

Hell for the Holidays



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To Mom and Dad, who are ***not*** in this book





## Introduction

You are holding a twofer. That's Midwestern for "two for the price of one"—which it isn't really, but that's not the point. This book contains what used to be two stories, *The Very Devil* and *Now Playing on the Jukebox in Hell*, which were written for the Web as the third and fourth installments in a series. Fortitude Press thought they'd work as a single book, so here you go.

You should know a few things about what you're about to read. The series centers on Devlin Kerry and Cassandra Wolfe, who lead very complicated lives. That's only to be expected: They're in advertising, they're a couple, and they both have demons. The first two books—*Several Devils* and *The Average of Deviance*—explain how Dev, Cassie, and the demons Monica and Vanessa got together. (Technically, Dev got together with Monica first, as in slept with her. Cassie hates that.)

At the end of *Average*, things had gotten into a bit of a state. There was trouble with a fundamentalist group called the Family Foundation, run by a terrible man with the terrible name of Howard Abner. There was trouble with TV stations. There was trouble with people turning into possums. There was trouble with just about everything, really. The owner of J/J/G Advertising was home in bed under round-the-clock medical supervision; the creative director and a senior copywriter were locked up in a psychiatric hospital; and Dev and Cassie were taking a badly needed vacation at the beach. Their demons were taking the vacation, too, and one of them had just turned the other into a seagull. It all makes a little more sense in context.

Which brings you to this point. *Hell for the Holidays* picks up right after *Average* and takes you on two more vacations with Dev and Cassie: Thanksgiving with the Wolfes and Christmas with the Kerrys. Demons being what they are, Monica and Vanessa weren't about to be left out—hence, the *Hell* part of the title.

Some of what follows is true. The Thanksgiving chapters are set in Kansas City, where I lived for a while in the '80's. I still have great affection for both KCMO and Johnson County, Kansas, and any inaccuracies are due to faulty memory. Some of the Christmas chapters take place in the fictional town of Hawthorne, which is loosely based on my real hometown but not to be confused with it. Finally, the Kerry and Wolfe families are imaginary. (Mostly.)

Thanks for taking this long, strange trip with these characters and me.



## **Thanksgiving**



## The First Word

### Somewhere Over the Midwest

**This is Cassie speaking**, and the first thing you need to understand is that Devvy exaggerates a little. I'm not saying she made up everything so far, but she does make up things for a living. So you should get one fact straight right off: Monica is *not* all that gorgeous.

I mean, *Monica*. Honestly. What was Devvy thinking? I asked her once whatever possessed her, and she gave me one of those looks and said, "Exactly."

I'm working on her attitude.

Anyway, she wanted to write everything down, in case anything happened to her, so someone would know. I think that's ridiculous, because nothing's going to happen to her. Unless *I* do something.

That's looking like a real possibility right now. We've been on an airplane for a while, and Devvy's getting restless. She got mad when I took the PowerBook away—I *told* her not to bring it; I *told* her we were on vacation—and then she made a great big production out of reading a magazine. Except that she wasn't really reading it, just rewriting all the ads. So I had to take the magazine away, too. Now she's sulking and listening to one of those in-flight music channels. They were playing that "La Vida Loca" song a few minutes ago; I could tell just by her expression. She said the most awful things about Ricky Martin all summer after *I* said I thought he was cute.

That was before, though. Now that we're together, she just laughs and trashes my taste in men.

Like she should talk about taste. She slept with the witch for *months*.

Monica, I mean. What a bitch. Devvy's not crazy about *my* demon either, but Vanessa isn't half that bad. Also, Devvy never slept with her, which is all good if you ask me.

Besides, Vanessa does me favors. For one, she keeps an eye on Monica. For another, she helps me keep an eye on Devvy. (I don't think Devvy knows that, exactly.) She even does things for both of us. It's not like J/J/G isn't a loony bin already, but she just helped put two of our biggest problems—Jack and Kurt—in a *real* loony bin. And thanks to her, Jenner (he's generally harmless, but he owns the agency) is home in bed. We think they'll all be out of commission for a while, so it was finally safe for us to take this vacation.

This isn't to say we might not be playing with fire by having demons around. They have a really bad way of showing up whenever they feel like it and doing whatever they want, and Devvy doesn't trust either of them. I know *I* don't trust Monica.

But I'm not going to think about that right now. We had a great time at the beach, I got Devvy to relax a fraction of an inch, and now we're on our way to spend Thanksgiving with my family. I think that's what she's *really* sulking about. She and Daddy had a fight the last time they saw each other, and she thinks he wants to kill her now.

He doesn't want to kill her. Not really. At least, Mom says he doesn't. But I think just to be on the safe side, I'll make sure they're never alone together. Daddy has a temper, and Devvy...

Well, I'm working on that, too.

I have to go; she just found the phone in the seat back. She's been wanting to call the office all week. I may have to hurt her, in front of all these people.

Just remember what I said about the making-things-up part. I don't think we're going to have a demon problem at Thanksgiving—Vanessa's still at the beach, and the witch is still a seagull, which is good enough for her—but you never know. I love her to death, but Devvy is trouble.

## Chapter One

### Wednesday

**The first thing I wanted in Kansas City** was lunch. We'd been trapped on a plane for hours, and I figured we'd earned a couple of sirloins or at least some barbecue.

"This is not a cow town anymore," Cassie said, annoyed.

"I never said it was. But they still have steak here, don't they?"

"You don't need steak. We're having lunch at Mom and Dad's."

I did so need steak. After a week of seafood, I would have killed for even a White Castle. Irritably, I watched her drive for a second. "I'm not going in there on an empty stomach."

"Whose fault is that? You could have had something on the plane."

"What? Those little pretzels?"

"They'd have brought you more if you'd asked."

"I don't like pretzels."

She adjusted her sunglasses with one hand, making her bracelets rattle. "Then look in my purse. I think I have some Altoids."

"You're missing the point here. I need actual food. I'm *starving*."

"Mom said she's making quiche. You'll—" She glanced over at me, and the rental car swerved slightly. "What is that *look*, Devvy?"

"What look? Watch the road."

"Don't tell me you don't like quiche either. I've seen you eat it. Besides, you've never had my mother's. She makes the best shrimp quiche in—*what?!?*"

"Watch the *road*, Cass."

She informed me that she'd been driving since she was fifteen, thank you very much, and got all A's in driver's ed...and there was probably going to be more of that speech, except that she almost hit a Mitsubishi, which distracted her for a moment. What was up with her today, anyway?

To be fair, though, things were up with me, too. I'd had maybe two hours of sleep, followed by last-minute packing, taxis, air travel and close confinement with a woman who kept taking things away from me. Now I was sentenced to seafood again. And turkey tomorrow. It was enough to make me want to eat a whole cow.

"If you loved me," I complained, "you'd at least drive through a Burger King."

She only laughed.

"That line always works on *me*," I said, injured.

"Yes, it does. Every time." Good humor apparently restored, she tried to pat my knee, but I blocked her. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing a burger wouldn't fix."

"We'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes. Then you can have quiche."

Maybe it was time to try a different tack. Frowning in concentration, I felt along my wrist for a pulse. The silence made her look over again. "What are you doing, Devvy?"

"Checking for vital signs. I had some a few hours ago."

She blew me a very wet air kiss and kept driving.

"So you're saying you *don't* love me?"

"I adore you, and you know it. But Mom'll be insulted if you don't have seconds at lunch. You don't want to start off the weekend by insulting my mother, do you?"

No, but there was something to be said for getting it over with. Mrs. Wolfe would be insulted a dozen times over before sundown anyway; why put it off?

"I *said*, you don't want to insult my mother, do you?"

"Of course not, sweetheart," I lied. "I'll be on my very best behavior."

Cassie glanced over, instantly suspicious.

"You don't trust me?"

"I've seen your very best behavior," she said. "I still have nightmares about it."

"Monty Python's loss," I muttered. "You missed your calling. You should've been a comedian."

"There were no women in Monty Python, honey," she said serenely.

What *was* up with her? I couldn't even get a decent argument out of her today. Frustrated, I turned on the car radio and started punching buttons. Maybe I could find that Santana song. By good fortune, I found something Latin-sounding and turned it up.

Unfortunately, what I'd found was "Livin' La Vida Loca." With purpose, I changed the channel.

Cassie, never taking her eyes off the road, reached over and changed it back. So I changed it again. Then she changed it back.

That meant war. "Menudo," I said coldly. "That's where he came from, you know. *Menudo*."

"That was a long time ago. And *you* have a George Michael CD. Does the name 'Wham!' mean anything to you?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Duran Duran."

"So what? The Bangles."

"I *like* The Bangles. Adam Ant."

"Ha! Paula Abdul."

"Bon Jovi."

The rental car swerved again. Touché. She hadn't known I knew she had that tape.

"Olivia Newton-John," she snapped.

I wasn't taking that bait, not for anything in the world. Leaning into her space, I crooned a few bars of "Livin' on a Prayer."

Cassie looked daggers at me. "Don't make me sing 'Physical.' Not if you ever want to get physical with me again."

"We've already had this conversation, Cass. Nothing happens this weekend."

"Not if you're going to be like *this* all weekend," she agreed.

Thinking quickly, I went a few moves ahead of her. I could either win this argument or get lunch. "Don't worry—I probably won't be. I probably won't even make it to your parents' house in the first place. Any second now, I'll fall over dead from starvation, and you'll have to call 911. If you can actually *make* calls on that little



toy phone of yours.”

She didn’t say anything, but I could tell she was listening; her grip on the steering wheel tightened.

“Tell your mother I’m sorry about lunch. It’ll probably get burned, what with her having to leave the house to go bail you out of jail for manslaughter, but—”

Without warning, Cassie whipped the car off on the exit ramp that we’d almost just passed. Then, tires still screeching, she made for the stoplight doing about 60.

“Are you trying to *kill* me?” I shouted, gripping the dashboard for balance.

She didn’t answer; she was too busy ignoring the stoplight, which was just turning red. I couldn’t look.

But nothing crashed into us, or vice versa, and when I thought it was safe to look again, I saw that we were pulling into a McDonald’s.

“I love you,” I said, meaning it.

“You’re buying,” she replied, meaning that too.

Fine. The last thing I wanted in Kansas City was trouble.

**A Quarter Pounder and fries later,** Cassie decided to forgive me. She’d been starving herself, as it turned out, and she didn’t like quiche much either. We solemnly swore to keep the burgers a secret.

“As long as we clean our plates, Mom’ll be fine,” she said. “We’ll just let the dog in the dining room. He eats everything. Here, sweetie—have another fry. Want some ketchup?”

“Thanks.”

“The trouble will be keeping him out of the bedroom,” Cassie continued, looking thoughtful. “If you feed him, he’ll like you, and if he likes you, he won’t let you out of his sight. The last guy I brought home—”

“The last *guy*?”

“You know what I mean. Buster followed him everywhere. Even the bathroom. Whenever we tried to have sex—”

People at other tables started looking very interested. I gave them the evil eye, to no avail. “I don’t want to talk about this, Cass.”

“Jealous?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

Hell, yes. “No.”

“Good. If you *weren’t* jealous, you’d be in big trouble.” She dunked another fry in ketchup and offered it to me. “Anyway, Buster might be a pest. We’ll have to put a chair under the doorknob in the bedroom so he can’t get in.”

“Do whatever you want. If he gets into my room, he gets—”

“There is no ‘my room,’ Devvy. We’re sleeping together, and that’s final. If you don’t stop it, I’ll make you sleep in my old room with me.”

There were many implications in that, all of them horribly Freudian. But I figured she was bluffing. Surely not even Cassie would want to do those things in her childhood bedroom, with her parents down the hall—especially not with me. “How is that a threat?”

“Did I tell you the room is pink?”

“Yes, but—”

“Did I tell you it’s Barbie pink?”

Involuntarily, I winced, thinking of the Barbie section at FAO Schwarz.

“With a canopy bed,” she continued, watching me intently. “With heart-shaped throw pillows and a lace bedspread and a pink-and-white quilt. The blankets are pink, too.”

“Charming,” I said.

“Did I mention the vanity table?”

“No, but I get the pic—”

“It’s white. But everything on it is pink. Pink combs, pink brushes, pink nail polish...oooooh, you’ll hate this...pink plastic headbands. Remember those?”

Not amused, I shifted in my plastic chair. “All right, Cass.”

“No, wait—I’m not done. I had pink barrettes, too. Sometimes I just tied my hair back with a pink ribbon. Except when I had on my cheerleader uniform, because pink clashed with it. But I always wore pink underpants, because boys liked them, and—”

“All *right*, already. Enough.”

“I win?”

“Yes, goddammit. You win.”

“You’re sleeping with me?”

I could feel the heat of the open stares around us. “Try and stop me.”

She didn’t even bother to try not to look smug. “You’re cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed. And stop picking fights with me today. You’re going to make me mad.”

“You’re even cuter when you’re mad.”

A teenager a few tables over snorted Coke all over himself. Served him right for listening. Lowering my voice, I gave Cassie a very hard stare. “I am *not* cute.”

“Well, not cute like a little bunny. More like cute like a baby tarantula.”

I hated this conversation. “Cut this out *now*. What’s wrong with you, anyway? All this talk about ‘pink’ and ‘cute’ and little animals—”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m regressing. I *am* going home.” She sucked on the end of her straw for a second. “I might be nervous.”

“Nervous? You?”

“Maybe a little.”

It wasn’t a good explanation, in my opinion, but it *was* an explanation. It might even be the truth. She’d been really brave and feisty about our relationship from the start, but that was easy at J/J/G; everyone there was worse than we were. And she’d been outright brazen at the beach, but that was easy too, because nobody knew us. I had a feeling that Cassie’s family was going to be a much harder sell. As far as I knew, girls didn’t just take girls home to Kansas City and expect their relatives’ heads not to explode.

“How far are we from your parents’ house?” I asked.

“About fifteen minutes. Why?”

“How long if we take a scenic route?”

Her eyes lit up, but she tried to frown anyway. “We don’t have time for that. I

said we'd be there by 1."

"We'll call from the car. Tell them our flight was late. If we're lucky, maybe they'll start lunch without us."

"I really don't think we should, Devvy. I told them—"

"Well, this'll teach them to listen to *you*. So how about it? Do they have scenic routes in Kansas City? Or is this still just a cow town?"

She gave up with visible pleasure. "Just you wait, wise guy. Have I got a route for you."

"I'm not a g—"

"You *know* what I mean."

## Chapter Two

**The rental car clock read 2:00** when Cassie turned onto a quiet street. She didn't make any announcement about it, so I figured we were still on the scenic route. But the next thing I knew, we were going through a gated driveway, headed for a big, big house.

Disbelieving, I turned just in time to see WOLFE lettered on the gatepost.

"Home," she said.

"You're not serious."

"Really? I'm not? Why not?"

"I've seen pictures, Cass. This isn't your parents' house."

"You've seen *old* pictures. We moved here when I was ten."

Unconvinced, I took another look. "What happened when you were ten? Did God die and leave you his estate?"

"Close. It was a repossession."

A repossession. She didn't seem to notice the irony, so I decided not to point it out. Still and all, it gave me a strange feeling. "You said your dad's a banker. You didn't say he actually owns the bank."

"Very funny."

"I'm not trying to be. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"This is just going to make it worse, you know. It's bad enough that I'm me. But if he thinks I'm after your money—"

"It's not my money."

Well, it probably wasn't anymore. The SOB had probably already cut her out of the will on grounds of deviance.

With growing trepidation, I watched the house get larger in the windshield. God, it was big. There could be a whole soccer team living upstairs, or a boatload of Chinese assassins. What did Chinese assassins go for these days, anyway? Surely it took real money to import—

"Devvy?"

I jumped a little. "What?"

"We're here. What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing." Shaking her head, she turned the engine off. "All right, let's have it. I am *not* taking you in there looking like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you think something terrible's going to happen."

"You don't?"

"It's just Thanksgiving. It's just my family."

"And the assassins on the second floor," I said darkly.

Cassie reached over to put a cool hand on my forehead. "You might be just the least bit paranoid, honey."

Irritably, I shook her off. She just smiled, though, and leaned in for a kiss...just

as the front door opened. Figured. We hadn't been there a minute yet, and I was in trouble already.

But the trouble turned out to be four-footed: a golden retriever, bounding down the steps with an expression of welcome. Cassie gave me that kiss, very quickly, and jumped out of the car into an armful of dog. With its paws on her shoulders, it was almost as tall as her, but not half as beautiful.

I kept a suspicious eye on the house as I got out of the car. No Wolfes yet.

"This is Buster," she reported, dodging another sloppy kiss. "Buster, be nice. Go say hi to Devvy."

The dog licked her face one last time, let go and trotted over to check me out. Remembering something I'd read somewhere, I crouched down on the blacktop, careful of the tail of my new coat, and held out a hand for him to sniff.

"Should I pet him now? He looks—yow!"

"Buster," Cassie said severely, "be good."

Be good? Her dog had just stuck his nose *there*, and that was all she was going to say? With one hand, I tried to hold the animal off. "Nice doggie. Good b—*damn!*"

This time, the jolt knocked me right off my feet. Swearing with feeling, I shoved the dog away.

Only then did I notice Cassie's parents on the front porch. By the expression on Mrs. Wolfe's face, they were well within earshot.

Buster took advantage of my state of shock to do it again. This time, Cassie grabbed his collar, hard, and kept hold of it.

"Welcome to Kansas City, pookie," she said, doing her best not to laugh.

**The next five minutes** were the longest year of my life.

Cassie and her mother had gone off somewhere with Buster, theoretically to calm him down, which left me and her father. Alone. In the foyer. With motive.

"Nice day," I said, trying for détente.

Mr. Wolfe just stared at me. You'd have thought I was some horrible winged thing that had just swooped in from Hell with his daughter.

Very faintly, I smiled. His expression didn't change. In blatant silence, he scanned me up and down disapprovingly, taking extra time on the long black leather coat.

What did he think I was—an amateur? Drawing on years of experience in scaring clients, I scanned him back and raised an eyebrow.

No good. He just went back to staring, which was getting on my nerves. It was also starting to remind me of Cassie in a certain mood. Father and daughter had the same intense blue gaze, hard to hold up under, and though I could usually sweet-talk Cassie out of looking at me like that these days, that line of talk was not going to work on him.

The grandfather clock on the opposite wall ticked off the seconds as the silence went on. Where the devil was Cass?

I tried again. "Nice house."

"I got a favorable interest rate," Mr. Wolfe said.

More silence. The clock ticked louder and louder. Then, in a sort of slow motion,

I saw his right hand move to his pants pocket. There was only one thing to do: jump out of the line of fire.

A second too late, I saw what he was holding: a handkerchief.

"It's not loaded," he said dryly. "Take it."

"Sir?"

"Lipstick," he explained.

Lipstick. Wonderful. Absolutely swell. Exasperated, I took the handkerchief and wiped off.

"I suppose you have luggage," he said.

"We do. It's out in the car. I'll just—"

"I'll see to it."

"Not a problem. I can get it. But thanks for—"

"Of course it's not a problem. She's my daughter. I'll get it."

Cassie's father or not, I was starting to want to deck the man. "Don't trouble yourself, sir. It's not much. I can handle it."

"That may be. But in *my* house—"

"Is anything wrong?" Cassie asked, all innocence.

We both wheeled around, thwarted.

"I hate to interrupt," she told her father, "but Mom wants to see you in the kitchen."

"In a minute, Cassie. I'll just get your luggage first."

That did it. I took one step toward the front door, to intercept him—and felt her grab the belt of my coat in a death grip. Her expression, though, was perfectly calm. "She said *now*, Daddy."

Mr. Wolfe, who was already reaching for the doorknob, let his hand drop helplessly. "Now?"

"That's what she said."

He heaved a sigh of painful experience and headed off to find out what was wrong. Or, more likely, what was wrong *this* time. Watching him trudge down the hall, I felt an unexpected twinge of sympathy.

"Now," Cassie said, still gripping my belt, "I want to know what that was all about."

"Nothing. We were just discussing luggage."

"I *know* that. I want to know what you were just about to do."

"Bring it in?" I asked, hoping that was the right answer.

"Before or after you hit each other?"

"I wasn't going to hit him, for God's sake. He's your father. But he was getting all macho about the luggage, and I...well..." Suddenly, it all seemed indefensibly stupid. He was a middle-aged man with gray hair, whose daughter I loved, who felt threatened, and the least I could do was let him drive me crazy for a few days. After all, I'd have the rest of his life for payback. "Never mind. I'll go get it."

"*We'll* go get it." She gave my belt a sharp yank for emphasis. "Now come on. I'm going to let *you* get the heavy bags."

**By mutual agreement, bedtime** was early that night. Cassie told her parents we were tired, which was the truth, but not that we were miserable, which was also the truth. What with Buster being exiled to the back yard for his behavior, we'd had to eat all that quiche ourselves.

"Go on and get ready for bed," Cassie said as soon as we got to the guest room. "I'll go find us some Alka-Seltzer. How many do you want?"

"As many as you can find."

She nodded, understanding completely, and took off down the long dark hall while I searched the suitcases for nightclothes. What with one thing and another, we hadn't worn any at the beach, so we'd never thought to check whether Vanessa had packed any for us. Fortunately, she had: my favorite pajamas and a nightshirt of Cassie's.

The nightshirt, unfortunately, was pink. But I reasoned that Cass wouldn't mention the color tonight, in her condition, and I wouldn't even see it in the dark.

Wearily, I changed and went into the bath. When I came back out, Vanessa was standing by the bed, dressed up like a nurse, mixing something fizzy in a glass.

"You," I said with no particular emotion. It had been a long day.

"Your powers of recall are amazing. Here. Down the hatch."

"What is it?"

"You don't want to know."

"No, I don't. Go away, Vanessa. Cassie's got it covered. Besides, you don't even have the uniform right. Nurses don't dress like that anymore." Critically, I studied her from little white cap to sensible white shoes. "Where did you come up with this getup, anyway?"

"Haven't seen her old room yet, have you?" Vanessa pushed the glass into my hand and started turning back the bedcovers. "She's not kidding you about the Barbie stuff. Now drink that. You'll feel better."

"I'll feel better when she gets back. Would you mind telling me what you're doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at the beach keeping an eye on Monica?"

"Well. About that. I don't know how much you know about demons, Devlin—"

"More than a person should have to," I grumbled.

"—but these spells don't always stick. Who's the dog in the back yard?"

That scene in the driveway flashed through my mind—and without an instant's hesitation, I drained the glass.

At which point Cassie came back. "I hit the mother lode, honey. You wouldn't believe their medicine cabinet. Do you want Pepto-Bismol or—*you*?"

"Hello, Cassandra," Vanessa said. "Wait just a second. I'll mix you up another."

Cassie turned to me for an explanation and saw the empty glass in my hand. "Another what?"

I shrugged.

"What are you *doing* here, Vanessa?"

The demon didn't answer right away, being occupied with conjuring up another glass.

"What is she doing here?" Cassie demanded of me.

"I was just getting to that part," Vanessa said. "There was a little problem with Monica."

“Buster,” I said grimly. “She’s in the dog.”

Cassie was dumbstruck, but Vanessa only laughed. “Oh, for Lucifer’s sake, Devlin, we don’t do dogs. That’s only a myth. Jackals sometimes, sure, but—”

“You asked me who the dog is,” I reminded her.

“I was just curious. It’s talking to a seagull out back. This seems kind of far inland for gulls, so I wondered—”

“No,” Cassie insisted. “You said she’d leave us alone this weekend.”

“I didn’t say it *was* her. It might be anybody. But I think I’d better stick around just in case. She could make a lot of trouble for you, you know.”

Cassie sat down hard on the bed, looking even greener around the gills than she had before. Concerned, I took the glass from Vanessa and offered it to her.

“What is it?”

“Alka-Seltzer,” Vanessa said. “What did you think?”

Muttering something—all I could make out was “newt”—she drank it.

“Now into bed with you. Both of you. You’ve got a long day tomorrow.”

“Don’t even think about sleeping here,” Cassie warned her.

“Don’t be silly. I’m staying in the pink room. It is *so* cute, girlfriend. Do you mind if I put up your Rick Springfield poster?”

I raised an eyebrow. Cassie, muttering again, grabbed her nightshirt off the bed and disappeared into the bath.

“You’d better go,” I told Vanessa.

“I’m going; I’m going.” She paused on the threshold. “Her little sister’s coming tomorrow, isn’t she? Bringing the hubby and kiddies?”

“As far as I know. Her mom said nine for dinner.”

“Ever met them before?”

“No. Why?”

“Tomorrow,” Vanessa said, and then vanished into thin air.



## Chapter Three

**Cassie knew many inventive ways** of waking me in the morning—not to mention in the middle of the night—so when she licked my face, I just smiled. Whatever Vanessa had given us, it must have worked; both of us seemed to be feeling a whole lot better.

Another lick, longer and wetter this time; also a little tickly. Cassie was good at that. Half-awake now, I pulled her closer, enjoying the warmth of her body under the half-open nightshirt, the silky feel of the blonde head on my shoulder, the heat of her breath in my ear...

Wait. How could a person's head be in two places at one time?

My eyes shot open. Cassie was still asleep, and there was a wide-awake golden retriever next to my side of the bed, peering at me with great interest.

Well, that explained the breath problem. "Go away, Buster."

The dog started wagging its tail.

"Hell," I muttered. Then I remembered and looked hard into his eyes. "Monica? Is that you?"

No answer—just a gaze of pure canine devotion. Meanwhile, Cassie was waking up.

"Everything's fine," I told her, stroking her hair. "Go back to sleep."

She mumbled something, then gripped my pajama shirt tighter and snuggled closer, just as Buster tried to climb up into the bed.

"Down, dammit!" Reluctantly taking one arm away from around Cassie, I tried to hold him at bay. But he was a big solid dog, and I didn't have much leverage lying down, so he won. Contented, he flopped down on top of us like a ton of furry bricks.

"Is that Buster?" Cassie asked, eyes still closed.

"Afraid so."

"Make him go away."

"I don't think I can."

Sighing, she disengaged a little and gave the dog an evil look. "Off the bed, Buster."

In reply, the dog licked her too.

"Yuck," she complained, wiping her face with my pajama sleeve. "His breath is awful. Buster, I said off."

"Maybe if we both push," I suggested.

We did. It worked, but only for a minute. No sooner had Buster landed than he was back on all fours, waiting for another chance to get up on the bed. Defeated, I lay back down.

"Daddy must have let him in before he went to bed," Cassie said. "I don't know what this is all about. He has a perfectly good dog bed downstairs. Did you shut the door all the way last night?"

"I thought Vanessa did."

"Oh. Right. Forgot about that part. Well, let's not think about it yet." She sat up, yawned and stretched, then rubbed her eyes. "What time is it, anyway?"

Turning my head on the pillow to check the travel alarm, I came nose to nose with Buster. He licked me again. “Yuck” was right. What had he been eating—raw squirrel? “A little before 8. Should we get up?”

“Might as well. Lucy’ll be here early, and I want to get lots of caffeine in my system first.” She reached down to brush the hair out of my eyes. “Yours too, sweetie. Why don’t I go down and get us some coffee, and you warm up the shower?”

“I’ll just go ahead and take one.”

“Not without me. Not this morning.”

“Cass, I really don’t think—”

“It’ll scare Buster off. He hates water.”

Sold. I got out of bed and went in to turn the shower on. When I stuck my head back into the bedroom, all I saw of Buster was his hindquarters hurrying through the door.

Cassie gave me a triumphant smile and followed him out.

**We reported to her parents** in the front parlor about an hour later, freshly showered, nicely dressed and in very good spirits. Mr. Wolfe lowered his newspaper a bit to inspect me over the top of his reading glasses, and I tried very hard not to look like someone who might have had carnal knowledge of his daughter under his roof—or in his guest room shower.

His countenance darkened.

Oh, well, Mrs. Wolfe was only looking at me as though I’d picked up the wrong fork. Caught, she forced on a social smile. “Did you sleep well, Devlin?”

“Very. Thank you.”

Cassie smiled knowingly—but only because her parents couldn’t see from that angle.

“Looks like another nice day,” I added.

Mrs. Wolfe agreed. Conversation stopped again.

“Have I mentioned how much I admire your house?”

Lowering his paper again, Cassie’s father addressed her mother. “I explained about the interest rate.”

“We got a very favorable one,” Mrs. Wolfe told me. “Calvin’s bank gave us attractive terms.”

Silence brooded over the parlor. All right, damn it all, enough was enough. “I wonder if I might have a word with you both. About the elephant in the corner.”

Mrs. Wolfe looked faintly alarmed. “Elephant?”

“An expression,” I assured her. “It means ignoring something that’s just too big to ignore. In this case—”

“Devvy, don’t,” Cassie said.

“—the fact that Cassie and I are together. I can understand that you’re not comfortable with it. This can’t be what you expected for your daughter. It’s not what I expected either, to tell you the—”

“I don’t care to discuss this,” Mr. Wolfe snapped, slamming the paper down on the carpet next to his chair.

“—truth, but I want you both to know that—”

“My daughter could have had any man she wanted.”

“—she means a lot to me, and—”

“Until *you* came along,” he added, glowering. “Filling her head with strange ideas.”

Cassie had heard enough. “Daddy, stop. You too, Devvy.”

“—I swear to you that...” I paused, finally hearing what he’d just said. “Strange ideas?”

Mrs. Wolfe jumped out of her chair to busy herself with the coffee service on the sideboard. “Would anyone care for more coffee? I just made a fresh pot.”

“She was a nice, sweet, normal girl,” Mr. Wolfe said, getting up himself. “Popular with the boys. The best boys from the best families, and a date every night of the week if she wanted.”

“How nice for you,” I growled. “Good for business, was it?”

Cassie, exasperated, looked from one of us to the other but couldn’t decide which one to yell at.

“She could have been married by now,” he informed me. “Should have been married years ago. Her sister Lucy has three children already.”

*Here we go.* “Your daughters aren’t breeding stock for your grandchildren program. With all due respect. *Sir:* This is Cassie’s decision to make, and if she doesn’t want children—”

“Would anyone mind if I got a word in edgewise?” Cassie asked icily.

“—then she doesn’t want children, and you don’t have a thing to say about it. In fact—”

“She’s my daughter. I think I have everything to say about it. If it weren’t for you—”

“STOP IT!”

Interrupted, Mr. Wolfe and I both scowled at her. But we did stop it. After which it got very quiet in the parlor again.

“Coffee?” Mrs. Wolfe pleaded. “Anyone?”

No one answered. Somewhere outside, something started baying.

Then the doorbell rang. Cassie’s mother practically dissolved in relief. “That must be Lucy. I’ll go let her in.”

Cassie, who was glaring at me, didn’t break eye contact for a second. “That would be nice, Mother.”

The woman all but ran out of the room. In her wake, Mr. Wolfe cleared his throat. “I think I should go, too.”

“Perfect, Daddy,” Cassie said, still glaring.

Now what? I waited till her father was safely gone to glare back. “What did I do?”

“I was saving this fight for Sunday morning. I was going to start it. Then I was going to let you finish it. And *then* we were going to have to leave to catch our plane.”

“So what? We just got a head start.”

“Oh, we got a head start, all right. Now my parents are both upset, and my sister’s here, and they’re probably telling her *all* about it right now, and we still have to be here for two more whole days. *That’s* so what.”

Well, yes, when she put it that way. Still, it wasn’t the end of the world. “All

right, it might be a little uncomfortable. But it already was. Your dad wants to kill me, Cass. I just—”

“I’ll bet he wants to kill you *now*,” she agreed.

I took a deep breath, to argue back, and then let it out again. She was right.

Shaking her head, Cassie closed the distance between us and gave me a hug. “You meant well, honey. You were trying to defend me. But you’ve got to take it easy here. They’re my parents, and I love them. It’s not like I have a choice.”

“I know. That’s the hell of it.” Ruefully, I kissed the top of her head. “I’m sorry, Cass. If it’s any consolation, mine are even worse.”

She looked up, half-smiling. “Would it be tasteless of me to agree with you?”

“Easy for you to say. You only met them once.” Footsteps and conversation floated through the door from the direction of the foyer; we were about to not be alone again. I let her go. “Remind me to kiss you later.”

“Coward.” But she backed off. “Listen, Devvy, about my sister—”

“Ix-nay,” I said softly. The woman herself was just coming into the room, and by the look in her eye, she was going to be a problem.

**It was interesting, in the bad way,** to be surrounded by Wolfes. There was a certain anthropological value in it, though. Take the family resemblances. Cassie had her father’s eyes, her mother’s looks and a few traits from both, but she and her sister didn’t even look related. Except for the dark hair, which was Mr. Wolfe’s doing, Lucy might not have passed for a member of the family.

She might have been as pretty as the rest of them, though, if it weren’t for the permanent scowl. As hard as I tried not to, I kept seeing the Red Queen whenever I looked at her. Maybe it was all that childbearing.

The produce in question were somewhere upstairs right now, playing with Buster. By the squeals, thuds, thumps and occasional woofs, everyone was having fun. Were children always this loud?

Mr. Wolfe, dug in at the head of the breakfast bar, lowered his paper to look at the ceiling doubtfully. Then he shrugged, apparently trusting insurance.

“They’re all excited today,” Lucy said, a bit defensively. “They couldn’t wait to see Buster. *And* their Aunt Cassie, of course.”

Like I believed that. They’d barely let her kiss them hello before they made tracks upstairs as fast as six feet could take them. It had hurt Cassie’s feelings a little, I could tell, and all three of them were on my list now.

“I can send them outside to play if they’re bothering you, Daddy.”

He grunted something from behind the paper. Mrs. Wolfe and Lucy exchanged glances over the turkey they were basting; then Mrs. Wolfe shook her head. Apparently the Lord and Master was fine with the racket—for now.

“Michael always says he likes the pitter-patter of little feet,” Lucy continued. “I honestly think he wants another baby. But we just got Jeremy potty trained, and I think three is enough, don’t you, Cass?”

Cassie finished buttering her coffee cake before she answered. “That’s between you and Michael, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s nice to have your family’s approval before you do important things. Don’t you agree, Devlin?”

Under the table, Cassie locked her feet around one of mine; over it, she silently pleaded for peace. *Oh, all right.* “Very nice. But it *is* between the two of you.”

Lucy didn’t quite know what to say to that. But the pounding upstairs was starting to make speech difficult anyway. One particularly solid thump made us all look up; the chandelier was swaying slightly.

Mr. Wolfe put the paper down and gave his younger daughter a meaningful look that I recognized at once. So Cassie came by it honestly.

“I’ll have Michael speak to them when he gets here,” Lucy told him. “He said he’d be here by 11.”

“The house may not still be standing by 11,” Mr. Wolfe said.

She looked puzzled. Apparently she hadn’t inherited many of the IQ points in the gene pool, either.

But I saw a chance in the situation. “Why don’t I take them outside to play? It’s a beautiful day. I could use some fresh air myself.”

Cassie started to protest, but the relief on the others’ faces was so clear that she reconsidered. “Be careful. You don’t want to ruin your coat.”

“I’m not planning to.”

“What coat?” Lucy asked, as though it were any of her business.

Too casually, Cassie said, “Oh, a nice black leather duster. I made her buy it. It’s *very* sexy.”

I left the room on the double, to thunderous silence.

**Finding Lucy’s brood** was no problem whatsoever. Talking them into going outside was a little more trouble—until I told them I’d seen the *South Park* movie. We’d have to discuss it outside, I said; parents got so weird.

Then Buster tried to say hello again in his own special way, but this time I was ready; I put a knee in his chest and sent him sprawling.

These two things combined impressed the children mightily. A grownup who knew bad words and could punch a dog out! They raced me to the stairs and were already waiting at the picnic table when I got there.

About fifteen minutes later, Cassie came out to find the children playing nicely on the swing set; Buster curled up on the ground nearby, keeping a watchful eye on them; and me leaning against a tree with my hands in my coat pockets, probably looking as satisfied as I felt.

“There you are,” she said. “What happened?”

“Nothing much. I told them about the *South Park* movie—”

“Devvy, you *didn’t*.”

“—and then I told them that Cartman was nothing compared with what I’d do to them if they dissed their Aunt Cassie again.”

Several emotions fought for control of her face, but one of the softer ones won. Glancing at the swing set to make sure she hadn’t been seen yet, she slipped her arms around me and kissed my cheek. “You didn’t have to do that, honey. They’re just little kids.”

“No excuse. I meant it.”

“I know you did. That’s what worries me.” She checked the swing set again; the coast was still clear. “You know they’ll tell Lucy.”

“No, they won’t. I had a talk with them about *that*, too. If they tell, their mom and dad are going to think they really saw the movie themselves, and they’ll be grounded till spring break.”

“Thank God you’re on my side,” Cassie said, laughing.

“Always.”

She gave me a real kiss, which I obligingly returned. We cut it short, though, just to be safe.

“Mom sent me out here to bring you all in,” she said. “Michael just called from the car. He’s on his way.”

“This should be good. Do the kids look like him?”

“Unfortunately.”

I shook my head. “Something wrong there. But I figured there was anyway. What kind of person insists on being called ‘Michael?’”

“The kind of person he is. You won’t like him. That’s all right, though; I don’t like him either.”

“Can’t wait,” I lied.

She gave me a little squeeze and then let go. “Come on. Lucy’ll be out here next if we don’t bring the kids in.” Turning back toward the swing set, she cupped her hands around her mouth. “Chad! Rachel! Jeremy! Time to go in now!”

Buster had to hustle to keep up with them as they raced over to Cassie—and then almost knocked her over in a group hug. I stepped back a few paces to memorize the scene and the look on her face.

That was more like it. Now I’d have to do something about the rest of the family. *South Park* probably wouldn’t work on them. But demons might.

## Chapter Four

### And then there was Michael.

I didn't like him right from the start. It might have been the junior-executive nerd-boy coat with the fur collar; it might have been the mean piggy eyes; but I was having more trouble with the artificial hair. His teeth were all capped, too. He'd gone to a lot of trouble on himself, for some reason. But it was no use without working out, and he clearly didn't run except for jelly doughnuts. What did Cassie's sister see there? Maybe it was true what they said: Viagra puts flagpoles on condemned buildings.

"What's funny?" Cassie demanded in a whisper.

I drew her aside to tell her. She almost doubled over laughing, just managing to grab my arm for support.

Michael didn't seem to appreciate the wanton PDA. But he didn't make a point of it—simply peeled his coat and gloves off and handed the lot to his wife. Narrowly, I watched her bear them off to the coat closet. His arms didn't look broken; what was his damage that he couldn't hang up a coat?

"So how is business, Michael?" Mr. Wolfe asked, almost smiling for the first time that day. "Keeping busy at the office?"

"Twenty-four-hour job, Dad. Even this morning. Thank God for wireless." He patted his jacket pocket comfortably. The word *burgher* popped into my mind; bemused, I pictured him in lederhosen and one of those little hats with the feathers. "We've got a huge deal going down in Singapore right now. I'm leaving the beeper on just in case. Hope you don't mind if I have to leave again."

Mr. Wolfe assured him that business was business. There followed a several-minute discussion of same, during which Cassie got increasingly restless; finally, she simply pulled me out of the room.

"I hate when they do that," she said. "It's like being drafted into Rotary. I'd rather sit in the kitchen and listen to Mom and Lucy talk about childbirth."

Startled, I dropped a step back. "*Do* they do that?"

"Of course they do. When they're not talking about Martha Stewart or what's on sale at Saks or why I still haven't gotten married."

"They talk about that in front of you?"

"You may not have noticed, but we're not shy in this family."

"Neither am I. And if they're fool enough to bring it up today, in front of *me*—"

"You said you'd be on your best behavior. You promised me."

"This won't count. I get an exemption for people who ask for it."

She pulled me to a stop. "They're my family, remember? I don't always like them, but I love them. And if *you* love *me*—"

"This is so unfair," I grumbled.

"If you love me, you'll cut them some slack. They really do care about me. They just have a strange way of showing it sometimes." When I didn't argue the point, she loosened her grip, but only a little. "They just want the best for me. You don't get that this is a test, do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

“You really *don’t*,” Cassie said, a note of wonder in her voice. “What do you think I brought you home for? Why do you think my father’s been trying to start fights with you?”

My inner Cartman started jumping up and down, howling. “If you’re trying to tell me we’re doing that goddamn sex-roles thing—”

“You are *so* touchy about that. Want a pink barrette? I know where I can find some.”

I didn’t even smile.

“Relax, Devvy. It could be worse.”

Of course it could be worse; no doubt it would get worse soon. But for the moment, nothing supernatural was happening, and I wasn’t afraid of anyone or anything in this house. Except maybe Cassie if I let her down.

“All right, dammit. Let’s go hang with the womenfolk. Help in the kitchen or bear some live young or something.”

“You do your chromosomes proud, honey,” she said, not even bothering not to sound sarcastic.

**Dinner began precisely** at noon. Mrs. Wolfe was very particular about that. She and Lucy had hovered over the turkey in the kitchen like midwives from 11:30 on, and only at the stroke of 12 would she serve.

We all reported to the main dining room, which was a paradise of Baccarat, Limoges and starched linen, bristling with intimidating silverware. There was also a huge fireplace, burning about a cord of wood. Fire struck me as being strangely appropriate.

While we found our seats, I tried to figure out what the tiny forks were for. We’d never gone beyond three forks in my family and went to three only on the grandest occasions.

“Oyster forks,” Cassie whispered, slipping into the chair on my left.

“Thanks,” I whispered back. Then I noticed the place card in front of her. “Wait a second. That says ‘Michael.’”

She shrugged and tore it in half, under her brother-in-law’s disapproving eye.

“Never mind, Michael,” Lucy soothed him. “Devlin was supposed to sit next to me. You can sit here instead. Won’t this be cozy?”

Considering that the new seating arrangement followed battle lines—Cassie and me on one side of the table, Lucy and Michael on the other, and her parents at either end—I wouldn’t have called it “cozy,” but at least it would be convenient. It was good, too, that children and dog were having their dinner in the other room. Things would get messy enough in here without them.

Mr. Wolfe tapped his wineglass for order. “We might give thanks.”

Under the table, in private, Cassie took hold of my hand. I smiled back at her. Yes, there were things to be thankful for this year.

“Because you’re our guest,” he continued, “we’ll allow you to do the honors, Devlin.”

Cassie squeezed my hand harder than she probably intended and then let go. I



suddenly felt sorry for every male who'd ever been dragged home to meet the girlfriend's family. I felt sorrier for myself, because I wasn't even a guy—and if they didn't believe me, they could ask Buster. Just because this ritual was the only one they knew didn't make it right.

"Whenever you're ready," Mr. Wolfe prompted.

Unwillingly, I rummaged around in memory for a Methodist grace from childhood. Too workaday for this room. Then I remembered Sunday dinners at my Catholic friend Mary Bernadette's house. "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive—"

Mrs. Wolfe almost didn't gasp. "Why, Devlin, we didn't know you were Catholic."

"I'm not, Mrs. Wolfe."

"Oh." Uncertain, she glanced at her husband, who didn't look convinced. "You have a very Irish name. What are you, then?"

*She's her mother. She's her mother.* "Not all Irish are Catholic, Mrs. Wolfe. You may have heard about the Troubles. As for what I *am*, I was brought up Methodist."

While she located me on the social scale—Episcopalians at the top; Presbyterians next; Methodists second-to-last, ahead of Baptists—I tried to remember what denomination the Wolfes were. Mr. Wolfe, of course, worshipped at the Church of Mammon, which had temples everywhere.

Michael cleared his throat impatiently. "I think we might have a toast, Dad. May I?"

Mr. Wolfe said that he might. Looking dubious, Cassie moved her chair slightly closer to mine.

"To freedom of religion," Michael intoned, "the reason this great country was founded. And to all the immigrants who came here to make a decent life."

*Well.* By his tone, he'd just stopped short of calling me a bog-trotting infidel mick, but he was probably saving the personal stuff for dessert. Coolly, I lifted my wineglass. "To the never-ending health of the Aryan people."

Cassie kicked my foot, but not very hard.

"I wasn't quite done," he said. "To the family. Without family values, none of us would be here today."

"To reproduction, which crosses all political lines," I replied.

Cassie kicked a bit harder this time. "Well, that was fun," she told the table brightly. "Now let's—"

"Civilization is based on the family," Michael retorted, starting to breathe a little hard.

I gave him a thin, cold smile. "Nice try. I've met your children."

At the head of the table, Mr. Wolfe made a strange noise that sounded more like laughter than coughing, which got him lasered by both his wife and his younger daughter.

"At least I can *have* children," Michael snapped.

"We have oysters," Mrs. Wolfe interrupted. "Cal, would you like to start—"

"Sit down, Elizabeth," he told her, almost happily.

Cassie had been suspiciously quiet for a while; I glanced over to see what was wrong. She was staring somewhere over Lucy's head, toward the bay window, so I

followed her sight line.

A large raven was perched on the window ledge, looking in. Bad. Then, as we watched, it simply vanished. Much, much worse. She was supposed to be a seagull right now, but when it came to Monica, “supposed to” never meant much. She was here, all right, and my guess was—

“I *said*, at least *I* can have children,” Michael repeated.

“Not now, Nature Boy,” I said, rather absently.

“I don’t think I like her, Cassie,” Lucy told her sister. “She’s rude.”

Cassie only half-heard that. “Later.” She pushed her chair back and tugged on my jacket with both hands, still focused on the window. “You and I need to take a little walk.”

“But we haven’t started dinner yet,” Mrs. Wolfe protested. “And it’s starting to look like rain.”

It was at that. The beautiful clear weather of an hour before was gone; now the sky was lead-gray, threatening lightning. In fact, in the brief silence that followed Mrs. Wolfe’s weather report, we heard thunder.

“We’re not going far,” she said. “Start without us. Devvy hates oysters anyway.”

*Thanks a lot, Cass.* “I don’t hate them all, Mrs. Wolfe. I’m sure yours are—Hell!” Manners forgotten, I grabbed Cassie and shoved her behind me, keeping a sharp eye on the raven that had just shot down the fireplace. “Don’t anyone move. Let me handle it.”

No one said a word. Suspicious, I turned. They were all rooted to their chairs in silent shock—all except Michael, who was missing. I figured I knew where to look, though, and sure enough, that was where he was: under the table.

Making sure I knew where Monica was first—she was busy swooping around the room, trying to get her bearings—I checked Lucy. Our eyes met, and I saw embarrassment in hers. I filed that information for later, along with a note to try to feel sorry for her.

By now, Mr. Wolfe had recovered his senses; he was pushing his chair back, looking determined. “I’m going to sue hell out of that contractor. There’s supposed to be a screen on the chimney. Why didn’t that bird burn up in the fire?”

“This one doesn’t burn,” I informed him.

“Keep it away from the turkey, Cal,” Mrs. Wolfe pleaded. “We spent all morning—”

“I’ll handle it,” he said, grabbing the carving knife. “Michael?”

Michael stayed right where he was. Looking very much like the deadlier of the species, Lucy reached for her oyster fork and stabbed him under the table with it.

Mr. Wolfe sighed. “Cassie?” A moment’s hesitation. “Devlin? Let’s get these doors closed. Then you two help me get it down.”

Cassie gave me an affectionate nudge before she let go of my jacket and went to close the double doors at one end of the room. I took the ones at the other end. It wouldn’t do any good, but if it would make the man feel better, fine.

Just as I took hold of the door handle, Vanessa pushed in. She was dressed up this time like a French maid of some sort, in a chic little white apron and a chic little black dress with a very low neckline, carrying a covered silver dish. “What?” she

asked, affecting innocence. "Is it too late to serve?"

"Get out of here, Vanessa. And take her with you. We've already got enough trouble today."

*"Au contraire.* Close the doors now."

By her tone, she meant business. I closed the doors behind her, and she strolled on into the dining room, unnoticed in the commotion. All the Wolfes were on their feet, tracking the bird; Michael was up now, too, trying to stay out of its flight path.

"Devvy, come here a second," Cassie said. "I think if we chase it that way—" Then she saw Vanessa, and her eyes narrowed. "You could be some help here."

Vanessa smiled charmingly. "A pleasure to be of service, miss. Care for an oyster?"

Mr. Wolfe, swiping at the raven with the carving knife, turned toward the unfamiliar voice. "Who is that woman? Where did she come from?"

"It's a long story, Daddy," Cassie said.

I decided to let her handle that one. Meanwhile, I started walking the perimeter of the room, hoping the raven would follow me.

"Look!" Mrs. Wolfe's hand flew to her throat. "It's following her!"

So far, so good. Now if I could get it outside, maybe I could get it to turn back into Monica, and we could have words. As if it read my thoughts, the raven landed on my shoulder.

"Thank you," I told it. "We'll just go out back now, and then we'll talk. Deal?"

By way of answer, the raven gave me a friendly peck on the jugular.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Lucy complained.

"Quiet," Cassie said. "Devvy, I'm coming with you."

Another peck. It hurt this time.

"I don't think it wants you to. But come anyway. I might need some help." Slowly, I started walking toward the doors at the other end of the room, which were closer to the back door. The raven tightened its talons on my jacket. Irrelevantly, I wondered whether some alterations place in Greenville could repair claw marks.

We were halfway to the door, which Cassie was holding open, when Vanessa stepped into our path and the raven screeched—a horrible noise, especially so close to a person's ear.

"Hello, Monica," Vanessa said. "Oyster?"

The bird let go and made a direct line for her. There was a terrible flash of lightning, followed by a terrible clap of thunder, followed by the crash of the silver dish's cover on the floor, where the raven had thrown it. The next thing I knew, it had an oyster in each foot—which it promptly shelled and dropped down the front of Vanessa's little black French-maid dress.

Vanessa howled in outrage and started pelting the raven with oysters, half-shells and all. Her intention was better than her aim, though; one landed smack on the top of Mrs. Wolfe's beautifully coiffured head. The woman looked stunned for an instant—but only for an instant. Blue fire flashed in her eyes as she searched the table for something airworthy. And in that second, I finally saw my beloved in her mother.

Mrs. Wolfe launched a dinner roll, knocking off Vanessa's little cap. Vanessa, not amused, scooped up the roll and lobbed it back.

"You can't do that to my wife," Mr. Wolfe snapped.

Vanessa laughed. “‘Can’t,’ hell. I’ve got an oyster with your name on it, too, you old tightass.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tightass,” Vanessa repeated—and nailed him in the forehead.

The food fight was on.

Cassie still had the doors open at the other end of the room; I crossed the battlefield, stepping around oyster and turkey parts, to close it for her. Without a word, she wrapped herself around me and buried her face in my shoulder so she couldn’t possibly see.

“My family for Christmas,” I promised, holding her tight.

## Chapter Five

**We sat around the long table** in heavy silence. I'd taken care to see that Cassie got the only clean chair; that dress was one of her favorites, and I doubted that cranberry sauce and gravy would come out of wool.

Frankly, I doubted that they would come out of wallpaper, Oriental rug or upholstery either. The Wolfes were fairly well totaled too, including Lucy, who'd turned out to be an easy target but a deadly shot with turkey wings. Part of one was still lodged over her husband's left ear, just where he had a tuft of real hair. The toupee itself was in the gravy boat—a good enough place for it, in my opinion.

As for Monica and Vanessa, they'd disappeared at the height of the battle they'd started, which was just like demons. But at least we had some quiet time now.

Cassie gave her parents another reproachful look. Mr. Wolfe frowned and straightened his tie, dislodging a clump of stuffing.

"Maybe we should let Buster in," I said, watching it scatter on the rug.

"No, we should let *goats* in," Cassie corrected. "We probably need a couple hundred of them. Go call directory assistance, honey. There must be goat ranches around here somewhere."

"That's enough, dear," her mother said wearily.

"She thinks that's enough," Cassie told me, feigning amazement. "I wonder what she thinks would be too much. I put on my best perfume for this dinner, and now just look at this place. Of course, the *goats* won't care, but—"

Mr. Wolfe frowned. "Cassandra Renée, that'll do."

"Now they're doing middle names," she continued, still addressing me. "I always knew I was in trouble when they did that. Know one thing I always got in trouble for? *Playing with my food*. Throwing peas at my sis—"

"She's too big to spank," her father told her mother, shrugging.

"—at my sister. Just so you know, she always started it."

Across the table, Lucy actually stuck her tongue out at Cassie. Cassie did it right back.

"Girls," Mrs. Wolfe scolded, "how many times do I have to tell you that isn't ladylike? Young ladies..."

Her voice trailed off as both her daughters glared at her. No doubt this was an ancient irritation. No doubt it was extra-irritating now, coming from a woman who'd been throwing cranberry sauce at people a few minutes ago.

"I am not a lady," Cassie said grandly. "I'm a professional advertising executive. I own lingerie that would make Great-Aunt Emily spin in her grave."

What that had to do with anything was debatable, but it was certainly true. Feeling the family's concentrated attention, I tried to look nonchalant—and to think about anything else.

"But that doesn't matter today, does it? No. It's only Thanksgiving. I only brought home the person I love, and you only acted like *this*. It's a miracle no one was killed."

"All right, Cass," I said, sensing where this was going. "It's over. Let's not—"

“Over? Oh, no. I’m just getting started. You.” She targeted her sister. “You’ve been acting like Devvy’s some kind of slimy green thing in a petri dish, and *you* call *her* rude. And *you*.” Now she had Michael in the crosshairs. “I don’t like you. I never, ever did. As of today—”

Michael, who’d pursed his tiny lips as soon as she started on him, unpursed them with an audible pop. “For God’s sake, you can’t expect me to approve of this...*arrangement*. It’s unnatural.”

“So are half your parts,” Cassie shot back.

Both her parents gave her the two-name warning again. But Lucy was smirking.

“Well, it *is* unnatural,” he insisted to the room at large. “She’s a girl.”

Cassie tossed her head impatiently. “Thank you for that news flash, Michael. For your information, I know the difference. For your *further* information, you don’t count. Now get that wing off your head. You’re disgusting.”

“We don’t have to sit here and listen to this,” Lucy said. But neither of them moved.

“As for you two,” Cassie told her parents, “you are just beyond belief. You’ve done everything but put Devvy out in the doghouse, like she wasn’t even civilized, and then *you* act like animals. Really, really *bad* animals.”

The Wolfes just sat there too, taking the Fifth.

“I hope you’re happy. There are little children in the other room. How are you going to explain this to them?”

“Oh-oh,” Mr. Wolfe said, startled.

Cassie nudged me. “‘Oh-oh,’ he says. My father, the bombardier, says, ‘Oh-oh.’ I think it’s a little late for ‘Oh-oh,’ don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“Maybe you can take them all out back and hose them off while I set this room on fire. I really don’t see any other way.”

She had a point. But she was forgetting one very important thing. “There’s always another way,” I told her. “Mrs. Wolfe?”

The woman tried to smile. “Yes?”

“Do you have a back staircase?”

“Yes, we do. Why?”

“I’ll bet if you sneak upstairs and clean up, and we watch the kids for a while, they’ll never know.”

The four miscreants looked at one another. Then Michael snatched his hair out of the gravy boat. A heartbeat later, they were all scrambling out the back double doors and up the stairs. Cassie and I waited. Feet pounded down the hall overhead; doors slammed; water started running.

“You told me to cut them some slack,” I explained, in defense of the way she was looking at me.

“That was before.”

“Let it go, Cass. Vanessa started it. And I’ll remind you whose demon she is.”

“Don’t go anywhere near there. *She’s* not the one who flew down the chimney in the first place.”

I considered. “All right, Monica started it. But we still have to finish it. We can’t leave this room like this. What do you want to do? Demons or maid service?”

"There's always both," Vanessa said.

We turned. She was right behind us, still in maid costume, but in a clean one now.

"You've already been enough help," Cassie snapped. "You don't look like a very good maid anyway. And while I'm already yelling at you, what is *up* with these little getups of yours? Have you been playing with my old Barbies or something?"

"Exactamento."

"I don't think there was ever a Hooker-Maid Barbie, Vanessa."

The demon shook her head sadly. "Pity. It would've been popular. Can I ask you something?"

"No."

"What's the deal with Barbie feet?"

Cassie looked at me, exasperated, for help with the translation. "They're a weird shape," I said.

"Of *course* they're a weird shape. The little shoes wouldn't stay on if they weren't. What's her point?"

"Her point," Monica said, "is exactly the shape of her head."

Cassie and I were far past surprise for one day, so we took her sudden appearance for granted. For her part, Vanessa just rolled her eyes.

"She could have at least shelled the oysters first," Monica continued. "She could have cut your mother's head right off, Cassandra. You're lucky she throws like a girl."

"Ooooh, that hurts," Vanessa said, smirking. "But look who's talking anyway. You missed the old man by a mile with that pie."

"I winged him, Blondie. Don't talk to *me* about—"

"Winged him? You couldn't have hit him if he were ten feet wide and yellow."

"Enough," I told them.

"Stay out of this, Devlin," Monica said, pushing the sleeves of her long black gown up. "I'll fix all of them for you later. I promise. But first, I'm going to fix *her*."

Cassie sighed. "You handle this, honey. I'll go keep an eye on the kids."

"Why do I always have to do everything?" I complained.

"Because the witch is *your* fault."

Monica shot a menacing look at her but let her leave the room. That left me and two demons—and a mess that could take years to clean up. As I scanned the room again, wondering where to start, I noticed that the chandelier was dripping. There seemed to be most of a turkey carcass wedged up there, cavity end down. How could *that* have happened?

"Now," Monica said, closing in on Vanessa, "you pay for this, you amateur bitch. Turn me into a gull, will you? How would *you* like to be the next Mrs. Michael Jackson?"

Mockingly, Vanessa whistled a few bars of "Beat It"—which did it for me. I shoved them apart and held them off, too mad to care what they might turn *me* into for it. "Get this straight, both of you. I don't care what you are. I don't care why you hate each other so much. I don't care who started it. I just want it to stop. *Right now*. Understood?"

"Don't forget that you're mortal," Monica said dangerously.

"And don't *you* forget that I'm not stupid. You can't win if I don't let you. All I have to do is go straight again—"

She barely bit back a hiss of surprise. "You wouldn't dare."

"—and you're gone. Isn't that right, Vanessa?"

"I don't think you should," she said, looking concerned. "Cassandra would kill you."

"Then I'd be out of my misery either way, wouldn't I?"

Both demons considered the implications. While they did, I tried not to think. Cassie *would* kill me, all right, which would cost her the moral edge she'd just gained over her family.

As if on cue, the turkey carcass plopped down out of the chandelier at that moment, landing on the table with an awful half-squish, half-thud. Vanessa's nose wrinkled in disgust.

"You're bluffing," Monica told me.

"Maybe. But don't bet the rent. You two are a lot of trouble."

Vanessa shrugged. "You're right about her. She's always been no good."

"You're just as bad," I reminded her. "If you'd stayed at the beach like you said, none of this would have happened."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Devlin. You hate that Michael person. He hates you. Somebody would've thrown something sooner or later."

"I don't doubt it. But probably not on *this* scale." Pointedly, I surveyed the ruin of Mrs. Wolfe's beautiful dining room. "Now let's talk cleanup."

It was Monica's turn to smirk. "That would be a job for Hooker-Maid Barbie here."

"That would be a job for *both* of you. Humans couldn't possibly get this place cleaned up before the board of health found out. I figure between the two of you, you can manage."

"That sounds like a threat, Devlin," Vanessa said, with a bit of edge.

"It's not a threat. It's a fact. You two put this room back together on the double, or I give the straight thing another chance."

I held my breath, waiting to see whether the demons would buy it. Finally, Vanessa threw up her hands.

"All right, c'mon, Monica. It won't kill us. Where do you want to start? Ceiling or floor?"

In grudging silence, my demon lifted a finger, literally, and the ceiling was clean again.

"Thank you," I said. "Now I'm going to go get Cassie, and we're going to get out of this madhouse for a while. Can I trust you two to be gone before her family comes back down?"

Vanessa snorted. "Like we'd even want to be caught dead with *them* again."

"I don't know about this. We're just letting them walk out of here," Monica said.

"They'll be back. The weekend's not over."

That seemed to pacify her. With a martyred sigh, she pointed to the chandelier, which started tinkling as the crystals started coming clean. Satisfied, Vanessa set to work on the windows.

I left them then, hoping that I hadn't just made a big mistake.



## Chapter Six

**Cassie said she wanted me to have** one good memory of Thanksgiving, so she took me to Country Club Plaza that night for Plaza Lights.

We'd driven through the day before, on the scenic route. From the street, the Plaza had looked both interesting and expensive, which was all I asked of shopping districts. But it was even more interesting close-up—blocks and blocks of 1920's ersatz-Spanish mall, bristling with ornate towers, balconies, courtyards and fountains. Lots of fountains. It didn't take long to run out of coins.

Cassie told me Kansas City had more fountains than Rome and more miles of boulevards than Paris. When I asked what that proved, she stopped speaking to me for two or three minutes. So I took it back. In all truth, I'd found the city surprisingly beautiful, and I liked the look of this Plaza. Maybe we'd come back in the summer.

Without telling her family, of course. Also without these crowds—the streets were positively mobbed—and without the caroling.

The up side was that all these people could function as windbreaks. It was getting seriously cold. We'd put on heavy sweaters when we changed clothes and thrown on coats when we left, but they weren't enough now. Cassie was starting to shiver a little, which concerned me. All these stores and not one of them open, or I'd have found her something warm, damn the cost. Then I spotted a coffee vendor down the block.

"Put this on," I told her, stripping off my leather coat. "I'll be right back."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Hard to say. Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

Cassie grumbled something about having to drag my frozen corpse to the morgue, but when I looked back, she was draping the coat over hers like a cloak. Good. She got really crabby when she got sick, which I didn't need.

A few minutes later, I came back with two large coffees, almost too hot to hold through the thin foam cups. She wrapped both hands around hers and closed her eyes in bliss.

"It's just plain coffee," I remarked. "That was fastest."

"I don't care if it's battery acid; it's *hot*. Thank you, honey."

The people nearest us pretended not to have heard that. I gave them a look that made them pretend not to see us, too. Reassured that we wouldn't be an issue, I peeled back the plastic tab on my cup lid and soaked up the escaping steam. God, it was cold out. "So what happens here? Where's the tree?"

"It's not about a tree. See those lights?"

I looked where she was pointing. The tops of the buildings were strung with lights—probably miles of lights, if they'd wired up the whole mall.

"There's a little ceremony," she said, "and then the lights get turned on. It's really kind of pretty."

"So we don't have to stand anywhere special? We don't even have to stand?"

"No, but—"

"Come on. I remember a place."

She didn't argue, for once. We crossed a few streets and wound up at the Neptune fountain. There was just enough room left on the base for one small person to sit all scrunched up; I hovered meaningfully over people until they made enough room for Cassie.

"You're not sitting?" she asked.

"We'll take turns."

She seemed about to argue, but that was when they turned the lights on, and everything got very festive for a while.

Being coldhearted and evil, I was mostly immune to Christmas lights. Still, the effect was prettier than I'd expected, and so was Cassie's expression. All this carrying-on seemed to take her back to childhood somehow. Looking at her, I suddenly saw a blonde little girl in bunny slippers and a flannel nightgown, up early Christmas morning, all wide-eyed wonder that the milk and cookies were really gone...

Damn, I was doing it again. A few weeks ago, I'd pictured her on a Schwinn with pink streamers, and now this. What was wrong with me, anyway? The cherub in my head had nothing to do with the real Cassie, who most likely had ripped into packages first, asked questions later and taken no prisoners.

"Hey," she said softly.

I could barely hear her over the crowd noise and the music. "What?"

She got up and moved close enough for private speech. "You had the weirdest look on your face just now."

"What look?"

"It was like you were a little kid on Christmas morning, and you knew you weren't going to get what you wanted."

Startled, I just stared at her.

"I had this really clear picture. You had on a flannel robe and fuzzy slippers, and no front tooth. It was adorable, except that you were so sad."

"Sad?"

As discreetly as possible, she gave me a little hug. "Never mind, Devvy. It's been a long day. Let's go back."

There was more to that, I was sure, but it was much too cold to argue. Obliging, I turned to follow her through the crowd to where we'd parked the car. Then something occurred to me.

"Hold up," I said, fumbling in my pocket for the coffee change. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. Leaning over a young couple, I tossed the coins into the fountain and just stood there a minute watching the water.

Cassie tugged on my sweater sleeve. "What was that for?"

All I could do was shrug. It had felt a little like asking for something, but I didn't know what.

"Well, if you wished you wouldn't see my family again, you just wasted your money. Look."

I did. There they were, the whole pack of Wolfes, about to cross the street right in front of a horse-drawn carriage. Michael still looked peevish, although for all I knew he always looked that way.

There was nothing to do but grab Cassie and push off in the other direction.

We made lousy time, but we got out of the Plaza alive.

**First thing back** at the house, we found matches and made a fire in the den. We were still cold to the bone, so we found some brandy, too. Then, to make absolutely sure of our survival, she took the stadium blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around us both.

"Only until your parents get back," I said.

"For as long as it takes," she countered, reaching for the snifter she'd set on the coffee table. "This is for medical purposes."

Her close presence under the blanket didn't feel medical, but whatever. In silent accord, I clinked snifters with her, and we drank. The brandy burned all the way down, but it burned good.

"Will you tell me something?" she asked.

"Sure."

"What did you wish for? Back at the fountain?"

That seemed like a strange question. She was serious about it, too, which was just as strange. "I'm not sure, Cass. Nothing in so many words. I just had a feeling."

"So did I."

That was all, but something unspoken hung over us. I couldn't tell whether it was good or bad, but it was big. She reached over to pat my thigh and just left her hand there, fingers tracing idly.

It hit me then how cold I'd been, how tired I was and how much I wanted this day over. Taking a careful grip on the snifter so it wouldn't spill, I put my head back and closed my eyes. The house was absolutely still except for the tick of the clock on the mantel and the crackle of burning wood. Falling asleep seemed both possible and desirable.

Then warm fingers touched my face, and a warmer mouth touched mine. Cassie made it last a while. "Don't go out on me," she murmured. "Want to go upstairs?"

Yes, eventually, but the very effort of moving, much less climbing stairs, was too much to think about just then. Reaching deep for some physical reserves, I pried one eye open. "This is the first time I've been comfortable all day. Ten minutes?"

Her lips curved into a gentle smile. "Fine."

Relieved, I let the eye close again. Cassie was still there, but it was probably safe to relax for a few minutes. I felt her tuck the blanket closer around both of us. Then she kissed me again, very softly, still taking her time, and my mind and body fought a short battle. The body won. That decided, I started to put the snifter on the end table, but Cassie took it and did it herself, reaching over me.

This maneuver put her in a compromising position, which I helped her get much farther into. Straddling me now, she bent back down. My hands ran up her thighs and around her hips, lingered a while, then moved of their own accord. While I fumbled with the buttons on her sweater, she pushed my pullover up and unbuckled my belt. It had a difficult catch, which was just as well, because just as she got that done, her family walked in.

We might never have noticed if Mrs. Wolfe hadn't made some noise fainting.

Cassie jerked up and back to see what had happened, pulling the blanket back in the process—and Michael slapped his hands over his eyes. Too late, I realized that she'd unhooked her bra before we were interrupted. It was one of those front-closing models, and a good part of her was on full display.

Our eyes met. For a second, she looked a very guilty sixteen, caught making out on prom night. But I must have looked guiltier, because she suddenly laughed and started buttoning her sweater back up.

Right. Good point. Quickly, I took care of my own predicament. Then, with trepidation, I checked the family's reaction. Mrs. Wolfe was out like a light on the Oriental rug; Mr. Wolfe had just managed to catch her head, but the rest of her had knocked over a small table. He was too busy with her to pay us any mind at the moment. And Michael had turned his back on us, hands still over his eyes, as though he'd just happened onto a crime scene.

But Lucy didn't look shocked, horrified or even particularly upset. She was patting her husband's shoulder reassuringly but almost smiling at her sister. Cassie sighed deeply and shrugged at her, which got her a real smile. There might be some history in that, I thought. Both of them had probably been caught like this before, and sisters generally stuck together in sticky situations.

All right, neither of them would have been caught exactly like *this*, but that wasn't the point.

"I suppose this makes us even," Cassie said, twisting around to sit on my lap. "One food fight for one make-out session on the couch. All right, Daddy?"

He mumbled something indistinct, still patting his wife's cheeks in an effort to bring her around.

"I'm going to take that as a yes. Michael?"

"Are you decent?" he asked sharply.

She rolled her eyes in amused exasperation. "Yes."

Mistrustfully, he turned. By his expression, he'd expected "decent" to mean we were at opposite ends of the county. But he didn't make a point of it. "I'm just glad the children didn't see that."

"Well, thank God," Cassie said, her tone dripping venom. "It's bad enough that they see animals having sex on the Discovery Channel. Where are the little angels, anyway?"

"They wanted to say goodnight to Buster," Lucy explained. "I imagine they let him out back to pee."

Michael winced. "We've discussed that word, dear."

"Pee," she said clearly and distinctly, looking him straight in the eye.

Cassie nudged me, delighted. But given this family's recent history, I wasn't sure how much more fun I was up for.

"We'll talk about this later," Michael promised his wife. "Right now—"

Lucy cut him off. "Right *now*, I think you should get that bug out of your butt. I've about had it with you today."

"Let's get out of here," I told Cassie.

"Not a chance. Here." Retrieving our sniffers, she handed me mine and then clinked hers against it. "Cheers."

“—your attitude,” Michael was saying. “Sometimes you surprise me, Lucy. Not good surprises, either. The kind of surprises that make me wonder why I stay married.”

That really was all I wanted to hear. “If you’ll excuse us, I think—”

“Keep out of this, Devvy,” Cassie said happily, hooking her free arm around my shoulders.

“Why *you* stay married?” Lucy snorted, sounding very much like her sister at times of high emotion. “You look more like the Pillsbury Doughboy every day. I’ll have you know that men still whistle at me on the streets.”

“They’re hailing taxicabs, Lucy,” he said patiently.

“Oh, taxicabs my ass. Do you ever wonder what I do when you’re out of town? Do you ever wonder why Jeremy is just a little *cuter* than the other kids?”

The shot of brandy that I’d just taken for fortitude almost went down the wrong way. Cassie patted me on the back, but a little absently.

“He’s got my ears,” Michael insisted. “He’s got my feet.”

Ears? Feet? Did parents really get this anal? Then I considered the source. Yes, they did if they were Michael. To prove my point, he started ticking off a list of features, each of which Lucy argued about.

At the same time, Mrs. Wolfe began to stir on the rug. “There, there, Elizabeth,” Mr. Wolfe said anxiously. “You’re all right. Just a little spell.”

“What happened?” she asked him. “What’s going on?”

He patted her face again. “Never mind.”

I would have liked to have heard more of that, but things were heating up at our end of the room. Lucy was informing her husband that she had her lawyer’s number on speed dial, he was telling her that his lawyer would eat her lawyer’s lunch any day she named, and Cassie was drinking to each point her sister won. By now, she was getting a little looped. So was I, what with keeping her company.

Then things got personal. Out of the blue, Lucy went off on her husband for going off on Cassie and me. “She’s my sister. I love her no matter *what* she sleeps with, and what you think doesn’t—”

“She’s turned queer, Lucy,” Michael shot back. “Your own sister. The aunt of your children. You’re fine with that?”

Damn, I wasn’t. Cassie was laughing, but I didn’t see anything funny about it. “Let’s not be using that word, boy. She hasn’t ‘turned’ anything.”

He rounded on me, his face even redder. “The hell she hasn’t. You two were groping each other like weasels in heat, and if that isn’t—”

“Weasels in heat,” Cassie repeated thoughtfully. “How do you happen to know what that looks like, Michael?”

“What are they saying?” Mrs. Wolfe asked, still on the floor.

Mr. Wolfe promptly covered her ears. “Nothing, Elizabeth.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Lucy told us. “He’s just jealous of Devlin. Isn’t that right, pumpkin?”

“I beg your pardon,” he said stiffly, “but I most certainly am not—”

“Of course you are. You’ve been jealous of everyone she ever brought home. Don’t think I don’t know you want her yourself.”

"Oh, God, kill me now," Cassie moaned, sinking down on my shoulder.

Michael glared at me significantly. "She's just saying that. She's just trying to make me look bad."

"Works for me," I said, raising my snifter to Lucy, who smirked in return.

"I do *not* want to sleep with Cassie," he insisted. "She's my sister-in-law, for Pete's sake."

Cassie lifted her head enough to blister him with a look. "She doesn't want to sleep with you either. And believe me, you could *be* the last man on earth."

"That's enough," Mr. Wolfe announced. "We don't have to discuss these things."

Michael wasn't done. "With all due respect, Dad, I really think we should have this out. I think..." Suddenly, he froze in an attitude of listening. "The kids. Quick—everybody act normal."

Pointedly, Cassie got even closer to me.

"The kids," Michael pleaded. "They don't need to see this."

"Don't they?" she asked. "Well, let me just check with your wife and see what *she* thinks. Lucy? Do the kids need to see this?"

"I don't know why not," Lucy replied. "They see everything else."

Michael practically burst a blood vessel, but it was too late; the children were already stampeding into the den. They took in the scene—their grandmother on the floor, their aunt on my lap—and didn't react in the slightest. The two little boys tried to tackle their father, and the little girl tugged on the hem of Lucy's sweater, wanting to be picked up.

"They look traumatized, all right," Cassie remarked. "We're going to bed now. Can I say *that* word in front of them?"

They were still arguing about it when we left the room.

**She was already in bed** when I came out of the bath, looking very much asleep. That worked for me; I was dead tired. On top of that, we were still in her parents' house, and I'd had enough of fighting City Hall for one day.

Wearily, I switched off the light and climbed into bed. I'd barely closed my eyes when she rolled over to snuggle up. That worked too. Pulling her closer, I kissed her hair and then settled in for the night.

"You're awfully quiet," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just tired."

"You don't sound fine. You're not having a good time, are you?"

There were many possible answers to that question, all of them wrong. But the stress of the day had been too much, and all I could do was start laughing.

A little anxiously, Cassie raised up and put her hand on my forehead. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Am I all right? Well, let's see. So far this weekend, I've had to deal with your parents, your sister, the prick she's married to,—"

"I don't think it's all his."

"—flying turkeys, hyperactive children and a psychotic dog. Not to mention Vanessa. Not to mention Monica. Not to *mention* that we just committed foreplay in

public. Of course I'm not all right. Are *you* all right?"

"Yes. And I'm having a great time." With a sigh of relief, she snuggled back down. "This isn't what you expected, is it?"

"I don't know how anyone could be *expected* to expect something like this."

"It's all right, honey. My family's crazy."

"Well, yes. But I don't blame you. So is mine."

"See? We're a perfect match."

Wisely, I kept quiet.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too. Get some sleep now."

"Devvy?"

Good thing I *did* love her. "Cass?"

"Can I do something?"

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

She laughed. And then she started to sing, very softly, a song that I never dreamed she even knew.

My eyes shot open. "How do you know that? I didn't think you even liked Cowboy Junkies."

"*You* do. And I love you. Problem with that?"

"No, but you mean you—"

"Shhhh," she said, and sang the next two lines.

Cassie wasn't just saying it. She meant it. She loved me. She didn't love my taste in music, though, so this could mean only one thing:

This was getting serious.

In the silence that followed, I blinked hard a few times, but it was no good. She raised up and touched my face in the dark, finding the place where the tears were starting to run down.

There was no need for words between us then, or for sleep till a long time later.

## Chapter Seven

### Friday

**Mrs. Wolfe knocked once**, as a formality, and opened the bedroom door without waiting for an answer. “Good morning. I thought you might...Oh!”

I watched her nearly climb the wallpaper in panic. It was oddly satisfying. “Good morning,” I repeated politely.

“I didn’t...I thought...I mean...”

“Cassie’s in the shower. Can I give her a message for you?”

The woman’s lips worked, but no sound came out. Very peculiar. I was lying in bed fully clothed in pajamas, all buttoned up, not doing a thing, yet she was acting as though she’d stumbled into Satan’s reception room.

“She should be out any time now,” I added. “She usually takes about twenty minutes. Baths are a different story. Get her in a tub, and she’ll stay there for hours. Especially if she has her foam bath fish to play with. Is something wrong, Mrs. Wolfe?”

“No, no, nothing. I just...” Her gaze swept the room, lingering on the dresser, where we’d dumped our jewelry, keys and other effects. “I didn’t know you were staying in this room, Devlin.”

I tried not to smile. “Cassie asked me to.”

“I see. When she said she was staying in here, I naturally thought...” A sigh. “Well. You say she’s in the shower?”

That was what I’d just said. She might also have caught a clue from the sound of running water in the bath or the steam leaking around the closed door. But there was no point in oppressing her about it. “She is.”

“Well. Would you tell her I’m starting the cookies?”

“Will she know what that means?” I asked cautiously.

“Oh, yes. She likes to lick the beaters. Ever since she was a little girl. So I thought maybe...If you think of it, would you tell her?”

“I’ll tell her. I promise.”

Mrs. Wolfe answered with a strained smile and then excused herself, closing the door firmly. Barely a minute later, Cassie emerged from the bath, hair wet, wrapped in a towel.

“That felt great,” she reported. “Did you miss me?”

“Desperately.”

“I left you some hot water. Don’t be long.”

“I won’t. By the way, your mother was just here.”

“She was?”

“She seemed surprised to see me.”

Cassie sighed. “She’ll live. What did she want?”

“She said to tell you she’s starting the cookies, and something about licking the beaters.”

A snort. “What am I, six years old?”



"I think she was trying to make a peace offering. It might be a start. What kind of cookies?"

"Christmas cookies. She always starts baking the day after Thanksgiving. As if there aren't any bakeries."

I couldn't help it. "'Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?'"

Cassie unwrapped the towel from around herself, snapped me with it and then turbaned it around her hair. "I'm getting dressed now. Go on and get your shower. We can have cookie dough for breakfast if you hurry."

I propped myself up a bit, idly enjoying the view as she rummaged in the big suitcase for clothes.

"I mean it, Devvy."

"All right, all right, I'm going." Regretfully, I stretched one last time before getting up. One hand made contact with something dangling off the headboard; curious, I yanked it down to see what it was.

So that was where Cassie's pink nightshirt had gone last night.

"Did my mother see that?" she asked, amused.

"That would be my guess."

"Then you'd better let *me* test all the cookie dough. She might try to poison you now."

True.

"I'm kidding," she said.

"Be sure to tell *her* that."

Cassie crossed the room, kissed me and shoved me in the direction of the shower. It seemed to me that she was taking the threat awfully lightly.

**There are two kinds of people** in the world, they say: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don't. It had always been my opinion that there were too many kinds for there to be only two, but a few minutes in Mrs. Wolfe's kitchen made me reconsider. In her world, you either baked or you didn't. Period. And if you didn't...

Well, hell's bells, how was I supposed to know how to use a cookie press? I'd never even *seen* one before. Cassie tried to make me feel better by sneaking me some dough, but it was still a bitter failure. Morosely, I retreated from the field and started washing dishes. That, at least, I knew how to do.

"Do be careful with that," Mrs. Wolfe urged as I picked up a mixing bowl. "It's a family heirloom."

"Yes, ma'am." *Family heirloom, hell. I'll bet you bought it at Restoration Hardware, you old—*

"And don't use soap on that pan. It ruins the temper."

Several smart remarks came to mind, but I let them pass. My mother had an iron skillet that she was the same way about. Personally, I didn't see how you could get a thing really clean without soap, but it wasn't like I cared.

Cassie detoured past the sink on her way to the oven. "It could be worse," she whispered. "My sis—"

Exactly at that instant, there was a godawful commotion in the front of the house, which could only be Lucy and her brood.

"Oh, good," Mrs. Wolfe said, sounding as though she really meant it.

Cassie started to say something to that, but suddenly the children were among us, squealing; Buster was barking in the back yard; and Lucy was yelling at everyone to stop yelling. Without quite meaning to, I said a bad word, which got me a sympathetic scratch on the back from Cassie.

There were several minutes of unbelievable chaos in the kitchen, which ended only when Mrs. Wolfe surrendered the first batch of cookies and sent the children outside. "They're not decorated yet," she fretted to Lucy. "I hate giving them undecorated cookies. Are you going to stay a while? Do you want to help?"

Lucy didn't answer right away. It took a second to figure out why she was staring at me: the Christmas apron. Annoyed, I stared right back. It had been Mrs. Wolfe's idea. She and Cassie had on Christmas aprons, too, and in my judgment we all looked stupid, so singling me out wasn't fair.

"I wasn't planning to, Mom," Lucy finally told her, "but maybe I should. I don't have an apron, though."

"Of course you do, dear. We've always had aprons."

Lucy looked at mine again with greater significance.

"Oh, for God's sake, your name's not on it," Cassie told her.

"It's tradition," she said. "I always wear that one."

This was just ridiculous. I wiped my hands on the dish towel and then took the apron off, handing it over in silence.

Lucy lost no time putting it on. "It's nothing personal, Devlin. It's just that...well, this is family."

"Of course it is," I agreed.

"We've had these aprons for years."

"I understand."

"Now, if you were part of the family, we'd probably get you your own apron. But that would be a little weird, wouldn't it? I mean, Cassie never brought a girl home before, so—"

"Get over it, Lucy," Cassie snapped.

"Oh, get off your high horse," Lucy shot back. "I don't care. I just don't know how I'm supposed to act. What am I supposed to do?"

I started to excuse myself, but Cassie yanked me back. "You could start by acting normal," she said.

"Normal? Come on, this isn't *normal*, and you know it. Why, the kids were asking last night if they need to call her Aunt Devvy."

With a strangled little noise, Mrs. Wolfe dropped a cookie sheet and fled the room. For my part, I was too stunned to run.

"Don't make this weird," Cassie warned. "We're not doing that stuff."

"Well, how do I know? I keep reading about it in the papers. How am I supposed to keep up with what we're supposed to call you?"

It seemed to be time for me to get involved. "What do you mean by 'you'?"

"You people."

Cassie tried to keep hold of my sweater, but I broke her grip. “We aren’t ‘you people.’ We’re us. What’s your problem with that?”

To my surprise, Lucy started laughing. “Got a temper on her, doesn’t she, sis?...I don’t have a problem. I don’t hate you, either.”

“Your husband does.”

Lucy snorted. “Michael’s a pig. He’s *my* pig, but he’s still a pig. At least I’ve got three beautiful piglets with him.”

The mysteries of attraction were too profound for my understanding—and for Cassie’s, too, by her expression. But at least the tension in the room was dropping off.

“He *is* jealous,” Lucy continued. “And I think he’s scared. I think he thinks it’s contagious. One time in college, a lineman came on to him, and—”

“He played football?” I interrupted.

“In college. Anyway, they were all in this tackle, and—”

“I never heard this story,” Cassie said.

Lucy shrugged. “Well, you wouldn’t have. It’s not like it’s something we’re proud of or would *talk* about or—what? Did I say something wrong?”

Cassie and I looked at each other. Then Cassie let out a long breath. “Never mind. Maybe we should do cookies and not talk. How would that be?”

“Fine,” Lucy said abruptly.

We all set to work again. Except for the shrieking and barking in the back yard, it was quiet for a few minutes.

“So do you like men at all, Dev?” Lucy asked.

Cassie slammed the oven door shut perhaps harder than she meant to. “What kind of question is *that*?”

“It’s all right,” I told her. “It’s a fair question. Lucy, you really want to know?”

“Considering that you’re sleeping with my sister,” she said, “I might even have a right to know.”

While Cassie sputtered, trying to come up with something bad enough to say, I debated how to handle it. Well, truth never hurt. “No, you *don’t* have a right. But since you asked, and since you’re her sister, I’ll tell you anyway. Yes. I do. I like a lot of men, and I even think some of them are attractive.” Feeling the heat of my beloved’s annoyance, I turned and gave her my very best smile. “Not half as attractive as Cass, though. I’ve never seen anything so gorgeous, have you?”

That mollified Cassie—a little—but didn’t throw Lucy for a second. She leaned on the counter on both elbows, all rapt attention. “Really? Wow. This is interesting. So what men *do* you find attractive?”

“This could start an argument,” I remarked. “Cassie and I have different opinions. She thinks Ricky Menudo is cute, for—”

“Martin,” Cassie corrected.

“—example, but I go for Johnny Depp myself. Or Tom Cruise. Kevin Kline.” I considered a minute. “Mel Gibson.”

“Well, *dub*,” Lucy said, laughing. “Who doesn’t?”

“I like John Travolta, too,” Cassie said thoughtfully. “Devvy hates that. Then there’s Kenneth Branagh. We agree on him, don’t we, sweetie?”

I just smiled.

Lucy shook her head. "I'll be damned. What about Sean Connery?"

"The older one. Not James Bond."

"You're a girl, all right," Lucy said approvingly. "I hear Buster likes you, too. And I know *he's* not gay."

Cassie ignored that, still thinking. "Brad Pitt."

"Too pretty," I told her. "Tim Daly."

That stopped conversation.

"The guy from 'Wings'?" Lucy asked.

"Yes, the guy from 'Wings.' I saw an interview with him once, and...I don't know; there was just something about him."

"Let's change the subject," Cassie snapped.

Lucy started laughing again. "Jealous much?"

Cassie glowered at her and went back to work with the cookie press.

"So you two really like each other," Lucy told me.

"We really do," I assured her.

"Yeah, I guess you do. Well. Tell me something, then. What's it like?"

I didn't like where she might be going with that. "What's what like?"

"Later," Cassie told her. "Mom might come back in any minute."

"Well, I'm curious. Not curious *that* way, but still. Is it any good? Do you get off?"

Cassie gave her sister a murderous glare. "I said later."

"Oh, come on, you can tell me. So how do you even *do* it, anyway?"

Cassie lost control of the cookie press, sending dough flying across the kitchen. A glance confirmed that she was in no mood to be rational, so I jumped in before she could. "Look, Lucy, this is private. If you don't mind—"

"You were practically having my sister in public last night," she retorted.

There was no defense for that, but Cassie tried anyway. "You weren't supposed to be back yet. You *never* get back from Plaza Lights that early."

"Doesn't matter. You could've gone up to your room. It's not like we would've walked in on you there. For crying out loud, she had you half-naked on the couch."

Outraged, I was about to change the subject in no uncertain terms when a gasp from the doorway made us all turn. Mrs. Wolfe was standing there with her hand at her throat, visibly unsteady on her feet.

"Mom?" Cassie asked.

Mrs. Wolfe opened and shut her mouth a few times, with no result, and then simply turned and walked away. We heard her heels clacking on the stairs in an irregular pattern, as though the effort of climbing was too much.

Cassie untied her apron, wadded it up and hurled it at her sister as hard as she could.

"It was just a question," Lucy protested.

"I'm going to get you for this," Cassie growled. "In the meantime, *you* finish the cookies. Come on, Devvy. We're going shopping."

**We didn't need to shop,** but that wasn't the point. We lost ourselves in the crowds at the mall, looked at everything, argued about jewelry and gradually forgot our troubles. After about an hour, we stopped for lunch. Except for some cookie dough, we hadn't had breakfast, and it was time for a little something.

There was a line outside the restaurant, but Cassie knew one of the managers—very, very well, it seemed, as eager as he was to hustle us a table. I eyed him speculatively over the wine list. Wouldn't have thought she would ever have gone for a man with an earring, but he wasn't as bad as her usual.

"We're old friends," she explained after he finally left to fetch us a waiter.

"Did I say anything?"

Cassie smiled but didn't answer. Which was just as well, because all of a sudden two waiters were hovering all over us. Yes, she'd slept with the guy, all right. But at least she was getting good service now.

We hadn't even started ordering when a third waiter showed up with a bottle of wine. "We hadn't decided yet," I told him.

"It's from the party at Table 10. Would you care to taste it?"

He was already pouring, so I didn't argue. Then I realized that Cassie was very quiet. She was staring at whoever was at Table 10, wherever that was, so I turned to see what was wrong. They looked harmless enough—just two ordinary-looking couples out for a day at the mall. One of the men was smiling at Cassie, but she wasn't smiling back.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

She didn't take her eyes off the other table. "Did I ever tell you about Charlie Foreman?"

"No. What about Charlie Foreman?"

She didn't answer. Uneasy, I turned again. The man was on his feet now, headed our way, and we were clearly about to be boarded.

"Work with me on this," Cassie said softly.

## Chapter Eight

**He was nothing to look at**, really—so ordinary that I probably couldn't have picked him out of a police lineup unless he was on fire. Everything about him was vanilla, from the thinning no-color hair to the buttoned-up Oxford shirt he had on with his Levis and sneakers. My guess was insurance agent or wholesale carpet dealer. Not Cassie's type. Not even close.

But the closer he got to our table, the greater the disturbance in the Force. There was something about his smile I didn't like. It practically screamed cat and canary, which meant there was something I didn't know, which meant I was going to hate whatever was about to happen.

"Hello, gorgeous," the man told her.

Under the table, Cassie kicked me—fairly gently, but not accidentally. "Hi yourself. How are you?"

"Great. Can I?" Without waiting for an answer, he made himself at home in the chair next to her. "Jeez, Cassie, you look great. So what have you been up to?"

To my alarm, she gave him the full treatment: the little tilt of the head, the little half-smile, the batting eyelashes. "Nothing special. Thank you for the wine, Charlie. That was sweet of you."

"What can I say—I'm a sweet guy." He smirked at his own cleverness and hitched his chair a little closer. "So what's going on? You married yet? Or do I still have a chance?"

I cleared my throat significantly. Cassie shot me a silent warning.

"Sorry," I said. "Sinuses."

Charlie smiled ingratiatingly and stuck his hand across the table. "Charles Foreman. Old friend of hers. And you are...?"

"Devlin Kerry." With great reluctance, I accepted the clammy handshake. "Also a friend of hers. Not quite as old."

Not knowing how to take that, he let go in a hurry. Cassie, however, knew exactly how to take it and kicked me under the table again. "She's visiting us for Thanksgiving," she explained. "Her boyfriend dumped her last week, and she didn't want to go home this year. You'll have to excuse her; she gets a little *irritable* these days."

My boyfriend? And *I* got dumped? Shading my eyes with one hand to block his view, I raised an eyebrow at Cassie. Stubbornly, she raised one back.

"Too bad," Charlie said, too sincerely to mean it. "What about you? Your boyfriend didn't mind that you didn't bring him home instead?"

"Oh, no. He's very special," Cassie replied. "He goes along with whatever I want. Isn't that right, Devvy?"

In silence, I contemplated the menu.

Charlie shook his head. "Can't blame the lucky bastard. *I'd* sure go along with anything you wanted."

I felt Cassie's smirk but refused to look up.

"Isn't that sweet," she said.

"I'm not just saying that. If you wanted to, say, go out tonight, I could go along."

That got my full attention—and so did the arm that he'd just draped over the back of her chair. Mostly unconsciously, I fingered the blade of the bread knife, testing the edge.

"You know what? I'm at a hotel this year. Too much commotion at the folks' house. So we can be alone. Say, 8 tonight? My room?" He leaned even closer to her. "Just like old times."

Cassie looked stricken. "I really can't, Charlie. I have company."

"Bring her. I've got a friend, if that matters. How about it?"

I was no longer working with this situation. Cassie and I were going to have a long talk about how her past affected our present, but first, I was going to hand this little weenie his head.

Then a set of long, sharp fingernails ran lightly over my shoulder, and Vanessa took the vacant chair next to me. "Sorry to be late, darling," she purred. "There is the *most* annoying traffic today. Did you order yet?"

If Cassie had looked stricken before, it was nothing compared with now. That made two of us. Vanessa smirked across the table at Charlie, who was gaping as though she'd walked in stark naked—which wasn't far off, given how low her sweater was cut in front and how tight her jeans were. It was no consolation to me that she'd at least showed up in civilian clothes.

"You must be Cassandra's boyfriend," she told him.

"I like to think so." Leaving his arm on Cassie's chair, he leaned forward and offered his hand. "Charles Foreman."

Vanessa took it in a way that had nothing to do with a handshake. "Vanessa. Devlin's lover."

Cassie, who'd chosen the wrong moment to try the wine, started choking. Solicitously, Charlie began to thump her on the back.

"Any more of that wine, honey?" Vanessa asked me.

"Don't 'honey' me," I snapped, keeping a close eye on Charlie. He didn't seem to be affected by the premise at all. What was wrong here?

For her part, Cassie seemed affected to the point of wanting to lunge across the table, but Charlie held her down. "Easy," he said. "Steady there. You're all right."

I wasn't. "This isn't what you think," I told him. "She just made that 'lovers' thing up. We don't even *like* each other."

Briefly, he looked over at me, then at Vanessa, who put a proprietary hand on top of mine. I shook her off as hard as I could.

But he only smiled. "Hey, I'm cool. You don't have to lie about it."

"See, sweet pea? I told you it's all right." Vanessa tried to put an arm around me, but I whacked her away.

"It is *not* all right," Cassie informed her. "You are *not* her lover."

"I don't see why not. She doesn't have a boyfriend. You said so yourself."

Cassie shoved Charlie off her before she answered—and he got that gotcha look again, for some reason. "Never mind what I said. How do you even know wh...oh, never mind. Devvy wouldn't touch you. She has better taste than that."

"Vanity, Cassandra," Vanessa chided.

Ominous silence fell on the table. Suspicious, I checked Charlie's table. They were watching—and, clearly, listening—with great interest.

"About tonight," Cassie said, her voice strained. "Maybe I can make it after all. Where are you staying?"

Vanessa held me down, but barely. Charlie noticed that, too, and started laughing.

"Excuse me?" I asked coldly.

Cassie tried desperately to ignore us. "I can probably get away for about an hour. What's your room number?"

"Forget it, Cassie," he said. "The jig's up. I knew it. *Knew* it. Hey, Pete!"

We all turned; the man at his table made a show of cupping a hand to his ear.

Charlie grinned big at him. "Pay me!"

Cassie went white, which told me everything I needed to know. Without caring whether all of Kansas City was watching, I scraped my chair back, went around the table and yanked him up by the shirt collar. It didn't take much; he was about the size of a mouse.

"Hey!" he yelped. "What's the matter with you?"

With another good shove, I started walking him out of the restaurant. "You're the matter. And you're leaving."

"You don't *look* like a dyke. Hey, watch where you're—ouch!"

"Keep moving," I ordered, keeping his collar pulled tight. Served the little creep right for using the D word...and for buttoning his top button without a tie this long after the '80's.

A beefy hand grabbed my shoulder from behind. The man it belonged to started to tell me to take my filthy paws off his buddy, but the threat ended in a strangled squeak, followed by a thud. Keeping hold of Charlie, I turned to see what had happened. His friend Pete was flat on his back on the carpet, eyes rolled back in his head.

I scowled at Vanessa. She smiled back at me and then blew on her index finger. Smoke rolled off it.

Damn.

**How we got out of the restaurant**, I'm not sure; things got a little confused for a while after that. But no one pressed charges, no one paid damages, and I doubt anyone ever paid for the wine.

Cassie hadn't said a word for a very long time. Usually, that meant she was furious, but she just seemed shell-shocked. So I drove the rental car, and she curled up all the way on the other side, hugging the armrest.

Vanessa had insisted on coming along; I made her sit in the back. She didn't argue. In fact, no one said anything until we were a mile or so down the road.

"Where are we going?" I asked Cassie.

She didn't answer.

"Stay on this street for a while," Vanessa directed.

I glanced at her in the rearview mirror. She had the red-eyes thing going again, but it wasn't the same as Monica—more like the difference between a pit bull and a poodle.

That reminded me. "Where's Monica?"



"She left," Vanessa said.

"Left?" I checked the road again, to make sure no traffic was within crash range if something happened. "What do you mean, she left?"

"She said she couldn't do anything here. It's true, you know." Vanessa sounded rather proud. "This is Cassandra's turf. I have a home field advantage."

It occurred to me to ask whether Monica would have a home field advantage if I took Cassie home for Christmas, but I was just smart enough not to ask in front of her. She was upset enough already.

"Anyway," the demon added, "she said she wanted to get a head start at the office."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, Devlin, she *is* your admin now. Have you forgotten?"

Yes, I had, and so had Cassie. She raised her head a few inches off the door panel, gave me a piteous look and then put her head back down. Uncertain, I reached over and patted her shoulder.

"She'll want to go through your files, I imagine," Vanessa continued. "Get up to speed on your clients and read your e-mail and return your phone calls and all that. I hate her, you know, but I've got to hand it to her: She's thorough."

"We'll talk about this later," I told her, meaning it with all my heart.

"What would you rather talk about, then? Politics? Religion? How about sex?"

"How about what just happened back there?"

"Sex it is. Good." The demon got comfortable, stretching out sideways in the backseat. "Do you know who Charlie Foreman is?"

"I sort of figured him for a rug salesman," I said.

"Pharmacist. But that's not important. He went to high school with your sweetie there, and that's where he found out."

"Found out what?"

"That she was going to be gay."

That got no reaction from Cassie at all. I reached over again and rubbed the back of her neck one-handed, for comfort. She usually loved that, but it got no reaction either. "Vanessa, I hate when people think they can pull my chain. So don't—"

"I'm not a people. I'm a demon." In the mirror, I saw her pull out a nail file and set to work grooming her claws. "Now, are you going to keep interrupting, or are you going to let me tell the story?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No," she said. "It started freshman year. The little geek started hitting on her as soon as he got a couple of hormones. He was just like..." The demon paused, frowning. "What's that stuff that sticks together? Hellcro?"

"Velcro," I said, not amused.

"Are you sure? Well, I'll humor you anyway. He was just like Velcro. *Stupid* Velcro. Cassandra kept telling him to get lost, but he wouldn't. Not that she thought about him all that much—she was too busy dating the football team." Vanessa leaned farther across the seat to speak confidentially. "She always had awful taste."

"Never mind," I told her. "Go on."

"I *am* going. What was the worst thing you could call a person in high school?"

I had to think about that one. “Depends where you went. Where *I* went, the worst thing you could be was a Delbert.”

“Sexually,” Vanessa prompted.

“You mean like the majorettes? We called them the Whore Corps. I don’t like to repeat what we called the cheerleaders, because Cassie *was* one, and she’s sitting right there, but—”

“Don’t be stupid on purpose, Devlin. Queer bait. *That* was the worst.”

Oh. Right. That was a bad one. But still... “What’s your point?”

“Not my point. *The* point.”

“Don’t make me stop this car,” I warned Vanessa. “Either tell the story, or I’ll—”

“He blackmailed her. He thought he saw her doing something she wasn’t *really* doing with another cheerleader, so he said he’d tell everybody she was queer bait if she didn’t go out with him. So she caved.”

“But that’s crazy,” I argued. “She was straight as an arrow in high school. She was only with one other woman, and that was in college. Only *one time*.”

“Since when do rumors have anything to do with the truth, Devlin?” Vanessa asked. “Although in this case, they did and they do. She knew a long time ago how she was going to be. She just didn’t know who *you* were going to be.”

I checked Cassie again. Nothing. “What are you saying? She slept with that little pissant just so people wouldn’t talk about her? Because she had some kind of hunch?”

“She never slept with him. She just let him tell everyone she did.”

“But he said—”

“And you believed him? Tsk, tsk, tsk. It was high school, Devlin. A rumor about sleeping with boys could ruin a girl’s reputation. In a good way. A rumor about being gay, on the other hand...” She filed her nails in silence for a few seconds. “Well, you remember high school.”

Grimly, I gripped the steering wheel tighter. There’d never been any proof in my case, either, but there had been rumors.

“Want to talk about it?” Vanessa asked hopefully.

“No.”

“Oh, all right. We’ll just talk about Charlie some more. Want to know what else I know about him?” She was hanging on to the back of my seat now, radiating eagerness.

“No.”

“Oh, come on—this is the good part. Even *she* doesn’t know this.”

“Let me guess,” I said wearily. “He cheats on his wife.”

“What wife?”

“Or his girlfriend. Whatever. The woman he was with at the restaurant.” *Trouble*, I thought, rubbing the bridge of my nose. Vanessa was working up to something, which was just like her. “You know, that bothered me. It was bad enough that he was hitting on Cassie at all, but doing it right in front of his—”

“You mean Pete?”

I frowned at her in the mirror. “No, I mean the woman he was with.”

“He wasn’t with a woman.” Small red sparks danced in her eyes. “He’s gay.”

Cassie sat up abruptly. "What?"

"Mr. Queer Bait is queer!" Vanessa bounced on the backseat gleefully, getting control of herself just as I drew breath to tell her to stop it. Then she leaned forward again. "And so is his friend, and so are the women they were with. How do you like *that*?"

I risked a quick look. Cassie had gone a very bad shade of white again.

Vanessa was clearly savoring the moment. "There were two whole tables of people just lying their heads off today in that restaurant, and the amateurs took *you* to the cleaners."

"He chased me for years," Cassie protested. "He really meant it."

"Of course he did. He didn't want to be called 'queer' either. That's why he went so far the other way. You'd know something about that. Wouldn't you, Cassandra?"

A few beats of silence.

"All that closet stuff is a crock," she added. "The best place to hide is in plain sight. Isn't that right, girlfriend?"

"Devvy, make her stop," Cassie ordered.

"She's *your* demon," I reminded her.

She pondered that. Then she curled back up against the armrest. She didn't say another word for hours.

**We spent a tense, mostly silent evening** avoiding her parents. That was easy. Mr. Wolfe was dug in with a stack of newspapers in the den; Mrs. Wolfe was in bed, allegedly nursing a migraine; and it was a very, very big house.

When we finally went upstairs, Cassie stopped short of the guest room door. "Not tonight," she said quietly.

"I know. I wasn't asking."

"No, I mean..." She took a step back. "I think I want to be by myself tonight. In my old room. Do you mind?"

No, I didn't, not really. But for some reason, that really hurt. Trying not to let it show took all that I had. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine. I just need to be alone for a while."

Mechanically, I nodded. "What about Vanessa? Isn't she sleeping in there?"

"She can sleep hanging upside-down in the attic for all I care." Cassie sounded downright poisonous—the first flash of emotion she'd shown since the restaurant. I decided to take it as a good sign.

So I kissed her goodnight—platonically, on the forehead—and went to bed in the guest room. Alone.

**Something woke me** a couple of hours later. Half-expecting a burglar—or, worse, Buster—I reached for the bedside lamp with the idea of using it as a weapon. Just in time, I recognized Cassie's perfume.

She didn't say anything at first; she just climbed into bed and held on tight. In sheer relief, I did the same.

"I thought not tonight." I hoped it sounded casual.

"No." She held on tighter.

"Is something wrong? Did..." An unpleasant thought surfaced. "Did Vanessa say something?"

I felt her shake her head. All right, we could talk tomorrow. All that mattered now was that she was here.

One thing was sure, though: I was going to have Vanessa help me out Charlie Foreman before we left town. It probably couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

## Chapter Nine

### Saturday

**Cassie was more or less herself again** in the morning, so we got off to a good start. That was only asking for trouble, of course. Being around the Wolfes was like being forced to play with a jack-in-the-box—a contraption I'd hated when I was little and still didn't like much. Nothing good could come of a thing that started with "Pop Goes the Weasel" and ended with a plastic clown, in the toy box or in the larger world.

But Cassie's family was even worse. You never knew what was going to pop up, or when, or what it would want when it did; and nine times out of ten, it led to some kind of violence.

The day did start harmlessly enough, though.

Her parents had finished breakfast by the time we got downstairs, and they made a point of sticking around to have coffee and small talk with us. Very small talk: the weather (lovely), the stock market (favorable), the Chiefs' chances in the playoffs (who knew). Mrs. Wolfe and Cassie even had an animated conversation about winter handbags, which drew her father and me together in silent sympathy. It wasn't that I didn't care, even though I didn't, but I had a couple of perfectly good purses already.

Shoes were different. But everybody knew that.

When they tacked off to fashion organizers ("The cutest little credit card case," Mrs. Wolfe was saying, "and in five colors!"), Mr. Wolfe shook his head, folded his paper and engaged me directly. "So. Devlin. Cassie tells us your agency is having a very good year. Business is good?"

I muttered vague agreement, troweling maple-walnut cream cheese onto a bagel.

"She says you're looking to diversify."

*Diversify?* I gave her a narrow look, but she was lost in Gucci, Pucci and Coach, and not going to pay me a bit of attention for a while.

"Your client base," he prompted.

Thank God. "We'd like to. An agency always likes to have a range of clients."

"She says you specialize."

I almost choked to death on coffee. Absently, Cassie smacked me between the shoulder blades while Mr. Wolfe attempted not to notice.

"Specialize?" I coughed again, to clear the last of it. "Well, not exactly. We work in teams at J/J/G, and some teams are better with some types of accounts, but—"

"I would imagine that you'd want to diversify, if you specialize."

"Very true."

"Do you handle many financial services accounts now?"

Cassie was right: Talking to her father was like being drafted into Rotary. If this was what old boys' clubs were like, the old boys could keep them. "You'd have to ask Cassie; she's more up to speed on the overall client base. I know Walt's team has the First Third account, and I think we have an S&L somewhere, but—"

"Are they all local?"

"Most of our clients are local, yes. We have a few regional accounts. Most of the big ones go to Bates, though. They've got an office in town."

"Could your team handle out-of-town banks?"

I didn't believe it. Yes, he'd behaved badly all weekend, but throwing business to the agency might be an excessive make-good. Still, I could live with taking advantage of guilt. "I imagine we could. J/J/G made its rep on lifestyle accounts, but banking wouldn't be a big stretch. Everybody banks, right?"

At this point in any pitch, Cassie always reminded me to smile. So I did. It was nice to remember for once and not get an elbow somewhere.

To my surprise, it worked. Mr. Wolfe didn't exactly smile back, but his features loosened a little.

"We'll be in touch," he said. "Who do we contact?"

"Nathaniel Jenner. He's the head of..." No, wait—Jenner was on medical leave, thoughtfully arranged by Vanessa. She did have her good points.

I backtracked. "On second thought, you may want to talk to Jack Harper. He..."

Wrong again. Vanessa had checked him in at Research Psychiatric, in a room just down the hall from Kurt, who had checked in on his own. Hell's fire, who was left?

"Is something wrong, Devlin?" Mr. Wolfe asked.

"No, sir. There's been some reorganization at the agency. I'm just trying to sort it out. Excuse me one second." I tapped Cassie on the shoulder. "Cass?"

She broke off her conversation, whatever it was—I'd just caught the terrible phrase "leopard print"—and turned to me. "Is it important?"

"Your father is thinking of throwing the bank's account to us," I said. "He wants to know who to contact. With the *reorganization*, I'm not sure what to tell him."

Cassie was a very fast thinker, which was one of the things I liked most about her. "Rita Sanchez," she said promptly. "So is that true, Daddy?"

"I don't see why not. We're not satisfied with our advertising."

"Might be a conflict of interest," I remarked.

She shrugged. "Chip can handle it. I was going to talk to Jenner about giving him a raise anyway."

"Then it's settled," Mr. Wolfe said.

*Amateur*, I mused. But no new client wanted to know what really went on in advertising, and half of them never figured it out even after they saw it firsthand.

Cassie pushed her chair back and went around the table to give her father a hug. "You're not so bad for an old fogey," she informed him, mussing his hair. He tried to act like he didn't like it but didn't quite pull it off.

Mrs. Wolfe and I watched this heartwarming moment with polite interest. Then she smiled at me. Clearly, there'd been marital conversation the night before. I wondered whether Vanessa had eavesdropped and whether she'd tell.

Scratch that—of course she'd tell. The question was whether it was worth giving her another IOU. I'd been careful not to rely on her, but services rendered always had their price.

"We'll be decorating the Christmas tree this afternoon," Mrs. Wolfe happily informed me. "I hope you don't mind."

“Not at all.”

“The children get so excited.”

“The children?” I asked, uneasy.

“Oh, yes. They always have such a good time. They have a little Santa hat for Buster, and—”

I deliberately didn’t hear the rest. If this was the price of getting a big account, it might be time to consider another line of work.

**The Christmas tree arrived** just before Lucy’s family did, which was very bad timing. While the men from the tree farm struggled to get the monster fir upright in the stand, the children tried to “help.” I was sure there would be bad language before it was over, and I may not have been the only one who thought so, because Mrs. Wolfe kept nudging up the Christmas music on the stereo.

It would make perfect sense. My brothers and I learned to swear by watching our father put up Christmas trees, after all.

“Kids! Settle down!” Michael ordered.

Naturally, they ignored him. So he parked himself in a club chair and scowled at me. Then, for good measure, he scowled at his wife, who was chatting with me at the moment.

“His face is going to freeze like that one of these days,” she predicted. “What’s the matter, Michael? Are they ignoring you again? Are you feeling...oh, I don’t know...*impotent*?”

Cassie had gone out to bring Buster in and arrived back just in time to hear that. She practically fell over laughing...and lost her grip on Buster’s collar. The dog streaked right for me, making contact at high speed. Michael liked that, and so did his shrill little spawn. The tree farm workers practically dropped the tree.

“Honestly,” Lucy said, offering me a hand up, “I think that damn dog is oversexed. Are you all right?”

“This is really starting to get on my nerves,” I complained, wondering whether I would get out of the weekend with even a shred of dignity intact.

“OK, sweetie,” Cassie said calmly. “I’ll take care of it. I’ll take him out back and shoot him...Daddy? Can I borrow a gun?”

Mr. Wolfe shook his head at her, not in answer but in reproach.

“I don’t know why he keeps picking on *me*,” I told Cassie, who was dutifully trying not to laugh. “It’s not like I don’t shower.”

“I know,” she soothed as she rubbed my back.

“It’s not even like I don’t like dogs. I *love* dogs.”

“I know.”

“But this is getting—”

“Do you two have to keep *handling* each other all the time?” Michael asked abruptly.

This time, the workmen lost the tree altogether. The crash was the only sound in the sudden silence, except for the Christmas music. Acting purely on instinct, Mrs. Wolfe turned it up another notch.

“Excuse me?” Cassie replied in a tone that could have flash-frozen Havana.

Michael didn't answer.

"Here we go again." Lucy sounded aggrieved. "Honey, I want you to stop this right now. You're not *that* big a bigot. You have black clients. You're just giving Dev the wrong idea about you."

She said a few more things after that, but I was still working on the part about the black clients. Unbelievable. Under her breath, Cassie was muttering something that sounded like "Shut up, Lucy. Shut up *now*, Lucy."

Michael still hadn't said anything. But he was looking at his wife as though she'd sprouted antlers.

"We have Christmas cookies," Mrs. Wolfe offered with desperate cheer. "Would anyone like a cookie? Some coffee?"

"You're not fooling anyone, Michael," Lucy snapped. "This is *really* all about you wanting to screw my sister."

The workmen froze on the spot.

"Christmas tea?" Mrs. Wolfe pleaded.

"Stop that, Elizabeth," Mr. Wolfe said firmly.

Cassie slumped onto my shoulder and said something indistinct into my sweater.

Lucy wasn't done yet. "Now, if you want to punch Dev in the nose or something, you go right ahead. She's a girl, so it wouldn't be very gentlemanly of you, but you're not acting like a gentleman anyway, are you? No, you're not. I don't think my sister wants you, but you just go right ahead and do the caveman thing, and I'll just call my lawyer. That work for you, snookums?"

Damn, these Wolfe women were good. I was proud to be there with them, ruining the family Thanksgiving.

"I think you've lost your mind," Michael told her flatly. "I worried this would happen someday. We're calling Dr. Owens first thing Mon—"

"Hold that thought. Kids?"

The children looked up. They'd been trying to wrestle a Santa hat onto Buster, which had mercifully kept them preoccupied.

"Why don't you go out back and play with Aunt Devvy for a while?" Lucy suggested.

"Now, just a goddamn minute," I said, truly annoyed. "I am *not*—"

But Cassie just started laughing again. "Great idea. Come on, kiddos—your mommy and daddy want to get rid of us. What if Aunt Devvy pushes you in the swings?"

Bristling, I pushed her off me. But suddenly there were shrieking children and a hyperactive dog all around us, and it was too late. Cassie gave me a smug little look, knowing she'd pulled off her fast one.

She thought fast, all right. Sometimes it was one of the things I liked *least* about her, too.

**When Cassie and I finally came back in**, the tree was up, the tree guys were gone and the battle was over. Only just over—you could practically smell gunpowder over



the pine and holly. We hung back in the doorway and surveyed the damage.

Michael, his tiny lips pursed into a fish mouth, was sullenly holding a string of lights for Mr. Wolfe, who was up on a ladder. Mrs. Wolfe had collapsed into a chair with a dazed expression but was still alert enough to give frequent helpful advice to her husband, who wasn't saying much but was definitely getting a bit of the fish look too. And Lucy was stretched out on the couch, eating cookies with evident relish. Every so often, Michael would shoot her a disapproving look, and she would deliberately cram a whole cookie into her mouth.

Why, I wondered, did anyone ever get married?

"Need some help?" Cassie asked.

The range of expressions when they noticed us standing there was fascinating.

"Ask your mother," Mr. Wolfe said peevishly. "She's the expert."

I flashed on Christmas trees past, and on my own parents' conduct, and instinctively took a long step toward the door, but Cassie grabbed hold of my sweater. Lucy saw, and smiled.

"Where are the kids?" she asked. "You didn't sell them, did you?"

"No takers," I said. Lucy and Mr. Wolfe found that amusing; Michael and Mrs. Wolfe did not.

"They're still out back," I added, resisting the urge to bat Cassie's hand away as she steered me back into the room. "Trying to push Buster in a swing. I don't think he's having a good time, but he's wearing the hat."

"It's all right, then," Lucy told us. "It'll end in biting, and then they'll be sorry. But it takes a while to get Jeremy that mad." She popped the last piece of cookie into her mouth and got up, brushing off crumbs. "C'mon, Cassie—let's get out the ornaments. I get to hang the red ones."

"Divide them up, girls." Mrs. Wolfe was still reclining in the big chair, but she delivered the order with military precision. "We're not going to have this argument again, and I don't want any more scenes in this house this weekend. Do you understand me?"

I don't know what got into me, but after three days of hell on the prairie, I'd finally found an ally. Without thinking, I crossed the room, put a hand on either side of Mrs. Wolfe's head and kissed her on the forehead. She looked as startled by it as I was.

"Oh, Christ," Michael spat.

"Sorry," I said quickly. "Nothing personal."

She blinked a few times. Then, against all odds, she smiled. "Make sure they let you hang some of the red ones, too, Devlin."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

Well, I'd be damned.

**There was only one more ordeal** to get through in Kansas City, I thought. It would necessarily be a bad one: Lucy and Michael's children were in a Christmas concert that night. But the next day, Cassie and I would get on a plane, and it would all be over.

So we got dressed up after dinner and drove to the concert. I figured if it was bad enough, and the auditorium was dark enough, I could at least catch up on some sleep.

But even Ebenezer Scrooge finally broke, and so did I. It might have been the Christmas decorations. It could have been that the concert wasn't bad. What it probably was, though, was the little girl in the white dress.

I'd noticed her early in the evening. She was with her parents in the balcony, in the tier of seats closest to the stage, and she couldn't sit still. Every few minutes, she ran between her mother and the balcony railing, which she would hang on to gape in wonder at the goings-on below.

Every time she did, I couldn't help smiling. She had on a fancy white dress, with a little red bow in her hair, and in the lightspill from the stage, she looked like a tiny angel playing hooky to hear the music.

Cassie nudged me. "What are you smiling about?" she whispered.

I pointed out the girl, who was busy directing the choir at the moment. Cassie laughed and reached over to squeeze my hand.

When we came to the audience participation number—"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," which is never a good audience participation number because of the high notes—we all stood and did our best. Most people fumbled in the half-dark with their programs, trying to read the lyrics, but I didn't need them. Neither did Cassie. We'd done enough church time as children to know the church carols by heart.

The little girl in the balcony didn't know the words, but she sang her heart out anyway. Just looking at her made me happy, for some reason.

That night, after Cassie had fallen asleep, I thought about the girl. I had a very clear picture of her, white dress shining in the stage light and a beatific smile on her face as she hung over the railing. I left that picture lighted in my head as a benediction and finally dropped off to sleep myself.

## Chapter Ten

### Sunday

**Our flight home** left Sunday morning, so we were up at dawn, throwing things into suitcases. I was ready. Not just because I wanted to get out of that house before anything else could happen, but also because it was time to go back to work. We'd been away for two weeks, after all.

Cassie said she'd loosen up my work ethic sooner or later, even if it took a crowbar.

We were almost packed when it dawned on me. "Cass?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can I see your old room?"

Her head popped out of the bath, where she was gathering up the last of her many, many hair appliances. "What?"

"Your old room. I haven't seen it."

"You won't like it," she cautioned. "Are you sure?"

I shrugged. "How bad can it be?"

**Stupid question.** I knew it the second I asked, and when Cassie opened the door to her room, I knew we were in trouble. My first clue was Vanessa. She was floating a couple of feet above the bed, wearing a pink sleep mask, fuzzy pink slippers...and nothing else. I winced.

The demon snorted. "Oh, don't be a baby. I'm just having a little fun with you."

"Not *that* much fun," Cassie insisted. "Devvy, don't look."

I didn't. But everywhere else I looked was bad, too. The infamous vanity table. The cheerleader costume hanging in the closet. The Barbies—dear God, the Barbies. And, just as Vanessa had threatened, the Rick Springfield poster tacked up on the wall.

"No stuffed animals?" I heard myself ask in a very small voice.

"On the bed," Cassie admitted. "But don't look yet. Get dressed, Vanessa. *Now*."

"All right, if you're going to be like that," she said sulkily. "How's this?"

Cassie started sputtering in outrage, so I took a chance and looked. Vanessa was still floating over the bed, but now fully dressed. As a nun.

Cautiously, I walked over to examine her getup. When I met her eye, Vanessa winked.

"I'm not wearing anything under this," she said.

That was all Cassie wanted to hear. She pushed me away, grabbed a double fistful of Vanessa's habit and yanked her out of the air. The demon landed on the carpet with a thud. "Hey!"

"Don't 'hey' me," Cassie told her, with some heat. "You're not funny, Vanessa."

"Just think about it a while. It'll come to you." She stood up, making a show of straightening her wimple. "You humans are so touchy about your childhoods. You pay good money to tell doctors how your mothers warped you, and all it does is buy swimming pools for the doctors."

I was lost again. It was starting to feel like my normal condition. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Monica’s right,” Vanessa said, a little sadly. “You’re hideously literal. Here you’ve been in the middle of a psychodrama all weekend, and you haven’t seen a thing. Don’t make me explain it, Devlin; I hate being bored. Besides, I don’t think I can.”

“Try,” I growled.

Vanessa heaved a sigh and flounced past Cassie to perch on the edge of the bed. Inevitably, she started to reach into her cleavage for the nail file—which required some unbuttoning, with that habit in the way—but Cassie was in no mood.

“Get one off the vanity table,” she ordered.

Putting, the demon pointed a talon at the table. Things obediently lifted off and flew toward her: files, emery boards, cuticle scissors, little bottles of pink polish. Alarmed, I pulled Cassie back. Vanessa selected the longest, sharpest file and set to work.

“You were saying...?” I prompted.

“Just look around you,” Vanessa said. “This is what she was: a nice girl from a nice family. She was going to be an insurance salesman’s wife, sure as she was alive. She did everything she was supposed to do. Including sleeping with the football team, but her parents didn’t know that.”

“I did *not* sleep with the football team,” Cassie complained. “Just the quarterback.”

Vanessa smirked knowingly. “That’s how rumors get started.”

“She’s crazy,” Cassie told me.

“Don’t look at Devlin,” Vanessa said. “*She* slept with a defensive tackle.”

Cassie gave me a look that could take paint off a battleship.

“He was cute,” I protested.

Vanessa laughed. “Dumb as a box of rocks, too. The only time he ever recovered a fumble, he started running toward the wrong end zone. His own teammates had to tackle him. Remember that, Devlin?”

I remembered, all right. It had been homecoming, and I’d had to go to the dance with him after that. God, the humiliation.

“That was the night you started thinking boys might not be all they were cracked up to be,” she added.

I would have argued with her, but Cassie was still giving that look. “Never mind. We were talking about Cass.”

“What’s the difference? You both hate being embarrassed. And now just look at the two of you.”

“Cut that out. *You’re* sitting on her bed in a nun costume.”

“It’s a metaphor.”

My head was starting to hurt. “I *get* it, Vanessa. What about her parents?”

“They don’t get it.”

Cassie said a bad word and walked over to the window, glaring out at nothing in particular.

“They think this is all your fault,” Vanessa continued. “They’re trying, but her father still kind of hates you. And don’t even get me started on that brother-in-law of hers. He’s such a chauvinist, someone’s going to make bacon out of him one of these days.”

"And die of ptomaine," Cassie said, still glaring out the window.

"Don't worry about him. I'll fix him. It'll be fun." Vanessa filed in silence for a few seconds. "Speaking of fixing people, aren't you going to ask me about Charlie Foreman?"

Cassie didn't say anything. All right, then, it was probably OK to bite. "What about Charlie Foreman?"

"I've already fixed him."

*Good*, I thought.

"Aren't you even going to ask how?" the demon asked.

*Lead me not into temptation, because I already know the way.* "No."

Vanessa smiled evilly and switched the file to her other hand. "I'm going to tell you anyway. He's having boyfriend trouble. Now humor me and ask me what kind of trouble."

Cassie turned. "Stop picking on her. She's barely had coffee this morning. Just tell us, so we can—"

"His boyfriend found God last night."

"What?" Cassie asked.

"It came to him in a dream. He was visited by a nun." Vanessa clasped her hands to her chest, gazing toward the heavens with a vacant expression of rapture. "And yea, he didst repent of his wickedness. Yanked off the nipple rings and called—"

"Too much information," I advised her.

"—one of those church help lines. He's on his way to be saved right now. He made Charlie go with him. Did you know that churches can cure deviance?" She started filing again, looking gleeful. "That trick might have worked on *you* a few months ago, Devlin. You're lucky Monica's too vain to stoop that low."

"I hate to be a bother," Cassie said icily, "but we have to finish packing. So if you have anything else to say to us..."

"It can wait." Vanessa gave her claws one last swipe and started to tuck the file into her habit, but Cassie pointed meaningfully at the vanity table. The demon shrugged and sailed it over. "I'll leave you two now. Don't forget to show her your trophies, Cassandra. She'll be *très* impressed."

"Trophies?" I asked.

But Vanessa was gone, and where she'd been sitting on the bed was a pink stuffed animal.

Correction—a pink stuffed demon.

Cassie caught on at the same time I did. Without a word, she grabbed the thing, marched over to the window and threw it open. The toy demon followed. I heard it bounce on the rooftop, making little squeaks of protest.

Then she slammed the window back down with a bang that rattled everything in the room. "I hate her. As soon as we get back home, we're calling an exorcist. I *mean* it. I think—"

"Trophies?" I repeated.

"They're not trophies. They're just souvenirs." She shook her head, disgusted. "Honestly. She's trying to make me out to be some kind of schoolgirl slut."

I didn't say anything.

“Oh, c’mon, I wasn’t *that* bad. Here. I’ll show you.”

She walked across the room to the little desk against the far wall. Over the desk was a cabinet of the type normally used to display porcelain knickknacks. But the cubbyholes were filled with jewelry. Lots of jewelry. Enough to stock a small store.

I frowned, scanning the inventory. Boys’ high school rings. Boys’ ID bracelets. First Promise rings with the fake diamonds. A couple of solitaires that looked suspiciously like—

“Engagement rings,” Cassie confirmed, following my glance.

“You kept them?”

“Well, of course I kept them. They were stupid enough to give them to me, weren’t they?”

“Tarantula,” I said.

“Me? I gave back all the other stuff. You should’ve seen my friend Amber. She still has about twenty stereos and a couple of big-screen TVs.”

I brooded on that for a minute. What would a girl have had to do to *get* a big-screen TV?

“Are you upset?” Cassie asked, very softly. “I know it looks bad, but—”

“No. It’s OK. You were normal.”

She touched my face, concern in her eyes. “Were?”

“Well, you went into advertising after that, didn’t you?”

Cassie started laughing. Then she hugged me as hard as she could. “You’re crazy, Devvy.”

“So are you. Now let’s go home.”

**We hadn’t made it** halfway down the stairs when we heard the awful unrest that could mean only one thing. Well, technically, three things.

“I wish Lucy could keep a babysitter,” Cassie grumbled.

“Probably not enough money in the world for that.” Apprehensive, I shifted the big travel bag to the other shoulder. “What do you want to do? Sneak out back and go around the house?”

“That would be rude.”

“Yup,” I agreed, turning to go back upstairs.

She grabbed the strap and yanked me to a halt. “Not so fast, Devvy. We have to at least say goodbye to my parents.”

“They’re your relatives. *You* do it. I’ll send them a Christmas card when we get home.”

Cassie fixed me with her most terrible glare. “Do you want me to be like this at *your* parents’ house at Christmas?”

In silence, I weighed the options. There weren’t many. I would back her no matter what, but I knew how she could get, and I’d never hear the end of it from my family if she did.

“I didn’t think so,” she said. “Now come on. Five minutes, and then we’ll go.”

Without waiting for an answer, she swept on down the stairs, banging into both railings with her luggage but refusing to notice. Easy for her. I was hauling more suitcases than she was.

"There they are," Lucy reported, catching sight of us from the foot of the stairs. "Kids! Come say goodbye!"

Cassie managed to set her suitcases down before the children charged her. That was all very well and good. But I was still a couple of steps from the bottom when Buster galloped in. He skidded to a stop at the foot of the stairs, tongue hanging out, tail wagging.

"No," I ordered, looking him straight in the eye.

He didn't move. Carefully, I started to take the next step down.

I never saw him coming. There was just a dog-colored blur, and then there was a sharp snout in a very personal place. After that, the world went sideways.

"Damn you, Buster, I'm having you neutered," I heard Cassie growl.

If he understood, Buster didn't care. He was standing over the wreckage, breathing in my face, and I was fairly sure he was laughing.

"Wow! That was cool!" Chad told me. "Can you do that again?"

Cassie, who'd just shoved the dog halfway to China, told her nephew to go away. She was starting to tell Lucy a thing or two on top of that when her parents hurried in.

"What was that noise?" Mrs. Wolfe asked.

*Don't worry, Mrs. Wolfe; it was nothing. For my next trick, I'm going to saw that damn dog in half.*

Painfully, I got up, with a little help from Cassie and even less from Michael, who was helping only because his wife had given him a look. Cassie gave him one, too, for good measure. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Who knew? "Fine," I said.

"We'll just put the dog out back," Mrs. Wolfe said apologetically, glancing at her husband.

Mr. Wolfe smiled faintly and took hold of Buster's collar. "Around here," he said, "'we' means me. Come along, Devlin. Let's have a talk before you leave."

Still dazed from the fall, I didn't argue. Cassie instantly fell into step with us, but her father shook his head. "Alone," he added.

"You'd better not kill her," she warned. "I'm not kidding, Daddy."

I hoped it wouldn't come to that. But all bets were always off in that household. Numbly, I followed Mr. Wolfe and Buster to the back yard.

## Chapter Eleven

**Mr. Wolfe kept his own counsel** for the whole walk out back and for a while after. Scooping up an old tennis ball, he played catch with Buster for a few minutes without saying a word. I watched with growing impatience. Cassie and I had a plane to catch, so if he was going to kill me, he'd have to start soon.

"Good boy," he finally said when Buster brought the ball back for the dozenth time. "You're a very, very good boy."

Buster wagged violently in agreement.

"Did you have dogs when you were growing up, Devlin?"

"A couple."

"I think it's good for children to have pets. Teaches them responsibility."

Theoretically, I supposed that it did. The main thing I learned from having a dog, though, was that my mother got bent out of shape if it got in the house, even when I *told* her we were just going to watch cartoons. "I'm surprised that your grandchildren don't have a dog, as much as they like Buster."

"He *is* their dog. They didn't take care of him."

There was no point pursuing that topic. I smiled uncertainly.

"You don't seem to like him much," Mr. Wolfe said.

"It's not that I don't like him. It's just that he keeps doing that thing with his nose."

"He's trying to get your attention."

As ways of getting attention went, there was no beating Buster's strategy. Still... "I'm not sure I follow you."

He threw the tennis ball again, sending the dog barreling over the lawn after it. "The way to handle him is to say hello to him first. If he thinks you're ignoring him, he'll do 'that thing with his nose.' As you call it."

"I haven't ignored him," I protested. "He hasn't ever given me a *chance* to ignore him."

"This is dog logic. It isn't supposed to make sense to us. When you see him coming, say hello right away and pat him on the head. That'll make him happy, and he won't bother you anymore." He broke off to accept the tennis ball back from the dog. "Good boy."

I watched him throw the ball to the other corner of the yard. "With all due respect, Mr. Wolfe, why couldn't you have told me this the very first day?"

"I don't like you much, Devlin. I didn't see any reason to tell you."

"As long as we're being honest," I said, "I don't like you much either."

To my surprise, he smiled—genuinely. It didn't last, though. "I love my daughter. I want the best for her. Frankly, I'm not sure you're it."

"Neither am I. But that's *her* choice to make. Not mine. Not yours."

"Cassie's choices never give me much confidence."

"Likewise."

"She has unfortunate taste in men."

"The worst there is. But I'm not—"



"Yes, I know. That's the problem." He bent down to take the tennis ball from Buster again, but this time, he didn't throw it. "I have no guarantee that her taste in women is any better."

This conversation was beginning to get on my nerves. "There are no guarantees in life. Now, if that's all you wanted to say to me..."

"No."

I waited.

I waited some more.

Finally, I couldn't stand it. "Mr. Wolfe?"

"I feel very peculiar asking this," he said, "but I feel that I have to. What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

"My intentions?"

"I don't want her throwing her reputation away on you if you're just having a good time with her."

My God, he wanted to know whether I was going to make an honest woman of her. Was it ever too late for *that*. Even if I could, of course, which of course I couldn't. "I'm not sure what you're asking."

He frowned at Buster, who was starting to paw his trousers. "I'm asking what's in this for Cassie."

"That's a question for her to ask," I said, annoyed. "Are you going to throw the ball to the dog now, or what?"

Silently, he flipped it over to me. It was damp. Yuck. More to get rid of it than to pacify Buster, I lobbed it toward the back fence.

"You're not going to give me an answer," Mr. Wolfe observed.

"I'll give *her* an answer. If she asks. Which she hasn't. If you'll excuse me..."

"One more question."

Making a production of it on purpose, I checked my watch. "We'll be late if we don't leave soon. What's the question?"

"How are your parents going to behave when you take Cassie home?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Probably no better than you did."

"I won't have that," he warned.

"Neither will I. Don't worry about it. Between the two of us, we can handle my family." I thought that over for a second. "Except maybe my mother. You'd get along with her, you know. She hasn't approved of anything since the '50's."

Unexpectedly, he laughed. "All right. You pass."

"Sir?"

"Her mother and I wanted to see what you're made of. We still don't like it, but we suppose you'll do. At least this weekend didn't scare you off."

I gave him a very narrow once-over, searching for signs of insanity. "The food fight came close. Was that a test, too?"

"Ah. Yes. That." He looked away sheepishly. "We didn't plan that part. But I'm glad you brought it up. About that woman."

"You mean Va—the maid?"

"We appreciate the thought, but it wasn't necessary for you and Cassie to hire us a maid for the day."

No, and it never would have occurred to us to do that, either. But we'd needed a cover story. That one was the best we could come up with. "Our pleasure."

"We did think it was odd for a maid to be throwing food. But Cassie said she did it so she could make extra money cleaning up after dinner. We understand now. That's good entrepreneurial thinking."

No, it was fast thinking on the part of a skilled professional liar: his daughter. I was very proud of her. "She's an operator, all right."

"We still thought we saw a *few* odd things. But..." He shrugged. "Never mind. We were talking about the maid. I'd like to give her a tip for doing such a good job. Elizabeth says the crystals on the chandelier are as clean as she's ever seen them."

"Don't bother. We'll be paying her enough," I said with conscious irony.

"There was cranberry sauce on the ceiling, Devlin. I think getting it off is worth an extra fifty."

"Whatever. But make your wife pay. I saw her do it."

Mr. Wolfe smiled again. "Cassie might turn out like her mother, you know."

"Takes more than that to scare me."

"Wait twenty years," he advised. "Let's go back now. You've got a flight to catch."

**It almost ended** the way it started. All our luggage was parked by the front door, waiting to be carried out, and no sooner did I pick up a bag than Mr. Wolfe took it. I took it back. He reached for it again. Only Cassie's quick intervention stopped a scene.

"I thought we agreed to a truce," I told him through gritted teeth.

He glared right back. "We also agreed we don't like each other."

That much, we *did* agree on. Grudgingly, I put out my hand. Grudgingly, he shook it.

Then Mrs. Wolfe, vigilant for trouble, stepped in to say how glad she was I'd been able to join them for Thanksgiving, which gave Cassie a chance for a private talk with her father. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that she was doing most of the talking. It was too bad I couldn't hear what was going on, but she'd tell me all about it on the way to the airport.

Which reminded me to check my watch again. Damn, we were going to be late in a couple of minutes. "Excuse me," I told Mrs. Wolfe. "Cass? It's almost quarter after."

Cassie sighed, gave her father some parting advice and then went around the room hugging people goodbye. Wanting a piece of the action, Jeremy toddled over to me and held out his hand. I bent down and started to shake it, but he jerked it back, scowling.

"He wants you to give him five," Lucy explained. "Jeremy? Try again, honey."

Patently, I waited for him to stick out his hand again; he was occupied with gnawing his thumb at the moment. Finally, he did.

"Attaboy," I said, giving his hand a light smack. "Now give *me* five."

He did—harder than I expected.

"Give me ten," I suggested.

He did.

“Give me fifty.”

Lucy laughed. But Jeremy just stood there, looking troubled. The next thing I knew, he grabbed his mother around the legs and burst into tears.

“Hey, kid, I’m sorry,” I said, concerned. “It was just a bad joke. I make them all the time. Ask your Aunt Cassie.”

At the sound of her name, Cassie turned, saw her nephew in tears and frowned. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. Lucy, I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“Forget it. I’ll explain it to him later. Then he can torture Chad and Rachel with it.” Lucy smoothed her son’s hair. “Isn’t that right, sweetie? You love making them miserable, don’t you? Just like your daddy.”

He nodded vigorously, face buried in her thigh. Cassie and I exchanged glances. Thank God *we* wouldn’t ever have three-year-olds.

“Well, it was interesting,” I told Lucy. “I hope I’ll see you again. But not too soon.”

“You mean not too soon if I have Michael with me,” she said. “Don’t worry—I’ll either kill him or leave him home with the kids. That would probably work out to the same thing.”

I laughed. The woman had possibilities after all. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Oh, he’ll be back. I made him take your luggage to the car.”

Yes, definite possibilities. At that very moment, there was a screech of pain from out front. We all went running, Lucy with a child still attached to her leg. Michael was sprawled on the driveway, clutching his back.

“It’s that damn bag,” he gasped. “The big leather one. Threw my back out.”

I almost felt some sympathy for him. Cassie’s beauty supplies were in that bag, so it did weigh about a ton. When I was sure he was looking, I casually picked it up by both handles and tossed it into the trunk. It just took experience—and enough IQ to lift by both grips.

Michael gave me a very nasty look, which I answered with a shrug. Not my fault.

“Go on,” Lucy told us. “He’ll be all right. And if he isn’t...well, he has lots of life insurance.”

I shouldn’t have laughed, but then, Cassie shouldn’t have either. In the awkward silence that followed, we jumped into the rental car, and Cassie gunned it.

With utter relief, I watched the huge house get smaller in the passenger-side mirror. Thank God that was done. We’d had the very devil of a time, but now it was over.

At least, until Christmas.

I hoped.

**Not quite two hours later**, we were airborne—and flying first class at that. Cassie had booked coach tickets, but somehow, they’d been upgraded at check-in. We figured Vanessa had something to do with it, which was perfectly all right just this once.

The way we saw it, she owed us.

The flight was uneventful at first. Cassie read magazines; I amused myself by editing ads with a felt-tip pen. When she saw what I was doing, she just shook her head and went back to her reading...but also slipped a sneaky hand over the armrest and started experimenting with my self-control.

The words *Mile High Club* crossed my mind. In a fierce act of will, I started blacking out a model's teeth in a toothpaste ad.

At that moment, something blocked my light from the window. The plane was still climbing; we were probably going through another cloud layer. I looked over, just to see.

Monica was outside, peering in through the airplane window. When our eyes met, she smiled wickedly, baring her fangs, and kissed the glass.

"Devvy?" Cassie asked.

Too shocked to speak, I leaned back to let her see.

"Oh, damn," she said.

Monica let go, sliding slowly down the side of the plane, leaving a red lip print on the window.

We sat for a moment in complete silence. Then Cassie lunged over me to slam the window shade down.

The flight attendant came running. "Is everything all right, Miss Wolfe? Can I bring you anything?"

Cassie pondered the question. "Tequila."

I can't drink tequila; it pretty much knocks me flat. So...

"Doubles," I added.

Well, we were going to have to face *my* family in about a month. It wouldn't hurt to get a little extra rest.