasey. I married Kasey. I couldn't give a rat's behind about Sandra. And do you know what else? It's times like this when I really miss Dad the most. He never would have let you get away with a tenth of the crap you've pulled these last few years. Mom, I'm not going to do this any more. I won't play the peace-keeper for one more holiday." He shook his head. "I don't know why I'm surprised that you didn't stick to your promise that this year would be different. Sadly for you, now there's going to be consequences."

Her wounded look slowly fading into one of calculating suspicion, she took a slow step backwards. "What do you mean?"

Turning, Ryan left the kitchen long enough to fetch the phonebook from the living room. He tossed it onto the counter next to her. "You'd better find a place to stay tonight. Tomorrow, I'll take you to the airport as planned, and we'll say goodbye there."

Debra's jaw dropped all over again. "You can't be serious! Ryan, sweetheart—"

"I'm going to miss you," he said honestly. "Maybe you hate Kas so much it won't matter, but if you ever want to spend another holiday with us, I suggest you start honing your butt-kissing skills to their finest point. The only way you'll ever set foot in my house again will be at her invitation. Not mine."

"You can't be serious!" she practically wailed, chasing him as far as the hallway when he turned and walked away.

Ryan only threw his hands up into the air. "I'm not doing this anymore; I told you that before you came down here. You'd better start making phone

calls. I'll pay for whatever hotel you find, but you are *not* staying under this roof for one more night. Not one more. You're all done."

One down, one to go.

Ignoring his mother's plaintive cries, Ryan walked upstairs as if in concrete shoes. This was the last thing that he wanted to have to face, but despite all his mother had done, Kasey's action could not be ignored.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands when he opened the door. She sniffled once as he came inside, but didn't look at him. Instead, she simply stood up, fetched her pillow from the head of the bed, and dropped it listlessly at the edge of the foot. Without a word, she stripped off her own pants and panties and lay her hips down over the hump. Legs draped off the end behind her, bottom bared, she folded her arms on the mattress and hid her face from him while she waited.

Sighing, Ryan softly closed the door and went to sit next to her on the bed. He rubbed her back. "I know you tried."

She stopped breathing, and her shoulders began to shake.

"She is far from the easiest person to deal with. I know that."

"Just do it and get it over with," she whispered.

He reached for her. "Come here, honey."

"No."

"Come on." He caught her arm, pulling her gently up until, reluctantly; she crawled into his lap and lay her head upon his shoulder. He could feel the brittleness in her as she struggled to keep from falling apart in his arms. "I'm sorry, honey."

"I'm not," she whispered in shaky defiance.

When he began to rock with her, she hiccupped, her breath catching in the very back of her throat.

Her arms snaked a little tighter around his neck and shoulders.

It was the rocking that must have been her undoing. In all the time he'd known her, Kasey had never been big on crying. Only in times of high stress or when he blistered her backside did she ever dissolve into tears, but even then she'd muffle the sounds in an attempt to hide her misery from him. The only reason he knew she was crying now was because she couldn't hide the shaking of her shoulders.

Ryan tightened his arms, holding her closer. "We're going to be okay?"

She shook her head.

He squeezed her gently. "Kasey," he repeated. "We're going to be okay."

"I'm not sorry." Sniffling against his shoulder, she said, "You've got a right to be mad at me, but I'm still not sorry."

"And I still say we're going to be okay," he replied. He stroked down the curve of her back, his hand gliding down over the hem of her shirt, touching the bare flesh of her hip and then caressed back up again. "I love you with all my heart."

Her shoulders shook again harder than before, but still the only sounds he heard were her uneven breaths and the occasional snuffle. Gradually, her gasps grew slower and more even, and her breathing returned to normal.

"So what happens now?" she whispered.

"Mom's going to a hotel for the night, and tomorrow I'll drive her to the airport."

"No, I mean between us."

Now it was Ryan's turn to draw a deep breath. He gave her one last tight hug before slowly letting her go. She sat up, and they looked at one another in complete understanding of what had to come next.

"How else could this have been handled?" he finally asked.

"I could have walked away until I calmed down enough to deal with the situation rationally. But," she confessed, a half smile twisting the corners of her mouth upwards. "It felt really, really good just to pop her one."

Ryan shook his head. He knew better than to laugh, but he almost did anyway. "That's going to cost you, honey."

"I know." She didn't look the slightest bit repentant, although she did lower her eyes. Rubbing her hands on her naked thighs, she finally asked, "What are you going to use?"

"My hand."

Her eyes flashed back to his in surprise. "I would have thought slugging your mother was worth the cane, at least."

"Had you actually slugged her, that's exactly what you'd be getting, and I doubt I'd be smiling right now. But quite frankly, you're right, she did have it coming." He patted her hip, gesturing for her to get up. "Let's get this over with."

Standing, Kasey then lay herself bottom-up across his lap. With her torso resting almost comfortably along the foot of the bed and her long legs stretched out behind her, she braced herself.

Even without the cane, he absolutely tanned her backside. With a broad and heavy hand, he spanked the upturned curves of her nethers past the point of blushing pinkness, past scarlet, taking her all the way to boiled lobster shell before he was done.

For the first time, Kasey couldn't have cared any less if her mother-in-law heard her cries or not. Although she tried her best to be quiet in the beginning, when he turned his attention to smacking the backs of her thighs, she was... well,

still not sorry for hitting Debra, but certainly sorry that she was getting spanked for it.

Afterwards, he pulled her right back into his arms, albeit this time they held each other standing up so she wouldn't have to sit through his comforting embrace.

"I love you," Ryan said again, stroking her hair and back.

"I love you, too," she sniffled.

He drew back, rubbing her arms before letting her go completely. "You don't have to come down if you don't want. I'll see mom off."

As he started to leave, she said, "Let her stay. One more night won't kill us."

He stopped in surprise, one hand resting on the doorknob. "Are you serious?"

Sniffing, she swiped at the tears still drying on her face and shrugged. "She's already ruined dinner, what more can she do? Besides, you only get to see her once a year, anyway. May as well make the most of it."

Eighteen hours, twelve minutes and fifteen seconds left to go... fourteen... thirteen...

"Oh, baby." For the first time since Debra's arrival, Ryan's face split into the biggest of grins. "You don't know what this means to me."

"Yes," she muttered. "I do. That's the only reason I said it."

He danced back to kiss her again. "You're a true lady, honey. Boxing gloves and all. Just for that, I'm going to do something very special just for you. I could build you a turkey run, the biggest turkey run that silly bird's ever had. Complete with a little house all its own. I'll even pick you up some feed for it on the way back from the airport."

Her jaw dropped. "How did you know? I thought I hid it so well!"

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a slightly greasy pop-up button she'd forgotten to remove

from the frozen turkey before she'd stuffed it into the oven. "Turkeys don't normally come with these installed." He smiled and kissed her again, as he pressed it into her hand. "Don't worry. I took it out before mom saw it."

Now that was love.

First Impressions

Chapter One

Oh, what she wouldn't give to make the bed stop spinning.

Lida Hanleigh tried really hard not to open her eyes and check the time. She knew it had to be morning, since the sun was shining right on her eyelids, and that was good enough for her and her aching head.

Her aching eyes.

Her spinning bed.

And not only was the bed spinning, but it felt as though someone were holding her feet in the air while her skull was ground down into her pillow. Her stomach roiled.

Oh, how she hurt. Everywhere. All over. Head, eyeballs... hell, even her hair hurt. Down to the very last follicle. It must have been some party last night... if only she could remember it.

Lida reached blindly up with one hand to cup her forehead, but even that slight motion sent a sharp wave of nausea coursing through her stomach and pain rocketing through her skull. She groaned, but the soft muffled sound that escaped her throat wasn't anywhere near expressive enough to sum up how she felt.

Lida tried again, a long, low groan tinged with a wince because the sound seemed to amplify in her ears to a deafening, pulsating, throbbing crescendo within her pounding skull. "Oh, please, somebody kill me now."

"No kidding," groaned a man from beside her.

Lida opened her eyes. Snapped them open, in fact. Right into the beams of sunlight spilling painfully across her face through the rude gap in the blue curtains of the window above the bed. It hurt her head to move, but it hurt her eyes worse

not to, and she slapped a hand up to block the golden rays. It wasn't until she'd managed to block most of the sun that she realized she was not in her bed. She wasn't even in her bedroom. And, if she followed this train of logic, then that would eventually lead to the undeniable truth that she was not in her house.

So, where the hell was she?

Every hair on her head screamed in agony as Lida forced herself to turn just far enough to glimpse the man lying beside her.

A very handsome man.

A very handsome, dark haired man lying naked beside her, covered only to the waist by a thin sheet. One of his legs, sparsely peppered with dark hair, was sticking out from under the cloth as if to bask in the sunshine. And on the mattress next to her, twined in strands of her long blonde hair, sprawled his right arm. A thick and bulging, muscular and masculine arm. One that she was pretty certain she'd never seen before in her life. It had lipstick kisses on it, and those were very much in her shade.

"Oh, my God," she strangled.

"Please don't." He reached up to cup his forehead.

Lida sat bolt upright in bed. "Oh, my God!" she strangled again, louder. She grabbed her throbbing forehead, and then she looked down at herself, also covered only to the waist with the sheet and just as naked as he was.

She shrieked, and reeled backwards, almost collapsing on her pillows again. Ouch, that hurt! Wide eyed, on the verge of panicking, she still clutched her head, as if her skull remained in one piece only so long as she held onto it.

The man grabbed his head with both hands also. "Lady, please. Ow. I will give you a million dollars never to do that again."

Grabbing the sheet and swaddling herself with it, Lida fell off the bed. She crawled until she could stagger onto her feet. She spun to face him only to find that she'd stolen his only cover and now he was naked! Very naked. And very, very fine to look at. Damn, he was fine. And hard as a rock, that utterly masculine part of him standing straight up in the air as if to say, 'Howdy, nice to meet ya!'

She screamed again.

"Aargh!" the man cried, covering his head with both hands. "What's the matter with you?"

Gaping at him first like a landed bass, Lida then snapped around to face the wall. It was too late, the image of him was resoundingly burned into her mind. "W-w-where are my clothes?"

"Clothes," he said thickly. After a moment, he raised his head to look over the side of the bed and then, as if the effort had exhausted him, collapsed back on his pillow and covered his eyes with one hand. The other he rolled aimlessly in the air. "They, uh... they don't seem to be here."

"Not here?" she all but shrieked. "What? Did they grow tired of my company and walk away on their own?"

"Please, stop screaming," he moaned.

"Not until you tell me where I am." But her own shrill tones had her clutching her aching head even as he winced and did the same. She swallowed to keep the rising nausea at bay and, reluctantly, lowered her voice. "I also want to know who you are."

His eyes fluttered open and he looked at her. At first startled, he then began to laugh.

Lida narrowed her eyes at the wall, turning her head back to him but not so far back that she might actually catch an accidental glance of his nakedness. "What's so funny?"

"Not funny so much as a great relief," he corrected, still chuckling. When she still didn't get

the joke, he elaborated. "You don't know who I am."

"I got that part," she drawled.

He grinned and slowly pushed himself up on his arms. "I don't know who you are either. I'm glad you said something first, because I sure wasn't going to. Talk about a major morning after faux pax. Only slightly worse is waking up with a wedding ring on your hand and not knowing how it got there."

Startled, she looked down at her hand.

"Don't worry," he said. "That was the first thing I checked."

Her eyes narrowed even more and she opened her mouth to say something scathing, but he walked past her, and she forgot completely what she'd been about to say. He was still completely buck ass naked a very nice ass but buck naked and still very much in that early morning protruding state of manhood.

She tried not to look at it. She looked. Oh geez... and quickly covered her eyes with one hand.

Lida shook her head. This couldn't be happening to her. Things like this never happened to her. She wasn't the type for one night stands with strange men. Strange, big, handsome, naked men with really broad shoulders and really big—

Lida covered her face with both hands. Don't think about it, she told herself sternly. Think about the important stuff. Like who he was, where she was, how she'd got here or what had happened to her clothes. And probably the absolute most important question of all: what on God's green Earth had she done last night?

Last night had been the company-wide party, hosted at Vintage Plaza, a four-diamond luxury hotel, a send-off for retiring CEO Benny Bradshaw and the naming of his replacement all rolled into one. Lida had debated all evening about whether or

not she should even go. After all, she was pretty sure that the new CEO wasn't going to be her, despite the fact that she'd busted her butt for four years to get the job and was the best person for it. Unfortunately, she was also a woman, the company had a "glass ceiling" and she'd flown face-first into it a long time ago.

Still, she'd swallowed her bitterness and pride last night, and she'd gone anyway. She remembered that. She also remembered cozying up to the bar like any devoted wallflower would do and ordering her first Long Island to help keep her cheerful until dinner was served and the evening's long awaited announcements made.

Somewhere towards the back of her pounding skull, she remembered her decision to break her one-drink-per-party rule and to just have fun for one night. Right about then was when the boys from sales cozied up to the bar beside her and began to set up tequila shots for a little salt and lime contest.

"Please tell me I didn't match them shot for shot," she whispered. Unfortunately, her fuzzy memories seemed to indicate otherwise.

"Yeah," the naked man agreed, groaning and chortling at the same time. "Helluva party last night."

Lida touched her fingers to her temples, but try though she might, her last dream-like memory was of Vince McAllister, the company president, sitting down beside her to join in the game. Of dinner, there wasn't a single recollection to be summoned and if they named the new CEO it was still a mystery to her exactly who had nabbed the position out from under her feet.

She groaned, dropping her hands. "I have to go. I-I have work. Where are my clothes?"

"Probably wherever mine are," the naked man yawned. He scratched both his butt and his chest and walked into the bathroom.

The instant the door closed between them, Lida scrambled for something to wear—hers, his, anything so long as it covered her.

She found both of his socks and her bra under the bed. Just about everything else was littered down the hallway to the bedroom door, a dismaying trail of nylon and polyester breadcrumbs that pointed a very distinctive light on her wayward activities of the night before.

"Oh Lida," she whispered, disentangling her nylons from his underwear. "What have you done?"

She followed the trail into the living room, scooping up clothes every few steps—her white skirt, her bra, her panties—until she found her blouse and purse, the final articles, lying in a guilty heap not two steps inside the front door.

She hadn't even made him talk to her first or pour her a drink or anything.

Lida closed her eyes, pained. Twenty-eight years of carefully maintained self respect, and she'd blown it all on one night that she couldn't even remember. She didn't even know if she'd enjoyed herself.

Doing her best to shake the wrinkles from her shirt, she turned to go into the living room, but caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror hanging by the door. What she saw in her reflection froze her mid-step. Her eyes bulged, and her jaw dropped.

"Oh my God!" she strangled. Dropping the blouse, she reached up to touch her throat. Hickies! She was covered in hickies, big bruise-like circular marks that necklaced her throat, traveled up to her ears and down her shoulders to her chest. She tried half-heartedly to count them. "Eleven... twelve... thirteen..." But there were simply too many.

She lowered the sheet she'd toga-ed around herself and continued counting all the way down her

breasts. Her jaw dropped as she glimpsed more down her belly. She lowered the sheet even more, following the line of hickies that circled her belly button before delving further still. The last one marred the otherwise pale inner slope of her thigh.

She straightened and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she turned around. She was almost afraid to look. Twisting back her head to peek over her shoulder, she gasped. There was even one on her butt! "I don't believe this! What is he? Half leech?"

"There you went."

Lida instantly yanked the stolen sheet back up around her and snapped about to glare at the handsome stranger she'd maybe, probably, most likely slept with. It was a scathing look, but since he was focused on their mingled clothes, he missed sharing in it.

Dressed in only a navy blue towel, he came down the hall, one eyebrow cocked at the sight of her blouse and his tie on the floor in front of the door. "Wow, we didn't waste any time chit-chatting, did we?"

Already disgusted with herself, her expression didn't change, and she didn't answer.

"Can I ask you a question?" He bent down to pick up his tie and then grinned at her. "Can you tell me what magical, holy grail words I used to make this come about?"

Her frown darkened. "Is that supposed to be charm?"

"Did I miss the mark?"

"Get out."

His smile faltered. "What?"

"You heard me. Get. Out!" Fuming, she turned and flung open the front door. Holding her sheet tight around her, she pointed outside. "Leave. Vamoose. Be gone. Be off with you, villain. Scram!"

"But," he said.

She grabbed the tie out of his hand and chucked it out the open door onto the manicured lawn.

"Oh, come on now. Don't do that."

Whirling about, Lida grabbed his catch-all plate, sitting on a short table in the entry way and threw that outside as well. His wallet, cell phone, and a pocketful of change became briefly airborne before raining down on the cobblestone walkway. His wallet and cell phone landed in the flowerbed, disappearing into the leaves of a red rhododendron bush, while the change twinkled in the sunlight on the stones and in the grass.

"Hey!" he said, even louder. Holding his towel about his waist, he pushed past her. "I need my phone for work!"

She could have cared less, so long as he was out of the house. No sooner was he across the threshold than did Lida slam shut and lock the door.

Preston Blaylock stood wrapped in a towel on the front porch of his brand new house and blinked at the closed door. He'd just been thrown out of his own home by a woman whose name he still didn't know. The lock clicked over and one quick search of the ground around his feet and down the walkway told him his keys hadn't been one of the articles that his mystery one-night stand had hurled outside ahead of him.

Preston sighed, his shoulders drooping. Hands on his hips, he shook his head at himself. The morning was rapidly shaping itself into the sort of day that it just didn't pay a guy to get up for.

Something told him losing his temper would accomplish very little at this point. So he tried something else: painstaking politeness. He swallowed his dignity and knocked on his own front door. "Excuse me? Hello, crazy lady in my house?"

She didn't open the door, but she did snap back the side curtain and glare balefully back at him, one hand holding her head as she snapped, "What?"

"I hate to point this out, but you're in my house. That means, you can't throw me out of it."

His overwhelming logic failed to impress her. "I have to get dressed."

He glanced down at his towel, then looked back at her with one eyebrow arched. "So do I, honey. And since I only moved into this neighborhood two days ago, I'd really appreciate it if you'd open the door."

She shook her head. "I am not getting dressed in a house with a half naked man that I don't know."

"Had you let me know that last night, you wouldn't have had to! I could have called you a cab before I fell asleep." He thought he was being reasonable; from the look on her face, she obviously thought he was a jerk.

"Serves you right for taking advantage of an intoxicated woman!" she snapped.

"Take advantage?" He stared at her incredulously. "Lady, I was drunk too. For all I know, you took advantage of me!" He nodded at her skeptical snort. "Yeah, that's right. This could be all your fault, but you know what? I'm not blaming you." He looked her up and down, and lost his irritation to a half smile. "Heck, I'm not really even objecting all that much, I just want to come back inside with my dignity and my modesty still intact."

She gave him a scathing look, and over his shoulder, Preston became aware of a soft whistling coming down the sidewalk. He glanced behind him. Oh, great... The papergirl.

"Uh, lady," he said and turned back to the window with a renewed sense of urgency. He knocked on the glass. "Let me in, now. No more playing around."

She let the curtain drop, but instead of opening the door, he heard her footsteps retreating into the house.

"Lady!" He pounded on the door with one hand, grabbing onto the top of his head with the other to keep the thudding sound from blowing his skull apart. "Ow, my aching head... Let me in, Lady! This isn't funny anymore!" The whistling was growing louder, and he looked worriedly over his shoulder, and then down at his towel, and then shaded his eyes and tried to catch a glimpse of the woman through the window. As far as he could see the living room was empty. "This is my house, dammit! This..." He looked over his shoulder, knowing at any minute, the papergirl was going to pop around the bushes and not only would he be able to see her, but she'd be able to see him. "This is my... my..." he faltered, and then cursed under his breath as he dove for the rhododendron barely in time to hide.

He had to bite his lip to keep from growling his frustration. He couldn't believe this! Thrown out of his own house and left to hide in the bushes, like some sort of peeping tom, so as not to be discovered by the papergirl.

She looked young, too. Preston closed his eyes, fervently praying, please, dear God, let her just drop the paper on the porch and leave again.

Unfortunately, God must have been laughing too hard to hear him, because the papergirl got only halfway up the walkway before she saw the scattered coins and stopped.

Yeah, go ahead, he thought. Pick up the coins and go.

But she didn't. After glancing up at the house, the girl squatted down to gather up his change, then walked up the front porch and knocked on the door... just as his cell phone rang.

He looked down at the phone in his hand; the papergirl snapped around and looked at him. Her eyes widened.

Preston held up the hand he wasn't using to hold his towel in place. The way his luck was going this morning, he wasn't about to trust it out of his grasp. "Please wait. This isn't what it looks like."

The papergirl dropped both newspaper and fistful of change and screamed. She ran back down the sidewalk the way she'd come.

Preston swore. Leaping out of the bush, he tried the door again. Not surprisingly, it was still locked. Framing his eyes with his cell phone, he peeked through the crack in the interior curtain, but the woman must have gone back into the bedroom to dress because he couldn't see her.

"Pervert! Peeping Tom!"

Preston turned around. One of his new neighbors across the street was standing on his porch, hands on hips as he glared at Preston. Turning sharply, he stormed back into his own house, yelling, "Ethel, call the police! We've got a streaker in the neighborhood!"

Oh, great!

The phone rang again. Growing ever more irritated by the second, Preston checked the caller ID, then winced. Reluctantly, he answered it. "Hi, Nancy."

"You know," his secretary drawled. "The day after you get promoted for all your hard work is generally not the day to play hooky."

From off in the distance came the faint wail of police sirens.

Preston winced again. "Uh, I know. I've had a little problem."

"What sort of problem?"

Scratching the bridge of his nose, Preston half laughed. "It's a silly thing really."

"I could use a good laugh."

"I'm locked out of my house."

"Want me to call a locksmith?"

"Without my clothes. I startled my brand new papergirl."

"Without your... Is that police sirens I hear?"

"Yup." Preston half laughed again, completely without mirth. "And here I thought moving three blocks from the police station would be a good thing. I am so going to jail. Do me a favor?"

"Don't worry, I'll reschedule your lunch with the board of directors," she said, sounding a little strained.

"Thanks. And please, don't tell anyone about this."

"Uh," she said.

"What?"

"I've got you on speaker phone. Jim and Marshall are here."

Preston could hear something that sounded suspiciously like laughter behind Nancy's voice.

"They wanted to congratulate you and welcome you aboard. So did Rachel. And Evan. And Benny."

"Oh God." Preston closed his eyes.

"And most of accounting and sales. Human resources. The secretaries' pool. The janitor."

He definitely should have stayed in bed. Shaking his head, he opened his eyes again in time to see the first black and white patrol car pull up to the front of his house. "I have to go now, Nancy."

"Remember, you get one phone call!" she said quickly. "And if they beat you, you can get on Sixty Minutes!"

Shoulders sagging, he ended the call just as the first officer was getting out of the car.

One hand on the handle of his nightstick, the cop sauntered across the lawn towards him. "Good morning," he called, looking anything but cheerful as he eyed Preston up and down.

With nothing else to do, Preston half-heartedly smiled. "Morning. This isn't what it looks like."

"No?"

Preston thumbed over his shoulder. "This is my house."

"I don't suppose you have some ID in that towel."

Looking down at himself, Preston remembered his wallet. "No, but... um..." He scoured the ground around his feet. "I do have it... lying here..." He ducked down. "There it is!" He had to crawl partway under the rhododendron to get it, but he came up waving his wallet. "Here you go."

"Preston Blaylock," the officer read.

"That's me," Preston said helpfully.

"Mr. Blaylock, this is not the address listed on your driver's license."

"That's because I just moved in. I've only been here two days."

A yellow cab pulled up to the house not far behind the police cars, and a bare second later the front door opened.

"Oh wait! Ask her!" Preston said, pointed back at the woman, redressed in last night's cast off clothing, looking only slightly rumpled, with her blouse buttoned all the way up to the neck. "She'll tell you this is my house."

"And who's she?" the officer asked.

"The lady who locked me out of it." Preston glared at her.

She glared coolly back at him, and the police officer glanced between them.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said, motioning her over. "Do you know this man?"

The woman looked from the waiting cab back to Preston. Finally, she arched her eyebrows as she met the policeman's gaze. "I can honestly say, until this morning I've never seen him before in my life."

Preston's jaw dropped. "This is my house! She's lying! Make her show you ID, I guarantee her address won't match either!"

"Are we done?" she calmly asked the officer. "I'm going to be late for work."

"We're done."

"I don't believe this!" Preston exclaimed, as his arms were seized and twisted behind him. "Call my realtor, she'll tell you who I am!"

"Nice towel," the woman told him, and then she turned and walked to the cab.

Preston was hauled off to jail.

Chapter Two

It took an extra large caramel latte, a pair of dark sunglasses, a lot of heavy makeup to cover the hickies that stuck up above the collar of her blouse, and six aspirins before Lida strolled into work feeling anything even remotely close to normal. Even so, walking through the receptionist's area was an agonizing experience. The blaring shrillness of the ringing phone stabbed into her head with a sound that followed her all the way to her office.

Her secretary, Kelly, handed her a stack of messages and winced. "Ow, it hurts me just to look at you."

Lida cracked half a smile. "Gee... thanks."

"Aren't those the same clothes you were wearing last night?"

"Yes." Lida headed into her office.

"Did you sleep in your car?"

"I wish."

"Ooo hooo, someone got laid!" Kelly got up to follow her. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No." She didn't even want to think about what she'd done last night, what she'd awakened to this morning, or even how she'd left the poor guy. Oh well, the past being what it was, she wasn't likely to ever see him again so there was little point in feeling guilty about it. "Let's just pretend I came in looking normal, okay?"

"Oh, come on. Give me details! Was it someone you met last night?"

Lida gave her a look. "If you don't have something to do, I can find you something."

"No, you can't," Kelly scoffed. "I've already done it all. The Jenkins and Donaldson accounts, Vaughn Financial, Leslie and Leslie, and South Lane have all been handed over to Evan. Richie, Richards, and Greene have gone to Sarah, and Perrin insisted that

he continue to work with you, so Benny wants us to finish that project, and everything else goes to Bob. We're all set. We're cleaned up and ready to mo— what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Lida shook her head slowly. "What are you talking about?"

Kelly blinked at her, lowering her head to peer at Lida out from beneath her pencil-thin eyebrows. "Your promotion last night. Or was that such a small event in your life that you've forgotten it already?"

Lida dropped her messages and her coffee. Fortunately, she'd drunk most of the latté on the way up the elevator; her phone messages soaked up the rest. She lunged for her secretary, grabbing Kelly's hands. "I got the promotion? You're kidding? You're serious?! Don't play with me, woman! The job is MINE?!"

Eyes wide, ever so subtly trying to reclaim her hands, Kelly nodded. "Yes."

Lida screamed. She had to grab her head, first, and it hurt like hell, but she screamed anyway. And she jumped up and down.

And Kelly took a healthy step backwards from her suddenly lunatic boss. "Boy, how plastered did you get last night?"

Lida ran into her office. She covered her mouth and screamed again, jumping up and down when she saw her computer was missing, her files in boxes all around and her personal affects already gone. "I got the job!" She yelled, throwing her hands up in the air. She laughed like a maniac, eyes and fists squeezed tightly shut as she stomped on the floor. "I'm the new CEO! Take that, glass ceiling! I broke you!"

Throwing back her head, Lida laughed long and hard. While she became an instant conga line of one, dancing all around her now ex-office, Kelly crept into the doorway. "Do you want me to hold

your calls and well-wishers at bay? At least until you regain your sanity?"

"No no no." Lida made herself stop dancing, although there was no stopping her ear-to-ear grin. "It's my first day on the job. It's bad enough that I came in late, I don't want to alienate anybody. Where's my new office?"

"Fourth floor. And don't worry about it, at least you came to work. Your partner celebrated so hard last night he got arrested this morning."

"Partner?" Lida blinked twice, her grin slowly vanishing. "What partner?"

Eyebrows pulling together, Kelly stared at her. "Do you not remember anything from last night?"

"Precious little. Why?"

"Benny changed the CEO position. It's bigger than any one person can handle now, so the responsibilities have been divided between you and a guy named Preston Blaylock from the east coast branch. He's already been moved down here. It's just you and him in the corner office upstairs." The corner of Kelly's mouth turned up and she began to laugh. "That is if he can find his clothes. He was arrested this morning for streaking his neighborhood in a towel. Says he got locked out of his house, but personally I think he had too much to drink and woke up starkers in the yard."

Lida's smile was gone. So was her euphoria. It had been replaced by an oddly strained knot in the very pit of her stomach. "Towel?"

"That's what Evan says. Scared some poor papergirl half out of her wits."

"Was—was it a blue one?"

"What's the matter?" Kelly peered at her. "Are you all right? You look white."

"I—" Lida swallowed hard. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Drinking'll do that to a body," Kelly called after her, but Lida was already hurrying down the hall for the bathroom.

She shut and locked the door behind her, bracing her back against it as she stared wide-eyed at her reflection in the mirror. She covered her mouth with her hand, as if she really, truly were about to throw up. Unfortunately, as bad as her suddenly rolling stomach felt, she knew the feeling wasn't caused by her hangover. Even worse was the niggling little whisper in the back of her head, telling her that the consequences of this weren't going to be anywhere near as pleasant as suffering through an upset stomach.

So much for breaking through the "glass ceiling."

It took an extra large, black and strong cup of coffee, a pair of dark sunglasses, five hundred dollars to get out of jail, and six aspirins before Preston could bring himself to walk into work. Even so, he had to hold onto his head as he stepped off the elevator and passed six salesmen, gathered around the water cooler, all of whom burst into a rousing chorus of Ray Steven's The Streak.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he muttered, forcing a smile and waving one hand at them.

Nancy stood up when he approached her desk and leaned over the top to hand him his messages. "Lida Hanleigh's already inside."

"Right," he said, flipping through the multitude of pink squares he'd been given. "Remind me, who's Lida Hanleigh?"

"Your new partner."

"Right," he said again. He sighed. "Does she know?"

"Honey," Nancy said with a small but sympathetic smile. "Everybody knows."

"Oh." Great.

"Until they rearrange the space upstairs, you'll be sharing this office with her."

"Do me a favor."

"What?" She smiled, her eyes drooping half closed in anticipation of a ridiculous request.

"Buy me a plane ticket back home and tell everyone here I died."

Nancy laughed; Preston was only half heartedly convinced he was joking. With a rueful smile, he opened his new office door and walked inside to meet his new partner. His smile died when he set eyes on Lida Hanleigh, the woman of his mid morning nightmare. The one responsible for providing him with his own personal set of mugshots, the one solely to blame for the two hours he spent sitting on a stone slab, dressed in only a towel and pressed like a veal between the brick wall and a bald headed, tattoo covered Hell's Angel named Killer.

In the middle of unpacking a box of personal affects, she looked up at him and her face instantly contorted into a look of acute dismay. "Oh no," she half sobbed and half whined. Flopping onto her chair, she dropped her head onto her desk.

Preston shut the door. "You!" he accused.

She softly and repeatedly banged her forehead on her desk calendar, the last whack catching the bottom of her company phone. "Ow!" She caught her forehead with both hands.

Preston wasn't moved. He pointed at her, his face darkening. "You got me arrested!"

Lida sat up, glaring at him out from beneath her fingers. "Yeah, well, you got me drunk."

"Uh uh, sweetheart." He shook both his head and his finger. "You did that to yourself."

That look of dismay returned. "I know," she admitted. "It just makes me feel so much better if I can blame you for it."

Glaring at her, he then shook his head. "I'm not working with you."

Lida jumped to her feet as he headed for the door. Claspings her hands in supplication, she cried, "Please wait! Please!"

Against his better judgment, Preston did. Fuming, he looked back at her. "Why should I?"

"Because you'll win." Lida came out from behind her desk. "They wanted you enough to move you all the way across the States. They only had to promote me. I wasn't a big financial investment, so they can demote me just as fast."

"When do we come to the part where I should care?"

"I've worked for four years for this job," Lida told him. "I've worked nights, weekends, holidays. Personal life? What's that? I've lived, breathed, ate, drank and slept for this promotion alone. I can't lose it now. I just can't." She bit her bottom lip, hesitantly offering, "I'll make you a good partner. You'll never regret it."

He gave in to a burst of incredulous laughter. "I'm already regretting it!"

Lida dropped to her knees, hands still clasped as if in prayer. "I'll tell the police the truth. I'll repay your bail bond. I'll call Channel Eight and tell them what really happened."

His jaw dropped. "My arrest was on Channel Eight?"

She winced. "Maybe it was a slow morning?"

"Great." Preston snapped around and stalked towards the door again.

"Please!" Lida crawled quickly after him. "I'll do anything!"

"Don't!" He turned on her, pointing stiffly and angrily down into her face. "Don't even make that promise to me. I'm this close," he held up two fingers a scant space apart, "to giving you the spanking of your life!"

In the shocked silence that fell between them, he faintly heard a snort of barely muffled laughter from Nancy outside.

Lida blinked at him, her mouth working without sound, bobbing open and closed several times before she stammered, "You can't spank me. I'm a grown woman!"

"Good bye," he said, throwing up his hands and turning back around.

"Panties up or down?" she blurted after him.

Preston stopped in the doorway. "Yeah, right. And then get arrested for assault? That'll go real well with my improper conduct with a minor. No, thank you."

"I swear I won't!" Lida told him. She unclasped her hands long enough to cross her heart. "I swear. I'll never say a word to anyone. I'm a very nice and trustworthy person... if you don't catch me on a bad day... a really, really bad day... like this morning."

"Amen," he darkly agreed, and then scowled at her in silent contemplation for a long, long time. Finally, he leaned his head out the doorway. "Nancy?"

His secretary looked back at him with bright eyes. She'd covered her mouth with both hands in an attempt to muffle her laughter and it took three attempts at clearing her throat before she could speak without losing her composure completely. "Yes, boss?"

"You can stop eavesdropping and go to lunch now. A long lunch. In fact, why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"Right." She gave him a thumbs up and bent, chortling and giggling, to gather her purse and coat.

"You'd better not say anything about this, either," he said. She giggled even louder, and he raised his voice, calling after her, "Or it'll be the same for you! And don't think I'm kidding, either!"

He might have been kidding; he wasn't yet sure. Closing the door to the office he was supposed to share, even if only temporarily with Lida, he then locked it and turned around.

"Nancy knows?" she asked, once again her face a mask of thorough dismay.

"Channel Eight is still in the dark," he said caustically.

She looked instantly contrite. She fidgeted with her fingers. "How do you want me? Over the desk? Grabbing my ankles?"

He arched his eyebrows. "You're limber enough to do that?"

"I don't know." She climbed up off her knees. "I guess we'll find out."

"Actually, I'm an old fashioned kind of guy. I was thinking over the knee, skirt up but panties in place, so long as you don't put up a fuss, kicking and fighting to get free."

She paled a little at that. "Is it—is it going to hurt that much? How can it? You're just going to slap my butt a few times with your hand, right? Just your hand?"

Finally, for the first time all morning long, the upper hand was his. He knew he probably shouldn't, one look at her face said she was pretty well unnerved enough as it was, but he couldn't help tweak her just a little bit as he sauntered past on the way to his desk. He clapped his big hands, the sharp crack making her jump, and then rubbed them both together.

Cryptically, he said, "I guess we'll find that out, too." He pulled his chair out into a small open space between all the boxes of packed files and sat down. He wiggled a finger at her, beckoning her to his side. "Come here."

"Right," she said, but she didn't move.

His natural good humor began to win out over the day's frustrations. "You started this," he reminded her. "Are you afraid to see it through?"

"Don't be silly," she quavered. "I am woman; hear me roar."

"Atta girl." He grinned and patted his knee. "Come on."

She still didn't move. "If I do this, then we're good, right? We start over. We're a clean slate. Right?"

His smile widened. Preston started to nod, and then shook his head.

Lida looked crestfallen. "No?"

"No," he said. "We're a clean slate as of right now. You still have to explain this to the police AND you have to show up and testify on my behalf at court. But I'm not going to blackmail you into taking a spanking."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're not?"

"Nope. Now, do you want to know why you're going to take one, anyway?"

"Do you want to know why I think you're crazy?" she countered back.

"You're going to take that spanking because you," he poked her lightly in the stomach, "know you royally screwed me over this morning. You know it was all your fault, and you feel so guilty about it that you're willing to lay yourself across my knee, with your skirt up around your waist, while I paddle your little bottom raw. Until it hurts as bad, if not worse, than your head did when you first woke up."

"I took some aspirin," she mumbled, staring down at his lap.

"Don't worry." Smiling, he reached for her hand to pull her towards him. "We're going to work beyond it."

As he drew her in to him, her expression flittered from barely contained crabbiness to disbelief to pained resignation.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she grumbled as she toppled into position.

Neither could he, really. A guy just had to admire a woman like this. Of course, she was infinitely easier to admire with her upturned bottom centered across his lap, her long legs stretching out forever to the right of him and her hands braced against the floor on his left, a cascade of blonde hair shielding her face from view.

"I never should have gone to that party," she muttered.

That she had was starting to make him really happy, but he bit his tongue before he said as much. She probably wouldn't have appreciated knowing it anyway. The arch nemesis of helpfulness, she tried to press her hips into his leg when he began to work her tight business skirt up over her bottom, and he only bared her panty-clad rump in the end because he was stronger. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he lifted her hips into the air and her underwear came into view inch by tantalizing inch. Whoever knew white cotton could be so sexy or so revealing. Just high on her thighs and trimmed with lace, it covered very little.

"Nice," he said, his tone deepening with admiration.

"Just get on with it," Lida said through gritted teeth.

"As you wish."

When Lida shivered, he smiled and raised his arm. The first sharp slap was like the pop of a small firecracker. The sound reverberated throughout the small office, mingling with Lida's quick gasp.

"How's that?" he asked. "Is it terribly unbearable?"

"Yes," she said, tossing her hair back so she could look at him over her shoulder. "But I think I've learned my lesson, so if you'll just—"

She tried to get up, but he only tightened his arm around her waist. "I don't think so. How about fifty more just like that, and then we'll be done."

"Fifty!" she cried. She tried to twist around, if not to roll off his lap then at least to sit up.

"More or less."

"More or... No no! Less! I want less!"

"Now, now, let's have none of that," he said, holding her firmly down as she began to struggle—not to get up but to reach back and cover her bottom. He wrestled for control of her hands and swatted her bottom again. Then again. She had just enough jiggle and wiggle in her back end to make this fun.

Obviously, with a different opinion of this, Lida yelped. Her whole body stiffened as the first real swat caught her full across the center of her rosy bottom cheeks. His hand nearly covered the entire surface of her panties so long as he aimed to smack both buttocks at once. But his fingers and palm overlapped delightfully each time he diverted his attention to one cheek or the other.

"Okay, okay!" she cried, her hips squirming from side to side, whichever way was furthest from the last spot his hand had attacked. "I really am all done, now. Let me up."

"I don't think so." Preston stopped for a moment to flex his hand. He hadn't given her more than a dozen swats and already his palm was smarting as if he'd stuck it into a hornet's nest. "I'm not going to say this is for your own good, because I'm getting a certain amount of satisfaction out of it, too. I'm not even going to say that it'll hurt me more than it will you—because that's a lie. I guarantee by the time we're through, this will have

hurt you a good deal more. But that's only fair, don't you think?"

Lida struggled to wrest her wrists free so she could rub the blushing pink stain that was spreading out from under the elastic of her underwear. "I've changed my mind!"

"It's a towel, a finger printing, a court date and five hundred dollars bail money too late for that." He began to spank all over again, only this time he didn't use the slightly playful swats like before. His broad, hard hand wasted little time in turning her pink bottom to a hot shade of red that matched his scarlet tie.

"Okay!" she shouted. "I'm really done, now!"

"I think you're missing the point of this." Preston tightened his grasp. "I'm the aggrieved party. Therefore, I get a big say in when we're done. So far I think we've evened the score right up to the moment that the police were called. Now, we're going to work on the fingerprinting and Killer."

"Killer?" she quavered, a note of fragility creeping into her tone.

"The three hundred pound biker I was trapped beside, dressed in nothing but a towel for two hours this morning." He laughed very dryly. "Oh, I think I'm going to need more than just my hand for this one."

Lida let out a shriek as all playfulness was abandoned. He captured her legs between his, vising them into immobility, while the flat of his hand vigorously attacked her unprotected backside. He spanked her hard, as hard as he knew how. Her whole body jerked with the smarting pain his descending arm imparted. She struggled and kicked, making it only through the first four walloping swats before her teeth-clenched silence broke into a loud wail. Babbling first one plea and then another, and another, she howled as though she didn't care if anyone heard her, not on this floor

or even on the ones above and below them. And the whole time he kept right on smacking her bottom, deepening the color until the very seat of her bottom seemed to swell and darken and turn as stiff as plywood under the thin surface of her skin.

Her ability to fight back her sobs failed bare seconds before his hand gave out. He brought it to a rest on the blazing hot globes of her bottom.

"Oh," she moaned and hiccuped. "Let me up, let me up!"

Preston let go of her hands, but he kept the vise on her legs, and his arm tightened around her waist.

"Ooo!" she cried, her hands tenderly exploring her aching nates. "I've been scalded!"

Preston couldn't help but smile. She was very soft and very desirable just then. It was almost enough to make him forget all about the morning's fiascos. "We're done," he said. "The slate's clean."

She twisted back her head to look at him, her eyes and cheeks glittering moistly and the tip of her nose red. "Does that mean I can get up?" she sniffled.

She looked so good lying over his lap, he almost wished it didn't have to be over. With no way around it, he took hold of the hem of her skirt and reluctantly pulled it down over her pantied bottom, hiding the evidence of his brief return to barbarism.

"Ooo!" she sobbed, and her feet scrambled on the carpet the instant he released her legs. She pushed herself up and off his lap, catching hold of her bottom, wincing and rubbing as she pranced in place. "That hurts! That really, really hurts!" She gave him a scathing look. "That's the last time I ever go to bed with you!"

He almost laughed. "Perish the thought."

Sniffing, she twisted both her head and her hips, pulling her skirt up in an attempt to see the

extent of the damage done. "I think you've bruised me."

"That was the point. To give you a bit of a reminder for the next time that you decide to... that you..." he paused, blinking.

"The next time I what?" she asked, arching an eyebrow. "The next time I get totally sloshed, wake up in a strange bed with a man I don't know only to find out later that he's my new business partner?"

"I guarantee if that happens, and I'm not the guy, there will definitely be hell to pay."

The phone rang before she managed an acidic reply, and Preston wheeled his chair up to the nearest desk to answer it. "Preston Blaylock, how may I help you?"

"Hi, it's me," Nancy said, her voice tight and strained, as if she were smothering near uncontrollable laughter.

"Aren't you supposed to be on lunch?"

"I got as far as the lobby," she snickered, and Preston could hear laughter in the background.

An odd sinking sensation went through his stomach. His eyes narrowed, and he looked at Lida, who was watching him curiously and mouthing 'What?'. He shook his head slightly. "What's going on?"

"I just thought you ought to know," she said in between chuckles, and he could definitely hear other men and women laughing uproariously in the background behind her. "You guys need to check your phones."

Preston's eyes widened. He vaulted to his feet, staring past Lida to her phone. The one she'd whacked her head on. The one with the blinking red button flashing on the bottom.

"You've left the intercom on."

