
Chapter 1

Cassie Duff sat on her dock enjoying the tranquility she felt watching her beloved river flow by. Tranquil was not a word that usually described Cassie's life. Her eyes sparkled with a combination of mischief and the wisdom that comes with age. She was a bit secretive about her exact age, sure that most people would call her *mature* and she supposed she could live with that. Those using descriptions like 'elderly' or 'old' had better hope they could outrun her.

Her once-blonde hair had settled into a champagne color over the last few years as white mixed in. Her skin was still smooth, if not as taut as it had once been. She stood just a few inches over five feet, shorter than her two best friends, Sue Moore and Annie Holmes. Cassie and Sue were very much alike. Each had a few extra pounds they could happily have done without, despite the active lifestyle they enjoyed. Sue's hair had settled into a mature salt and pepper that suited her perfectly. Like Cassie, her temperament was sometimes 'spicy'. When angered, she could curse like a sailor and could drink most of her acquaintances—as well as most sailors—under the table.

On the other end of the scale, Annie was most certainly the

'lady' of the group. No one had to blush or cover their children's ears when Annie was talking. She was soft spoken and unfailingly kind to everyone. She was also the most athletic of the three women and kept herself in good shape. In many ways she was the opposite of Cassie and Sue, but her calm sweetness balanced them out. Although she often seemed too quiet to stand up for herself, there was a core of steel in Annie that allowed her to face down even Cassie and Sue when the occasion warranted it.

That afternoon, they all sat rocking on Cassie's deck, at least *looking* the part of three little old ladies, when Cassie said suddenly, "We need to plan a girls' trip. It's been ages."

"You're right about that," Sue agreed. "Though, I think the guys are just getting over the last one we went on."

"That may be so," Cassie agreed. "But still, it's time. We haven't been to the island in a while."

Cassie and Sue owned a large home on an island in the Bahamas. It had been a gift from their husbands, Tom and Steve, years before and was a favorite vacation spot for the whole family.

"We'll need to just start talking about it to get the boys used to the idea. You know they really don't like us heading off by ourselves anymore," Annie joined in the conversation. "And you really can't blame them," she added, with a raised eyebrow.

Cassie and Sue gave her a sour look and Annie laughed. "You two got *arrested* the last time we went off on our own!" she reminded them.

"That wasn't the *last* girls' trip," Cassie said, not wanting to think about some of their more notorious escapades. "The most recent trip was planned by Allie and Jenny," Cassie pointed out, referring to a trip they'd taken with her daughter-in-law and her friend. "We didn't get into any real trouble then." Sue and Annie rolled their eyes and remained silent.

"Well, just think about it. If we want the younger girls to go, we'll have to plan it around their work."

A few minutes later, Cassie smiled as she heard Tom's car pull into the garage. She rose and went to greet her husband as he came into the kitchen. Tom—even after a marriage of over forty years, he still made Cassie's eyes light up when he walked into a room. To her, he'd always be the most beautiful man in the world. She'd always described him as tall, dark and handsome. So now the dark hair was white, but it was still thick. Time on the golf course kept him tan much of the year and caused his vivid blue eyes to stand out even more.

Those blue eyes were causing Cassie some concern as she gave him a kiss. "You look exhausted. Are you all right?"

"I'm just fine," he assured her. "But that golf course fought me every inch of the way today. And I definitely lost the battle." Tom poured a glass of wine for himself and followed Cassie to the screened porch, greeting the ladies.

"If you're home, I'm guessing our husbands are too," Annie said. "I think I'll go join mine."

"Be gentle," Tom advised. "I just told Cassie the golf course was a bear."

"Maybe I'll go offer Andy a back rub then," Annie said with a nod.

"Oh, Annie, you are just the perfect little wife, aren't you?" Sue teased. "You give the rest of us a bad name. I think I'll go home and have Steve give *me* a back rub."

Everyone laughed and Cassie turned to Annie. "At least you'll never have to worry about Sue taking the 'perfect wife' title from you."

Cassie and Tom waved as the ladies departed to walk to their homes. Turning to Tom, Cassie asked, "So what about you? Do you want a back rub?"

"My back's just fine, but I'd love a short nap. And I sleep best cuddled up with you. Want to join me?"

"You know I do," Cassie answered eagerly. And soon they were in the bedroom curled up together. Cassie, not particularly

sleepy, simply enjoyed being cradled in Tom's arms. As it often did in quiet times with Tom, Cassie's mind played over their years together. For some reason her thoughts today reached far into their past, back to the beginning.

Her heart nearly burst with the intense love she felt for this man. Tom was her world. He had rescued her from a life of drinking and partying that she couldn't have survived much longer. He'd taken a lonely, unloved, self-destructive woman and changed her world.

It hadn't been easy. He'd had to use every tool in his arsenal. Conversation had been what he'd tried at the beginning. Thinking back, Cassie realized that he was the first man who had ever really listened to her. Tom *wanted* to know all about her. He knew she had survived a horribly abusive marriage and he'd heard story after story about how she had lived after that terrible man had died. She'd been as wild as they come, using drinking, wild parties and any available man she could find to try to block out her desperate loneliness and misery.

Despite the wildness she displayed, Tom had fallen in love so deeply that he was determined to do anything he could to save her. Cassie smiled and snuggled deeper into his arms, thinking about one of the tools he'd used that might not have been understood by most people. Tom was an old-fashioned man. He firmly believed that as the man, he should be head of the household, protecting the woman he loved. He had expectations for Cassie's behavior, mostly having to do with her safety. She followed these expectations as well as she could—most of the time. In truth, Cassie did as she pleased ninety-nine percent of the time. But when she did something Tom felt was dangerous or when she out-and-out defied him and conversation wasn't working, his tried-and-true solution was a trip over his knee for a sound spanking that would get her attention. When he was seriously upset by her actions, the unforgiving ivory hairbrush was applied vigorously. At those times, Cassie would usually give a swift

apology and promise to straighten up immediately. *And I do try*, Cassie thought to herself. *But sometimes it's not my fault and things just happen*, she assured herself.

Cassie realized that many people, especially these days, might see this as abuse. Cassie knew better. *I guess I didn't have much of a choice at the beginning*, Cassie mused, thinking of their lives well over forty years ago. But, it didn't matter now. She couldn't be happier, and she was in favor of the way they lived their lives—except during the moments Tom was actually spanking. At those moments, she was *not* so much in favor. But now the vast majority of her spankings were purely for fun, and she loved those.

Thirty minutes later, Cassie felt Tom stir and she rolled over to face him. She gave him a lingering kiss and he pulled her tightly to him. As the kiss ended, Tom whispered, "I don't know what I did to deserve that, but whatever it was, I hope I do it again."

"That was just for being you. Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"I do," he whispered. "And I thank God for it."