

Dancing in the Moonlight

By Melinda Barron

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Chapter One

“Nothing like Louisiana in October. The weather is beautiful here, don’t you think?”

Lucia Tulo nodded to the woman standing behind the counter as she signed her name on the guest register. The clerk checked her ID, then asked for the credit card she’d used to book her room.

Lucia reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. She made sure to pull the right card, the one that had her name on it, and not the name of the bail bonds company she worked for in Oklahoma City.

She had to keep up her cover. She was a writer here to do research for her next book. That gave her access to a lot of people. Folks liked to talk to writers. They liked the idea that the writer might use them in their next book. They liked the idea they could say, “I know her,” when they saw her novel in the bookstore.

When you said you were a writer, people opened up to you. When you said you were a bounty hunter they clamed up like you’d just announced you had the plague.

“You’re looking for who? No, I’ve never seen that person before.” More often than not, that person was hiding out in the house Lucia was standing in front of. She couldn’t count the number of times people had lied to her about knowing someone.

“Did you stop in New Orleans on your way here?”

“Well, it was out of my way, but I did go down there,” Lucia responded as the woman swiped her credit card. “I promised my sister I’d get her some of that chicory coffee while I was here.”

“You’re going to love our coffee in the morning, then. It’s really delicious.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Lucia responded, resisting the temptation to ask about the cooks. It was a little too soon for that. At dinner she’d ask about the person who had prepared her meal.

According to the information she received, it was Shawn Hastings, a man wanted in connection with the disappearance of his girlfriend in Oklahoma City. He’d been on the run for six months now, and the bond was huge. The company Lucia worked for, Acme Bail Bonds, had written a million dollar bond on the jerk. And then he’d skipped town.

At first he’d been charged with causing bodily harm, because of the amount of evidence they’d found in the couple’s apartment. But after he’d disappeared, officials were seriously considering murder charges, saying he wouldn’t have run if she wasn’t dead. Detectives had found blood in his apartment, and when they’d typed it, they’d discovered it was that of his girlfriend, Denise Howe.

Lucia had followed every lead she could get her hands on to try and find Hastings, but so far she'd been unsuccessful. Until she'd received an anonymous tip saying he was working as a cook at a plantation B&B in Louisiana. It was called something, the caller had said, with moonlight in the title. She'd found Moonlight Abbey on her first computer hit, and booked a room that very day.

"You're lucky, you know," the clerk said as she handed her back her credit card. "The week of Halloween is usually our busiest time. We just happened to have a cancellation when you called."

"Well, I'm glad you could fit me in Mrs....?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm Bernadette Quinn. You can call me Bernie. My husband, Gene and I own the guesthouse. We have been very busy. We had one gentleman call the same time you did, and he's staying in the pool house. We don't normally rent it out, but he's a photographer and he wanted to capture some photos of the house for a travel article he's doing. He has a deadline, so we went ahead and cleaned the place up for him."

The hair on the back of Lucia's neck stood up. If someone had called at the same time she did, there was every possibility another bounty hunter was trying to find Shawn Hastings, and that wasn't good. Lucia was a sworn agent of the company who held the bail on him. She had papers to prove she had the legal right to capture him. Someone might be poaching on her turf.

If there was a rogue bounty hunter here, things could turn ugly if Shawn Hastings was actually here.

"Now, you booked for three nights, right?"

"That's right."

"We're lucky the room was available that long."

Luck had nothing to do with it. Lucia had asked how long the room was free, then told them she'd take it for that amount of time.

"What's your book about?" Her gracious hostess put her elbows on the counter and fixed an inquisitive stare on her. Lucia panicked just enough that her palms went sweaty. She hadn't thought that far ahead. Then she thought back to the conversation she'd had with her boss, Ivan Taylor.

"This place is supposed to be haunted," she said.

"Aren't lots of places in the south haunted? It's sorta like England in that manner." Ivan had laughed and stretched out his legs, crossing his boots on the desk.

“They say the ghost is a lady in white.”

Ivan had thrown his head back and roared with laughter. “It’s always a lady in white. People need to be more creative. How about a man in white? Why does the guy always have to be the jerk? What’s the story? She had a very tragic past, her lover died, or he left her pregnant, or she died suddenly without telling him that she loved him and she can’t find eternal rest until someone helps them reconnect in the afterlife?”

“Well, according to the website, she died right after the Civil War, of a broken heart when her lover failed to come home.”

“Typical,” he responded. “Always someone with a broken heart.”

“Maybe because ghosts who don’t have broken hearts move on,” Lucia responded.

“Bring me back proof of a ghost and I’ll give you a bonus,” Ivan had said as he’d handed over Hastings’s capture papers. “And be careful. This guy is dangerous.”

“Yeah, I heard that.”

She tried to pull herself back to the present, to the woman standing in front of her with an expectant look on her face. “Um, my story,” Lucia said, trying to come up with something plausible. “Is a romance novel, about a woman who falls in love with her father’s enemy. They live on neighboring plantations right before the Civil War.”

“Excellent.” Bernie clapped her hands together. “It sounds brilliant and I can’t wait to read it.”

“Well, I have to write it first.”

“Of course, but you’ll find plenty of inspiration here. We’d love for you to use Moonlight Abbey as your house. We’d be honored.”

“Thanks.” Lucia tried to think of a nice way to ask for the key to her room. Talking about her fake job made her nervous, and made her feel bad for lying to this sweet woman.

“So, did you buy lots of things while you were in New Orleans, besides the coffee, I mean.”

“Oh, I bought some T-shirts for my nieces and nephews, and some other odd trinkets.”

You know, extra bullets and another pair of handcuffs, just in case.

“Sounds like fun.” She finally produced a key, a real key instead of the cards people used in bigger hotels. “Now, your room is on the second floor, third door to the left. Would you like me to help you with your bags?”

“No, thank you.” Lucia picked up her duffle bag. It contained everything she needed, including her gun and her computer so she could do a search on local records, see if Shawn Hastings showed up anywhere. He hadn’t the first time they’d done it, but there was every possibility he could this time around.

“Thanks again, Bernie.” She waved as she started toward the stairs.

“Dinner’s at seven, and if you want some snacks before then just call down.”

“I will, thanks.” Lucia started up the stairs, wondering what to do next. Her gut told her to lay low, scout out the place and see where the nooks and crannies were. Her heart wanted her to rush into the kitchen, point a gun at Shawn Hastings and say, “You’re coming back to Oklahoma with me, asshole.”

Ivan had warned her that the first thing she needed to do was locate the Parish Sheriff and tell him she was in town, inform him of what she was doing.

“The last thing you want is for someone to see you pointing a gun at poor Shawn and call the cops. They’d arrest you, or worse shoot you, because you’re the outsider and you’ve got a gun.”

She didn’t plan on pointing any guns tonight, so she would wait to do that until the morning. Right now she needed to get the lay of the land. That meant putting her things in her room and taking a look around, familiarizing herself with the people who were staying here, and the layout of the house.

She opened the door to her room, closed it behind her and then put her bag down on the bed. Then she took a look around.

Not bad. Not bad at all. It was a little more ornate than her tastes, but it was very nicely decorated. A large four-poster bed had bed curtains and a great deal of throw pillows. The curtains were lacy, and the couch was dark wood with flower-patterns on the cushions. There was even a fireplace, although there was no fire built in it.

She went into the bathroom and her murmur of appreciation filled the room. An old-fashioned claw-footed tub, which looked big enough for at least two people sat against the wall. Next to it was a modern shower stall. The toilet had its own little closet.

“They did some major remodeling to give each room its own private bath,” she said, gazing again at the tub. The eleven hours she’d spent in the car from Oklahoma City to New Orleans tugged at her shoulders. She’d stopped to talk to a bail bond friend of Ivan’s, to familiarize herself with capture laws in the state.

Add to that another hour and a half up here. All in all it had been a very long day. She’d left home in the middle of the night, and she was tired. A good soak in the tub would feel fantastic. Her gaze drifted to the counter, where various lotions and bubble bath products stood ready for use.

“Thank you, Bernie,” she said as she went over and examined them more closely. She picked out one that smelled like roses, then turned on the tap to the tub. This was definitely the way to relax and get to feel more like herself.

Then, after that, she’d take a look around.

“Hi.” Mick Ash put his bag on the floor and dinged the bell on the counter. The woman sitting at the desk lifted a friendly gaze to him.

“Hi yourself. Welcome to Moonlight Abbey. Are you checking in?”

“I am indeed.” She walked to the counter and he handed her his credit card.

“Oh, the photographer! I’m Bernie Quinn. We’re thrilled about you wanting to take photos of our place. We’re very happy here.”

“I can see that.” He looked around. “It’s very nice.”

“Thank you. Just let us know what you want and either my husband or myself will show you around.”

“Thanks again, but I prefer to find things to photograph on my own. No offense.”

“None taken.” She smiled at him as she swiped his card. “I will need to see some ID.”

He opened his wallet and she looked at his license. “Well, isn’t that interesting. We have another guest from Oklahoma City. Must be a rush from your area.”

“It must be. What’s the name?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that.” She handed him his wallet and card. Then turned a book toward him. “We have an old fashioned guest register, just because we think it’s interesting to do things the old fashioned way. Except for credit cards, of course.”

Mick looked down and a smile touched the edge of his lips. So Lucia was here, was she? He must be on the right track, then.

“Do you know her? She’s a writer, and I imagine you creative types stick together.”

“Oh yes we do, but I don’t know a writer named Lucia Tulo.” He signed his name below hers, happy that she’d gotten here first. He needed to find out her room number. There was no bellhop that he could bribe, and he was pretty sure Bernie wasn’t going to give him the information, although she had given him the name, in a roundabout way.

There was no room number written next to Lucia's name, though, which was a pity. That would have made things very easy. Too easy. Half the fun was in the chase, and finding out which room Lucia was in would be fun.

"I hope you don't mind that you're staying in the pool house," Bernie was saying. "We're full up. Your city mate took the last room in the main house."

"I don't mind at all." He winked at her, happy to see that she blushed. That meant she might be open to giving him information if he flirted with her, just a little.

"It's a ways away from the main house, out by the pool, obviously. And just as obviously it's not part of the original structure. I don't think they had a pool when the house was built in the eighteen-forties."

"It's in great shape for its age," he said with a grin. She gave him one right back, then she cleared her throat.

"My husband and I bought it ten years ago. It was in a slight bit of disrepair, but we did some work and I think it turned out beautifully."

"I think you're right." He glanced down at the register. "Are you always this full?"

"Not all year long, no, but at Halloween we're very busy." She lowered her voice. "The ghost, you know."

"Ah yes, the ghost. I hope I can capture it on film." He really did mean that. Photography was a hobby of his, and he had all the necessary equipment to make it a perfect cover when he was on a case, like he was now.

"That would be wonderful," she said. "Now, dinner is at seven. I'll just walk you out to the pool house."

"Don't bother yourself," he said. "I'll find it on my own."

He picked up the key she gave him and then snatched up his bags. "See you at seven."

As he started off, a young woman came around the corner, excitedly asking for Bernie. The innkeeper left her post and followed the young girl out of the room. Mick went back to the desk and looked over the counter.

Bernie was very organized. Near the computer there was a whiteboard, with room numbers and the names of guests. Mick searched for what he wanted and found it very easily.

Tulo, room 208.

He looked down at the key in his hand. He was sure all the rooms had actual keys, which would make it very easy to get inside. It was time he and Lucia had a talk about the job they were both obviously working.

Lucia relaxed against the bath pillow, letting the hot water soak around her. Her shoulders ached from the drive, and this bath, with the wonderful rose-scented bubbles, was helping her to feel rejuvenated. Maybe she would go looking for Shawn Hastings tonight after all.

Of course that meant a trip into town to find the Sheriff, but right now she felt like anything was possible. She would find the Sheriff and Hastings in one fail swoop. Then she would take him back home to face justice.

A million dollar bond on a disappearance was a lot, but Lucia knew the DA planned on charging him with her murder if more evidence was found. She wondered about his guilt, about whether or not he'd killed the woman he supposedly loved.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. "It's not your job to try him for the crime, Tulo. It's your job to find him and bring him back, or else Ivan's going to be out a hell of a lot of money."

"Ten percent of a million dollars is a lot." Lucia's eyes popped open and she stared at the wall. No, no, it couldn't be...it couldn't be.

"Hello, Lucia."

"Mick." She turned her head slowly. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Why I imagine the same thing you are...well, not exactly the same thing. I'm not naked and soaking in bubbles, but I'm here to find Hastings, just like you."

"Get out."

"I think I need to amend that statement." He propped his butt against the counter and crossed his legs at the ankles and his arms over his chest. "I'm not here as a bounty hunter. I'm here as a private investigator. The Howe family hired me to do the job the police are having trouble with, and I got this phone call that said Hastings was working as a cook, at Moonlight Abbey in Louisiana."

Any relaxation Lucia had was gone. She felt as if the water would start to boil from the heat and anger coming off her body.

"I'm telling you one last time to get out of my bathroom!"

"Do you think he killed her?"

“Get out!” She picked up the bottle of bath suds. “I swear, if you don’t leave now I’m going to bean you with this.”

“Will you?” He chuckled and Lucia wanted to scream. “I don’t think you can throw it hard enough to bean me with it. You might hit the floor. To do a really good job, you need to get up out of the water, come over here and take aim. I still don’t think it’s going to do a lot of damage, though.”

She dropped the plastic bottle, then sunk down into the tub. “How did you get in here?”

“Oh please, with those locks? It took me all of two seconds to pick it. We really should talk to Bernie about security.”

“I really should talk to the local Sheriff about arresting you for breaking and entering!”

He fixed a glare on her. “And what would the Sheriff say after he learns I’m your husband?”

“Get out.”

“Come on, Lucia.” He picked up a towel and walked to the tub, holding it out in either hand. “Climb out and let’s talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m here on official business, and you’re just poking your nose into my business.” She glared at him. “And I’m not getting out of this tub until you leave.”

His deep laugh infuriated her. “Lucia. I’ve made love to you more times than the two of us can count. I’ve skinny-dipped with you. I’ve watched you dance, naked, in the moonlight. I’ve spanked that round, gorgeous ass of yours until it’s red as an apple, and then watched you stand in the corner, naked, with said ass sticking out for me to admire. You know what all those things have in common? You were naked. You don’t have anything I’ve never seen before. Come on, step out and let’s talk.”

Water splashed over the side of the tub as Lucia pushed herself up. It rolled over Mick’s shoes, which made her laugh. She grabbed the towel from him and wrapped it around herself.

“Come on, give me a better look than that.” He gave her a look that was all too seductive. “Drop the towel just a little. Let me see your hard nipples. You know how much I love them.”

“Screw you.” She pushed past him, once again fighting the urge to scream when he said, “Promise?”

She stalked to her duffle bag, where she rummaged through it until she found her robe. She wrapped it around herself, then pulled out the towel, dropping it on the floor.

“Spoilsport.” She turned to find him sitting--no, lounging--in one of the chairs. “Speaking of red asses, how long’s it been since you’ve been spanked. Maybe that’s why you’re in such a foul

mood. I know how you like to feel a brush--or my hand--against your bottom. I'm wearing the belt you love so much? Want a few whacks?"

"You are insufferable!"

"If I'm that bad, why haven't you filed for divorce?"

"Why haven't you?" She put her hands on her hips. "You're the one who moved out."

"Because you asked me to." He stretched his legs out. "Shall we talk about our marriage, or shall we talk about Hastings?"

"Why did the family hire you?"

He jiggled his hands, and Lucia looked at them. Damn him for bringing up things they'd done together in the past. Now all she could think about was those hands stroking her breasts, her thighs, and yes, even spanking her bottom until it was red as an apple.

"The family has come to the conclusion that Denise Howe is not dead."

That pulled her attention back to the present. "What?"

"There's been some pings on her credit card, in New Orleans. I checked it out and the signatures matched with hers. In one store a woman remembered the young woman very well, because she spent so much money."

"Why would she do this, though? Surely she's heard that he's been charged in her disappearance, and he's skipped bail."

"It's my opinion that she spent so much money for the very reason that it would attract attention. I think that she thought, and this is just a supposition, that they'd learn she was alive and drop the whole thing."

"Not after he's been arrested and then ran." She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Have you talked to the prosecutor about this? The cops?"

"I have. They think Hastings has a new girlfriend, who looks exactly like Denise, and that they're playing with her money. They have detectives in New Orleans, trying to flush him out."

She turned her gaze toward the window. "I wonder if they got the same call that I got."

"About him being at Moonlight Abbey?"

"Yes."

"I got the same one." He cocked his head at her. "Was yours from a woman?"

“Yes.”

“Mine, too.” He stretched his arms above his head, and then he stood up. “I think Hastings is here, with Denise, and they want to talk. If the cops new about this place they’d be here now. I think they both realize the situation they’re in, and they see us as a chance to get out before the cops arrive.”

“Why do you think that? That’s just stupid.”

“You know how I feel about that word.”

“Okay, it doesn’t make sense, does that make you feel better? Listen, he knows we’re all looking for him, right? Why would he call me, when I can haul his ass back to Oklahoma, legally? And why would he call you, when her family hired you? Better yet, how does he know her family hired you?”

“Don’t know.” He shrugged. “Maybe he wants help with something. Maybe there’s something going on that we don’t know about. I just know that Denise Howe is not dead.”

“Well, it’s not my job to know it, or to use that information in my decision. Ivan has a huge bond outstanding on this runner, and I have to bring him back, undead girlfriend or no.”

“Let’s talk to him together.”

“No.” She walked to the duffle where she pulled out panties and a bra, then a pair of jeans. She was searching for a T-shirt when she felt Mick’s presence right next to her.

“Can I watch you dress?”

“No.”

“Come on, I love to watch you dress. It’s so sexy. Of course not as sexy as watching you undress, or seeing you with your jeans and panties around your ankles, bent over the bed, waiting for a spanking, but I’ll take what I can get. New bra set?”

“Leave.”

“Can I bend you over the bed? I’m hard as a rock.”

“You are insufferable.” She hoped her voice was under control, and that he didn’t know she was wet, and not from the bath water.

“Fine, be that way.” She heard him move toward the door, but she kept her gaze focused on the bag. If she watched him there was every chance she would change her mind, tell him to come back and make love to her. She missed his touch so much.

“But if you need anything like, say, kisses, some loving,” there was a pause, “a hard spanking. I’ll be in the pool house. Come and find me.”

She heard the door close and she turned her head, disappointed to find that he’d actually left. If he’d pushed the issue she would have changed her mind, let him slap her ass, then make hot love to her.

Mick had always been able to get her juices flowing in all the right areas. It was too bad he was such a jerk about other things.

Chapter Two

Lucia had hoped to get a table to herself at dinner, or maybe to sit with a family at a crowded table where there would be no room for Mick, but she had no such luck. The minute she stepped into the dining room, Bernie rushed over to her. She took her arm and led her to where Mick was already seated, sipping on a glass of wine.

He stood when she approached and Bernie clapped her hands in delight. "Since you're both from Oklahoma I thought it would be nice to have you eat dinner together. That way you can talk about your city, see if your interests are the same. Maybe you know the same people."

Lucia was tempted to say, "Yeah, we've slept together hundreds of times in the seven years we've been married, so I'm thinking we know a few of the same people, and we sure know each other's interests."

But she didn't say anything. It would be too difficult to explain to the sweet innkeeper what they were doing here in separate cars, in separate rooms, and why they had different last names.

Actually, Lucia only used her maiden name for business. In everything else in life she was known as Lucia Ash. She kept one credit card as Lucia Tulo for business purposes.

"It's so considerate of you," she heard Mick say. "I always love eating dinner with beautiful women."

He'd skirted around the truth very nicely, Lucia thought. Obviously he didn't want to make any explanations to Bernie either.

Mick walked around the table and held Lucia's chair out for her. She sat down and Bernie waited until he was seated back in his chair to give them both a big, bright smile.

"The wine is on the house in honor of your first evening here. Dinner tonight is crawfish etouffee with white rice. It comes with a side salad and a wonderful praline cheesecake for dessert. Enjoy."

They got another of her bright smiles, then she was skipping off to the next table. The guests were mostly couples, but then again it was the middle of the week. Maybe they'd have families on Halloween weekend, but Lucia hoped she wouldn't be around to find out. She wanted to be back at home by then, with Shawn Hastings safely tucked into jail. She didn't care about his undead girlfriend. That wasn't her job.

"You know, Mick, I'm thinking that, if you were a gentleman, you'd pack your bags and leave tonight."

He picked up a small loaf of bread and tore off a huge chunk, then he slathered it with butter. The whole time he was doing it, he said not a word.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Oh yeah, I’m listening. But you know I’m not a gentleman, not in matters of business. That’s why I’m such a good detective. I don’t care if I hurt someone’s feelings in the pursuit of truth.” He took a bite of bread. He waved it close to her as he chewed. When he swallowed he said, “Sourdough. I know it’s one of your favorites. Take a bite.”

“No thank you.” She tried to ignore the bread. She did love sourdough. While he ate she glanced at where two waiters were going in and out of the kitchen.

“If you’re thinking about rushing inside and finding Hastings don’t bother. I’ve already been in there. He’s not here tonight.”

“Tonight?” She lifted one eyebrow in question. “But he does work here?”

“According to the cook there’s a sous chef named Shawn, but his last name is…”

“Smith,” she said with a smile.

“Brown,” he corrected her.

“Very clever of him not to use the two most common last names,” she replied, “Smith or Jones. But still, he could have been more creative than Brown, another very common name.”

He took another hunk of bread. “I’m going to eat this whole thing if you’re not careful.” He waved it near her and she glared at him.

“Stop trying to tempt me with bread.”

“Why? Have your eating habits change since you kicked me out?” He leaned forward. “Do you have a new beau I need to know about?”

“If I did, I would have already filed for divorce.”

“Thank you for that.” He finished off the small amount of wine in his glass and refilled it. “You haven’t touched anything.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’re just pissed because I’m here.”

“That too.” She glanced at the bread, then sighed heavily before grabbing the last piece. “What the hell.” She buttered it, then took a big bite. It was definitely delicious.

“So, now that I’ve talked you into trying the bread, how about you tell me your plans for capturing Hastings.”

“How about you--” she glanced over his shoulder, “eat your dinner.” She smiled at the waiter as he appeared with salad plates. She thanked him, then dug into the food. The dressing was delicious, a wonderful mixture that was slightly spicy.

“Did you call Ivan and tell him what I told you, about Denise Howe?”

“That’s none of your business.” She took another bite, then mumbled around her food, “This is really delicious.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

She put a cucumber spear in her mouth. “I’m sorry, does this bother you? Maybe you should go sit somewhere else.”

He took a bite of his own food, chewed it carefully. “Your manners seem to be lacking tonight. It’s obvious to me you need a good spanking. A nice, hard one with a belt, or a paddle. Wouldn’t we shock the other guests if I upended you over my lap, bared your ass and gave you a good blistering?”

Damn him! Her lower body clenched at his suggestion. She loved spankings, and he knew it. The best thing for her to do now was sit up straight, be prim and proper and not provoke any more comments that would make her toes tingle.

She ate another bite, being careful not to do anything that would bring about the S word.

“I see just the mention of the word makes you squirm. That tells me—spanking—that you—spanking—definitely need a—spanking. What do you say, Lucia, wanna come to my place, say hello to my belt?”

“Stop it!” She glanced around. “Someone’s going to hear you.”

“Interesting that you didn’t scream no. You’re just worried someone’s going to hear how much you want to have your bottom tanned.” He twirled his fork in his salad. “Of course you know where it could lead, where it leads with us eighty percent of the time, with you moaning as I lick your pretty little pu...”

“Stop it!” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bernie heading their way. She must have spoken louder than she thought to attract the attention of their hostess.

“Is everything all right?”

“Perfect,” Mick said. “We were just discussing football teams. I’m a big Denver fan, and Ms. Tulo is a Dallas fan. Things can get a little heating when you’re talking about football, all those tackles and the swats on the ass.”

“Excuse me?” Bernie’s eyes widened and Lucia wanted to melt into the hardwood floor.

“You know, the high five the players give each other on the butt. That’s what we were discussing.”

“What does that have to do with different teams?”

“Well, different teams handle it differently,” Mick said. Lucia wanted to crawl under the table and die.

“He’s pulling your leg,” she said before Mick could open his mouth and spread more lies. “We were discussing football, but it had nothing to do with guys patting each other on the butt. Mr. Ash seems to have a strange sense of humor.”

“That’s what my w—that’s what I’ve always heard,” he said as his eyes widened in anticipation. “Look, here’s our dinner.”

“Enjoy it!” Bernie started to leave, then she came back. “There’s a walking tour later, that goes by the family cemetery and down by the lake that’s on the outskirts of the property. Would you two like to join us?”

“Love to,” Mick said with a smile. “Sounds like prime opportunities for photographs.”

“No thank you,” Lucia replied. “I’ve had a long day, and I’m ready for...bed.”

“Well, we’ll do it again tomorrow night. We do it every night for the newcomers, so they can get the lay of the land.”

“I’ll try for tomorrow then.”

“I’ll still go tonight,” Mick said as he glanced down at the huge bowl set in front of him. “It will give me an opportunity to work off some of this food I’m about to devour.”

Lucia waited until they’d been gone about fifteen minutes. Bernie had told Mick the walk would take an hour and a half, to get to the lake and back.

Lucia was glad to hear that. It would give her plenty of time to break into the pool house and rifle through his notes, see what he knew about Shawn Hastings that she did now. Something told her that her husband might know exactly where the bond jumper was. If he did, she wanted to know.

When the fifteen minutes were up she went downstairs. There were a few people in the bar, and she could hear a TV set from somewhere in the back of the house. She made her way through the bar, looking for Mick in case he'd read her mind and decided to stick behind.

He was nowhere in sight. She passed through a parlor, where some guests were playing a board game. She found two teen-agers parked in front of the television. Mick was nowhere to be seen in any of the rooms.

"Perfect." It was about a ten-minute walk to the pool, which was empty. She went to the pool house and pulled out her lock pick. She was about to insert it in the door when the door opened. For a minute she thought Mick would be inside. Then she realized she'd turned the knob, and it had opened. He'd left the door unlocked.

"Far too trusting, Mick." She slipped inside and looked around. It was still light outside, but he'd drawn the blinds, so it was dark. She flipped a switch and the light came on along with the paddle fan attached to the ceiling.

Mick's bags were resting on the dresser. She went to them and rummaged around. There was nothing more than clothing. She searched for a laptop and found none. There were no files, no photos, no anything.

"Damn it, Mick, where's your stuff?" She turned toward the bed. Maybe he'd put things under it. He'd sometimes done that when they were staying in hotel rooms. She wasn't sure why. To her it was a very obvious hiding place, and was probably the first place a thief would look.

"Wrong," she said softly. "Although you're not a thief, you are breaking and entering and you looked in the bags, first. So it's the second place a thief would look." She studied the bed, looking at the night tables on either side. One was empty. The other held a shoebox.

"Bingo." She walked toward it, although she thought putting things in a shoebox was a little strange. She'd never seen him do it before. She picked up the box and took off the lid.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Sitting inside was a large wooden hairbrush, the one Mick had always used on her ass while they were married. She loved the feel of it as he spanked her, love the string it provided, loved the harsh tingle that lingered afterward.

She'd looked for the brush after she'd asked him to move out, but she hadn't been able to find it. Now she knew why. He had it.

She took it out of the box and rubbed her palm against the smooth, wooden surface. She couldn't count the number of times he'd spanked her with this brush. Mick was a hard spanker, too. He didn't count swats. Instead he just slapped her ass until she thought she couldn't take anymore. Then he slapped it more. And more. And more.

Damn him for bringing this with him. She wanted to feel it on her ass; wanted him to be the one spanking her.

No! She shook her head as she placed the brush back in the box. *Don't you remember why you kicked him out?*

No, why, she asked herself. He wasn't cheating on you, he didn't lie to you. It was a stupid fight that you both overreacted to, and he's too much of a man to stick around when you told him to get the hell out.

He'd tried to come back, lots of time, but her mind had always gone back to the fight, back to him telling her she needed to...

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Somehow I knew you've come here." She stiffened and dropped the box on the bed. It tumbled over and the brush slid out. "And look what you found, right where I left it for you. You would have done better to wear a skirt. That would make this that much easier. Bare your ass."

"I don't think so." She sneered at him. "If you think I'm going to let you spank me, you're full of it, buster."

"Still, pissed, huh, after all these months? All I said was I wanted you to consider a desk job. Is that so hard?"

"Yes, it is." She balled her hands into fists. "We swore when we got married that neither of us would try to control the other's life where business was concerned."

"Concern is right. Do you forget that just a little while before I made that suggestion someone shot at you?"

"I was trying to capture a felon." She held up a finger. "And if you so much as utter one syllable that leads to the sentence, 'You're doing a man's job,' I'm going to come over there and smack your ass!"

"Maybe I did break the pact we had about jobs, but I did it because I was concerned. Someone had just shot at my wife!"

"Who didn't get hit, did she?"

"Not then, but what happens if..." he stopped speaking abruptly. "We're not going to discuss this. I'm going to spank your ass for breaking into my room and going through my stuff."

"Your stuff? I didn't go through anything."

"Wrong." He held up his phone. "I set it to alert me if someone came inside. I rigged the door with an alarm, and set up a camera. I watched you go through my bags, and then I saw you find

the brush. I know from the way you were holding it that you were remembering how it felt as it slapped down on your ass. Now, take down your jeans and panties and bend over the bed.”

“You forget that you broke into my room earlier in the day. Why should I be punished for doing the same thing you did?”

“I did it to talk to you. I didn’t go through your stuff.”

She snorted out a laugh. “You could have knocked on the door.”

“Maybe I did. Maybe you were just so engrossed in your bubble bath you didn’t hear me. Maybe I was worried someone had hurt you, and I had to come inside to see that you were all right.”

“Bull hockey!” She glanced around the room to see if there was another exit. There wasn’t. “I’m leaving now. Don’t try and stop me.”

“Oh darling, you’re not going anywhere, except over that bed, and then in the corner.”

“We’ll see about that.” She charged toward him, hoping she would catch him off guard. That didn’t happen, though. He caught her around the waist and picked her up as if she weighed nothing. Then he stalked toward the bed, tossing her backward so that she landed on the mattress. His fingers were at her waist immediately, tugging the button on her jeans. She tried to grab his hands, tried to fight him off, but it did no good. They’d done this before, playfully, but this time she meant business.

There was no way he was going to spank her tonight.

“I swear! If you lay one hand on my ass I’m going to...jerk! Get your hands off me.” He had her jeans undone now and he was tugging them off. Unfortunately her wiggling around only lifted her hips and allowed him to move the material down. Before she knew it her jeans and panties were around her knees, and she’d been flipped over. His hand came down on her ass. Hard.

“What are you gonna do, huh? Call the Sheriff? Tell him I’m spanking my wife? Seems to me like you need a good spanking!”

He slapped her ass harder, the burn spreading through her cheeks and down to her thighs where his hand strayed.

“Good spanking?” She wiggled to try and get out from under him. “If I need a good spanking I certainly won’t call you!”

Damn she was angry with him, and she was sprouting off words to match his. The only problem was she was lying. Nobody spanked like Mick. She’d had one other boyfriend spank her before she and Mick were married, and she’d hated every second of it.

But the first time Mick had slapped her ass had been pure heaven, and it had improved every time. It didn't matter if he used his hand, a belt, the brush or anything else that he happened to pick up.

Spankings helped her to relax. They made her forget about the outside world, about the troubles that faced them every day. It was a time for her to center on the sting in her ass, on the fact that it was either her husband's hand, or an implement that he was using, that was providing the stimulation.

She loved him, no matter how much she didn't want to admit it. She'd missed him so much when he'd left. If only he hadn't broken the pact and tried to control her work life. They'd sworn never to do that, and he'd broken that vow.

"A ninety-year-old grandfather spans harder than you!"

"Oh yeah?" His hand came down harder. "I'm going to blister your ass, Lucia. I'm going to remind you what a spanking feels like."

His hand came down harder and harder, and Lucia wiggled her ass, hoping it would make him think she was trying to get away. In actuality it made her ass sting more, made the feeling soak into her more.

When he reached down and picked up the brush she wanted to scream, "It's about time!"

He got off the bed and tapped it against her ass. "Stand up!"

Lucia followed his order without any complaint. She was beyond fighting it now. She needed it. Bad.

"Put your head on the bed, ass high in the air." She did as he said. "Hands above your head and keep them there. Understand?"

"Yes." He rubbed the wood against her ass.

"You need this. It's been far too long."

He was so right. Even after all these months it felt as if what was happening was natural. He rubbed her ass one more, and then he slapped it. And slapped it again. And again, and again.

He settled into a steady rhythm, the brush coming down on her until she thought she would cry out.

Finally, after a steady stream of swats that left her ass throbbing she thought she could take no more. "Mick, please, that's enough."

The next slap was the hardest yet. "I say when you've been spanked enough."

The swats were even harder now, and Lucia bit the inside of her lip. It had been far too long since she'd been spanked, and to get one this hard after the big break was almost too much to take.

"Mick, please." Surely he could hear the pleading in her voice. Why wasn't he listening to her? He could see her red ass. Why wasn't he stopping? She'd had enough. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

He gave her three hard swats on each side, swing the brush up so that he caught the tender spot where her ass joined her thigh. She cried out with each swat.

"Please, please! Enough."

"No!" Swat, swat.

"Yes!" One more hard one landed on each cheek, then she felt him move away from her. "Stand up."

Her body trembled as she did. She turned to face him.

Mick pointed the brush to the corner. "Now."

"No." She stuck out her lip.

"I said corner. Now."

She stuck her tongue out at him, but waddled to the corner as best she could with her jeans around her knees.

"You know what to do. I expect it done, exactly as it should be."

Lucia leaned in and placed her nose against the wall. Then she reached around and put her hands under her ass cheeks, lifted the red orbs for his inspection.

She hated that this felt good, felt right. She wanted to stay angry at him, to let him know there were things she had to have total control over in her life, like her job.

"Damn it, Lucia, I've missed you." She hadn't expected to hear that. "I love you so much, love your smile and your ass, and your round hips and luscious ass, especially when it's the brilliant red color that it is right now."

"I'm sorry for trying to get you to quit your job. It wasn't right. And if you hadn't been so damn mulish about it I would have told you that months ago."

"I'm sorry for being stubborn." She started to stand.

“Stay in the corner. You know the rule, for five minutes after a spanking you have to stick your ass out.”

Lucia went back into her position. He crossed the room and knelt down behind her.

“You’re so wet,” he said, running his hand along her thigh. He dipped it into her folds and Lucia moaned. It felt so good. But she wouldn’t give in to him. Not yet.

“I am, and I noticed that you’re hard, but that doesn’t mean the two of them are going together tonight. I’m still pissed at you for a few things, and I’m not willing to just let one good spanking turn things around. We need to talk.”

“Then let’s talk.”

She shook her head, even as it lay against the wall. “No, not now. We other things to think about, like Shawn Hastings.”

She wanted to stand, but she knew her five minutes weren’t up. She stayed in place, and when he caressed each cheek, the sign that her corner time was over, she stood and snatched up her panties, covering herself as quickly as she could.

The pain in her ass shoot through her whole body as she tugged up her jeans.

“Stay with me tonight.”

“No.” She shook her head, still facing the corner. “What would Bernie say?”

“She’d think she did a great job at hooking us up,” he said with a laugh. “Please stay with me, let me hold you.”

“No, it would lead to things we’re not ready for yet.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. “Who says we’re not ready? I know I am. But I promise you I won’t do more than just kiss you, even though I want nothing more than to bury myself deep inside you.”

Feeling his arms around her would be perfect. She’d never had a spanking from him when she hadn’t fallen asleep in his arms afterward.

“No funny business,” she said.

“Promise.” He backed up and Lucia nodded.

She took off her jeans and shirt, but left on her bra and panties. Her ass still throbbed and she tossed back the covers and climbed into bed. Seconds later he was behind her, wearing only his boxers.

His arms went around her and pulled her close. She could feel the hard length of him as he pressed them together. The spanking was good. The sex could come later, if she decided it was time to get back together with him.

“I love you, you know.” He whispered it in her ear, and then gently kissed her shoulder.

“I love you too, Mick. But you’ve got a way of setting me off that’s not always good. I do the same to you.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Sleep now.”

Lucia kept her eyes open, and it didn’t take long before she heard Mick’s even breathing. She loved being in his arms, feeling her ass throb, knowing he’d spanked her. They’d have a nice, long discussion about their marriage after she’d captured Shawn Hastings and taken him back home, and not before.

She would make sure Mick knew that in the morning.

Chapter Three

Lucia got out of bed quietly, looking down at her sleeping husband. There was a huge part of her that wanted to crawl back in beside him, wake him up by taking hold of the cock that had pressed against her most of the night and loving him until they both screamed in ecstasy.

Sleeping with him last night had been wonderful. She'd forgotten how much she missed having his arms around her, feeling his hard body pressed against her, listening to his breathing as he slept.

Their fight had been stupid, really. The incident leading up to it had been horrible. She'd gone on what she'd thought would be a simple capture, that of someone who missed a court date for a misdemeanor theft charge. The person had come out of his house with a gun, taking a shot at her before she'd even knocked on the door.

Turns out he was higher than a kite, and thought she was his neighbor, come to steal his drugs. She'd managed to subdue him easily enough, and the cops had taken him in. But Mick had been shaken. So had she, but it hadn't made her want to leave her job. She loved her job. Danger was a part of it. He'd know that when they'd married and made the pact never to discuss work at home, never to try and influence the other in the job world.

At first, they'd been religious about keeping that pact. The change had started slowly. They would discuss cases, seeking opinions from the other about what they thought about different situations.

But he'd never once told her he didn't want her to work as a bounty hunter. Not until the day of the shooting. And he'd screamed it at her, telling her if she didn't quit he would go down and tell Ivan she wasn't coming back. He would make Ivan so angry that Ivan would fire her. Not that it would work. She and Ivan adored each other. They had a great relationship and had worked together for ten years. He would know it was just a reaction to the shooting.

But the fight had continued, in intervals, for days. Finally, she'd looked at him and said, "If you're going to want to change me in any way, you can just leave. Get out right now."

And he had. She'd been so shocked, so hurt, that she'd cried for days. Then the shock had turned to anger. She knew he was sleeping on his brother's couch, just blocks away from where they lived. But she didn't go over there as she passed, didn't try to patch things up.

Instead she'd let her anger boil, and when he tried to call, tried to say they needed to talk, she'd ignored him. And they'd lived apart. For too long. Last night had proven that. She'd fallen into their spanking routine easily, fighting it only a little at the first. And she'd slept with him, spooned and cuddled with him all night.

Was it fate that had brought them to Moonlight Abbey together? Or was it a coincidence? The answer to that was easy. It was definitely fate. She and Mick were meant to be together. Their love was strong, but she'd allowed anger to sway her judgment. It was time for that to end.

She slipped out of her bra and panties, then knelt on the bed next to him, stroking her hands over his hard thighs. He groaned slightly and his cock started to rise, tenting out his boxers.

She parted the fold and let him spring out. Her pulse raced at the sight of him. She'd seen him hundreds of times, yet this was like the first time. She leaned over and kissed his mouth. He put his hand on her arm and stroked her skin. Then he opened his eyes and they widened in what she could only term as appreciation.

"It's my naked wife," he said, his finger moving lazily toward her breast. "This is a more than pleasant surprise."

"So I see." She wrapped her fingers around his erection. "Mick?"

"Yes?"

"Make love to me."

"With pleasure, my Lucia." He took over in a flash, standing up and shedding his boxers. The sight of his arousal sent her reeling and she fell back on the bed, wincing as her sore bottom came in contact with the sheets.

"Yeah, you got a good spanking last night, didn't you?"

"Yes." He was kissing her belly, staying away from all the places that she really wanted him to touch. She knew he was purposely teasing her, making her want him even more than she already did.

He nipped and licked her belly until her body felt as if it were on fire. "Mick!"

"Yes?" He looked up at her innocently.

"What you really want is down south, or up north. Put it in gear and go one direction before I push you aside and take over the driving."

"As you wish." He grabbed her hands, held them tight at her side, then dove between her legs. Lucia lifted her hips into his mouth, then groaned in absolute pleasure as he found her clit and sucked it into his mouth.

She came with a bang, stars dancing in front of her eyes as he continued his erotic assault, licking and nibbling and sucking, feeding on her as if he were starving. She came again, the feeling gliding through her like a river of pure pleasure.

She was still moving her hips when he stopped. She looked up at where he stared down at her. The look in his eyes was that of a hunter. He licked his lips, then swirled his finger in a circle.

“Roll over.” She did as he asked, grasping the sheet in her hands as he caressed her ass cheeks.

“You took a good spanking last night,” he said as he leaned over and licked each orb. “I love to see your red ass. It makes me hard knowing how much you like to get spanked, and seeing the evidence of it.”

“Love it,” she whispered, even though she wanted to scream at him to hurry up and take her.

“When we get home you get the belt, the utility one that leaves such wide marks on your ass.”

“No.”

“Yes.” He continued to lick her, gently soothing her buttocks. “You were a bad girl, keeping us apart for so long. I tried to make it up to you, but you were too stubborn to listen. The utility belt is your punishment for that. Will you take it?”

She wanted to say no. She’d only tasted the utility belt once. It was a hard, thick leather and it stung like nothing she’d ever felt before. As much as she wanted to scream at him that it was all his fault, she knew that wasn’t true. It was her fault, too. He was right when he’d said she’d kept them apart. She couldn’t count the number of times he’d called.

“I’ll take it for a set number of strokes.”

“Thirty.”

“No!” She turned to him in a panic, almost as if he had the dreaded strap in his hand and was about to use it now.

“Thirty.”

“Ten.”

He chuckled before he licked her cheeks again. Then he sat back onto his knees. “Thirty. I won’t budge on this. I want you to remember it. Will you take it?”

“I won’t like it.” She turned her head to look at him.

“I don’t want you to like it.” He stroked her folds, his fingers slipping inside her. Lucia pressed against him, savoring the pressure from his large, manly hands. He kissed each cheek again. “And since you’re being so good, I’ll take it down to twenty.”

“Ten,” she said with a giggle as she looked over her shoulder at him.

“Don’t push it.” He slapped her ass. “Roll over for me, baby. I want to see your face when I’m inside you.”

She did as he asked, and for several long moments they stared at each other. Then he slipped inside her. Her body seemed to sing as it welcomed him. She clasped her hips around him, wrapped her arms around his middle as he rocked into her.

He leaned down and claimed her lips, breaking just long enough for them to get air before he dove in again, his tongue invading her mouth over and over while his cock thrust in and out.

“So good,” she whispered into his mouth as she felt him tighten, then spill inside her.

“Love...you...never...”

She clasped his cheeks between her hands. “Never again. I promise, I will never, ever fly off the handle and ask you to leave the house.”

“Good, cause I’ll never go again.”

They rolled onto their sides, still joined together, arms and legs buried under each other as they held tight, almost as if they were afraid if they let go, the other would disappear.

Lucia’s eyelids felt as heavy as weights, and when she heard him snore softly, she knew she was following right behind him in sleep, cradled safely in his arms.

“Mr. Ash?” The sound of a female voice brought Mick out of a deep sleep. For a minute he thought it was Lucia calling him. Then he realized she wouldn’t call him Mister, and she couldn’t be talking because she was sleeping right next to him, soft and warm in his arms.

His cock hardened at the sight of her, then instantly withered when he heard the sound of his name again.

“Mr. Ash? It’s Bernadette Quinn. Are you there?”

“Holy crap,” he said as he pushed away from the bed and grabbed his jeans. Lucia was rousing, sitting up in bed. The sheet slipped away from her, displaying her full breasts and he wanted nothing more than to tackle her, put his mouth on her nipples, one at a time, over and over, and stay there for hours.

“Mr. Ash?” Bernie was sounding desperate, and he was afraid at any minute she would come inside the bedroom.

“Just a minute!” He pointed to his wife. “Stay here. I’ll see what she needs.”

He picked up his watch from the dresser and his eyes widened. It was after seven, and since it had been morning the last time they'd woken up, when they'd made love, that had meant they'd spent the day in bed.

He pulled on his jeans and snatched up a shirt before heading into the living room, shutting the door to the bedroom behind him. "Hi."

"Hello." She looked a little nervous. "I apologize for coming in, but you didn't answer the knock. Have you seen Ms. Tulo?"

"Um, Ms. Tulo?" He looked over his shoulder. "Um, yes."

"Oh good." Bernie let out an audible sigh of relief. "Is she..." she pointed over his shoulder and he wanted to say no. Instead he just nodded. The smile Bernie gave him was almost too much. She was obviously very pleased with her "matchmaking" skills.

"Well, her editor has been trying to call her since last night. He finally called the desk and asked if we'd seen her. He said she wasn't answering her cell phone and he was quite worried. He sounds rather gruff for a man who edits romance novels."

Mick stifled a laugh as he thought about big, gruff Ivan editing romance novels. "I'll tell her to call him."

"Thank you so much, and may I say I'm thrilled with this development. Shall I have your dinner delivered out here?"

"That would be great, thank you very much."

"You're welcome. You two enjoy your evening. Don't forget about the walk, since Ms. Tulo missed it and you came back early."

"We will, thank you."

"Have fun." She giggled and hurried out the door. Mick opened the door to the bedroom, only to find Lucia sitting up, laughing so hard her shoulders shook.

"She's pleased with herself, that's for sure."

"That's not what's so funny," Lucia replied. "I had the sudden image of Ivan with a romance novel in his hands."

"We may be laughing, but I don't think he is. You'd better call him."

Lucia hurried out of bed and found her bag. She'd forgotten about it last night during the spanking and the bout of lovemaking this morning. She found her phone and realized it was on silent. She'd turned it off before she'd come into the pool house. There was nothing like a ringing phone to interrupt a good burglary.

She hit the button for her messages, cringing as she listened to them, each one more frantic than the last until he threatened to call the Sheriff unless she let him know "exactly what the hell's going on!"

Lucia glanced at Mick. She could tell he'd heard Ivan's bellow. "I'll step into the shower while you call him."

She nodded her thanks. She waited until she heard the water running, then she dialed the phone.

"Hi." That sounded so lame.

"Hi? I didn't send you to Louisiana to screw your husband, Lucia. Where's Hastings?"

"How did you know about--?"

"The nice Mrs. Quinn told me she thought you might be with Mr. Ash. When you called me yesterday you didn't tell me that he was the one who gave you the information about Denise Howe reportedly being alive."

"Sorry."

"So am I. What have you found out?"

"Hastings was off work yesterday. I'll get him today, I promise."

There was a short pause. "Don't make a promise, Lucia. It's a dangerous thing. What did Ash tell you besides the fact the family had heard from Howe?"

"Nothing." She sat on the bed. "What have the police told you?"

"Nothing more than what I said yesterday. We've got to get him back here soon or I'm out a hell of a lot of money, and his family is out their house."

"I know." She ran her fingers through her hair. She'd been neglecting her duties while she'd been screwing her husband. She should have been working.

"Have you contacted the Sheriff?"

"No."

There was another long pause. “You know, Lucia, usually it’s the guys who think with their little head. I realize that you and Mick are probably thrilled that you’ve made up, but please save the celebration for later. Find Hastings and get his ass back here.”

“I will. I will.”

“Call me before midnight.”

“Yes, sir, I will.” They said goodbye and hung up. Lucia tossed the phone onto the bed, then threw herself back, bouncing on the mattress. She stared up at the ceiling, wondering exactly why she’d allowed herself to get so distracted. She never did that while on a job. It was because of Mick. Well, not his fault, but it was because they’d spent so much time apart that they’d not wanted to leave each other when they’d finally realized how dumb they’d been.

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!”

“You know how I feel about that word.” She turned to see him in the doorway, a towel wrapped around his waist. She wanted to tease him into giving her a better look, but she knew that wasn’t the thing to do right now.

“Yeah, well, it fits right now. What we did last night was stupid, not because of us being together, but because of the timing. I was supposed to be working, tracking down a fugitive from justice. We should have waited to play until we got back to Oklahoma City.”

She glanced at him, expecting him to argue with him. There was a sad smile on his face. “I suppose you’re right, but it doesn’t bother me so much when I think that Shawn Hastings is not a murderer. He and his girlfriend had a fight, she ran and he was accused of doing something he didn’t do.”

“You don’t know that.” She stood up and started to pace. “That’s a supposition, besides, as I’ve told you--”

She stopped speaking when he held up his hand. “I know, that’s not your job. But getting to the truth is mine. We need to find him. Tonight. We should go eat in the dining room, and then I should tell Bernie that I’d like to see the kitchen, take some photos for my story.”

Lucia sat down on the bed. “I feel a little guilty about that. She’s such a nice woman, and she expects photographs from you, and a novel from me. I can barely write a grocery list.”

“That’s not true and you know it.” He sat down beside her. “I have a friend who runs a travel magazine, as you remember.”

“Doug.”

“Right. I can take photos and you can write a story. If it’s not perfect, Doug can help it along. We can get her some publicity.”

“And how do you think she’s going to react when she learns that she didn’t set us up, that we’ve been married for seven years?”

He ruffled her hair as he leaned over to give her a kiss. The contact made her feel warm and gooey inside, and she wanted to do nothing more than to lay down with him and make love all night long.

“She’s going to be thrilled that she had a hand in getting us back together,” he said when the kiss broke. “Mark my words, that woman is a romantic. I can tell by the way she told the story of that poor woman in white, the ghost that haunts the plantation.”

“A ghost we’ve yet to see,” she said with a laugh. “You know, Ivan promised me a bonus if I brought back proof of a ghost.”

“Really? We can fake it.” This time they both laughed. “What sort of bonus did he offer? A trip to Hawaii? England? The Bahamas?”

“He didn’t say.” She leaned into his shoulder. “Maybe he’ll send us to the Bahamas this time. We’ve already done Hawaii. I’d prefer the Islands at this time of year, warm and sunny.”

“We need to find a ghost, then.” They both looked up at the knock on the door. “This place is a regular Grand Central Station today,” he said as he stood and opened the door.

“Hello!” Bernie’s bright voice boomed out. “I brought your dinner. Tonight it’s oyster po’boys with fries and coleslaw. There’s no dessert because of the scavenger hunt. I forgot to tell you all about it.”

“What scavenger hunt?” Lucia came out of the bedroom and sat down on a chair. She tried to ignore the knowing, amused glance Bernie sent her way.

“Well, we do it about once or twice a week, depending on the guests. We have a list of items that are hidden around the grounds, and the people go in search of them. At this time of year we do it at night, to make it a little spookier. You guys want to play? We have lots of snacks and desserts for afterward. My staff has been working hard on them all day.”

“The kitchen staff?” Lucia perked up.

“Yes.”

“Do they work the party?”

“Yes, they have as much fun with it as we do.” Bernie put her hands together, twisting her fingers like she had something to say that wasn’t pleasant. Here it comes, Lucia thought. She’s going to get on to us for staying together in this room, after we’ve only known each other for a night. We’re going to have to tell her the truth, and she’s not going to be happy that we lied.

“On another matter, if the two of you don’t want to pay for two rooms, I’m fine with Ms. Tulo moving her things out here. After all, there’s no sense in you paying for two rooms if you’re only going to use one.”

Lucia felt as if a feather could knock her over. She glanced at Mick, who was smiling like he’d just won the lottery. She knew he wanted to answer, but he looked at her instead, making it seem as if he were leaving it up to her choice. They both knew the answer, though.

“That would be fine,” Lucia said. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Bernie clapped her hands. “I had a feeling about you two the first time I saw you together. Last night at dinner you seemed like an old married couple, you were that comfortable with each other.”

Comfortable? Lucia wasn’t sure that was the term she would use for how they were last night. They’d been on edge, each of them angry that the other was on their turf, so to speak. Then there had been that whole football players patting each other on the ass fiasco. Had Bernie seen them last night, or was she talking about another couple?

Lucia could tell from the confused look on Mick’s face that he thought the same thing.

“I’ll have your things packed up and brought out.”

“No, thanks!” Lucia stood. “I’d rather do it myself, if that’s okay with you.” She didn’t want someone in her things, especially since she had her gun hidden in her duffle bag. It wouldn’t do to have a clerk find it and raise the alarm that Lucia was up to no good, even though she had a license to carry.

“Sure.” Bernie replied. “But can you do it quick? I had a call for a room and well, he’s willing to pay extra if I can get him in tonight.”

Lucia bit back a laugh. Bernie might be a romantic, but she had her eye on the bottom line, too. If she could make extra cash on a room that wasn’t being used, she would surely do it.

“I’ll do it right now.”

“Thank you.” She clapped her hands, and Lucia wondered how many times a day she did that. She seemed like a cheerleader at a pep rally. “The scavenger hunt starts at eight-thirty. You’ll be provided with a list, and flashlights. There are other lamps set up around the grounds, and it’s marked off so you don’t get lost. It’s a fun time, and the food is available from eight-thirty on. See you then.”

She seemed to skip out of the room, and Lucia glanced at Mick. “Wanna bet whoever is willing to pay extra has something to do with Shawn Hastings?”

“Like I said, Grand Central Station.” He examined the food. “This looks delicious. And you know what they say about oysters, don’t you?”

“No, Mr. Ash, what do they say about oysters?”

He picked up half of a sandwich. It looked scrumptious, and Lucia’s mouth watered at the sight.

“They say, Mrs. Ash, that if the two of us eat oysters, that we’re going to be doing a whole lot more of what we did this morning.”

“You mean what we did without the oysters? Will it be better with them?”

“Sweetheart, it gets better every time.” He crossed the room and put one arm around her. “It’s hard to build on perfection, though.”

“Sweet talker.”

“I’ll keep trying.” He held the sandwich in front of her mouth. “Bite?”

She took a huge bite, savoring the taste of the oysters and the sweet sauce and slaw. “There’s one thing you can say about this place. They have great cooks.”

While she’d been chewing and talking he had taken his own bite. His eyes rolled upward in delight, and she laughed as he swallowed and said, “Oh man, that is just delicious.”

“Very.” She patted his belly. “Let’s hurry and eat, and then go get my stuff. I don’t want the chance of anyone trying to pack me up. Then we go to the hunt, see if Shawn is there working the food tables.”

“We also need to find out who our new guest is.” He took another bite, then said around the food, “He could bring trouble. And we don’t want that.”

Chapter Four

It didn't take long to move Lucia's things from her room. It also didn't take long to find out whoever was taking her room hadn't arrived yet. A young clerk at the front desk, whom Lucia figured was Bernie's daughter, said the man was coming from New Orleans and didn't expect to be in until after midnight.

"Let's go to the scavenger hunt," Mick said, taking her hand. "We can search for items and quit part way through. Then we come back and see who's serving food."

"Sounds like a plan." They went to the gardens to pick up their supplies. Tables had been set out, decorated with antiques, but no food was available yet. Lucia wasn't surprised by that. Dinner had been delicious, and it was barely over, so no one was really hungry. They would be, though, after searching for the list of items on the hunt.

"Please only take one of each item," Bernie said as she handed them a sheet, a bag to collect their goodies in, and a flashlight. "There are enough of each item for everyone to get one, so that all participants can find everything on the list. There are prizes for those who find the most."

They thanked her for hosting the fun event, and she winked at them both. "She's really into this 'I fixed you up' thing," Lucia said as they walked out into the grass. "She's going to be heartbroken when we tell her the truth."

"Who says we have to tell her the truth?"

"I do." She playfully punched him on the arm. "I kinda like it here. It's very relaxing. We can come back for a visit or two, and when we come back as Mr. and Mrs. Ash, she's going to tell everyone that this place is perfect for finding a mate."

"You're right." He looked at the list. "Oh well, we'll worry about that later. Let's see what we get to hunt for." He rattled the paper. "A red ribbon, a ball of blue yarn, a book, a shoe, a thimble--seriously, a thimble? Do you know how small those things are?"

"What's the matter? I thought you were a great detective who could find anything. Are you scared of a little thimble?" She batted her eyes at him and laughed at the look of disgust he shot her way. "I'll be finding the thimble, don't worry."

"Tell you what, you find the thimble and I'll let you spank me, outside, tonight. Maybe by the pool? In the moonlight?"

"Sounds perfect. Lead the way." They started walking, stopping to talk to various people along the way. For a few minutes, Lucia forgot about their reasons for being in Louisiana. Being with Mick again was perfect, and the sensations she felt when he touched her, when he held her hand, strengthened her resolve for them to never be apart again.

They found lots of things on the list, including the book and ball of yarn, and by the time they'd found the ribbon it was clear that items were marked, almost with big arrows that said, "Search here." Each place they'd found something from the list had been lit by a torch, a second one placed not far away marked the perimeter of where they would search.

"You now," she said after they found the fourth item. "I'm not sure this bet about finding the thimble is fair. These things are much too easily marked."

"Too bad," he said as he picked up a shoehorn and put it in their bag. "You made the bet, now you have to take the spanking."

He tucked the bag under his arms before he linked his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. "I'm getting ready. I'm out of practice giving a spanking. I don't think last night's was near hard enough."

"Forget it, buster. The deal's off."

"We'll see about that." He twirled the bag around his finger. Lucia could see him glancing off into the woods, and she followed his gaze to see what had caught his attention.

"Did you see the lady in white?"

"No." He started walking that way, then stopped. "Someone was here, watching us, but it was someone human. A woman."

"Really? Your eyesight is better than mine, because I didn't see anyone, and being able to tell male from female, when it's almost totally dark, is amazing."

"I didn't see her, but I can smell her perfume." He sniffed the air. "One of the more expensive perfumes, if my guess is right. Although I'm not sure which one."

Lucia sniffed the air. He was right. There was a heavy dose of perfume, which meant it was probably left by someone just a few minutes ago.

"I think it's time we go back to the party," Mick said. "Let's see if Shawn is there."

"Leave without finding the thimble? I guess that means no moonlight spanking for me." She danced away from him, swinging her arms out.

"You look beautiful. Tomorrow night's a full moon, you know. Watching you dance in the moonlight would make beautiful pictures."

"Darling, I'll dance for you anytime." She moved back the way they'd come. It took her a few minutes to realize he wasn't following her. "What's up?"

“Nothing.” He was tucking something into his pocket. “I just wanted to check for footprints.”

“Did you find any you could put in your pocket?” She tugged on his hand, surprised when he pulled out a piece of ribbon. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t want us to win the prize, so I’m hiding some of the stuff we found.”

“Why wouldn’t you want us to win the prize?”

“Because I’m hoping that whoever will win the contest will take front and center. Everyone will be focused on them, and we can talk to Shawn. If he’s there.”

“Excellent plan.”

“I know.” He leaned closer to her. “Bet you wish you’d thought of it.”

“Watch it, buddy.”

“Buddy? First I’m buster, then I’m buddy? I’m going to have an identity crisis before this is all over.”

“That’ll never happen,” she said. They were nearing the house now. The sounds of classical music drifted toward them. There were people laughing and it mixed with the sound of silverware clinking on plates. “Looks like we’re not the first ones back.”

“That’s not all it looks like.” She watched him point to a table. Shawn Hastings stood behind it, filling a plate with food for a guest.

“Hot damn,” she said. “Let’s get him.” But as soon as the words were out of her mouth she shook her head. “No, not in front of everyone. We need to try and get him alone. How do we do that?”

She tapped her finger against her nose. “We could cause a commotion, or we could...”

“Use her.” She looked to where Mick was pointing.

“Damn it! What is she doing here?”

“Good question, but I can bet Ivan didn’t tell her to come.”

Lucia pulled out her phone, then put it back in her pocket. “How am I supposed to tell the boss that his daughter followed me down here?”

“Not sure.” Mick shook his head. “But I can bet that if something happens, Ivan will be pissed. Not sure if he’ll blame it on you, but you can bet that he won’t be happy.”

Lucia studied Andrea, the boss's daughter, then looked over at Hastings. "It's a safe bet it was her perfume we smelled earlier. She's a twenty-two-year-old wanna be bounty hunter. I hope she doesn't do something stupid, like run over there and charge him."

"Hopefully she's smart enough to know she doesn't have the capture papers, and that she can't just slap handcuffs on him." Mick stepped in front of her. "Got a plan?"

"Yes, I think you should go talk to Andrea. She always liked you. I'll go to Shawn and explain the situation. Maybe he'll come to the room and we can talk. I'll spirit him away while you distract her. Got it?"

"Good plan. If you need help, just whistle."

"Fat chance of that." She skirted around the garden, heading to the area where servers were passing out food. She was inches away from the table when Shawn shifted his attention away from a plate of food and focused on her. He smiled, and the smile vanished as he realized who was approaching him.

They'd met before, once when she'd bailed him out of jail and he'd signed paperwork, and another time when he'd come to the office to talk to Ivan.

"You need to come with me," she whispered to him when she was closer.

"I'm working." He cast a nervous glance in Bernie's direction. She was talking to a man, and from the way they were standing together, Lucia was pretty sure it was her husband, Gene.

"It's not that simple, Shawn. There are people looking for you besides me. I'm giving you the chance to come and talk with me. Others might not be so nice."

That got his attention. He glanced around furtively, almost as if he expected people with guns to jump from the bushes and shoot him.

"We need to go right now. Come to the pool house with me." At first she thought he would object again. Instead he put down the tongs in his hand, and his head dropped, as if he were accepting his defeat.

"Come on." She put a hand on his upper arm.

"I need to tell Bernie that I have something to take care of. But I have to come back afterward and help clean up. It's part of my job."

Lucia was shocked that someone with his record, and someone accused of beating his girlfriend, would be so concerned about performing his duties. He seemed so different, almost as if he were beaten down. She guessed spending time on the run would do that to someone, but not everyone. She'd captured fugitives that had spat on her, cussed at her, and yes, there was the dreaded incident where she'd been shot at.

But she'd never captured someone who was so dejected. "Go and talk to her. I'll wait here. But don't tell her you're going with me. Just say something's come up."

"Okay." He seemed so young. His shoulders slumped, he walked toward Bernie. Lucia looked behind her. Mick was talking to Andrea, who had her back turned to the party.

"She should know better," Lucia whispered to herself. "Never turn your back when a fugitive is around."

Shawn was back now, standing at her side. Lucia looked over at Bernie, who was watching them in confusion.

"Let's go." She wanted to leave before the other woman came over and asked what was happening. Of course there was nothing to keep her from coming to the pool house to inquire about why Lucia was talking to her sous chef. Hopefully the party would keep her busy and Lucia could put Shawn in the car and they could leave tonight.

"You're in a lot of trouble, Shawn," she said as they walked. "Why did you leave?"

"I didn't beat her. I hit her, yes, and it was wrong. But I didn't beat her. I told the cops that."

"They think you killed her." That stopped him dead in his tracks. Even in the moonlight, Lucia could see that all color had drained from his face.

"No." He sounded like he was gasping for air. "She's dead?"

"They think she is, yes."

"No." He crumpled to the ground. "I just saw her two days ago. She came here, we were fine, then she got mad and left again."

"Shawn, stand up." Lucia leaned over. "We need to get inside and talk."

"She's dead...she's dead...she's dead..." he kept repeating the phrase as he pulled on his hair.

"Did you hear me! I said stand up, right now!"

He rolled his head from side to side and then, after a few long moments, he stood. Lucia wasn't taking any chances. She put her hand on his upper arm and guided him toward the pool house. He was listless, as if he had no will to walk, no reason to live.

Lucia hurried him along, making the pool house in record time. She thrust him in before her, then turned the knob when she was in. Not that it would stop anyone, but it would slow them down.

“Sit.” She indicated a chair and he followed her instructions. Then she got him a glass of water and he drank it down.

“I can’t believe she’s dead. I just saw her two days ago.”

Lucia pulled up her own chair. “Shawn, listen to me, I don’t know that she’s dead. The police think she’s dead because she disappeared after you beat her.”

“I didn’t beat her.” It was the first real show of anger she’d seen from him. “I smacked her, yes, but I didn’t beat her.”

“There was blood.”

He hung his head. “Okay, maybe I bloodied her lip, but that was all.”

Lucia shook her head. “You knew the cops thought she was dead when they arrested you, yet you ran.”

“I thought they knew she was alive,” he said. “She called a few days after I was arrested, told me to meet her in New Orleans, so I did.”

Oh Lord above, save me from stupidity, Lucia thought. “You were under bond, Shawn, ordered not to leave the city, much less the state! Why did you go?”

“Because she was alive, because she asked me to come. I figured she called the cops and everything was fine.”

A knock at the door, and Mick’s deep, “Open up,” caught her attention. She did as he asked, relocking the door behind him.

“We gotta go,” he said, moving toward the bedroom. “Andrea’s not checked in here, and that means there’s someone else on Shawn’s trail that’s going to be after midnight. I’d rather not stick around to see who it is.”

Lucia glanced at Shawn. “You have lots of stuff here?”

“Just some clothes.” He stood. “I’ll go pack and we can go find Denise.”

She didn’t want to dissuade him from the idea they were going in search of his wayward girlfriend. That would only upset him.

“She’s got you whipped, doesn’t she?” Lucia turned toward Mick. She wanted to smack him in the butt for what he’d just said.

“I love her!”

“Okay, okay, but don’t throw your life away on her,” Mick replied. “Let me--”

“Enough.” Lucia held up a hand. “We need to go. Now. We’ll take one car and come back for the other. Mine’s bigger.”

She kept a big vehicle because she never knew who would be riding in it, and lots of the criminals she went after were fairly large.

“I’ll drive,” Mick said. She shot him a look that she hoped conveyed the message that they didn’t need to tell Shawn where they were going.

He nodded very slowly.

“Let’s go,” she said to Shawn. At the door she looked back at Mick. “Give me my gun.”

His frown told her what he thought of the idea, but then threw up his hands in surrender. He dug in her bag and pulled out the gun. Shawn’s eyes widened as she took it.

“Handcuffs.” Mick handed her those, too.

She put them in her purse, wishing she could carry the gun on her hip so she could get to it easier if she needed it. “We’ll meet you at the car.” She dug around in her bag, tossing him the keys after she found them. “Have it started and ready to go.”

“Will do.” She turned to Shawn. “Let’s go. Now.”

Lucia handed Shawn’s capture papers to Ivan, then took the cuffs off him. He’d been angry that they’d tricked him into thinking they were going to find Denise, then scared, about what he would find in Oklahoma. Now he was just subdued, ready to get things over with.

He and Mick had bonded on the trip. Shawn had told them that Denise was more than likely at a friend’s house, making him wait out her anger.

Lucia had trouble believing they were playing games with each other, when it was obvious that Shawn was in major trouble. They both seemed to think it would just go away, that the cops couldn’t seriously think Shawn had killed her when she’d talked to members of her family.

“They’re going to have to see her,” Mick had countered. “You need to call her and tell her to come home.”

They’d tried that several times, but she wasn’t answering the number Shawn had for her. In truth, Lucia hated the thought of the young man in jail. He’d had a rough past, yes, and he’d hit a woman, several times, enough for her to bleed, but the woman was obviously playing with him, drawing things out and making them worse.

When they'd left Shawn in Ivan's care, they sat in the parking lot. She knew Ivan would deliver the young man to the police station.

"You know what we have to do," Mick said as he turned the key in the ignition.

"I know, but I don't want to do it now." She ran her fingers through her hair. "I'd like to go take a shower, make love, and sleep."

"Sounds perfect." Mick pulled from the lot. "But we have to go to New Orleans. It won't be hard to find her. And we have to go down there to pick up my car, anyway. We'll fly down tomorrow."

"It'll cost a fortune."

Mick laughed softly. "I'll bill the Howe's. They have a fortune. Plus, they'll be thrilled that I found her. As a matter of fact, I think one of them should go with us, to take control of their wayward family member and drag her back. Her brother would be willing to do it, I'm sure."

Mick called said brother, whose name was Jack, while they were driving. He put it on speaker for Lucia to hear. He said he was more than happy to go with them, especially since he'd talked to his sister that day and she'd refused to come home, no matter what.

"She's being a brat," Jack said. "If you can find her, I'll bring her home."

"I have an address," Mick said. "Doesn't mean she'll still be there, but I don't think she'll run, unless she figures out Shawn is back here. We made sure he didn't leave any messages that said anything other than please call me."

"I'll book three seats for tomorrow's flight," Jack said. "See you at the airport."

"You've got to wonder about the both of them," Mick said as they hung up the phone. "They're only thinking about themselves, not about the consequences of their actions."

"She's cost her family a lot of money, but I don't think she cares," Lucia replied. "And does she really think that the cops are just going to forget about Shawn's legal troubles?"

"Maybe she thinks her daddy will buy his way out of them. That won't happen, though. even though she's still walking the earth, he'll faces charges for running."

"It's just all so stupid," Lucia shook her head.

"In this case you're right, but I still hate that word."

They were pulling up in their driveway now. Lucia settled against the seat and thought about how right it was to be in a car with her husband, with him driving. He would go into the house with her and they would make love and sleep together. Again. It would be perfect.

He hit the button to lift the garage door and she put her hand on his thigh. “Will you shower with me?”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had all day.” He pulled the car in and lowered the door behind them. Once they were in the house she checked messages. There were two, one from her mother, the other from Mick, asking if he could talk to her.

“What were you calling me about?”

“I really just wanted to hear your voice. I was using Shawn Hastings as an excuse.” He put the keys on the counter. “When you didn’t answer, I thought maybe you were just ignoring me because you were still mad. Then when I got to Moonlight Abbey I found out you were there. And I’m glad I did.”

She stood on her tiptoes. “Me too. Now, come wash my back.”

“With pleasure.” He patted her on the butt. “Get us ready. I’ll go and check the mail. I’m also going to call Bernie and explain things, tell her we’ll be back to get my car late tomorrow or early the next day.”

Lucia went into the bathroom, stripping her clothes off as she walked. She let them drop on the floor, knowing Mick would notice, and that he’d say something to her when he was with her. It would be the perfect excuse for him to spank her. And Lucia wanted a spanking.

Sure she’d just had one last night, but she wanted another one today, and getting spanked in the shower was always fun for her. They had a huge shower, one that was almost as big as some people’s bathrooms. You walked down into it, and it had two jets on each wall so you could feel water coming at you from all sides.

Mick kept a paddle in there. He’d bought a rowing paddle a few years after they were married and cut the handle down on it. Then he’d made a spanking bench, set in the middle of the shower. It set up high enough that her feet and arms dangled over the edges when she was in position. She’d bend over it, and he’d paddle her bottom as the water hit them both.

It was highly erotic, and the sting was just perfect to her. It had been some time since she’d had a shower spanking, and she was more than ready for it.

She dropped her last piece of clothing on the floor before going into the shower and turning on the spray. They both liked hot showers, so she turned it up. Then she ran her fingers over the paddle, wishing that Mick would hurry up.

She got her hair wet, then tensed just slightly when she heard him clear his throat. She turned to find him standing in the shower opening, her bra dangling from his fingertips.

“What is this?”

“I would think it’s pretty obvious what it is.” She batted her eyes at him. “Do I need to give you a lesson in female clothing? Has it been so long that you’re forgotten?”

The look he gave her could have melted butter. “Assume the position.”

“No.” She turned back to the water, letting it slide over her body. It felt wonderfully warm, especially knowing her husband watched her. He hadn’t been hard, but she knew he would be within minutes.

“This isn’t a request, Lucia. Assume the position or get your butt blistered instead of the light spanking I was planning on giving you.”

She picked up a bottle. “We’re almost out of shampoo. Can you remind me to put it on the shopping list?” She gave him an innocent look. “We can go when we get back from New Orleans.”

“Lucia, this is the last time I’m going to say this. Assume the position.”

Hard streaks of need snaked through her. She put the bottle back in its place, then she turned to face him full front, her hands on her hips. Her nipples throbbed in their need for attention and her clit pulsed at the sight of her husband, standing there. The dark look on his face intensified the sensations running through her.

There was no way she was just going to bend over. That was no fun. There was more fun in playing games with him.

She lifted her nose into the air, then ran her tongue along her lips before she said, “Make me.”

Chapter Five

“Oh, you really didn’t just say that, did you?” Mick started toward her, but Lucia stood her ground.

“Hard of hearing?”

“Excuse me?” He took another step, stopping right in front of where the paddle hung from a peg in the wall. He reached out and picked it up, then swung it through the air experimentally. It made a heavy, swooshing sound as it flew in front of him.

“I suggest you follow the order I gave you, or you’re going to find it mighty uncomfortable sitting on the plane tomorrow morning.”

She giggled. “Doubt it. My butt didn’t hurt that bad from the spanking you gave me the other evening. I sat in the car for eleven hours and it didn’t bother me at all. A few hours on the plane will be a piece of cake. Sometimes I think you don’t know how to spank properly.”

He pointed the paddle at the bench. “You’d better get your ass over that bench. You’ve got about two seconds to save yourself from being as red as a holiday bow.”

“I doubt you could make it happen. Maybe we should find someone who could give you some lessons in spanking. That would make me happy. I’m sure we can find something on the Internet.” She sashayed over to the bench and bent over it, grasping the rails he’d given her for support. Playing in a slippery shower could be dangerous, so when he’d built it he put down pads in that area so they would both have sure footing. Still, the rails helped keep their game just that, a game. It save something bad from happing if she should lose her balance and fall against the tiles.

He rubbed the paddle against her bottom and Lucia closed her eyes as pure bliss soaked into her.

“What was that you were saying about me not being able to spank properly?” He tapped the paddle against her bottom, two, three, four light slaps that really didn’t hurt. She knew he was just getting her ready for the main event. And it came quicker than she thought it would. The first swat stung. The combination of the paddle and water had always provided stimulation that made her wince, but this one seemed to be harder than most.

Was it because it had been so long since she’d felt it? That was a good possibility, and the hard second swat made her think the possibility was reality. She bit her lip, wondering if she’d made the right play in taunting him.

He put his hand on the small of her back, rubbed the paddle against her, and slapped her ass again.

“Not so mouthy now, are you?”

“No, I think...oh, wait...ouch, ouch, ouch.” He’d set up a hard, steady rhythm, slapping the paddle against her ass in different spots. The sting was harsh, and it left behind lingering effects.

And Lucia loved every second of it, no matter how much she cried out and begged for him to stop, what she really wanted was more. The paddle moved around her ass, coming down hard, then soft, then hard. She never knew what was coming next, and that’s what it made it so exciting, so inviting, really.

She knew some people might look at her strange, but the stimulation never failed to send her senses reeling, to send her soaring toward an orgasm that rocked her body to its very core.

“Now, what were you saying about my spanking abilities?” He slapped the paddle against her ass over and over. “Answer me!”

“I said you don’t know how to spank!” She threw the words over her shoulder, not surprised when he doubled his efforts, the paddle landing harder than before. He started to slap it on the same spot, which only made the sting worse.

Lucia closed her eyes. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea. This was the hardest spanking she’d received in a long time. Harder than the one she’d had the other night, which had stung. This one did more than sting. It burned. She clasped the rail tighter as he continued to spank.

To try and take her mind off the sting she started to count. Ten, twenty, thirty. She stopped at a hundred and started over, then gave up totally before he finally rubbed the paddle against her cheeks she let out a sigh of relief. There was no telling how many swats he’d given her before she started to count. She would definitely be trying to find a comfortable position to sit in tomorrow morning.

“Stay in position.” She watched him hand up the paddle and return to her. He rubbed her bottom, his hand straying between her legs as the water sprayed over them. They’d been there so long the water temperature had cooled.

He continued to caress her, and then he entered her, sliding into her channel with gentle ease.

“Mick, oh Mick.” He slapped her ass as he took her, his hand landing in various spots, aggravating the sting she felt from the paddle. He pushed into her harder, swiveling his hips around. Then he held still, buried deep in her pussy.

“What a nice red ass,” he said, as if he were having a conversation about the weather. “Something tells me you’re going to feel this for a good, long time. I don’t think you’re going to tease me about my spanking abilities any more.”

She pushed back against him, her actions telling him she wanted less talk and more action. He provided her just that, starting to thrust again and spank again. Her legs felt like jelly and the water was icy cold when he stopped. He turned off the jets and helped her to stand.

“Come on.” He led her from the shower room and wrapped a towel around her, drying her off, and then drying himself off before he picked her up and carried her to the bed.

She lay on her back, her ass throbbing against the sheets as he positioned himself above her and slide inside her yet again. They rolled around together, each of them taking a turn on top.

Lucia came twice as she rode him, and right after the second one sliced through her, he tossed her onto her side, entered her from behind and pounded until he screamed out her name.

Their bodies shook as they lay there, their heavy breathing seeming to come as one breath that joined them. They fell asleep in each others arms, not having to say the words they had the other night, because they both knew they were where they belonged.

“Lucia, are you all right?” Jack Howe’s concern made Lucia smile. He was helping her out of the car in front of a house in New Orleans. It was an address Mick had found this morning by using the GPS on Denise Howe’s phone.

“I’m fine, why do you ask?”

“Well, you seemed to squirm a lot on the plane, and just now you seemed to wince. Do you not fly well? Are you feeling sick?”

“No, I’m just fine.” She couldn’t very well tell him that her husband had spanked her ass something fierce last night and sitting on the plane had been more than a little uncomfortable. Once they were done here she would be in the car again for the trip to Moonlight Abbey. Then she’d be in the car again for the trip back home. If her ass still hurt as much as it did now, she might make him drive the whole way while she slept in the back seat.

“Okay.” He looked at the door. “Do you think it’s wise that we didn’t announce ourselves by calling first?”

“It’s the smart thing to do,” Mick said as he came around the car. “Your sister is good at leaving when she thinks someone’s around to bring her back home. The prosecutor wants to see her, to prove that she’s still breathing, or else Shawn could be in a lot of trouble. It’s your job to take her back.”

“I understand.” Jack nodded, his look very sad. “She’s always been a little hellion, getting into trouble. Mom and Dad babied her. She needs a stronger man than Shawn who will take her in hand, show her she can’t get away with anything she does.”

"I couldn't agree with you more," Mick said. "Let's go to the house."

They were in a section of town near Tulane. Lucia figured the house was probably full of college students, and the young man who answered the door didn't dispel that ideal. He looked like he was about nineteen, and that he'd had a heck of a lot to drink the night before.

He leaned against the door, wearing only his jeans. "Yeah?"

"We're looking for Denise Howe," Mick said in his most authoritative voice.

"Man, she's still sleeping. Come back later." The kid started to shut the door, but Mick put his hand out, forcing it open.

"We'll see her now."

"You guys cops?"

"No," Jack said, pushing past Mick. "I'm her brother and I'm here to take her home."

"You can't just barge in here," the kid said, rushing after them.

"So call the cops," Mick replied, stepping in front of him while Jack went room to room, calling out Denise's name. "I'm sure they'd love to come in, check IDs for the drinking going on in the living room."

Lucia looked past him to where a bunch of kids sat.

"There's no drinking in there," the kid protested. "Besides, we're all old enough."

"Fine, I'll call the cops and tell them we're recovering someone who's in trouble with the law in Oklahoma. I still say they'd love to come in and sniff around and--"

"Okay, okay." The kid held up his hand. "Just get her and leave. She's pretty high-maintenance anyway. I won't be sorry to see her go."

"Get your hands off me!" The high-pitched female voice made Lucia smile. Someone wasn't very happy.

"You're coming home with me, Denise. Shawn's in a lot of trouble. He had no right to hit you, but you had no right to run, make it seem like things were worse than they were. You're coming back to Oklahoma City with me to help clear things up."

"Like hell I am!" Jack was dragging her down the hallway. She was already dressed, in jeans and a T-shirt, and Lucia was pretty sure that was probably what she'd worn to bed the night before.

“Watch your mouth,” he replied. “I’ve already talked to Mom and Dad this morning, and as of ten a.m. your bank account is frozen. You can’t get anything out of it without their permission.”

“They can’t do that!”

“Since it’s their account, they can.” Jack glared down at her. “Now, you’re going to get on that plane and come home with me. Understand?”

For a minute, Lucia thought Denise was going to spit in her brother’s face. But it seemed the threat of being without money won.

“Fine, but I’m not staying there, and they’d better give me my money back the minute I’ve gotten the jackass out of trouble.”

Lucia studied her carefully. “Tell me, Denise, where did the blood come from in the apartment? Shawn says he only bloodied your lip.”

“Yes, he did. And I decided to teach him a lesson. So I cut myself and bled on the floor. I knew the cops would find it and he’d get in trouble.”

“You little witch,” Mick said. “They thought you were dead, that he’d killed you and hidden the body.”

“He deserved it.”

“You deserve a good whipping,” Mick said, glancing at Jack, who nodded.

“In your dreams. Now let’s go so I can get this over with.”

Lucia shifted in her seat as Mick piloted the car toward Moonlight Abbey. “The only reason she’s going is because of the money she lost. How could she do that to Shawn? I think he really loves her.”

“I think you’re right,” Mick replied. “She’s been using people all her life. She really does need someone to take her in hand.”

“It’s sad.” Lucia looked out the window and shifted again.

“What’s wrong? Your ass hurt?”

“You know it does!” She laughed. “No spankings for a while.”

“That’s too bad.” He leaned a little to the left and stuck his hand in his pocket. He pulled out a thimble. Lucia’s eyes widened.

“Excuse me! When did you find that?”

He chuckled. “When I was sniffing Andrea’s perfume. It was hanging from a ribbon off a tree branch. So, when I told you I was putting a ribbon in my pocket, I was really telling you the truth.”

“You’re a big fibber,” she said. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about it.”

“The better to get my moonlight spanking out of you, my darling.”

If Lucia didn’t know better, she would swear her bottom screamed no at the thought of being spanked again. She loved it, yes, but it was too soon after last night, and the one before that.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” he said. “I brought my camera equipment with me. If you’ll dance for me in the moonlight, I’ll forgo the spanking. Well, I should say postpone it. You still have to pay that way, but I would love to take photos of you while you’re dancing in the moonlight.”

“Naked?”

“Of course. We can do it after midnight, if you like, out in that pasture that seemed pretty deserted.”

“But you want pictures of me naked?”

“Yup. I’ve long wanted pictures of you naked. This will be the perfect opportunity for that.”

Lucia thought about it, wondering what harm it would do. Then she thought about people who had made videos, or had nude photos. Somehow someone always saw them.

“It’ll be dark, lit only by the full moon tonight. You won’t really be able to tell who you are. Consider it my Halloween treat for the year.”

That made her see things in a different perspective. They’d always tried to get each other something special for Halloween. This was something unlike anything she’d ever gotten for him.

“And what do I get, a thimble?”

“You’ll see.” He turned into the drive for Moonlight Abbey.

“Tell me, how did Bernie take the news about us being married all ready?”

Mick made a hem-hawing noise. “Well, she was sorta pissed at first, but then she was thrilled that she had a hand in getting us back together. And then she was even more upset by the fact there was a fugitive on her staff. I think she’s doing background checks on everyone else who works for her.”

They both laughed. “Does she know we’re coming back?”

“Yes, and to show there’s no hard feelings she’s letting us keep the pool house.”

“Cool, it’s nice and private.”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand. “We’re staying for a few days. Ivan told me you needed a vacation, and I thought we needed the time together.”

Sweet love for her husband spread through her like wildfire. “Is that my present?”

“Yup.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I didn’t bring enough clothes for a few days.”

“You won’t need that many,” he replied. “And if you need something new we’ll buy it. It’ll be fun. I have several things planned for us.”

“Like what?” She couldn’t believe he’d thought of something like this. He’d never done it before. She wondered if Ivan told him to treat her, or if he’d thought of it all on his own. Either way it was thoughtful, and she loved him even more for it.

“If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, and I want it to be that way.

“Tell me.”

“Push me harder and I’ll pull this car over!” They both laughed at the threat, and then she sat against the seat with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Be that way.”

“I will.” He pulled up beside the inn. “Let’s go inside and greet Bernie and see if we’re too late for dinner. I’m starved.”

“Even innkeepers need a night off,” Mick said as he tipped the waiter who’d brought an assortment of po’boys and other foods to the pool house. The young man thanked him and left. “She can’t spend all her time here.”

“No, but I really wanted to see her and explain about...us.”

“I already did that, baby.” He winked at her. “Did you grab a blanket?”

“I did, ready for our moonlight picnic.”

He picked up his camera and the tray of food. "Let's go."

They found a spot among the trees, with a large area that looked as if it were a perfect picnic spot, something that had probably been used in the past.

"You can see the moon through the top of the trees," she said. "It's so beautiful."

"Yes, it is." He sat down the back and cupped her face in his hands. Then he kissed her, claimed her. Lucia thought no kiss they'd shared had ever felt so pure. And then he kissed her again, and again, and again.

Lucia was swimming in heady sensations, her body felt like as hair, her heart soared with each touch of his lips.

"I love so much, and I swear never, ever, to interfere with your work life again."

"You've already said all that, Mick. I love you, too. Very much."

"I just wanted to say it again. I don't think I say it enough."

"Then we'll say it all the time, just so the other knows." She nibbled on his lower lip. "Now feed me. I'm hungry."

They set out the blanket, the laid out the food. When it was all out they took turns feeding each other bites of sandwiches, laughing and joking when parts fell on the other person's clothing.

When food dropped on her shirt, he leaned over and snatched it up with his mouth. Then he put his hands on the hem. "This is dirty. You don't want to wear it. Raise your arms above your head."

She did as he asked and he pulled the shirt off, leaving her in her bra and jeans. He spooned up some coleslaw and ate part of it, then tipped the spoon over her jeans. "Whoops, sorry about that."

"Yeah, I can tell," she laughed. His fingers were already at the fastenings of her jeans.

"We better take these off before they get any dirtier." He gently pushed on her shoulder. "Lie back for me."

She did as he asked, lifting her hips so he could slide the denim over her bottom. She winced slightly and he caressed her thigh.

"You sure you don't want a little hair of the dog?" He tossed her jeans aside before he notched his finger in the band of her panties. "Let's get these off. Or do I need to pour some food on it?"

She giggled as he tickled her belly, then put his fingers into the waistband again.

“No food.” She lifted her hips again. “I don’t have that many clothes with me, remember?”

“I remember.” He ran his hand up her thigh. Then he leaned over and placed his mouth on her, pushing his tongue into her folds, licking and sucking on her as she closed her eyes and relaxed into his touch.

“Mick.” She wove her hands into his hair. “So good.”

“Oh baby, how I’ve missed you,” he said as he kissed her thigh. He dove in again, sucking her clit into his mouth. Lucia tensed, and then she came, thrashing around on the blanket as he continued to love her in the most intimate of ways.

When he was done, he slapped her thigh lightly. “Roll over, ass in the air.”

She did as he asked, shivering as he ran his hands over her bottom. “You’ve got some very pretty marks, sweets. They’ll probably be gone by tomorrow, which is sad. You know how I love them.”

He slapped each cheek, the sound loud in the open area. “Then I guess you’ll have to give me more later.”

“I guess I will.” He slapped her bottom again.

“Now, I think someone owes me a dance.”

“Don’t you want...” she pointed at his crotch.

“Later. What I want is to see you dancing in the moonlight.”

“As you wish.” She undid her bra and jumped from the blanket. She felt free, and sexy, her orgasm still ringing in her veins. She ran to the center of the trees and twirled, tipping her head back far enough to look at the full moon. It was beautiful and bright. Why had she never really noticed it before?

She wasn’t sure why, and she really didn’t want to question it. All she wanted to do was dance. She listened to music in her head, switching from classical to rock to slow ballads.

Each different tempo brought about a different dance. Her chest heaved with exertion but she didn’t care. This was unlike anything she’d ever done before, and she wanted to do it again and again.

Partway through the dance she noticed flashes of light. Her wonderful husband was taking photos of her. She imagined what they would look like. Would they be too dark to see? Or would they be blurs of a person swirling in the moonlight?

She couldn't wait until he uploaded them. He was very good at photography, so they should come out pretty good. They'd have to do it tonight, because she didn't think she could wait to see them.

She was twirling slowly in the center, her arms thrown out from her body, when she felt Mick's hand on her hip. She turned a bright smile on him.

"Do you want to make love?"

"Yes." He kissed her gently. "But what I really want is for you to look directly in front of you."

She did as he asked, her mouth opening wide at what she saw. A woman stood there. No, not stood. She floated. She was dressed all in white, and she was watching them intently.

"Oh my...is that...is that..."

"Yes, I believe it's the woman in white. I think your dancing attracted her."

Lucia did her best to cover her nakedness.

"I don't think you have anything she hasn't seen, sweetie."

That didn't matter. Lucia rushed to the blanket and picked up her shirt, pulling it over her head.

"Do you think she saw us...you know? Have sex?"

"Yeah, probably." Lucia could see that Mick was fascinated. He kept his gaze focused on where the figure stood, his eyes wide in wonder.

"What should we do," she said as she walked back toward him. "Should we try to talk to her?"

"Something tells me she wouldn't answer. Or maybe she can't answer. She hasn't taken a step toward us, and she knows that we've noticed her."

Lucia prodded her husband's arm. "Say something."

"Like what? Hello?"

"Yes!"

He turned toward the spirit. "Um, hello. We're the Ashes. I'm Mick and this is my wife, Lucia."

The image flickered, and then it disappeared.

"Great," Mick said, his shoulders slacking.

“I’m sorry, I guess that wasn’t the best suggestion I’ve ever made.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“It means we have to get proof that she exists so we can take it to Ivan, and get your bonus.”

Lucia turned to where the woman had been. “Hello? Come back, please.”

There was no answer, and nothing appeared. Lucia wondered if there was something else she could say, something that would attract the resident ghost, now that they knew one existed.

“Don’t worry, baby, we got a few nights. In the meantime I say we go back and download these, see what we find.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way, husband dear.”

“Whatever you say, my wife. Let’s go prove there’s ghosts at Moonlight Abbey.”

