

Christmas

Chapter Twelve

Wednesday After Thanksgiving

On the third day after we got back from Kansas City, I finally got around to visiting my boss and my employee in the mental hospital, where demons had driven them, with a little help from me.

All right, it was Cassie's demon who drove Jack to the hospital—literally, in a red BMW with a Jesus fish on the back. Kurt had taken a taxi. And I may have had more than a little to do with the situation. But there were demons at the bottom of everything that year, especially that December. If it hadn't been for Monica and *especially* Vanessa...

Well, it's a long story. But I guess this part of it starts at the hospital.

Clearwater Stress Center

5:53 p.m.

“This is it?” Cassie asked, incredulous.

“This is it.”

“But it looks like an office park.”

That it did. My guess was that it was supposed to. The development we were in was actually called a medical park, but the building ahead could have been anything. I'd probably driven by it a hundred times without a clue. Only the discreet little sign at the entrance gave it away—not just the words on the sign, but also the logo. There is no deader giveaway of rehab than bird-and-sun graphics.

“No bars on the windows,” Cassie mused as we got out of the car. “What kind of loony bin is this, anyway?”

“It's not a loony bin. It's a stress center.”

She snorted. “It's a loony bin if Jack and Kurt are in it. Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No. But you don't have to go in, Cass. If you want to just wait in the car, you can.”

The way she looked at my MG gave me pause. She seemed to have a personal grudge against it.

“We won't stay long,” I promised, locking the door. “Then we'll do whatever you want for dinner. All right? Where do you want to go?”

She thought for a second. “Italian.”

That helped. That narrowed it down to about a thousand restaurants. But she was a little edgy, and there was no reason to force the issue.

“Great,” I said. “Let's go get this over with.”

At the stroke of 6, a nurse appeared in the lobby to take the visitors back to the visiting area. We'd all been through the third degree—signing in, being checked against

a list, surrendering our Uzis and crack pipes—and were in a fairly surly mood, so when the nurse suggested that we follow her single-file, rude words were said.

I didn't say them, partly because Cassie had clamped down on my arm as a warning. But I did smile a little.

The nurse pretended not to hear. The residents, she said, were just finishing dinner, and—

“The *what?*” Cassie asked. “The *what* are finishing dinner?”

I clamped down on her.

“We don't use the word ‘patients,’” the nurse explained. “Step this way.”

Cassie leaned close to murmur in my ear. “I want this hospital's account. And then I want you to change their image.”

“It's not a hospital,” I said. “It's a residential therapy facility.”

“It's a nuthouse. Will you do it if I get the account?”

“What's in it for me?”

She whispered what she had in mind...and I walked right into a pillar. The crash, or maybe the language that followed, stopped our little group in its tracks.

“That's why I said you should follow me single-file,” the nurse said pitilessly. “One of those papers you signed at the front desk was an injury waiver. Just thought you'd like to know. Now, if you'll all come this way...”

We made it to the visiting room with no further casualties. There was my pride, of course, but that had been DOA since Thanksgiving.

Cassie pulled me under a light fixture to check for damage and frowned slightly.

“Honey, your nose is bleeding. Maybe you should lie down for a minute.”

“That would be a cliché. Lying on a couch in a loony bin.” I started to check my purse for Kleenex but then remembered they'd made me leave it at the front desk, just because they'd found a Swiss Army knife in it. Cassie had one in hers, too, but she'd batted her lashes at a male guard and gotten away with it. Sometimes, I feared her powers. “Do you have any Kleenex?”

“Not in this purse. Wait here. I'll go ask the nurse.”

She took off, leaving me nothing to do but check out the room. Which reminded me of a furniture showroom, with all the brutally modern earth-tone couches and chairs. In fact, I thought I'd seen those very chairs in a Bennison's Home Store ad. It wasn't our account, but I bet I could find out whether there'd been a trade-out involved. Maybe furniture store owners went wacko, too.

Idly, I watched the double doors at the far end of the room, waiting for Jack and Kurt. A few patients had already showed up, and little reunions were going on all around. There was also some activity outside in the courtyard. Through the window, I saw a small mob of patients smoking as though their very lives depended on it. Had I looked that desperate when I was still a smoker?

Not wanting an answer to that question, I walked to the other end of the room, toward the door we'd all come in through. At that moment, it opened again. Damn. Of all people, the person coming through it was Kurt's wife. The instant she saw me, she stopped cold.

Now what? I hardly knew the woman. We'd crossed paths at company parties and unavoidable social events over the years, but I doubted we'd had a minute of real conversation. Of course, Kurt always did all the talking for both of them. But never mind that. What did I say to her now?

"Hi, Peg."

She nodded. She didn't look hostile, though—just bewildered. I tried again.

"How is he?"

"Better. Thank you."

"Good. Good news. Great to hear."

Awkward silence.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I'm here to see him. Jack, too. But mostly him. I've been out of town, or I'd have—"

"Here," Cassie interrupted, holding up a wad of tissues. "Turn this way." Not waiting for me to oblige, she grabbed my jaw with her free hand and did the turning herself. "Hi, Peg. How are you?"

"How am I?" Peg still looked bewildered. "My husband's in an insane asylum. How should I be?"

Cassie let that pass, intent on blotting up the blood. I stood it for a second and then tried to shake her off, but she wasn't entertaining arguments.

"What happened to her?" Peg asked.

"She banged into one of those pillars in the hall," Cassie answered, rather absently. "I'm thinking about suing the architect for malfeasance. Dammit, Devvy, hold still."

"I'm fine," I protested. "Just a scratch. Listen, Peg, about Kurt...about what happened..."

Peg sighed. "It's not your fault. The doctor said he was already sick. I just wish I'd known it was that bad. Did *you* know it was that bad?"

Cassie tightened her grip on my jaw and leveled a meaningful look at me. I scowled back at her. How stupid did she think I was? "No, I didn't. But it's an ad agency. There's no way to tell when someone's going over the edge."

"I wish he'd gone to medical school," Peg said sadly. "I kept trying to tell him. He got good grades. He wanted to be a psychiatrist once. Did he ever tell you that?"

"Ironic," I agreed.

Peg didn't seem to catch the undertone; she even smiled a little. "I keep telling myself maybe this is a *good* thing. Maybe once he's better, he'll get motivated to do it after all. He'd make the most wonderful psy—Oh, good, here he comes now."

We all turned just as Kurt cleared the double doors. He hadn't seen us yet, which gave us some leisure to study him. Even from a distance, even for a copywriter, even for a copywriter who worked for me, he looked bad. I felt a cold stab of guilt.

"He's looking better," Peg said hopefully.

Cassie and I exchanged glances.

"Why don't you give me a minute with him alone? Then I'll bring him over. OK?"

"Of course," Cassie said.

We watched her hurry off to greet her husband. For a couple of minutes, neither of us said anything.

Finally, Cassie cleared her throat. “What if one of them asks what we had to do with this?”

“We lie,” I said flatly.

She laughed. “Lead on, sweetie. I’ll follow you anywhere.”

The only good thing I can say about that visiting hour is that it lasted less than an hour. Peg eventually brought Kurt over, and we had a little aimless conversation with him. The aimlessness, though, was mostly due to the drugs. Whatever they had him on had flattened him right out; talking to him now was like talking to his half-bright evil twin.

Well, maybe not an identical twin. He still had the cheesy mustache, but there was less of him otherwise; he’d lost a lot of weight. He was also as pale as the underside of a trout. In my opinion, this hospital wasn’t doing him any good. And maybe not even he deserved that.

On the other hand, maybe he did.

“You’re looking good, Dev,” Kurt remarked. “You too, Cass.”

Thank you. Deviance agrees with us. “We went to Florida for a week,” I said.

He nodded. “I heard. I hear that’s where Lisa Hartwell went, too. Remember her, boss? The TV reporter you kissed?”

“She *didn’t* kiss her,” Cassie growled.

It was a long story—just a misunderstanding about something I did to scare Hartwell when she was being a nuisance in my office. Cassie still wasn’t totally over it. Neither was Kurt, apparently, but for very different reasons. “What about her?”

“She was here, you know. They just discharged her a few days ago. She said she was going to Florida as soon as she got out.” A tiny smile twitched on his lips. “We all hope an alligator eats her. What a bitch. Nobody could get a word in edgewise in group—not even Jack.”

We tried hard to imagine.

“He’s not coming down,” Kurt added. “He said he doesn’t want to see you ever again.”

“Mutual,” I said, “but impossible. We work together.”

That awful I-know-something look settled on his face. It was good to see the Kurt I knew again. But not *that* good. “Not anymore, boss. He’s got a new job. Want to know where?”

Cassie was starting to dismiss the subject on the grounds that nobody cared what happened to Jack, when a horrible commotion started up across the room. A tall, disheveled man was clearing a path through the lounge, shoving some people out of his way and threatening all the others. It took a few seconds to recognize him.

“That can’t be Jack,” Cassie insisted. “He’s got hair.”

Kurt laughed. “Combover. When do you think we get haircuts around here?”

I didn’t pay much attention to that, intent on watching Jack’s every move. He was clearly not all there, and I wanted time to get between him and Cassie if he got too close. In his condition, she might hurt him.

“He’s usually not like this,” Peg explained, almost apologetic. “His medication

doesn't really agree with him. They'll get the staff guys to take him back upstairs in a—"

"YOU!"

We looked up. Jack was standing about twenty feet away, pointing at us like some vengeful Old Testament lunatic. Everyone else in the room—including the nurse, who was on the phone calling for backup—was frozen like a still life.

Making it look as casual as possible, I stepped around Cassie. "Hello, Jack. How are you feeling?"

He bared his teeth, caps glittering in the fluorescent light. There was a wild, glassy gleam in his eyes. At which point the truth hit me: Jack was all the way out of his mind.

I turned my head slightly and tried to whisper without moving my lips. "Get to the car. Take Peg with you."

"No." For emphasis, she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"*Nom*, Cass."

Stubbornly, she held on tighter.

"Idolators!" Jack roared. "Moneychangers! Fornicators!"

Not believing what she was hearing, Cassie leaned around my shoulder. "Moneychangers?"

Kurt, true to form, started laughing. Well, as long as he was feeling better. Warily, I pushed Cassie back. "What's this about, Jack?"

He waved a fist at me. "Abominators!"

"Been watching Sunday morning cable, have you?" I asked coolly.

"You'll burn in hell, Kerry!"

He was going to have to come up with something worse than that. After a few months of wall-to-wall demons, I didn't scare. "I've got lots of sunscreen."

Cassie nudged me, amused. It wasn't really funny, but it stumped Jack long enough for the orderlies to sneak up behind him.

"Think fast, Jack," I advised.

Having held off smiting me as long as he could, he raised his fist again and started forward—but the orderlies pounced. There was a short, vicious struggle. I hated myself for it, but all I could think of was a Monty Python line about the violence inherent in the system. Then a syringe flashed, and Jack went limp.

The orderlies heaved themselves up and stood guard around him, waiting for someone to bring a gurney. Satisfied that Jack was really out, I checked the rest of the room. No one had moved, or possibly even breathed, since the last time I looked.

"You said something about his new job," I prompted Kurt.

"I did, didn't I?" He sounded happy—which I knew was going to mean something bad. "Yes, he does. He has a new job."

Cassie muttered something and let go. "Spit it out, Kurt. Where?"

"It's a very good job. You'll never guess where."

"Don't make her hurt you," Cassie warned, pointing at me. Obliging, I tried to look fierce.

"Oh, all right," Kurt said cheerfully. "He's going to the Family Foundation. Working for Howard Abner. How do you like that?"

I didn't. The orderlies managed to grab me just before I got to Jack's throat.

6:47 p.m.

"Kicked out of a mental hospital," Cassie said reproachfully as we crossed the parking lot. "Really, Devvy?"

"There are worse places to be kicked out of."

"It doesn't look good, honey."

"I'm out of the caring-what-other-people-think business. Besides, so what? I lost my temper. It happens."

"I know. I didn't let them give *you* a shot, did I?"

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and started walking faster.

"I love you anyway," she said.

"Do you, now?"

"Yes, I do. I can't seem to help it."

Annoyed, I stopped walking. She just laughed, though, and slipped a hand through the crook of my arm. "You promised me Italian, remember?"

I considered sulking a while longer, but it was almost 7, and I was getting hungry. "Where?"

"Surprise me," she suggested.

Surprise you. Frozen pizza at my place would surprise you, wouldn't it? It would just about serve you—

Then I stopped walking again.

"What now?" Cassie asked.

"My car. Look."

She looked. She said a bad word. The MG was gone, and the red Miata was back—the one Monica kept conjuring up whenever she wanted to tempt me. There was no question whose car it was: The front license plate said DEMONLVR.

To verify, I fumbled for my car keys. Sure enough, the MG keys were missing; there were only Miata keys on that part of the ring.

Cassie slammed her purse down on the hood, dug through it for something and bent down at the front bumper.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Taking off this stupid license plate. What's on the back?"

I walked around to check. Also DEMONLVR. "You don't want to know."

It was probably best not to tell her about the Darwin fish, either.

Chapter Thirteen

Cassie wanted to go to the most expensive Italian place in town, most likely out of spite, and I wanted to order in. We compromised by going to the most expensive Italian place in town. When had I lost control of this relationship?

“You never had it,” she said when I asked.

I studied her narrowly in the candlelight. “You don’t see anything wrong with that?”

“No. How about pinot grigio for a change? Or a really *good* Chianti?”

“You’re saying this isn’t even 50-50?”

Cassie closed the wine list impatiently. “If it was 50-50, I’d still be waiting for you to trip over a clue. Let’s call it 70-30, and you’re lucky I’m giving you that much.”

That was outrageous. With more force than was really necessary, I slammed my menu shut.

“You know you love me,” she declared.

Even more outrageous. “I can stop any time. What’s with you? You were all right half an hour ago.”

“I’m still all right. I’m not fighting with you. I’m just explaining the rules.”

“Rules?” I could feel steam starting to leak out my ears. “There are *rules* for this?”

“There are always rules,” she said, as though everyone knew that. “We should’ve had this conversation a long time ago. But now that you bring it up...”

Our waiter chose that moment to come back for our order. One look from me made him jump.

“When we call you,” I warned.

Cassie shook her head. “Don’t pay any attention to her. She was just in an insane asylum. They had to kick her out; can you believe it? We’ll have a bottle—”

“Stop *nom*, Cass.”

She blithely developed convenient hearing. “—a bottle of your best pinot grigio. And two spinach salads. Then I’ll have—”

“Don’t order for me. I mean it.”

“—the shrimp scampi, and she’ll have the—”

We said it together: “—linguine with pesto.”

She smiled at me in her most infuriating way. “Write it down,” she told the waiter.

He just stood there, looking uncertain. I got the feeling that he wished he could be waiting on anyone else, anywhere else. Not that a person could blame him, the way Cassie was acting.

“Write it down,” I grumbled. “And tell the kitchen to put arsenic in my salad.”

He wrote it down—I couldn’t see whether he got the part about the arsenic—and then fled the scene.

“Problem?” Cassie asked sweetly.

Yes, and I finally knew what. “This is about Monica, isn’t it? You were fine till that car showed up.”

“You mean the witchmobile?”

That was it, all right. “We’ve been through this, sweetheart. Over and over and over. I’m *done* with her. I’m with you now. Not her. *You*. Why are you so jealous, anyway? It’s not like I’m some great prize.”

“You can say that again.”

There was a moment of hostile silence at our table.

“Well, you always *say* I have terrible taste,” Cassie said.

I wasn’t in the mood to be humored. “Maybe you’re with me because nobody else can put up with you.”

“Back at you, sweetie.”

Damn. We were probably both right. Cassie was high-maintenance, no question about that, but it wasn’t like I’d minded so far. And I couldn’t possibly be easy to live with, but she’d been talking about just that pretty much nonstop lately. It was a terrible idea, though. I’d told her a hundred times that moving in together wouldn’t work, not in—

The coin finally dropped. We’d spent our nights apart since we’d come back from Kansas City; after two weeks together full-time, I thought we both needed a break. *I’d* needed one, anyway. Just last night I’d put on my oldest, most disreputable clothes; run movies that Cassie didn’t like; and had a whole tub of frosting for dinner. It had been great.

“What did you do last night?” I asked.

She hadn’t expected that question. “What?”

“What did you do last night? I’m not checking up on you. I’m just curious.”

“Last night?” Frowning, she ran back over it. “I took a bubble bath. I think that was the highlight. Why?”

“With the fish or with your rubber duck?”

She looked at me as though I’d finally snapped. “With the duck. I hadn’t seen him in a while. Would you mind telling me what this is about?”

“If I’d been there last night, would you have taken a bubble bath?”

“Probably not. You hate them.”

“So you got a break too, didn’t you?”

Even in the half-dark, I could clearly see the nasty glitter in her eyes as she caught my drift. Just as she was winding up to have at me, the waiter came back with the wine. She sat back and folded her arms tight across her chest as I smiled at him. “Thank you,” I said. “Perfect timing.”

He didn’t follow. “Pardon?”

“Never mind. Go ahead.”

But he didn’t—and it dawned on me that he wasn’t sure which of us to pour for. I surveyed the room. It was all boy–girl couples and a few tables of business dinners, which was what it probably always was. Just Friends didn’t go to dinner at places like this. At least, not in Greenville. Damn Cassie anyway.

“She ordered it,” I reminded him. “Why don’t we let her try it?”

Relieved to have the decision made, he sprang into action. Cassie was still waiting, ominously, so I refused to meet her eye. Instead, I scanned the room again. It was my evil luck to look up when my junior copywriter walked in with whatever

she was dating these days. With a glad cry of recognition, she made straight for our table, pulling her date in her wake.

“What?” Cassie asked.

“Heather.”

She scowled at me as though it was my fault.

“Public place,” I pointed out.

She weighed the pleasure of making a scene against the possibility of clients in the restaurant. Business won—but she kicked me under the table to let me know it wasn’t over.

There are many ways to get even. The way I chose was inviting Heather and her date to join us for dinner.

There was no conversation on the drive back to Cassie’s house. Unnerved by the quiet, I grabbed the first CD that came to hand—the “Drew Carey” soundtrack—and stuck it in the player. I sang along with “Five O’Clock World” until the line about the long-haired girl who waits. Cassie gave me a look with so many sharp edges on it that I ejected the disc.

We proceeded in lethal silence for a few blocks. By the next red light, I couldn’t stand it anymore. “I’d rather you yell, Cass.”

“I bet you would.”

Normally, I’d have followed up on that, but the stress of yet another in a string of long, weird days was catching up, and I didn’t have the energy. The best thing was to drop her off, go home and get some sleep; we’d have it out sooner or later, and there was no point in doing it tonight. That decided, I waited in silence for the light to change.

Out of habit, I checked the rearview mirror to see where the car behind me was. I’d learned the hard way that a driver who gets right on your back bumper might drive into your backseat if you’re a second too slow on green. Also, I half-expected to see glittering red eyes right behind me—one of Monica’s favorite tricks—and was almost disappointed when I didn’t.

Beside me, Cassie cleared her throat. “Green light.”

I almost told her that I didn’t need a co-pilot, but her tone made me think twice. Not worth getting into at this hour anyway; whatever was wrong with her, maybe a good night’s sleep would cure it.

After we’d been parked in the driveway for a few minutes, I felt the need to speak. “This is it. We’re here. You’re home.”

No answer. She just sat there as though she’d sat there for all eternity and planned to keep it up.

“You can get out any time.”

Nothing.

“Cassie, sweetheart, I love you, I do, but you’re making me crazy. Can we just say goodnight now so I can go home?”

“We were going to discuss rules,” she said abruptly.

Fantastic. *Now* she felt like talking. But it was progress. To be a good sport, I switched off the engine.

“Then you invited them to have dinner with us.”

“What could I do?” I protested. “They were standing right there.”

Cassie seemed not to hear or, if she heard, to care. “That made it even worse. We were already having a bad date, and then Heather comes along on her bad date and we all have a bad date together. When you *knew* I wanted to talk to you.”

“I didn’t *know* any such thing. You were in a bad mood. I figured you were just taking it out on me.”

“Rule No. 1,” she snapped. “No ‘figuring.’”

“Fine. But what—”

“Rule No. 2. No interrupting during the rules.”

“Should I be writing this down?” I asked, getting impatient.

“Rule No. 3. I want you to move in with me.”

She was a real piece of work. “We keep having this conversation. Why is that? I keep telling you—”

“There’ll be other rules, but these should do for a start. Are you coming in?”

There were a million reasons not to, not the least of which was that she’d been hell on wheels most of the evening. But then she added one word: “Please?”

At long last, I got it. She was mad at me because she’d missed me.

Truth was, I’d missed her, too. No matter what my head said—and it was talking VERY LOUDLY about payback—my treacherous heart didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Without comment, I opened the car door. Cassie got out her side. We met at the front bumper and had a little make-up hug...which got out of hand almost right away, right there in the driveway. It seemed that we really *had* missed each other.

“One more rule,” she murmured.

“What?”

“The car goes.”

It wasn’t like I could take it back to the dealership, was it? “I’ll change the license plate, dammit. Now *drop* it. Are we going to stand out here all night, or what?”

Cassie opted for what. I’d had worse sleepless nights.

Chapter Fourteen

The little red demonmobile was still in Cassie's driveway the next morning, so I drove it to work, not that I had a choice. But first thing at the office, I was calling a car dealer. Maybe this particular temptation would stop if I broke down and bought my own Miata.

Cassie, of course, thought that was a fabulous idea. She thought a Volvo would be even more fabulous, but I reminded her whose decision it was—and whose bank account.

"For now," she'd said.

Wincing at the memory of the conversation that had followed, I took one hand off the wheel to rub my aching head. She'd claimed that she was only joking, but I hadn't believed her. Still didn't. Whatever was wrong with her was getting worse, and if she made one more crack like that, I was going to lose my mind. After six years, how could she drive me this crazy in only a month?

A month. I practically rear-ended a pickup as the awful truth dawned. Damn, damn, damn. Half-watching traffic, I fumbled in my attaché for the cell phone and speed-dialed.

Cassie answered on the first ring. "Devvy?"

I almost hit the pickup again. "How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess. Wait—I've got to change lanes." A terrible squealing of tires came through, and I had to hold the phone away from my ear. "OK, I'm back. What's up?"

"That's what *I* want to know," I growled. "You've been all over my case all week. Does this have anything to do with a one-month anniversary that you think I'm going to forget?"

"What makes you say that?" she asked, all innocence.

Silence on the line for a few seconds.

"Cass?"

"Yes?"

"You know I think this sort of thing is stupid."

Her voice softened perceptibly. "I know."

"Exactly how stupid do you want to get about it? Is just the day OK, or do you want to get down to the actual hour?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to do this right," I said grimly.

Cassie laughed. "Wait a minute."

"What for?"

No answer except for more screeching-tire noises. A little annoyed, I held the phone away again and waited.

Then a black BMW pulled up on my left, honking frantically. As soon as I looked over, Cassie rolled down her passenger window.

"You! In the little car!" she shouted.

Furtively, I checked traffic. People were looking. I decided to pretend I didn't know her.

“Hey! Cutie! Sugarplum!”

I was going to kill her. “We have cell phones,” I reminded her over mine. “If you have something to say to me, say it privately.”

She held hers up with an evil smile, punching at it with one finger, and the connection went dead. Not amused, I switched off my own phone, threw it on the floorboard and rolled down the window.

“What?” I shouted.

“I love you!”

People were slowing down to get a better look, and most of them were laughing. I gave everyone I could a very evil look back, making sure to watch the road once in a while.

“Poooooookie! I looooooove yooooooou!”

That did it. Checking traffic first, I leaned out the window. “I love you too! And you’re *fantastic* in bed!”

The look on her face was worth the laughter in the other cars. Without even bothering to roll her window up, she hit the gas and got out of there as fast as she could—which was really fast, the way she drove.

I’d make it up to her at some point. Probably. But God, that had been fun.

The fun didn’t last, of course. As soon as I got off the elevator, Heather pounced on me—literally, almost spilling my coffee.

“There’s someone in your office,” she reported.

What else was new? There was *always* someone in my office, usually when I didn’t want to see them. “So?”

“But nobody’s in there.”

Frowning, I rubbed my temples again. This was already shaping up to be a bear of a day. “You can’t have it both ways, Heather. Are you feeling all right?”

She tapped her foot impatiently, thinking. Then she grabbed my coat sleeve and yanked. “Come on—I’ll show you.”

I shook her off but let her lead the way. When we reached my office, she threw open the door and jumped back as though something might fly out.

“It’s supposed to be locked,” I told her. “How did you get in?”

“It was open.”

I mentally penciled in a call to Rita Sanchez. The cleaning people were getting lazy about this sort of thing; she might want to look into changing contractors. In fact, I’d call her right away, before either of us got distracted by the first crisis of the day.

But Heather pulled me back before I got all the way over the threshold. “Are you *crazy*? There’s something in there!”

Pointedly, I tugged my coat loose and went on in, tossing my attaché in one of the guest chairs and surveying the room. Nothing under the desk, nothing behind the chair, nothing curled up and hissing in a corner.

“It was sitting in your chair,” Heather insisted from the safety of the doorway.

“It?”

“It was reading your mail, Dev. I saw it.”

An unpleasant possibility crossed my mind. “What did you see?”

“Well, nothing. There was nothing there. Just the papers moving around. And then...”

“Then?”

“Then it started laughing.” She shuddered. “It was awful. Like scratching on a blackboard or something.”

What was it Cassie had said once? “Or cats in heat?”

Heather perked up considerably. “Yes! Like cats in heat scratching a blackboard. It was really—” Then it dawned on her. “Wait. You’ve heard it?”

No point explaining, now or ever. “A few times. Usually late at night, when I’ve been working too hard. Dr. Shapiro says it’s stress.” With a grave expression, I pretended to study her face. “You may be coming down with it, too. It’s been a tough few weeks around here.”

She didn’t look convinced. “Well, yes, but—”

“And there was last night, too. That *Dave* person. He can’t have helped.”

“No,” she admitted. “He didn’t.”

“So I think you should take the day off. Hallucinations aren’t good. And we’ve had too much of that going around. Look at Jack and Kurt.”

Heather went pale. “You don’t mean...?”

I shrugged. “Hard to say. But I don’t think you’d be happy in the bin. Did you know they have dinner at 5 there?”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. They do group hugs, too. Peg was trying to tell me they read *Inspiring Thoughts for the Day* out loud after breakfast, but that sounded too cruel, so—”

“I’m out of here,” she said sharply. “I’m going to go home and lie down. I don’t feel so good. Are you sure you don’t need me for anything?”

“Not till tomorrow. Go home.”

She bolted. The last I saw of her, she was shoving one of Walt’s artists out of her way in the hall, and by the thud he made hitting the wall, she meant business.

Oh, well, she probably needed a day off anyway. I’d have to take up the slack for her if anything came up, but it beat telling the truth—let alone losing one more copywriter to the shrinks.

Resigned, I hung up my coat and settled in at my desk to check e-mail. In the very next instant, a bad Presence loomed over my shoulder.

“Cats in heat?” the Presence asked menacingly.

“I was quoting. What do you want now?”

“Want?” Monica’s tone turned suspiciously sweet. “Really, Devlin.” She settled on the arm of my chair, with a little smile that matched the tone. “What makes you think I want something?”

“If you’re breathing, you want something.”

“Then this should be familiar. How *is* the irritating blonde?”

It came out before I thought. “Irritating.”

“Yes. That was my guess.” A set of long, sharp talons started to play in my hair. “She’s trying to close the sale. It would be more honest if she just put a ring through your nose.”

“Cut that out,” I demanded, pushing her hand away. “And don’t try to make trouble. Everything’s fine.”

“Is it? I thought she loooooooved you.”

“She does. It’s mutual.”

“You both have an interesting way of showing it.”

“Why? Because we argue? Because she’s a little possessive?”

Monica laughed—and I did hear something feline in it this time.

“It’s just how we work this relationship,” I told her. “This is how it was before. It works for us. We don’t want things to get all sentimental.”

“Horrors,” Monica said mockingly, and reached down to rake her claws through my hair again.

This time, I threw her off so hard that she nearly went over the chair arm. “You were going to tell me what you want. Tell me, and then get out.”

“You don’t trust me.”

I greeted that remark with the silence it deserved.

“All right, never mind,” she said, a little sulkily. “I’m here to do you a favor. Do you remember my offer?”

“What offer?”

“You’re headed for trouble, Devlin.” She leaned forward a little too far, and I had to forcibly remind myself not to notice the cleavage. “But I can still make it all go away.”

“Tell you what,” I said coolly. “You just make yourself go away, and we’ll have a deal.”

Monica just laughed again. “That ring through the nose will be very attractive. I’m sure your family will admire it. You *are* taking her home for Christmas, aren’t you? Planning to explain her?”

There was no explaining Cassie. And there was no point in having this discussion, either. Irritated, I got up and started to leave the office.

“The offer stands,” Monica said. “I’ll be around when you change your mind. In fact, I’ll be right here. I *am* your admin now, you know.”

That stopped me.

“Of course, I’m having a stress problem,” she added. “I’ll need to take the rest of the day off. With pay.”

“Fine. Just go,” I snapped.

She vanished from the chair arm and materialized in front of me—much too close. “Let me leave you with one thought, Devlin. You haven’t *seen* fantastic in bed yet.”

It was my turn to bolt out of the office. The artist Heather had shoved into the wall was blocking the hallway again, rubbing his head; I shoved him into the opposite wall and kept going.

Just to be safe, I spent the rest of the morning down in Video. And I made an intern check my office before I went back up.

Late that afternoon, someone knocked.

“Go away,” I said, intent on a rewrite.

The intruder knocked again. Annoyed, I swiveled around toward the door. “Who is it?”

“Land Shark,” a muffled voice said.

Against my will, I smiled a little. Too bad “Saturday Night Live” was no good anymore. “It’s open.”

The door opened, and I couldn’t see who or what came in, because it was carrying an enormous bouquet of snapdragons. Surprised, I got up to help.

“Thanks,” the courier said. “Should’ve brought this up on a dolly. Where do you want it?”

Good question. There wasn’t a square inch of clear space on my desk. “The credenza, I guess. Over here. Watch out for the coffeemaker.”

We managed to set the thing down without damage. Then we just stood there, staring at it.

The courier shook his head. “That’s a load of flowers. What did you do?”

“I have no idea. Is there a card?”

“I’m not looking through all that,” he informed me. “Have a nice day.”

I waited for him to leave and then started poking through the arrangement with a letter opener. Finally, a little white envelope fell out. I opened it and read the card.

You’re not half-bad yourself, sweetie. Dinner at 7?
C

Well, it was her version of an apology. I had a feeling that dinner could be arranged.

But we were going to have a little talk about nose jewelry, just in case she *really* had any ideas.

Chapter Fifteen

December

Several bad things happened the very first Monday of December:

- Kurt came back to work part-time.
- My mother called.
- Cassie's sister called.
- My mother called again.

Kurt was the easy part. He was still on heavy meds, so he wasn't up to being much trouble yet. I gave him bunny shots to start with—a new spot in an existing series, a couple of rewrites, a make-good for Walt's team—and pretty much left him alone after that. If he continued to be a good boy, I'd let him run another audition soon. If not...well, there'd be another Kester Mortuaries spot to write. Or I could give him Cassie's father's bank's account. That would teach *both* of them not to cross me.

But my mother was another story. She always was.

I was in a meeting when she called the first time. After that, I went straight to another meeting, so I missed the second call, too. It wasn't till lunch that I finally got the message—on Cassie's pager.

"It's for you," she said, handing it across the table.

I squinted at the tiny display. HAVE DEV CALL URGENT R SANCHEZ. What could be urgent? Jenner was still home in bed. Jack was still locked up. Kurt was under sedation. Monica hadn't been back, and neither had Vanessa. But Sanchez wasn't the type to panic, so if she said it was urgent... "Borrow your phone?"

She was already dialing. "You know, Devvy, the whole point of having a cell phone is always having it with you, so people can reach you."

"Exactly."

She laughed and gave me the phone.

"Rita? It's Dev. What's up?"

Those were the last words I got in edgewise in that call. Sanchez's voice kept rising and getting louder as she explained the situation, and by the time she read back the last message, she was almost shrieking. Then she hung up. Just like that.

I listened to the dead air in solemn contemplation for a few seconds before I hung up, too.

"She was yelling, wasn't she?" Cassie asked. "I heard it all the way over here. What happened?"

"Mom called."

Sympathetically, she reached across the table to squeeze my hand.

"Five times," I added. "The receptionists got scared after the second time and started transferring her to Sanchez."

Cassie frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"Not with Mom. Sanchez is going to need rehab, though." Unhappily, I dug in my purse for the Advil. "Go ahead and start without me when the food comes. I'll go outside to call her back. No point in both of us suffering."

"It's snowing outside, sweetie."

"Then that's the perfect place to do this. It'll be just like a Russian novel."

"You're cute when you're paranoid, you know that?"

"I'm not cute." I took one Advil, considered, and took another. "Be right back."

But Cassie locked both her feet around mine under the table. "Stay put. We're in this together."

"You don't know her."

"After everything we've already been through," she said, half-annoyed, half-amused, "I think I can cope with one little mother. How bad can she be?"

Where would I start explaining? "All right. It's your funeral." I started punching in the number. "Give me your phone bill next month, and I'll pay for this."

"Forget it. My treat."

I would have argued that "trick" was more like it, but the phone picked up at the other end. "Mom?"

Then I listened. For a long time. She gave me about a minute and a half on the indignity of not being able to reach one's own daughter at will, followed by a couple of minutes on the perfidy of said daughter, followed by a long recap of our conversation when I'd told her I wasn't coming home for Thanksgiving, and it could have gone on for hours, except that I would need more Advil. "Mom? I'm kind of busy here. Can you get to what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Across the table, Cassie winced at the volume of the reply. *In this together, are we?* Smiling very faintly, I beckoned her closer and held the phone between us.

"—Christmas, at least. You could at *least* have taken the time to call your own mother and tell her when to expect you, not to mention that your Aunt Kitty keeps asking, but if you're too *busy* to make a phone call—"

This time, I said it loud. "Mom. Stop. Breathe. *Now.*"

The silence on her end was brief but indignant. "You're just like your brothers. Insolent as the day is long, all of you. Your father will be very interested in hearing about this conversation."

"Well, when you talk to Dad, be sure to tell him I said hi," I replied, trying to sound cheerful. "Now just let me say this, OK? I haven't called you about Christmas yet because I don't know my schedule yet. We've got people out sick, and I'm having to cover for them. But I think I can get away by the 23rd, so—"

"You're management," Mom said frostily. "That's what you have employees for."

Cassie almost started laughing; not finding that funny, I pulled back enough to scowl at her. "You brought me up to work hard, remember?"

The shot didn't even slow her down. "I *also* brought you up to be part of this family. Christmas is not optional, Devlin."

"Never said it was. I'll be there. Promise."

"Don't get sarcastic with me, young lady."

"I'm not being sarcastic. I mean it. When are Connor and Ryan coming home?"

“I don’t know,” she said peevishly. “Their wives haven’t *told* them yet. At least you don’t have that excuse.”

I was about to agree when Cassie moved slightly and put a small kiss on my temple. Damn, and in front of a whole restaurant full of strangers, too.

“Devlin? Are you there?”

“I’m here.” Cautiously, I looked around. No one seemed to have noticed. In fact, most of the other customers were busy on their own cell phones. Sometime, I’d have to worry what that said about us. “Listen, Mom, what if I bring someone home with me this year?”

Stunned silence. “Not a man,” she warned.

Cassie snorted; I had to smile myself. “No. She’s not a man.” Most definitely not. “You remember my friend Cassie? You met her about a year ago.”

“The blonde girl? She had too much lipstick on. And that blouse! It showed *everything*. Does her mother know how she dresses?”

Now Cassie was indignant, and it was all I could do to keep her from grabbing the phone away. “Since when are you the fashion police, Mother? I’ve *seen* that ratty old bathrobe of yours.”

“We’re not discussing me,” she said in offended dignity.

“Well, that’s a nice change. Now listen—Cassie’s spending Christmas with me this year. That part’s not open for discussion. We can come visit you and have a nice Christmas, or we can stay here and have a *very* nice Christmas. Your call. What do you say?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Mom?”

Still nothing. Cassie leaned close again, the better to hear.

“She can stay in my old room. I’ll sleep on the sleeper sofa. It won’t be a big deal. All right?”

Finally, my mother sighed. “I hope she’s not one of those people who have to have turkey at Christmas. *We* always have ham. I’m not changing the menu.”

“No one’s asking you to. Why don’t—”

“I have to go,” she lied. “Call me later.”

Then she hung up. Cassie and I waited to make sure she was really gone before we sat back. By her expression, Cassie was starting to rethink the holiday thing.

“She’s not always like this,” I said reassuringly. “Sometimes, she’s worse.”

Cassie smiled, but with very little enthusiasm. Fortunately, the waitress showed up with our lunches then.

“Sorry it took a while,” the waitress said, “but I heard the word ‘Mother’ while you were on the phone, and I figured it was trouble of some kind.”

She didn’t know the half of it. But she made Cassie laugh, which was going to earn her a huge tip from me.

True, it set a dangerous precedent; if I was going to have to pay people to make Cassie laugh this Christmas, it was going to get expensive. But I loved her, and it was only money.

God, I hoped Mom couldn’t hear that thought. The part about the money, anyway.

On the way back to the office, I bought Sanchez a make-up present.

She peered into the bag, looking doubtful. "What is it?"

"A Ping-Pong gun," I said. "You load it up with Ping-Pong balls, and then you can shoot at things. I keep one in the living room so I can shoot the TV whenever Martha Stewart comes on."

Sanchez, who was no fan of the woman's, smiled just a little. "Or Kathie Lee Gifford?"

"You need a cruise missile for that. C'mon, Sanchez, open it. You know you want to."

"Well..." Gingerly, she peeled off the bubble packaging. "I suppose it can't hurt. Mr. Jenner should be back in a couple of weeks."

"And if you practice now, you can nail him in the forehead every time you try."

"No, I mean I'll give it to him to play with. It might keep him out of trouble for a whole morning."

"Optimist," I told her. "Have a nice day."

Halfway to the door, I got a Ping-Pong ball in the back. Sanchez was smiling serenely, still pointing the gun.

"Practice," she explained. "Thank you, Dev."

"You're welcome. But you'd better not let Cassie find out you did that. She'd turn you into kibble."

"No, she won't. She owes me now."

"Owes you for what?"

"I promised to have the switchboard hang up the next time your mother calls."

Whatever the agency paid Sanchez, it wasn't enough. We *both* owed her for that.

All afternoon, the snow kept falling. Cassie was out in it, calling on clients, and even though she was a grown woman with snow tires, I couldn't help worrying. For a city in the Snow Belt, Meridian was hopeless when it came to snow removal. One winter, the mayor decided that plowing would only make the streets worse. That policy lasted one snowfall. On Election Day, only his wife voted for him, and there were rumors that she'd tried to take it back later.

Finally, after I'd checked out the window for the hundredth time, I reached for the phone. Yes, she had her cell phone; yes, she was capable of calling someone if she needed help. But what if I'd run down the battery at lunch, dealing with my mother? Or what if she'd gotten stuck in a drift and bears had broken into her car with coat hangers and eaten her before she could call AAA?

Well, all right, that last one was a long shot, but I'd feel worse if I didn't do something. Just as I touched the phone, it rang, and I answered without thinking. "Cass?"

"Close. It's Lucy."

"Lucy as in Lucy her sister?"

"Gee, she's right—you *are* smart. How are you?"

"Fine." Impatient, I stood up to look out the window again. Still snowing. "You?"

"Well, I'm married to Michael, but other than that, I can't complain."

So much for small talk. “What can I do for you? I’m sort of busy, so—”

“Too busy to talk to me? Really? Are you sure?”

I counted to thirty. This was her sister, whom I was bound by honor to love, but no law said I had to like her all the time.

“Dev?”

“Still here.”

“Oh, all right, if you don’t want to chitchat, your loss. I called to ask you what you’re getting her for Christmas.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to make a mistake, do you?”

No, as a matter of fact, I didn’t. Christmas paybacks could be vicious. There’d been the year when Kurt gave Peg nothing but small kitchen appliances, and I could still make him jump just by saying the words “Salad Shooter.” Not that I was fool enough to try something like that on Cassie. “I’d rather not. What do you suggest?”

“Jewelry’s always nice,” Lucy said, much too casually.

“She *has* jewelry. I was thinking maybe an MP3 player, or one of those—”

“Dev?”

“What?”

“Are you a complete idiot?”

“I must be; I’m still talking to you. Are you getting at what I think you’re getting at?”

“What do you think I’m getting at?”

Be nice. She’ll be her sister all her life. “We’re not doing that, Lucy. We’re not even living together. So before you start spending three months of my salary, forget it.”

“I think three months is just a guideline,” she mused. “You don’t have to spend that much. As long as it’s nice, and she likes it...”

“No.”

“What you might want to do is get a loaner to put in the box. After Christmas, she can go pick out the one she really wants.”

“*No.* Are we done here?”

“You love her. I can tell,” Lucy said, untroubled by my tone. “You were hoping it was her on the phone just now. So if you love her—”

“Don’t *you* start with that.”

“Gotta run. The kids say hi. Remember: Three months is a guideline.” *Click.*

I slammed the phone down and put my head in my hands. When the phone rang again thirty seconds later, I hit the speakerphone button without looking up. “Kerry.”

“Is that any way to answer the phone at work?” my mother scolded.

Defeated, I slumped all the way over on the desktop, hitting it with a thud.

“Hello? Hello? What was that noise? Devlin?”

“You weren’t supposed to get through,” I mumbled. “They were supposed to cut you off at the switchboard.”

“They did. I disguised my voice this time.”

There was nothing I could say to that to make myself feel better. Silently, I waited for her to get on with it. Before she did, though, the office door swung open, and Cassie walked in.

Ahhh. That was better. I gave her what must have been a very goofy smile.

“You’re lying on your desk,” she observed. “Is there anything I should know?”

The speakerphone squawked a little. “Devlin? Who is that?”

I closed my eyes. “It’s Cassie. She just came in. What can I do for you this time, Mom?”

“Call me later,” she said quickly. *Click.*

The dial tone hummed for a while. Finally, I felt Cassie bend over me to hang up the phone.

“I was worried about you,” I told her, eyes still closed. “It’s snowing. Did you see any bears?”

“Bears?”

“Never mind.”

“You know, we could go to the beach for Christmas,” Cassie remarked, settling on my chair arm. “It’s not like we have to spend *every* holiday with our families. We’re grownups, after all.” She reached over and started massaging the back of my neck. “What do you think?”

“You’re not weaseling out of this. I had to do it. Now it’s your turn.”

“I’ll give you one of these every night for a month,” she bargained.

“Too late, Cass.”

She said a bad word not quite under her breath but kept rubbing. That was much, much better. When the phone rang again, I knocked it all the way off the desk.

“It’s almost 5,” she said. “Let’s cut out early. Want to pick up Greek? I’ve still got some ouzo.”

“Perfect.”

“You have to get up first,” she added.

Reluctantly, I did. On the way to the coat rack, I heard tires squealing in the parking lot and idly looked out the window.

Cassie heard, too, and came over to see. “What in hell...?”

“Right,” I said glumly, pointing.

Vanessa was doing doughnuts in the parking lot in her red BMW, with the top down, spraying snow everywhere. She looked like she was having the time of her life. I didn’t know what she was up to, but then, I really didn’t want to know.

“We’ll sneak out the back way,” Cassie declared. “And we’ll take *my* car.”

Chapter Sixteen

Cassie's clock radio woke us, completely against our will. She groaned and tried to pull all the covers and both pillows over her head. I could relate; I just couldn't remember what freight train had hit us. God, there were a lot of pieces missing from last night.

"S all right," I told her. "Got it."

She gave up her futile effort with the covers and flopped back down. Unable to open my eyes all the way, I felt for the radio, found the snooze button and smacked it with genuine hatred. Then we went back to sleep.

For eight minutes.

"Give you a thousand dollars to turn it off," she mumbled.

No charge. If she felt anything like I felt, neither of us had any business waking up anyway. But we had meetings. So I shut off the alarm and scraped myself out of bed. Cassie probably would be all right by herself for a while, and if not...well, it had been her idea and her ouzo last night.

Pulling my robe off the footboard, I threw it on and staggered to the bath. Every step made my skull hurt. Why? We hadn't had *that* much ouzo. Maybe it had been the food. We might've gotten hold of bad grape leaves or toxic lamb or something.

Yeah, that was probably it.

I switched on the bathroom light and almost howled in pain as my eyeballs tried to explode. Not good. Between that and the red-hot knives in the brain, I might not live long enough to call an ambulance. Not that it mattered, because I couldn't even remember the number for 911.

Gripping the towel bar on the shower door for support, I waited till the world stopped spinning and then felt blindly for the faucets. With my remaining strength, I turned on the cold water full blast and got in the shower, robe and all. It felt great. By comparison, anyway.

It took a while to realize that someone was hammering on the shower door.

"If you're Norman Bates, forget it. I'm already dead."

Cassie wasn't in the mood for Hitchcock jokes; she slammed the door open and waited for me to turn the water off.

"Can I help you?" I asked politely.

"Phone."

"For me? Here?" Frowning, I pushed wet hair out of my eyes. "Who is it?"

"It *sounds* like your mother trying to disguise her voice. Either that or a sick rhinoceros."

A better person would have objected to that crack, but Mom had sinus problems from decades of smoking, and she *did* sound a little rhinocerosy first thing in the morning. Rhinocerosy? Rhinocerish? Rhinoceresque? Oh, to hell with it. "What does she want?"

"I don't know." Cassie grabbed a towel off the rack and shoved it at me. "You still have your robe on."

"My eyeballs were going to explode," I explained. "There wasn't time to take it off."

She clearly wanted to have words about that, but then she remembered the open line in the bedroom. “*Do* let me watch it for you while you speak to your mother. Did I mention that she’s on the phone? Right *now?!?*”

Grumbling under my breath, I stripped off the robe, wrapped up in the towel and abandoned the field. The phone was in the middle of the bed, upside down; I stared at it for a while with misgivings before picking it up. “Mom?”

“You were supposed to call me back last night,” she snapped.

“Good morning to you, too, Mother. Lovely to hear from you. How did you get this number?”

“A very nice girl at your office gave it to me yesterday. Vanna or Vera or someone. She said if I called early this morning, I’d find you here.”

Damn Vanessa. “Did she, now?”

“Would you care to explain that?”

“No. But thanks for asking. Now, what’s so important that you had to call about?”

“You sound feverish,” she said suspiciously. “Are you running a fever?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Is that all you wanted? I have to get ready for work, and—”

“I want to talk to you about Christmas.”

“All right. We’ll do that. But we really can’t do it right this minute. What if I call you back tonight?”

“You *said* you were going to call *last* night.”

A warm hand tilted my head up. Cassie was holding a glass of water and a couple of Excedrin—the kind for migraines. Wonderful timing. Covering the mouthpiece with one hand, I raised up off the bed just high enough to kiss her. “Sorry, Mom. What was that again?”

“You said you’d call last night, and you didn’t. I raised you better than that, you know.”

I took the first caplet before answering. “Reared. Not raised.”

“It’s informal conversation,” she said frostily.

Good. This would derail her. Feeling a bit more hopeful, I took the second cap. “But that’s what you always told us. ‘*Raised* is for crops. *Reared* is for children. *Kids* are young goats, not—”

“Watch your tone; I’m your mother. And call me later. I mean it this time.”

Then she hung up.

“All clear,” I told Cassie.

She sighed and sat down next to me. “About Christmas, Devvy...”

“Don’t even start that. You’re going.”

“I know, I know. You can’t blame me for asking, though.”

I couldn’t. But it was a comfort to know that this year, I’d be going in with backup.

It would be fair to say that neither of us was at her best that morning. Even Cassie, who was fairly bulletproof that way, rescheduled her client calls and all but one meeting; she didn’t think she could be nice for more than an hour. Frankly, I had

doubts about even an hour. On the drive in to work, we heard those dogs barking “Jingle Bells” on the radio, and she hit the off button so hard that the whole radio nearly went through the dash.

Exactly how I felt about that one. Still, I thought I’d stay out of her line of fire, just in case she forgot she loved me. We had to do a meeting together first thing, but it would be short. And after that, we could take out our mood on everybody else for the rest of the day.

Partly appeased by that prospect, I went to my office to go over some paperwork before the client got there. No sooner had I walked in than Monica materialized on the edge of the desk.

My reflexes were too impaired for me to react in any way. Without comment, I surveyed her idea of a business suit.

She shrugged. “You should see what Vanessa’s wearing.”

“Vanessa isn’t my problem. Are you here to work? Or just to torment me?”

“I don’t know yet.” Thoughtfully, she examined me. “I hate to admit it, but it might not be much fun tormenting you today. You don’t look well.”

“I don’t know how I could be *expected* to be. First my mother; then you. And now I have to go see a man about a dog food account. *Dog food*. Do you know what’s in that stuff?”

She crossed herself.

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Really, Devlin. Just because I’m a demon doesn’t mean I want to hear about cow parts.”

“Cow lips,” I said darkly. “And pig lips. And lungs and hearts and ears and—”

“There are cultures that eat dogs. Everything’s relative.”

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “Go away, Monica.”

Obligingly, she parked herself behind my desk and made herself at home.

“I’m serious,” I growled. “You’re starting to wear out your welcome. Weren’t you supposed to go away after Cassie outed me?”

“I did. I got bored. I came back.”

“Can you do that?”

It was a stupid question; her eyes started glittering in a particularly nasty way. “I can do anything I want. Besides, you’re not as out as you think you are. All bets are still on. I can still make your life *unbelievably* interesting.”

“Don’t threaten me. Vanessa checkmates you, remember?”

“She’s an idiot.”

“Yes, but she’s *our* idiot.”

Monica didn’t say anything to that. I took advantage of the temporary peace to start the coffeemaker. Maybe if I just stuck my tongue under the drip, the caffeine would get into my system faster.

The local line rang. And rang. And rang.

“If you’re going to pretend to be my admin,” I told her, “you can start by answering the phone.”

Monica made a point of swiveling the chair around, turning her back on it. Muttering, I went over to pick it up. “Kerry.”

“Wolfe.”

Trouble of some kind, by her tone. “What’s up?”

“I have demons. Do you have demons?”

I glowered at the chair back. “Yes.”

“Mine wants to go to the meeting with us. Do you know what she’s wearing?”

“Do I have to?”

Brief, aggravated silence. “We’re coming up.”

“Fine, but—”

Before I could finish the sentence, Vanessa popped in out of thin air. I dropped the receiver. She was dressed up in a Catholic-schoolgirl uniform, but wearing it in a way that it was never meant to be worn.

“I told you,” Monica said sulkily, returning to her perch on the edge of the desk. “She looks like a secondhand virgin.”

Vanessa tossed her head. “Oh, tut. You’re just jealous because I look so cute in plaid. What do you think, Devlin? Do you like the kneesocks? Should I button the shirt just a little?”

I wasn’t fool enough to answer a question like that. Fortunately, Cassie stormed in just then. She didn’t seem to be armed, but I had no trouble picturing her with a really big stick—or, say, a couple of knives.

“There are no exorcists in the phone book,” she said direly, glaring at the demons. “I just looked. But as soon as this meeting is over, I’m getting on the Internet. You two want to keep your broomsticks handy.”

Vanessa hopped up on the edge of the desk next to Monica and leaned close to speak confidentially. “Hangover.”

“I could cure that by taking her head off,” Monica remarked.

That was a point. But Cassie was glaring at me now, so I had to do something about it. “Don’t even think about touching her,” I warned. “She’s in a really bad mood.”

Cassie yanked me close for private speech. “*You’re* supposed to threaten her.”

“I just did.”

Uncertain whether that was a compliment, she loosened her grip slightly.

“C’mon, Cass, let go. Let’s leave this for later. How about tomorrow? It’ll be more fun when we feel better.”

“I feel fine,” she lied.

I checked my watch. We were going to be late if we didn’t go now. Time to distract her. “I love you.”

She didn’t look distracted, but she didn’t look like she minded either. “Are you up to something?”

“Yes,” I said, and leaned in to kiss her.

But she foiled the plan by kissing back, which had the effect of distracting *me*. So I didn’t see the men in the doorway until long after they’d seen us—and the demons perched on my desk.

Howard Abner looked as though he’d been hit on the head with one of those cartoon anvils. Jack was a professional, though; he didn’t even blink.

“That’s them, Howard,” he said earnestly. “All of them. They’re the Devil.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jack said “the Devil,” and everyone—*everyone*—looked at me. I didn’t appreciate it. There were actual demons in the room, so how was that fair?

“No horns; no hooves. Knock it off,” I demanded.

Caught, Cassie patted my shoulder in apology. Then she turned on the intruders in the doorway. “Why aren’t you locked up, Jack?”

He started to answer, but Abner intervened. “Don’t speak to them directly. Don’t try to dialogue with Satan. Let me handle this.”

I couldn’t believe it. “Dialogue with?” Who taught him English? A cow? “*Dialogue with?*”

Abner ignored that. “Don’t look at them directly, either.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Vanessa complained. “And I went to all this trouble to look so *cute* today.”

I just managed to grab Cassie’s sleeve in time. “If we’re not talking and looking, Jethro, how are we going to communicate here?”

“Wait outside, Harper,” Abner said importantly, reaching into his coat. Something metal flashed under the fluorescent lights. A gun? A knife?

Acting on sheer instinct, I shoved Cassie out of the way and threw myself over her. The last thing I saw before we hit the floor was Monica raising her arm, an exquisitely bored expression on her face. Then there was a flash of very bright light, followed by a weird crackling sound.

“Stay down,” I warned Cassie.

She muttered something vaguely threatening and tried to push me out of her way. Intent on staying between her and whatever was going on, whether she liked it or not, I didn’t even bother to check what had happened to Abner until she froze, staring over my shoulder.

I blinked a few times, certain that I couldn’t be seeing what I was seeing. But it was no good.

Monica still looked bored; Vanessa was rolling her eyes.

“Wh...? Wh...?” Frustrated, I waited a few seconds for my language skills to kick in again. “What *is* that?”

“Salt,” Vanessa said.

“*Salt?*”

“As in a pillar of. Trite, huh?”

“I was making a statement,” Monica protested, with heat.

Vanessa snorted. “What statement? That you don’t have any imagination? Turning people into pillars of salt is so thirty centuries ago.”

“What else were we going to do with him? Turn him into a newt?”

Cassie’s demon seriously considered the question. I was really interested in hearing the answer, but Cassie snapped out of it just then and grabbed my collar hard. “Tell me I’m dreaming, Devvy. Tell me it’s the ouzo.”

“It probably *is* the ouzo, but you’re awake.” As gently as possible, I pried her loose. “He’s a pillar of salt. What do we think? Do we like it?”

She thought about it. “We don’t hate it. Where’s Jack?”

“Hiding behind the door,” Monica said. She flicked a talon in that direction, and the door swung shut, revealing Jack pressed flat against the wall. He tried to squirm the rest of the way through it. “What would amuse you, Devlin? I could turn him into a pillar of pepper, if you like.”

The symmetry of that appealed to me. The cleaning people would have an awful mess to sweep up that night, and they’d surely ask questions. But if my demon could go around turning people I didn’t like into condiments, there was no reason not to have some fun.

On the other hand...

“Let them go,” I told Monica.

“I don’t think so. They’re annoying. And they bore me.”

“That’s not the point. You can’t keep pulling these little stunts. I’m running out of explanations.”

“You’ve managed so far.”

That wasn’t the point either. It had taken all my powers to explain away the troubles before Thanksgiving. Fortunately, nobody at Channel 12 had believed Lisa Hartwell’s story about seeing devils and hellfire and a pudgy copywriter turning into a possum in my office. The film had come out blank, for one thing. Also, the cameraman had been high that day and couldn’t be sure what he’d seen. J/J/G’s bad rep had helped, too; everyone knew the place was a madhouse, so people were just shrugging off the rumors.

Still, it hadn’t looked good for Jenner, Jack and Kurt to go out on medical leave at the same time, and not everyone was really buying my stress-epidemic story. Walt, for example. He’d been giving me the fish-eye lately, and although he was dumb, it was only from the neck up; he had a certain animal instinct about things that I’d never liked.

“I’m tired of managing, Monica. Let them go. Nobody’s going to believe Abner if he tells, and Jack won’t say anything.” I glanced at him for confirmation. “You won’t, either. You’re under medical care. For all you know, this is your medication talking. Right?”

He swallowed a couple of times. “I hope so. I keep seeing things. I saw Elvis the other night, did I tell you?”

“I think we’d better get him back to the hospital,” Cassie said worriedly. “Can we sneak him down the service elevator?”

Vanessa sighed and snapped her fingers. Jack vanished. “He’s back. Just in time for group.”

“Spoilsport,” Monica accused.

“Naaaah, he’ll like it today. That redhead’s going to tell how she lost her virginity.”

Monica raised an eyebrow in question; Vanessa leaned closer to whisper.

“No. Really?”

“Really,” Vanessa assured her. “And humans call *us* names.”

Impatient, I checked my watch again. “Look, we’re really late for a meeting. Would you just change Abner back now so we can go?”

“You were more fun before Blondie there got hold of you,” Monica grumbled.

Cassie smirked and made a point of getting closer.

"I'll remind you who started it," I told my demon. "This is all your own doing. And by the way, thank you. Now change him back."

She folded her arms, sulking. "No."

"If you don't, Vanessa will, just to spite you."

Monica glared at her.

Vanessa shrugged. "She's right. It's my nature."

My demon made a few poisonous comments in a language I didn't understand. But she took the curse off, and Howard Abner rematerialized, clutching a crucifix. It was clear from his expression that he had no idea what had just happened.

"Go now," I advised him. "People are enjoying themselves somewhere. Somebody's got to stop them."

He stood there for a few seconds, blinking. Then he shook his head and walked away, salt pouring out of his coat pockets, leaving a trail. How would I explain that?

Easy. I would not. That decided, I got up off the floor and held out a hand to Cassie. "Let's go. We're late."

Vanessa hopped off the desk. "Right behind you. How do I look?"

"You can't go," Cassie told her.

"I don't see why not. You need all the help you can get with this account. Since you're not sleeping with clients anymore..." Delicately, she paused. "You *aren't* sleeping with clients anymore, are you?"

Cassie sputtered in outrage.

"How would it be if we had just one normal day around here?" I asked the demons. "What if Cassie and I go to work, and you two take the day off and do something fun?"

"This *is* fun," Vanessa said.

In all the excitement, I'd almost forgotten that my head was killing me. The reprieve was over now. "Fine. Just let us get this meeting over, and then you can burn the place down, for all I care. We're leaving right after this and going back to bed. Right, Cass?"

"To sleep," Cassie amended.

"Of *course* to sleep." Insulted, I threw the door open and started down the hall toward the conference room where we were meeting the dog food people. About halfway there, I heard a bad omen: barking. Even worse, it sounded like a small dog in a large mood. A Pekingese, maybe, or a toy poodle.

Sometimes, you don't even need demons to have a bad day.

For all my good intentions, I never got around to going home after the meeting. Kurt was feeling better, so he picked a fight with Heather, which wound up involving two departments and almost escalated into an international incident. I never did find out what it was about, but all I really wanted was for it to stop. So I started a rumor that Jenner was on his way in.

The rumor worked, of course. It was like a T-shirt I'd seen once: JESUS IS COMING. LOOK BUSY. But Sanchez came down later to shoot Ping-Pong balls at me

for it; half the agency had run straight to her office, trying to cover themselves. Her aim, I noticed, was improving.

At least Cassie was safe. She'd left not long after the dog food crowd did, and I hoped she was tucked into bed. Only a crazy person would be at work with this kind of hangover. Besides, it was snowing again. The only sensible thing to do that night was go home and stay home.

So I went Christmas shopping.

There was no good reason to go shopping in person; I had a perfectly good Internet connection. But Christmas was different. Maybe it was the thrill of battle, or the plastic holly and Muzak, but it just wasn't Christmas until I hit the malls.

Also, I had no idea what to get Cassie, and something might suggest itself if I looked around. All I knew for sure was that I wasn't going anywhere near a jewelry store.

An hour and three jewelry stores later, I gave up and went home.

To my surprise, Cassie's BMW was in the driveway. I found her curled up on the greatroom couch under the couch throw, sound asleep, with a fire burning down in the fireplace and an empty box of Godiva chocolates on the coffee table.

Bemused, I sat on the arm of the couch by her feet and watched her. It was the strangest feeling, but it was just about the nicest thing I'd ever come home to. Living together was still a terrible, terrible idea, but...

Well, we could talk about it sometime. No time soon, but eventually. *If* this lasted, which it might not. It probably wouldn't, so there was no reason to think about any kind of future. Was there?

Cassie's eyes fluttered open just then, and I promptly forgot the question. "Hi," I said.

She smiled slightly. "Hi yourself. What time is it?"

"Almost 7."

"God. I was just going to take a nap." Annoyed with herself, she pulled off the couch throw and sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"Don't worry about it. Feel better now?"

"Lots better. Thanks."

"Didn't do anything."

We let that conversation die of its own inanity and just looked at each other. That weird feeling started tugging at me again. This was crazy. I'd known her six years. How could a few weeks of knowing her in a different way make this much difference?

"I was going to offer to make dinner," Cassie said abruptly. "Kind of to make up for last night. Interested?"

"There's not much to work with. I haven't been to the grocery lately."

"That's why I said 'I was.' All you've got in your refrigerator is Tabasco sauce and coffee."

"I have Tabasco sauce?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

She laughed and scooted down the couch to whack me. "The plan from Column B is to order in."

Actually, the plan that was forming in my mind was from a very different column, so I bent down and kissed her.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she murmured, “but shouldn’t you call your mother before we get sidetracked?”

“Called her from the mall on my cell. That way, I could honestly say I couldn’t hear her.”

Cassie had leaned in again but pulled back at that. “What were you doing at the mall?”

“Christmas shopping.” I pulled her back.

This time, she waited longer to follow up. “For who?”

“Whom,” I corrected.

Torn between starting an argument and continuing what we were doing, she debated which way to go. Then, without warning, she pulled me down on the couch with her. “Gotcha. Now what are you going to do?”

I had a reasonably good idea. But it could wait a couple of minutes. “What do you want for Christmas, Cass?”

She hadn’t expected the question—certainly, not just then. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m really not sure what to get you this year. Can’t get away with a Chia Pet anymore.”

“Or a Clapper,” she agreed happily.

No, not a Clapper. We’d given each other deliberately silly gifts the first couple of years, but the Clapper had been the worst. Neither of us remembered now who’d given it to whom, but we’d spent the better part of an evening clapping at it, trying to get it to work. Finally, Cassie put the thing in the driveway and ceremoniously drove over it a few times.

Brushing a long strand of blonde hair back off her face, I smiled at her. “Your sister thinks I should get you jewelry. How about a great big mood ring?”

She kissed me before she answered. “What color would it be for this?”

Scarlet, probably, but that would be the wrong answer. “My favorite.”

“Mine too,” she said, going back for more.

Jewelry, then. I was in *so* much trouble.

Chapter Eighteen

Mid-December

Jenner finally came back to work the second week of December. Only Sanchez was really happy to see him, and only because it took a burden off her, but she was keeping the Ping-Pong gun where she could get to it in a hurry.

Everyone else was more worried about the Christmas party.

“I’m still not going,” Troy said for the fifth or sixth time.

Patience having failed, I gave rank-pulling a try. “You *are* going. It’s not an option.”

“I don’t care. He fired how many people last year? Ten? Twenty?”

Heather nodded sagely. “And he was in a *good* mood last year.”

I glanced at Cassie, who looked every bit as annoyed as I felt. At least when Jack was here, he ran the weekly meetings, and the rest of us were on the same side. “He’s probably not going to fire anybody. I doubt he’s even feeling up to it.”

“Well, what if he gets better all of a sudden?” Troy countered. “Then I’m screwed. I’ll wind up in a paper hat, saying, ‘Do you want fries with that?’”

Kurt smiled unpleasantly. “At least you’d be working for a living, pal. We can’t all be pretty and coast on our looks.”

Hell’s bells, couldn’t we have ten minutes of peace in this place? I was only just quick enough to intercept the notebook that Heather had sailed at Kurt’s head. Across the table, Cassie had a determined grip on Troy, while Chip was busy looking out the window, pretending very hard that he was somewhere else.

“You saw that. She assaulted me,” Kurt told me helpfully. “Think Jenner’ll fire her, too?”

Bristling, Troy pushed Cassie off and shoved his chair back. “Don’t you start with her...*boy*.”

The evil grin on Kurt’s face was all too familiar. “Why not? You think you might like girls this week or something?”

The silence bomb exploded, destroying the room. For a couple of seconds, no one so much as blinked. Then bodies started flying, and without really knowing how I got there, I was up on the conference table, blocking Troy, who had dived headfirst about halfway across it. Meanwhile, Heather was trying to stab Kurt with her ballpoint.

“Hey! Isn’t this illegal?” he complained. “Shouldn’t somebody call OSHA?”

Troy made another lunge. “I’ll give you OSHA, you redneck jackass.”

I didn’t have two younger brothers for nothing; drawing on a lifetime of experience with physical violence, I fainted and blocked him again.

“I don’t want to have to kill you, Dev,” he warned. Then he tried to pull my feet out from under me. Fortunately, Cassie got to him first. She probably didn’t mean to launch him as far across the room as she did, but she didn’t look especially sorry about it either.

There wasn’t time to thank her, because Heather was crawling onto the arm of

Kurt's chair, pummeling him with both fists. Exasperated, Cassie went around the table to help break it up. But just as I turned, Kurt called Cassie the one thing I never, ever allowed—and everything went bright red for a minute. The next thing I knew, I was in the middle of what sounded like a rather heated speech.

“—reproductively challenged. You can't get it up without a building crane. You can't *keep* it up without duct tape. Peg would be better off with an electric toothbrush. Remind me to get her one for Christmas. And *another* thing—”

Cassie practically broke a heel in her hurry to get up on the table. “That's enough, Devvy.”

“That's not even a start. After what he called you—”

“Never mind. Sticks and stones.”

That was a good idea, actually. “Got any?”

She bit her lip, possibly trying not to laugh. Taking advantage of her distraction, I turned to have at Kurt again. He was trying not to look like he was trying to look up her skirt, but when he saw that I'd noticed, he jumped.

“That's enough,” Cassie repeated, taking a preemptive hold on me.

No, it wasn't. But there were times and there were places for certain things, and it was starting to sink in that I was standing on a conference table, losing control of a meeting.

“All right. We're done here,” I grumbled. “Let me recap for you: Everyone goes to the Christmas party. No excuses. I know where you all live, and I'll hunt you down with bad dogs if I have to. Got that?”

I took the silence for assent.

“Now let's all get back to work. And I don't want any of you talking to anyone else in this room for the rest of the day. That goes triple for me. Understood?”

No one said anything.

“Now *go*.”

They shot out of the room like pinballs. I hadn't seen people move that fast around J/J/G for ages, not even that day last year when the microwave caught fire.

Cassie and I just stood there for a minute. Finally, she laughed. “Well, that was fun. You're getting better at this, you know?”

“I know.” Warily, I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I'm going to have to scare him again, Cass.”

“Not today.”

“No. I'll save it for the Christmas party.”

Her eyes lit up. “You *are* getting better at this.”

“It'll give me something to look forward to. I don't want to go either.”

“No one does.” She leaned closer. “Now, does that not-talking-to-you-all-day rule apply to me?”

“Depends what you want.”

“I want you to move in with me. But I could settle for lunch.”

“Settle for lunch,” I advised.

She just smiled. I was starting to know that look a little too well.

The Friday of the party, we were in Cassie's master bath getting ready when the doorbell rang.

"Just because it rings doesn't mean you have to answer," I reminded her.

"I know. That's what peepholes are for." She handed me the earring that she hadn't finished putting in. "Hold on to this for me. I'll be right back."

Muttering, I set it down on the counter and shook the eyeliner tube again, trying to get more on the brush. Cassie thought touch liner was for amateurs, but I thought pencil was too much work, so we generally avoided putting on makeup at the same time to avoid arguments. Tonight, though, we were short on time.

"Honey?" she called from downstairs.

I finished up quickly and recapped the liner tube. "Sweetheart?"

"Could you come here for a minute? Please?"

Please? Startled, I went down to see what was wrong. She was holding a long white florist's box, looking perplexed.

"It was on the doorstep," she reported. "Nobody was there. What do you think?"

"Is it ticking?"

"No. Should I open it?"

"Only if you want to know what's inside."

She backhanded me, but she was laughing, so I didn't take it personally. With mild interest, I watched her open the box. It looked like—

"Lilies," Cassie said flatly. "Dead ones."

I didn't like the sound of that, so I took the box away from her. "Don't touch them. Did you see a card?"

She held up a small white envelope. "It was on the lid. Wait a second." Cautiously, she tore it open and pulled out the card. She looked at one side and then, puzzled, at the other. "Blank. Who do you suppose...?"

"I don't know. But let's stick together tonight. No sense taking any chances."

"Oh, come on, Devvy. It was probably supposed to be a joke."

"Did you laugh?"

Cassie sighed, conceding the point. "I just hate to go in suspicious tonight. Things are going to be tense enough already. You don't suppose Jenner's really going to fire people this year, do you?"

"Wouldn't be Christmas without a Scrooge." I started to put the florist's box down, but something inside caught my eye. Trying not to be obvious about it, I looked closer. It was a cigar butt. Jack's brand.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No," I lied. "Speaking of Scrooge, you know what the best line in *A Christmas Carol* is? 'Darkness was cheap, and Scrooge liked it.'"

"You're trying to distract me."

"Nonsense. I'm just trying to have a nice literary conversation. What's *your* favorite line?"

Cassie scowled. "What's in the box that you don't want me to see?"

It was no use. Silently, I handed it back over to her.

"A cigar butt," she said. "So what?"

"It's the kind Jack smokes. I think it's supposed to be a calling card."

“I thought he was still locked up in the madhouse.”

“It’s not necessarily a life sentence. They might have let him out for the party. And if they did...”

“Trouble.” She tilted her head in resignation. “Well, sweetie, at least you’ve never bored me. This has been the most interesting year of my life.”

Mine too. I was still fairly sure that was a good thing.

There were two company parties at the Omni that night, but there was no mistaking one for the other. Cassie and I didn’t even have to ask which ballroom was the J/J/G party; we just went directly to the loud one.

For safety’s sake, we hung back in the doorway for a moment while we scoped out the room. On the surface, it all looked normal enough—normal in J/J/G terms, anyway. It could have passed for the premiere of some terminally hip independent film, if you didn’t count the garish Christmas decorations. Who knew there was that much red and green tinsel in the world?

Cassie nudged me and then leaned close to shout in my ear. “Look up.”

I did, expecting a piñata or a paper bell. Instead, I saw mistletoe. “Doesn’t count. It’s plastic.”

“Too bad. You still have to kiss me.”

That was true, and I was about to when Randy Harris sauntered by with a sprig of mistletoe sticking out of his fly. It put both of us right out of the mood.

“I’m going to go home after this,” Cassie said, disgusted, “and unscrew my head, and wash my brain. Does he really think that’s going to work?”

Yes, he probably did, and yes, it probably would; we had a pestilence of sorority girls working as interns that semester. But pointing that out would only ruin her mood. So I steered her toward the bar instead.

Unfortunately, the road to the bar ran through the last people I wanted to see together: Jenner, Jack, Kurt and Howard Abner. What was that weasel Abner doing here?

“Hi, boss,” Kurt called, seeing us approaching. “Come meet the new boss.”

“What new boss?”

Abner drew himself up to his full height, smoothing his vest over his paunch. I couldn’t help noticing that he was still wearing the big vulgar ring. “That would be me, Miss Kerry. And I’m absolutely delighted to say this: You’re fired.”

Chapter Nineteen

“I’m what?”

“Fired. Here.” Abner dug inside his vest and came up with a pink slip. An actual pink slip. “You have twenty-four hours to clean out your office. After that, we change the locks.”

Distracted by the pink slip—and by Cassie, who had gotten all the way inside my personal space to see it for herself—I was no longer listening. It was a preprinted form with “The Family Foundation” printed at the top; someone had crossed out that heading and handwritten the agency’s name, but they’d written “JJJ” instead of “J/J/G.” Cousin-marrying morons. No doubt all those Klan meetings had killed off their only two brain cells.

THE FAMILY FOUNDATION	
<i>JJJ</i>	
DATE	<i>December 15</i>
EMPLOYEE	<i>Devlin Kerry</i>
SUPERVISOR	<i>Howard Abner, Jack Harper</i>
REASON	<i>Insubordination & Witchcraft</i>
EFFECTIVE DATE	<i>Immediate</i>

LEGAL NOTICE: *We are not responsible for the actions of former employees.*

“Witchcraft?” Cassie’s voice hit a pitch that would call dogs in the next county. “Do you know what century this is, Mr. Abner?”

I recovered just in time. “Stay out of this, Cass. This is my fight, not yours.”

“Don’t even act like you want to go there,” she snapped. “You’re stuck with me. If you have a fight, I have a fight. If you’re fired, I’m fired. Got that?”

“Nobody’s fired. Abner’s just having brain cramps. He doesn’t even work here. Does he, Mr. Jenner?”

Jenner swallowed hard and tried to hide behind Kurt, who started laughing.

“I don’t have to work here. Mr. Jenner made me a partner,” Abner explained. “It was either that or lose his agency in court.”

“What are you talking about?” Cassie asked impatiently.

He didn’t even bother to acknowledge her. “Remember that little tape you made, Miss Kerry? The one you slandered me in by putting me in a dress? You didn’t think I knew about that. Well, I wouldn’t have, except that your friend Kurt here gave me a copy.”

That was very thoughtful of my friend there. And now he was going to die. I was within two steps of Kurt when Cassie grabbed the back of my jacket and tugged me aside. “You can’t kill him. Too many witnesses.”

"I'm not going to kill him," I lied. "I'm just going to geld him a little."

"You can't do that, either. You don't want to touch that thing. It was up Jack's pants when he was a possum."

She had a point. Grudgingly, I let her guide me back over to Abner. "Go on," I told him coolly. "You were saying...?"

Abner rocked back and forth on his heels a few times, immensely satisfied. "I could have sued this agency. I'd have won. But I couldn't sue you personally, and you're the one who deserved to be punished. So I worked out a deal. I get a piece of this agency, and you get fired. Officially, you're fired for insubordination." Smirking, he leaned into my face. "Unofficially, you're fired for perversion."

He never saw it coming. Cassie never let go of my jacket, but she hit him so hard that his fillings must have popped out. For a long moment, he stared at her, swaying, looking vaguely surprised. Then he keeled over, landing with a splat that reminded me of the noise the turkey had made falling out of the chandelier at Thanksgiving—a disgusting sound I'd never really wanted to hear again.

"Weenie," she declared. "You want to sneak out now, Devvy?"

Yes, but I didn't think we could. Everyone in the ballroom had either seen or heard, and we were the absolute center of attention.

"What the hell's going on over there?" Walt shouted.

There wasn't time to explain. Jack was advancing on Cassie, snarling something about the wages of sin, and the world went bright red again. The next thing I knew, Jack was flat on his back next to Abner with cartoon stars flying around his head, and I was holding my right hand, which hurt like hell. But it felt good in a way, too.

"Devvy," Cassie said urgently, "we need to get out of here."

I grabbed her head, kissed the top of it and stepped over the bodies to pop Kurt in the snout as hard as I could. He dropped like a rock. Damn, this was fun. Now, where was Jenner?

Just as I saw one of his shoes disappearing under a banquet table, Chip and Troy skidded to a stop right behind me and grabbed hold.

"Hey! I'm not done!"

"We appreciate it," Troy told me, "but we're getting you out of here. *Now*. Chip? You got Cass?"

"I've got myself," she said icily. "You just get her out to the car."

Annoyed, I wrenched loose from Troy and yanked Abner's vest open. A sheaf of pink slips fell out. I managed to stuff most of them into my jacket pocket before Troy pulled me away, this time for good.

Through all that, no one in the room had moved. They seemed mesmerized by the violence, as though they were home in their underwear, watching TV.

"Excitement's over!" Chip yelled. "We're leaving!"

Still no reaction. Chip shook his head. Then he and Troy dragged me out of the ballroom, with Cassie covering our escape from the rear. We may have looked a little conspicuous going through the lobby that way, but no one challenged us, and we got to Cassie's car without incident.

Troy shoved me into the passenger seat maybe harder than necessary. "You're a real piece of work, Dev. Did you have to do that?"

I smiled thinly, dug into my jacket pocket for the pink slips and gave him the one with his name on it. As soon as he figured it out, Chip had to grab hold of him.

"I take that back," he said. "I owe you one. Want me to go back in there and kill them all?"

Before I could answer, we heard a weird clicking/clopping headed in our direction. The source turned out to be Heather, who'd broken a heel but was still making good time. "Dev! Cassie! Wait up! I want to help!"

Cassie had started the car, but she started laughing at that and put the transmission back in park.

"For crying out loud," Chip complained. "What is with you guys tonight? Why do I have to be NATO?"

Silently, I riffled through the pink slips and pulled out his and Heather's. They took them, puzzled...and then the light dawned. This time, Troy and Heather had to hold Chip back.

The stripes on the roadway were starting to look like a solid line. Cassie was driving like a maniac even for her. "How fast are we going?" I finally asked.

"You don't want to know," she snapped.

Surreptitiously, I leaned over to check the gauge—and winced. She was right.

"We're not going to jail, Devvy. I don't care if we have to drive to Trinidad."

"We're not Bonnie and Clyde," I reminded her. "And we can't drive to Trinidad."

"Why not?"

I couldn't help smiling just a bit. "Caribbean Sea."

"I hate it when you get literal."

"Exactly what I always told her," Monica said from a few inches behind us.

We both spun around—not a good idea on Cassie's part, considering that she was driving. Both our demons were parked on the backseat, as far apart as they could get and still be in the same car. Even for demons, they looked crabby.

Well, tonight that made four of us. Grimly, I turned Cassie back around to make her watch the road and then leaned over the seat. "A fine time for you two to finally show up. Where were you when all that business with Abner started?"

Monica gave me one of her nastier smiles. "Are you saying you wanted my help?"

"She meant both of us," Vanessa corrected.

"You shut up. This is all your fault anyway, you halfwit."

"My fault?" Cassie's demon tossed her head haughtily. "Don't blame me. I didn't start this."

"You babysat the old goat while he was home in bed watching TV all day. *You* got him started on the God Channel. *You* gave Abner an opening."

Vanessa didn't like that. "I did not. I kept putting the TV on 'Brady Bunch' reruns. Can I help it if he figured out how to use the remote?"

"What's the point in making a person watch 'The Brady Bunch?'" I asked, curious. "I'm assuming it has something to do with the shortest path to damnation, or at least insanity, but—"

Monica showed me her fangs. Seeing the wild red light in her eyes, I decided it

might be best to stay out of the discussion.

“I tried ‘The Love Boat,’ too. And ‘Fantasy Island,’” Vanessa added.

“This isn’t about felony television,” Monica insisted. “You were supposed to keep him out of the way of people like Abner. I wasn’t done making Devlin’s work life miserable yet. And you hadn’t even *started*, you pathetic human-loving—”

“That’s not my job.”

“No, but Blondie’s your job. And *she’s* in charge of making the *rest* of Devlin’s life miserable.”

Cassie, who had been listening with relative patience, stomped on the brakes.

“Hey!”

Only my seat belt and a hand on the dash kept me from going through the windshield while we skidded out of traffic and slammed into a curb. It was déjà vu all over again, except that I wasn’t driving this time. Fortunately, Cassie’s BMW was newer and sturdier than my MG; the car rocked violently but stayed on the ground.

“She’s your human,” Monica said venomously, to which Vanessa flipped her hair in unconcern.

“Everybody shut up,” I demanded. “Cass? Are you OK?”

A little dazed, she nodded. Not quite reassured, I leaned over to kiss her. Then I turned back on the demons. “You two are responsible for this. If she’d been hurt, I’d have taken this out on you personally. I’d have found a voodoo doctor to curse a chicken for me. Then I’d have cursed you with chicken parts. I’d have—”

“Cursed us with chicken parts?” Vanessa raised an eyebrow at Monica. “She didn’t learn that from you, did she?”

Monica hissed at her.

“Quit interrupting while I’m threatening you. If you two were any use at all—”

Vanessa laughed. “That’s so cute. She’s threatening us. Should I turn her into something? How about...oh, I don’t know...a bunny rabbit?”

“You mind your own business,” Monica told her.

“She *is* my business. As long as Cassandra loves her—”

“Count on it,” Cassie said fiercely.

“—the two of them are a package deal. You should know that, for Lucifer’s sake. Didn’t you learn anything in Malediction 101?”

Monica defended herself briskly, but I didn’t pay any attention. Package deal, were we? It was an oddly appealing concept. Apparently, Cassie felt the same way; she reached over to squeeze my hand and didn’t bother to let go.

We’re in this together, she’d said a few weeks ago. I couldn’t let her be in this getting-fired thing together, but just for this evening, it wouldn’t hurt to pretend it was true.

The sudden cessation of argument in the backseat distracted me. Suspicious, I turned to see what was going on with them and almost banged heads with the demons, who were leaning forward avidly to see what was going on with us.

Vanessa smirked at my demon. “Told you. They’re a twofor.”

“We’ll see,” Monica said ominously. “Now, who takes care of this business back at the party? You or me? You started it, so—”

“Tosh. You started everything before that. *You* fix it.”

Cassie and I exchanged glances. “What do you mean, ‘fix?’” I asked Monica.

“I’m busy, Devlin,” she growled.

“I don’t care. What is she supposed to fix?”

“The firings,” Monica said, aggrieved. “They weren’t supposed to happen. Goldilocks here needs to turn everything back.”

I was interested against my better judgment. “Can she do that? I saw Superman do it in a movie once, but he had to spin the Earth backward.”

This time, Monica hissed at me. Cassie gave her an evil look and pulled me forward.

“I’m not doing it, Monica,” Vanessa insisted. “And you can’t make me.”

“I can make you wish you had.”

“You don’t scare me. Anyway, you’re losing your touch. You couldn’t—”

She never finished. There was a little squelching sound, and then her black gown collapsed. Startled, I leaned back over the seat. Monica was smirking, and Vanessa was a toad.

“Not very original,” I remarked.

My demon, in no mood for criticism, raised her hand. But just as she did, the toad sprang from the seat into her face. Cursing in a language I didn’t recognize, Monica tried to swat it away, but it hopped down into her cleavage. Her eyes met mine in shock for a split-second just before her gown collapsed, too.

“What are they doing?” Cassie asked.

“Fighting. Vanessa was a toad a second ago. I think she just got even.”

Then we saw something wriggling in Monica’s gown, and a snake poked its head out of the neck opening. Cassie recoiled, horrified. But the toad, which had jumped to safety on the armrest, hopped up and down meaningfully a couple of times, and the snake turned into—

“What *is* that?” Cassie whispered.

“A hedgehog. I think.” Frowning, I leaned over to get a better look. “It was a lot cuter in the Beatrix Potter books.”

The hedgehog didn’t appear to like that remark, but it had other things on its mind. It pulled out one of its quills and speared the toad with it, and the toad turned into a cockroach.

I’d seen enough. “Duck,” I told Cassie.

“No, honey, I think that’s a bug.”

There wasn’t time to argue. The combatants were going at it hammer and tongs now, turning each other into things at a furious pace. There might have been an actual duck in there somewhere, but it was hard to keep up with what was what, let alone who was who. Finally, one turned the other into a pigeon, which caused a violent fit of flapping and screeching.

“No birds in this car!” Cassie shrieked, hitting the window buttons. “Not on this upholstery!”

The pigeon shot out of the BMW, hotly pursued by a canary. They both did a couple of circuits around the car, flying close enough to the windshield that we saw the tiny fangs in their beaks. Then they lighted out, disappearing into the night.

When the shock had worn off, I reached over Cassie to roll up the windows. “Everything OK, sweetheart?”

She thought about it for a long time. I half-expected her not to answer. Finally, she drew a shaky breath. “Which part of ‘everything’ do you mean? The part where we’re both fired, or the part where we have more time to spend with your family at Christmas?”

“Never mind,” I said quickly.

Chapter Twenty

Three Days Before Christmas

Finally, there was nothing to do but go home.

Cassie and I had done all we could about the job thing. We had a lawyer all over it; charges were flying back and forth, and our lives would get very unpleasant soon. But the unpleasantness would keep until after the holidays. Lawyers were human, too, our lawyer explained.

An old joke occurred to me (**Q:** What do you have when you have a hundred lawyers up to their necks in sand? **A:** Not enough sand), but I was just able to resist repeating it. Chances were that he'd heard it anyway; a lawyer had told it to me in the first place.

So we had a small forced vacation, which about drove both of us crazy. By Christmas week, we were both eager for trouble. Anything to keep us busy.

Fortunately, I knew just the place to find all the trouble we wanted.

“How fast are we going?”

I glanced over at Cassie. “We’re legal. Why?”

“That’s not what I meant.” She leaned all the way over to check the speedometer. “This car goes a lot faster than that. I bet you can get it all the way up to 55 if you really try.”

“Speed limit’s 55 on this road.”

“Do you see anyone else doing the speed limit?”

A huge truck almost blew us off the road as it passed, making me grip the wheel for dear life. The last thing I needed today was to wreck Cassie’s BMW. If the crash didn’t kill me, *she* would.

“Bastard,” Cassie said, glowering at the truck. “I hope you die soon.”

“Your Christmas spirit needs a little work,” I told her, amused.

“Don’t change the subject. Can’t you at least do 60?”

Of course, but I didn’t want to. Every mile we traveled got us a mile closer to home, and there was no reason to hurry to get there.

“Devvy?”

“The road’s a little slick. Don’t want to take any chances. Especially not with you, sweetheart.”

That almost got me a kiss—almost, because she caught on at the last second.

“Try lying to someone who doesn’t sleep with you,” she advised. “You just don’t want to do this, do you?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to do it. It’s...” No, actually, it *was* that I didn’t want to do it. “Never mind.”

Another monstrous truck barreled by; she threw a withering glare after it. “I can’t think with all this *passing* going on. Pull over first chance you get.”

“There’s nothing for a few miles.”

“Then that would be the first chance, wouldn’t it?”

Irritably, I pulled my sunglasses down to regard the woman more closely. She smiled and then pointedly turned to look out her window.

Fine. If she wanted to be that way, fine. There was nothing much for her to see between Meridian and Hawthorne anyway but farmland, billboards and the occasional pay lake, one of which we were passing just then. CHASE’S, a big wooden sign said, right above a crudely painted fish. Fishing was none of my business, but it had always seemed to me that if the fish in that lake looked anything like the sign, people would be better off going to the grocery.

Then there was the occasional cluster of houses, not enough to constitute a town but too many to be a coincidence. They never changed, even if their occupants did. Even after all these years, I could still pick out the ones that had the lawn jockeys, the sun balls, the windmills—and the one that had all of the above *and* the concrete dwarves. Right now, in honor of the season, the dwarves would all be wearing Santa hats. It wasn’t something I necessarily needed to see again.

I slowed down a little more, hoping Cassie wouldn’t notice.

“What on earth is that up ahead?” she asked suddenly, tapping her side of the windshield.

“The ice tree.”

“The what?”

“Ice tree. The people who live there make it every Christmas. They put this really heavy plastic over the trees and spray water on it till it freezes. It takes a couple of weeks to build up enough ice. Then they put food coloring on it.” Unwillingly, I smiled. “At night, they have floodlights on it so you can see it from miles away. Want me to slow down so you can get a better look?”

Lost in stunned contemplation, Cassie didn’t answer, so I slowed down anyway. It gave me an excuse to look myself. Not that I was going to admit it to her, but I kind of liked the thing.

“Wow,” she finally said.

“Like it?”

She got her evasive look. I’d always hated that one. “Do you?”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. Wait till we get to Hawthorne. I’ll take you on a Christmas lights tour.”

“You don’t scare me, Devvy.”

“No? Are you sure? There’s a house that has a fifteen-foot inflatable snowman. They light it up at night, too—not that you could really miss a fifteen-foot inflatable snowman in somebody’s front yard. The people next door—”

“Rest stop,” she interrupted.

“I’m not tired. Anyway, the house next door has—”

“No, I mean there’s a rest stop ahead. Pull off. I want to talk.”

I considered pointing out that we *were* talking and quickly decided against it. Without comment, I pulled into the rest stop, parking as far away from other cars as possible. No point risking some idiot scratching Cassie’s paint. “All right, we’re pulled off. What’s on your mind?”

“I want to know what’s on *your* mind. You’re driving like you’re on your way to

your own execution.” Turning all the way sideways, she fixed me with her most intent blue gaze. “Is there something I need to know?”

“You’ll know everything you need to know soon enough. Five minutes with my mother, and you’ll think your family is the Cleavers.”

“Get real—nobody wants to be the Cleavers. Besides, your mother can’t be *that* bad.”

I didn’t even smile.

“She doesn’t have a tail. She doesn’t breathe fire. I’ve met her, remember? Sure, she was a little cranky, but—”

“You don’t even know what ‘cranky’ is yet.”

“Bet I do. I know *you*, don’t I?” She reached over for my hand and discreetly pressed it to her lips for a split-second. “I think...what’s wrong?”

I yanked my hand back before answering. “Don’t *do* that. Not in public. Not around here.”

“You’re kidding. How is that a problem?”

“Being stomped to death by hilljacks would be a problem. Trust me—I’m from around here.”

“Nobody noticed. I was careful.” She tried to take hold of my hand again, but I stuck it in my coat pocket. “Would you just relax?”

“This might be a good time to try practicing the Just Friends thing. You promised not to touch me in public.”

“Yes, but this isn’t your parents’ house. It’s—”

“Thirty miles away. Anyone here might know them. And anyone who knows them might tell.”

Cassie bit her lip slightly, looking thoughtful. Then she slid closer and put a hand on my forehead. “Don’t take this personally; I’m just checking for fever.”

Getting seriously annoyed, I pushed her back.

“All right, all right. Take it easy. I’ll behave while we’re there. But if I have to be a nun for four whole days, I’d like to get a little physical with you first.”

“What about this morning? That didn’t count?”

A little smirk. “Well...”

“Well nothing. We were an hour late getting started because of that.” Then it hit me—I’d been so busy worrying about not wanting to get there that I’d forgotten how much trouble I’d be in for getting there late. Quickly, I checked my watch. Damn. “And now we’re an hour and a half late. Mom’s going to kill me.”

Cassie slid closer again. “Think carefully before you answer this, honey: Are you sorry?”

“How stupid do you think I am?” I growled. “Would I say so if I were? *No*, I’m not sorry. I just don’t know how I’m going to explain being late, that’s all.”

“Then don’t.” Making sure no one was close enough to see in, she put one hand way up my thigh and leaned closer. “One kiss? For the road?”

“Cassie...”

“I can’t wait to see what this mother of yours is like,” she said acidly. “If she’s got you this paranoid from thirty miles away, she must be a real barracuda.”

“My mother has nothing to do with it. I’m just not into PDAs. Now would you

get off?”

She narrowed her eyes a bit. “Of course. After you kiss me.”

Clearly, I wasn’t going to win this one. And we weren’t going to be alone for long; a battered old van was heading in our direction. “All right, dammit, I’ll make you a deal. Get off me, and I’ll see what I can do about sneaking into your room at night.”

“You’ll see?” She leaned closer and blew lightly in my ear. “You’ll *see*?”

The van was getting closer—close enough for me to notice the Confederate flag license plate bolted to the front fender. And Cassie was practically on my lap, with no intention of going anywhere. If she did that blowing-in-the-ear thing one more time, I was going to be in bad trouble in front of Bubba.

“OK,” I said quickly. “I’ll make a *point* of it. Now for God’s sake, back off before somebody sees this.”

“I don’t have to be a nun after all?”

“Only in front of people. Now get off. *Please.*”

Cassie glanced over her shoulder at the van, which was signaling its intent to pull into one of the parking spaces near us. Without any further argument, she backed off, rolled her window down a crack and started talking very loudly about opera—a form of gargoylism, I was sure. That would scare the creatures away, if they wanted to make an issue of whatever they might have seen.

“I love you,” I told her, truly meaning it.

She didn’t miss a beat, working herself up into an outrage about the subtitles at the Met, but she winked. She didn’t like opera either.

The weather got worse the closer we got to Hawthorne, and I wasn’t sure it was coincidental. About ten miles past the rest stop, we’d run into some snow, and by the time we hit the first city exit, the stuff was practically sheeting down. Cassie tried very hard not to look nervous, with no success, but I couldn’t blame her. Only a fool or a local (same thing) would be driving around town in this weather.

Well, maybe I could distract her for a few minutes. “Guess we’ll have to skip the Christmas lights tour tonight, Cass. You lucked out. But we still have to go by the Martins’ house. I’ll bet they have the big Rudolph on their roof again this year. What do *you* bet?”

“Maybe you should drive now and badger me later,” she said in a small voice.

“I’m not badgering you. Believe me, you’d know.” Not taking my eyes off the road, I reached over to stroke her hair for a second. “We’re fine, sweetheart. I’ve driven in this town all my life. We’ll be there in a few minutes. *That’s* when the trouble starts.”

She smiled mechanically.

“Let’s go over the battle plan one more time,” I suggested. “We don’t tell them about the job thing yet. We don’t confirm or deny our relationship. We avoid PDAs like the plague. We let *them* figure out whether there’s any subtext going on. Check?”

“Check.”

Squinting through the windshield, I barely made out the street sign at the

stoplight ahead. But it was the right one. We'd be there after six blocks and one more turn. "One last thing."

"What?"

"Whatever my brothers tell you is a lie."

That finally did the trick. She relaxed visibly, not even flinching as we skidded a little going through the turn.

And then, too soon, the house loomed up out of the snow at the end of the cul-de-sac. There were lights on in every window, which could mean only one thing: My brothers were home. And that in turn could mean only one thing: My mother was going to be in a bad mood already, grinching about the electricity bill.

"Buckle up," I told Cassie as we pulled into the drive. "It's going to be a bumpy Christmas."

Chapter Twenty□One

Something was wrong. All the lights were on in the living room, the TV and stereo were going, and candles were burning on just about every flat surface. That was normal. But that was all. It was quiet. Too quiet.

“Hello?” I called again. “Where is everybody?”

Except for CNN and *The Messiah*, there wasn’t a sound. Uneasy, I set my luggage down and opened the coat closet. Nothing.

“What are you doing?” Cassie asked, setting down her own bags.

“Looking for relatives.”

“Why would they be in the closet?”

“You don’t know these people. They could be anywhere.” Suspicious, I poked something in the back; it was just one of Ryan’s old parkas. “Give me your coat, anyway. We might as well hang ours up.”

She handed hers over, and I shoehorned them both into the inadequate space that was left, most of the rest being hogged by my brothers’ old coats. Why didn’t they take the things home with them sometime, or at least give them to Goodwill? Of all the stupid—wait. Was that one of *my* old coats back there?

“Devvy?”

It sounded almost like a warning, but being busy digging through outerwear, I didn’t answer right away. “Hmmm?”

A wild battle cry rang out behind me, and a snowball bounced off the top of my head. I didn’t even have to turn to know who the culprit was.

“Defend yourself, English pig-dog!” Connor shouted.

I scooped up the snowball and wheeled around. He and Ryan were right behind me, trying to look tough.

“So. We meet again,” I said.

Ryan nodded. “We brought our armies. They’re just waiting for our signal.”

Not too gently, I pushed them apart to see. My sisters-in-law were standing behind them, holding big Tupperware bowls full of snowballs. “Hi, Jen. Hi, Amy.”

They both wished me Merry Christmas, smiling brightly.

“This isn’t a good idea right now,” I remarked. “We have company. If we could be civilized here for just a split-second and introduce ourselves...”

“It’s all right, Devvy,” Cassie said. “We can introduce ourselves later. Your brothers want to say hello to you first.”

Ryan nudged Connor. “I like her. She’s not a sissy.”

“And she’s kind of, sort of, really, really good-looking,” he agreed. “Maybe I’ll marry her. Of course, that would be bigamy. Big of her, too.”

Jen, long accustomed to her husband, just rolled her eyes. I shook my head and started to walk away, but Connor got a grip on my arm. “Not so fast. We haven’t had the airing of grievances yet.”

“Grievances, hell. You just want an excuse to show off in front of your wives. Except that you both throw like little girls.” The snowball was starting to make my hand go numb; I pushed back between my brothers and dropped the snowball in Amy’s bowl.

“Now, if the two of you want to put on some pathetic exhibition between yourselves—”
 “Lock and load!” Connor howled. “Artillery captains! Fire!”

Snowballs started flying around the living room, mostly at me. That did it. Dodging around Ryan’s left, I stole Jen’s snowball bowl—she was laughing too hard to keep a grip on it—and started firing the contents back. Cassie was at my side in a flash, giving as good as we got.

“The enemy is persistent,” Ryan remarked, wiping snow out of his eyes. “And the blonde one has done this before. What do you think? Should we *pitcher la vache?*”
 “STOP THAT THIS MINUTE!”

Everyone froze, even Cassie, who had so little experience with the woman.

Mom waited a few seconds to be sure that her message had gotten through before she advanced on us. She was so mad that her glasses were practically steamed up from the inside, so mad that the jingle bells on her Christmas apron were tinkling a mile a minute. Connor, who towered over her, almost tripped in his hurry to get out of her way.

“Now,” Mom demanded, “I want an explanation. I want to know who started this, and *why*. Connor? Ryan?”

Both of my strapping blond brothers looked at their feet.

“Devlin?”

I shrugged.

“I want to know why this happens every year. Every *year*, when you all know better. How many times do I have to tell you not to throw snowballs in the house?”

“At least one more,” Ryan said solemnly.

We all looked at one another, trying our hardest not to laugh. But when I caught Amy’s eye, she completely lost it, and that was that.

“Do you think this is funny?” Mom barked. “Just wait till your father gets home. He’ll have something to say about this.”

So she was going to try to be like that, was she? Not on my watch. Narrowing my eyes, I stepped into her path. “Just so you know, Mom, *Dad* started this whole thing. It was the Christmas Connor came home from college for the first time. Would you mind if I introduce our guest now?”

She didn’t hear the last part, which was typical; it didn’t involve her directly. “Your father’s a grown man. He would never—”

“Dev’s right,” Ryan interrupted. “Dad and I snuck out of the house the night before to make the snowballs.”

“Sneaked,” Mom corrected. “Not ‘snuck.’ How many times—”

Ryan sighed. “School’s out, Mom. Get over it.” He stepped around a big clump of snow on the rug to extend his hand to Cassie. “We haven’t really met yet. I’m Ryan. You would have to be Cassie, wouldn’t you? Welcome. The big dumb-looking guy is my brother Connor—”

“I didn’t come here to be exonerated,” Connor declared.

Without missing a beat, Ryan did a rim shot on the nearest table. “—who didn’t come here to be exonerated. That’s my lovely wife, Amy; his lovely wife, Jenny; and our mother, who isn’t related to any of us.”

It was showtime already, and Cassie hadn’t been there a half hour yet. Protectively, I moved a little closer to her. “Don’t pay any attention. They’ll calm down after a while.

Maybe.”

She smiled. There was melted snow on her eyelashes; I badly wanted to do something about that, but not in front of my family.

“You’re all dripping on my rug,” Mom snapped. “Go dry off this minute. All of you.”

Connor started to tell her that we couldn’t all, not at the same time, because there weren’t enough baths to go around and a person needed privacy, for crying out loud, but she wasn’t in the mood to hear other opinions. She sent him and Jen up to the master bath, Ryan and Amy up to the guest bath, and me to the half-bath downstairs. Only as an afterthought did she include Cassie. I made a mental note about that.

“And hang up the towels when you’re done,” Mom called after all of us. “I don’t want to find towels wadded up all over the floor.”

She would, though. I could have made her a list right then of all the things she’d find: water all over the bathrooms, empty beer bottles under the Christmas tree, male offspring drinking milk out of the carton when her back was turned. Not to mention all the lights on all the time, or both the TV and stereo going when no one was paying attention to either. None of it was my fault, but I would be guilty by association. That was OK, though, because it was better to be with my brothers than against them. Those two had never had a full deck between them.

Cassie waited to ask until I closed the half-bath door behind us. “Is she really mad?”

“No. She’s just warming up. But so are they.” Resigned, I pulled the last clean towel off the rack—apparently, my brothers had already passed through there—and handed it to her. “Go ahead. I’ll use it when you’re done.”

A little smile flickered on her lips. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“What?”

She looped the towel around my neck and gave the ends a tug, pulling me toward her. For quite a while, no drying off got done.

Fortunately, we’d just broken off when something tapped on the door. I opened it a few inches. Connor squeezed his face as far through the opening as he could, which was a very weird effect, which he knew. To my annoyance, Cassie started laughing.

“That’s disgusting,” I told him. “What do you want?”

“Police, ma’am. We got a complaint that you were having a good time in there. Will you be needing one cell or two downtown?”

I tried to slam the door on his face, but he got out in time. Cassie, being no help, was half-collapsed on the sink, still laughing.

“You only think they’re funny,” I grumbled.

“I do, actually. This might be fun after all.”

Wisely, I didn’t argue with her. She had no idea; she would find out in time.

After dinner, the first real trial of the holiday began: We played Trivial Pursuit.

Let me rephrase that: We played the Kerry Edition of Trivial Pursuit. Over the years, there’d been so many heated arguments over so many questions that we’d just

started throwing disputed cards away. That left us so short of cards after a while that we started filling in with cards from other editions. Then, the horse being out of the stable and halfway to town already, we started making up our own cards. The questions about family trivia counted double.

I tried to get Cassie a dispensation for those questions, but no one would hear of it, including her. That troubled me. What *had* I told her about the family? How much was I going to regret it? It was bad enough that Connor and Jen were on our team; he was the worst one of all of us about challenging questions and starting fights. I noticed that he already had a stack of reference books handy.

“Those won’t save you,” I predicted. “If I weren’t on your side, you’d go down in flames again, just like last year.”

“I hate to remind you, Dev,” Jen said, “but *you* went down the year before that. And the year before that, too.”

I surveyed her coolly. “Who let you in this family, anyway?”

“Your brother.” She yawned and put her head on his shoulder. “I think I’ll divorce him for it in seventy or eighty years.”

Was it my imagination, or did Cassie move a little closer to me on the couch? Better not have. “Shut up and roll the dice,” I growled.

Mom launched into a complaint about the lack of respect we were showing one another, and at Christmas, of all times, until Dad pulled his reading glasses down on his nose and gave her a severe look.

“Thanks, Pop,” Connor said, reaching for the dice.

At first, everything was fine. There were only two challenges and one incident of throwing dice at people in the first half hour, and the game was close. Then Ryan had to draw one of the family-trivia cards on Cassie’s turn. *Name our ancestor who was lynched in Scotland, and why. Extra point for each reason after three.*

Visibly agitated, Mom tried to snatch the card out of his hand. “I thought you *promised* me you took that card out. Ryan, give me that. Draw another one. This—”

“George Buchanan,” Cassie said calmly. “Devvy’s great-great-great-great-grandfather.”

Dead, shocked silence. My family looked at me accusingly. Scowling, I refused to be cowed. It was a good story, and so what if I’d told it to my best friend?

“You’ll have to give me a minute on all the reasons,” she continued. “There were five or six of them, weren’t there?”

Touché. Proud of her against my will, I patted her on the back. My brothers and their wives, I noticed, were amused.

My mother was not. And she was not one to keep a feeling—any feeling—to herself. “This is a silly game. A silly waste of time. We could all be having a nice conversation or going for a walk, but here we sit, raking up ancient garbage and—”

“Here’s a trivia question for you, Mom,” Connor cut in. “In what year did you stop treating your grown children like two-year-olds?”

Exasperated, I nudged him as hard as I could. He nudged back. Then he made a buzzer noise. “Sorry, Mrs. Kerry, your time is up. The answer is: never! But we do have some lovely parting gifts for—”

Mom didn’t wait to hear the rest of it. She got up and marched upstairs without

a backward look. We waited in silence until we heard a door slam.

“Way to go, Swifty,” I muttered. “Go apologize.”

He looked to his wife uncertainly. Not liking the look he got back, he turned to Dad. Even worse. “I was only kidding. Besides, what’s the big deal? It’s *your* ancestor, not hers.”

“Apologize to your mother,” Dad told him, his tone absolutely flat.

Connor threw up his hands and started up the stairs, stomping a little harder than necessary.

“I’m really sorry,” Cassie said. “I didn’t know it would be a problem. But Devvy told me the story, and it’s sort of a hard one to forget.”

Dad waved her apology off. “You have nothing to apologize for. Martha gets a little overexcited this time of year.”

And all other times of year, I thought. Carefully, making sure no one could possibly see, I rubbed the small of Cassie’s back reassuringly.

“She’ll slam doors for a few minutes, and then she’ll go out on the balcony to smoke a couple of cigarettes. After that, she’ll be fine.” Dad leaned forward confidentially. “So did Devlin tell you that George Buchanan fathered thirty children out of wedlock?”

I got up and left the room.

Very late that night, I retired to the small den downstairs, where the sleeper sofa was. Cassie was reluctantly settled in my old room, which was a generic guest room now; I figured we could skip the conjugal visit that night and catch up on sleep.

But I hadn’t been in bed five minutes before she sneaked in.

“You’re not serious,” I protested. “It’s 1 in the morning.”

“I don’t want to do *that*. Well, I do, but I’ll live tonight. I just want to sleep. Move over.”

“This is kind of risky, Cass. Mom gets up early.”

“So? You’re being awfully proper for someone whose ancestor fathered thirty children out of wedlock.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I said defensively, but moved over to let her in. “Promise you’ll go back upstairs early?”

She busied herself getting comfortable. “Set the alarm, and I will.”

That was all I could ask, then. Reaching up to the end table, I grabbed the travel alarm, reset it and put it back. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“You too,” she murmured. “Sweet dreams.”

It was very quiet for a long time.

“Devvy?”

“Cass?”

“What if we just have fifteen children out of wedlock? I think thirty would be showing off.”

I pulled the pillow out from under my head, whacked her with it and replaced it without a word. Cassie just laughed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cassie was still there when I woke up, which was long after I'd set the travel alarm for. At first, I thought it hadn't gone off, but then I saw it lying on its face halfway across the room. Cass had an awful habit of doing that to alarm clocks.

Apprehensively, I got out of bed and slipped out of the den, taking care not to wake her. It was still early, and everything seemed quiet; I'd just make a quick reconnaissance pass before deciding what to do.

First, though, I was going to turn up the thermostat. The house was freezing.

I'd just touched the dial when a small noise startled me. Connor was sacked out in the recliner, snoring lightly. Great. Either Jen had kicked him out of bed for some trespass or he'd gotten up in the middle of the night to watch "Mystery Science Theatre" reruns, but it didn't matter; this was a problem. Cassie would complain when I woke her, loudly enough to wake *him*, and I wasn't up to explanations. Not even to lies. Not before coffee.

Troubled, I considered the situation. He seemed to be dead to the world, but you could never tell with Connor; he could doze off watching football but tell you the score if you poked him. It was one of his scarier talents.

I was on the verge of poking him just to see what would happen when a hand landed on my shoulder. The surprise was too much; a second before I realized who it was, I yelped. Cassie tried to put her other hand over my mouth, but it was too late. Connor was awake. Worse, he was in a good mood.

"Is this some strange sexual practice I should know about?" he asked.

Seriously annoyed, I threw Cassie off. "Get therapy, Connor."

"What for? I never felt better." Yawning, he ran a hand over his disheveled hair. "Morning, Cassie. You're looking lovely today. Sleep well, did you?"

She glanced at me before answering. "I did, thanks. You?"

"Oh, not so well, not so well, not so well. Jenny threw me out for snoring. She said if she has to deal with my mother all day, she needs a whole night's sleep."

"She has a point," I remarked. "Sleep, and maybe a Doberman."

Connor smiled. "Maybe an armed Doberman. But never mind that. How did *you* sleep?"

This concern about my well-being was new and unwelcome. "Fine."

"Swell to hear it. I was worried you might be...oh, I don't know...lonesome in there all by yourself. Or cold. Or *something*. Hmmmm?"

Cassie coughed significantly and announced that she was going back upstairs. I waited until she turned the corner on the stair landing to whack my brother upside his pointy head.

"What was that for?" he protested, rubbing it.

"I'll give you *something*, buster. Wait till I tell your wife you were flirting with Cassie. You may never get *something* again without a credit card."

"Flirting? That's not flirting. I'm just being friendly. Not as friendly as *you*, of course, but—hey!"

It wasn't nice to pull his chest hair, but it was his own fault for having any.

“Whatever you’re up to, stop it.”

“I’m not up to anything. Can’t a person have a polite conversation around here?”

“No.”

Unfazed, he flashed one of those big dopey grins of his. “Suit yourself. I was going to start out polite this morning and work up to charming by lunch, but if you want me to just be myself...”

“Lesser of two evils,” I snapped.

“Temper,” he cautioned. “It’s Christmas.”

Not for two more days, it wasn’t, which gave me time to wreak justice on him. But before I could start wreaking, we heard the terrible scuff of Mom’s slippers on the stair landing.

Connor grimaced. “You get the thermostat. I’ll get the coffee. Run!”

“I don’t know why you children insist on making coffee so strong,” Mom said for the dozenth time. “It’s wasteful.”

Dourly, I poured another shot. Connor did overdo it some, but better that than the way Mom made it, which was more like essence of coffee than the thing itself.

“There’s coffee cake,” she added, also for the dozenth time. “Where’s Carrie?”

“Cassie,” I corrected. “Taking a shower, I imagine. Why?”

“I just hope there’s enough hot water for everyone. All of you take so long in the shower, and—”

“Drop it, Mother.”

“Well, you do.”

Irritably, I looked to Connor for some help. Mom and Dad had put in an industrial-size water heater a few years ago, after Ryan got married, so that we wouldn’t have an excuse to stay at the Holiday Inn when we all came home for Christmas. The only way we were going to run out of hot water now would be if Luxembourg came over for a bath.

“We do not,” Connor argued. “And even if we do, at least we’re clean. Isn’t cleanliness next to godliness? Or is that wealthiness?”

I shrugged. “Depends on the denomination.”

“Stop that,” Mom ordered me.

“Stop what? I haven’t said anything sacrilegious yet.”

“Yet?”

Dammit. “Never mind.”

Laughing, Connor tipped his chair back and started clucking.

“Forget it,” I told him. “That only works on Ryan.”

He clucked louder.

“You’re wasting your time, Connor.”

More clucking.

“I mean it.”

Clucking *and* wing flapping. I sprang at him just as he was rocking his chair back again and took him to the floor with a satisfying crash.

At which moment, of *course*, Cassie and Amy walked into the kitchen. I couldn’t

bring myself to see what Cassie thought, but Amy was perfectly calm. In fact, she just stepped around Connor and me; pulled up a chair; and nodded to Mom, who was speechless with shock.

"I have to tell you, Mrs. Kerry," she remarked, "I have never been bored in this family."

Point to the sister-in-law. Connor and I disentangled ourselves and retreated to opposite sides of the table. Only when I was safely seated again did I risk a glance at Cassie. She had her most neutral expression on, but her eyes warmed when they met mine, and a tiny smile touched her lips. That meant she was probably going to forgive me.

Not that she had a choice. Without me, she'd be all alone with these maniacs.

"He clucked at me," I explained, a little defensively.

"Really?" My sister-in-law reached for the coffee cake. "I thought that only worked on Ryan. Want me to go get him before you lose your dignity?"

Cassie and Connor liked that. So, by her smirk, did Amy, who was getting to be too much like one of us already. If Ryan was rubbing off on her the way Connor had on his own wife, I was doomed to smart-alecky relatives all the way to the grave. Especially if they ever figured out how to reproduce.

"That's enough," Mom said abruptly. "Carrie, have some coffee cake."

I cleared my throat. "*Cassie*. Not Carrie."

"Thank God," Connor said. "Carrie Kerry would be a terrible name. Don't you think?"

No one said anything. That was very bad. You were in trouble in this family only if everyone shut up.

"I'm going to take a shower," I said, trying to make it sound like a threat. "And then Cass and I are going to go check in at the Holiday Inn."

Mom frowned. "Don't be silly. We've got plenty of room."

"It's not the room I'm worried about. It's the company." At which point I scowled at Connor. "Clucking at *me*, when you don't have the nerve to ask me outright if I'm sleeping with her."

You could've cut the quiet with a chainsaw.

"Devvy?" Cassie asked softly.

I was still glowering at my brother. "What?"

"I'll handle this. Go take your shower."

"There's nothing to handle. Just get packed. I'll be fast."

"I thought we came here to spend Christmas with your family," she said, sounding dangerously reasonable. "It would defeat the purpose if we stayed somewhere else, wouldn't it?"

For the first time, Mom looked at her with something like approval. "It would also be expensive."

"Yes, it would," Cassie agreed.

Mom nodded. "Paying for two rooms and all."

Cassie heard the slight stress she put on "two" and gave her a very charming smile. "Absolutely."

"This is *not* about money," I protested. "Or about how many rooms. It's about—"

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Connor said, too quickly, and practically ran to the door. Spitefully, I clucked at him—and got such bad looks from Mom and Amy that I stopped. No one said a word until Connor came back.

"Who is it?" Mom asked.

"It's for Dev. Some hot-looking babe. Says she's from the agency."

Uneasily, I got up to see what the problem was—just as the problem strolled in.

I muttered a bad word. "Vanessa."

"Razor-sharp as ever," she shot back. "Why, I'll bet you can count to twenty without even using your toes. I just came by to drop off your termination papers. I can't believe I had to come all the way to this sorry excuse for a one-horse town." A little smirk. "So where do they keep the horse?...You look awful, by the way. Is this your family?"

"She doesn't look awful," Cassie growled. "She just hasn't had a shower yet."

Wonderful. Out of all that gibberish, she chose *that* part to respond to. My mother, on the other hand, zeroed right in. "Termination papers?"

"Oh, yes. It's a long story. May I?" Without waiting to find out whether she might, Vanessa took the last vacant chair. "She was fired a couple of weeks ago. They were *both* fired, actually. Devlin's problem was something about insubordination and witchcraft, but—"

"She was fired?" Mom repeated, rounding on me with a dire expression.

I didn't need that right then. "We're appealing it. It's a misunderstanding."

"That's not the point, young lady. You were fired, and you didn't tell me?"

"How is it your business?"

"If I could finish," Vanessa said, clearly enjoying herself, "I'll tell you about the insubordination."

I broke off glaring back at Mom long enough to include her. Then I checked Connor and Amy. They looked vaguely stunned, which was fine as long as it kept them both quiet. "Just give me the papers, Vanessa. Then get out."

"What for? I might miss something."

"That's the point."

Cassie narrowed her eyes at Vanessa. "Let's have a little talk in the other room. Devvy, why don't you go get your shower now?"

"Not a chance. I'm not leaving you alone with that...that..."

"Beloved colleague?" Vanessa supplied sweetly.

I let that go. "Not to mention alone with my family. We're going to pack now and go straight to the motel, got that?"

"No," Cassie said.

"What?"

"No." Purposefully, she pushed her chair back and walked over to pat my shoulder. "I'll handle this."

"But—"

"No buts. Go shower. I'll *handle* it." When I hesitated, she gave me a little push. "Don't make me force you."

"I'd pay to see that," Connor said reverently.

Amy, somewhat recovered, kicked him hard enough to make him jump. “Go,” Cassie said again. “Now. Please?”

I couldn't very well refuse when she'd asked nicely; it would get me a lecture from Mom on top of the lecture I would already get about being fired. Besides, it would give me time to think. I did some of my best thinking in the shower; maybe lightning would strike.

Reluctantly, I turned to go upstairs. The last thing I heard was Vanessa's laughter. I hoped she got a bad piece of coffee cake.

Some Christmas this was going to be. My relatives were already on their worst behavior, and now a demon was sitting at the kitchen table. No matter what, things were only going to get worse, and no matter what Cassie said, we were leaving as soon as I got done here.

Muttering, I took a towel and washcloth out of the linen closet and started unpacking my toiletry kit on the counter. Just as I was pulling the razor out of its travel case, something moved in the mirror behind me. Startled, I turned. Nothing was there. And for my trouble, I'd cut myself with the razor.

Great. My luck today, there'll be sharks in the tub.

I jumped again as a breeze blew past. That might have been my imagination, and so might the soft laughter that went with it, but it might also have been Vanessa's idea of a prank. The best thing to do was get a quick shower and get out.

Putting the weirdness firmly out of my mind, I hung my robe on a doorknob and turned on the tap in the bathtub. A stream of bright red liquid flowed out. It looked disturbingly like—

Blood. Quickly, I shut the tap off. A few seconds later, I turned it on again. The water ran clear.

“Humbug,” I said deliberately, getting in and pulling the curtain.

It was almost the fastest shower on record. I was just rinsing my hair when the lights went out, which was inconvenient but not critical. There were candles on the counter—Hawthorne women were big on decorating bathrooms with fancy soaps and candles, which I'd learned the hard way were not for actual use—and I could always light one.

But before I could even turn off the water, I heard a match strike and saw a faint glow through the shower curtain.

“Cassie?”

No answer. Maybe she was busy lighting the candles; the room was starting to fill with flickering light.

“What happened? Did the power go out?”

Very brief silence. Then a strong wind rose out of nowhere, flapping the shower curtain and blowing out the candles.

“Vanessa?”

I half-heard that soft laughter again—immediately followed by an explosion of thunder and lightning.

There wasn't time to be scared. Whether the bathroom was haunted was pretty

much irrelevant at the moment anyway; I was standing in a shower in a lightning storm, which was asking for trouble. Reaching down, I tried to shut the water off, but my hand passed through something ice cold. Alarmed, I pulled back.

In the flashes of lightning, I faintly made out the shape of a woman dressed in black, standing under the shower spray. I couldn't see her face, but her hair was blowing as though she were in a high wind—and both it and her clothes were completely dry. In the darkness between lightning bolts, I saw a pair of glowing red eyes.

Oh-oh.

Not being a fool, I tried to get out of the tub at that point. But the shower curtain wouldn't budge. That wasn't good. I was a little underdressed for an emergency, not to mention soaking wet, and the only weapon at hand was a plastic squeegee. Still, you do what you have to do with what you have. Yanking the squeegee off its hook, I held it out in front of me like a weapon.

The thing in the shower spray laughed—a weird sort of laughter, like mice on helium. Then it disappeared. But was it really gone?

Again, my peripheral vision caught movement, this time above me. I waited for the next flare of lightning.

A huge black snake was wrapped around the showerhead, its own head inches from mine, forked tongue flickering.

Well, that was just about enough shower time for one day. And it was time to get the hell out of there. Still gripping the squeegee, I gathered all my strength and tackled the immovable curtain.

A second too late, I realized that everything had suddenly gone back to normal. The storm was gone; the lights were back on; and I was hurtling through an ordinary, very movable shower curtain at a high rate of speed. Whatever I hit, it was going to hurt.

I braced for the worst as something grabbed me.