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Running Toward Fate
Mariella Starr

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RUNNING
TOWARD FATE

MARIELLA STARR



Chapter 1

THE MORNING WAS BEAUTIFUL, with a light breeze fluttering through the tall magnolia trees. Bella Cranfield-Madison thought it would be a perfect day as she climbed Celestial Hill to the cemetery behind the historical Magnolia Church. She carried a bouquet of flowers, a combination of white, pink and lavender gladiolus and iris, favorites of Bella and her mother.

Before her mother died, the Cranfield estate's flowerbeds were glorious, with ruffled blooms in vibrant colors. Now the gardens were tended by gardening professionals who planted and removed the flowers by the season. It pained Bella to see the flowers in rigid, symmetrically measured rows. God forbid the gardeners be off an inch or a weed snuck in among the fleeting beauty. She felt no connection to the flowers now, and it wouldn't have made a difference if she had. They were tossed away at the end of each season, their value spent and thrown in the trash to be replaced by more hot house selections.

Bella preferred the perennials of her mother's gardens. She'd always looked forward to their return every year.

When their time was over, she liked to think their mission of beauty was only temporarily suspended until they bloomed again. She'd always been so happy when it was time for the iris, gladiolus, peony, hydrangea, and rose bushes. All of them were gone now.

Laying the bouquet of tall-stemmed memories on her mother's grave and another on her grandmother's, she swept away a few dried leaves. Helen Cranfield wouldn't have minded the fallen leaves. Her mother had loved all the seasons except for winter in Georgia. Raised primarily in upper-state New York, Helen had lamented the lack of winter snow after returning to her ancestral home.

"Today is the day, Momma," Bella said, stroking the tombstone. "It's been a battle, but I stonewalled Catherine every step of the way. You would like Stephen. He's working in his father's investment firm, and everyone says he's building a good reputation. I so wish you were here."

Bella heard the cemetery gate squeak and whirled around to discover Captain Elliott McCroy entering the cemetery. A tall man, Elliott looked dignified and handsome in the uniform of an Officer in the Air Force. He always presented himself as spit-and-polish, even in civilian dress, and it suited him. Elliott was always clean-shaven, with the muscled body of a man who worked out regularly. He was a good-looking man with dark blond hair with a hint of auburn. "What are you doing here?"

"The same as you," Elliott said, lifting the flowers in his arms. "I'm saying goodbye."

"You're still leaving?" Bella said resentfully.

"I've never made any pretense that I would do otherwise," Elliott said with a shrug. "I'm thankful that my base Commander was able to swing a deal for me to have several weeks of emergency leave between reenlistments. I'm

grateful I could spend time with my mother before she passed.”

“You could...” Bella started.

“No, Bella. I won’t change my mind,” Elliott said firmly.

“It doesn’t make sense. You’ve already given the Air Force so many years!”

Elliott gave a slight shake of his head. They’d had this discussion before. “The Air Force paid for my education and training. What I do is important.”

“Stephen says you’re a genius with computers. You could put your brain to work in your father’s firm.”

Elliott’s jawline hardened, and he stepped back as if he was being attacked. “I will never work for Benton Abbott. He was my mother’s worst mistake. He’s not my father, and I despise the man.”

“He adopted you!” Bella protested.

Elliott’s narrowed eyes were his only sign of anger. “He falsified documents to the court stating that I agreed to the adoption! I tried to have it nullified. I went to court as soon as I was of legal age and changed my name back to McCroy. Georgia law makes it almost impossible to reverse an adoption. Otherwise, that would have been my first option.”

“He thought he was doing what was best, and you can’t blame Benton for your mother’s illness,” Bella pleaded softly.

“No, I can’t blame him for the cancer that took her life. I can blame him for being the most callous and self-serving man I’ve ever met. He has the morals of an alley cat,” Elliott said bitterly. “Benton Abbott is a serial cheater. He has cheated on every woman he’s ever spent time with. He didn’t have the decency to wait until my mother died before chasing after other women. I’ve always wondered if any of his women know his interest comes with an expiration date? What kind of a bastard cheats on his wife while she’s fighting

for her life? All Benton cares about is himself. Beware of what you're getting into, Bella."

"Stephen isn't like Benton," Bella protested.

Elliott turned away, shaking his head. "I hope you're right, and I can't stop you. If I could, I would, but short of kidnapping, nothing will make you see the truth until it's too late. The last thing I want is for you to be hurt."

"You're wrong, Elliott. I know you're wrong. Can't you stay a few hours longer? You'll miss the wedding," Bella pleaded.

Elliott shook his head. "I have a flight to catch, and I'm not going to hang around and watch you dive head-first off a cliff." He walked to a different area of the cemetery and placed flowers on the shared headstone of his father and mother, paying his respects to his parents.

He'd lost his father at the age of thirteen. He'd lost his mother after a long battle with cancer. Elliott left through the back gate and only turned for one last look at Bella when he rounded the corner of the church. Beautiful, naïve Bella was lost to him. Over the last few years, he'd lost contact with her. She wasn't the little spitfire he'd known before he'd left for the academy.

Warning Bella was useless. She wouldn't listen or face reality and was blinded by youthful romance and lies. As sure as he knew his name, Bella would be hurt. He didn't know how, when, or what, but it would crush her when she faced the truth.

Bella was in a reflective mood when she returned to what the locals still called the Cranfield Mansion and probably always would. She'd heard that Elliott's mother had lost a battle with cancer, but she hadn't been notified of the

funeral or the burial. No one had told her that Elliott was back in town.

The Cranfield ancestral home was located on the outskirts of La Rochelle, Georgia. The antebellum mansion had been built on the outskirts of a small village named Magnolia. All that was left of Magnolia was the church, the cemetery, and a few long-standing homes. A historical marker was posted on the roadside that most tourists didn't notice. Magnolia had ceased to exist as the town of La Rochelle had expanded over a hundred and eighty years.

The Cranfield Mansion stood on thirty acres of flowering gardens. Ancestors on her maternal side were emigrant English Quakers. The original family had owned several thousand acres and operated cotton and grist mills in the early 1800s. Later generations had sold off property acreage and invested in various industrial pursuits, none of which had ever involved the southern practice of slavery.

The estate, dating to the 1830s, was part of the La Rochelle Annual House Tour. Tourists to the area often stopped to take photographs. Sometimes the tourists were brazen enough to drive through the open gates to take pictures in front of the mansion, although a sign on the iron gates reminded people that it was a private residence.

Frank Madison, Bella's father, was an investor who took pride in the family history of his first wife. He was also proud of his own success. He'd been born into the southern gentry based more on wealth than bloodlines to the aristocracy.

Bella loved her father but knew he was a snob. She liked to think she wasn't but would admit to being spoiled. By her choice and the urging from her grandmother, Bella attended private boarding schools and graduated from Vanderbilt University with a degree in education. Teaching had always been her dream, although neither her father nor stepmother had approved.

Frank Madison denied his only daughter very little. In turn, she was expected to comply with his wishes and those of her stepmother, Catherine. And, there lay the root of most of Bella's problems.

Less than a year after her mother died when she was eleven, Bella was presented with a stepmother. She'd disliked her stepmother at first sight, and nothing had changed her mind in the last twelve years. She had grown to despise Catherine, and her childhood years had become an undeclared war of wills.

Bella had spent her secondary school and college years in boarding school dormitories by choice. Once she escaped, she'd made a vow to never return to her family home or live under her stepmother's rule.

When Bella graduated from college, it hadn't been to return to the Cranfield Estate. Although the property belonged to her grandmother, Mimi, it would eventually become hers. After finishing college, Bella wouldn't displace her father, but neither would she live under the same roof as her stepmother, Catherine. Purchasing a medium-sized, three-bedroom townhouse with part of her inheritance had been a step toward becoming an adult and independent. Bella had decorated her new home the way she wanted and not what was necessarily the latest and greatest in-home decorating.

She'd interviewed for a job and qualified to teach in Georgia. Bella was a third-grade teacher at the Union County Primary School. She loved every minute she spent with her students. Until she'd announced her engagement, she had visited Cranfield Mansion every other week to have dinner with her father and to make sure Catherine wasn't destroying the property.

When Bella had moved into a private school dorm room, her stepmother had seen her absence as permission to redece-

orate the Cranfield mansion to her liking. Returning home during the Christmas break had been eye-opening. Bella had witnessed the destruction of her home, and she'd turned to her grandmother, Harriet (Mimi) Cranfield, for help.

Mimi had rushed to Cranfield and had put her foot down. From that day forward, Catherine Madison wasn't allowed to change anything in the house without permission. And she would never receive consent from either Bella or Mimi. Harriett Cranfield had moved back into Cranfield Mansion to protect her granddaughter's inheritance.

Aristocratic southern traditions still held a tight grip on old customs. Many young women still didn't leave their family homes until they married, and multi-generation households were still considered normal. Mimi Cranfield had supported Bella and helped her escape her stepmother's clutches. Mimi held a tight-fisted hold on the inherited Cranfield fortune while allowing her granddaughter to spread her wings in boarding school and college.

When Bella purchased the townhouse, Frank Madison had wanted his daughter to return to her rightful home or to let him buy her what he deemed a more fitting residence. Bella turned down his offer. What her father meant was that it was embarrassing that his daughter hadn't returned to her parents' home after college. And, if she didn't want to live at home, she should purchase a home in a wealthier, more influential section of town.

Bella suspected those sentiments were coming more from her stepmother than her father. Anything suggested by her stepmother was vetoed automatically because there was either an ulterior motive behind it or there were strings attached.

Catherine had been mortified when Bella accepted a public-school position. Immediately afterward, several private schools contacted her offering employment. Her

parents had claimed innocence, but Bella knew the truth. Behind the exaggerated southern charm, her father and Catherine had used their social connections for the job offers. The exclusive schools were more acceptable in their social circle. Bella didn't need to work. She wanted to teach and inspire young children.

Elliott McCroy's soft-spoken words echoed in Bella's mind as she walked back to the Cranfield Estate, where her wedding was going to be held. She knew Stephen's father was a womanizer. *Everyone* knew it. She'd never seen, heard, or even suspected that kind of behavior in Stephen. They had discussed his father's penchant for cheating and discarding wives with almost the same longevity as his expensive vehicles. Stephen had sworn his devotion to her.

"Where have you been?" Catherine demanded as soon as Bella came through the patio door.

"Visiting my mother," Bella answered truthfully.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Catherine exclaimed. "We have a million things to do today. We're late for the spa appointment."

"I told you I didn't want to go to a spa," Bella said.

"Don't be silly," Catherine exclaimed. "Your bridesmaids are already there! We are scheduled for manicures and pedicures, and all the makeup will be done there. When we return, the back lawn and the gazebo will be decorated for the wedding. You'll only have to put on your dress and get ready to walk down the aisle."

Bella took a deep breath. "Catherine, I told you I wanted to be involved with my wedding preparations. All of them, and they didn't include going to a spa."

"It's inappropriate for you to be setting up tables, and it's unnecessary," Catherine exclaimed.

"What's the problem?" Frank Madison asked, entering the room.

“Catherine has made plans without bothering to clear them through me first,” Bella said. “I rejected the idea when she suggested it. I didn’t, and I still don’t want to go to a spa to prepare for my wedding.”

“You said you would think about it,” Catherine interrupted. “Frank, I was only trying to help. Bella doesn’t understand how important it is to do this. It’s *the* thing to do. People will think we’re cheap if we don’t treat the bridesmaids to a day at the spa.”

“God forbid!” Bella snapped wearily.

“Bella, the arrangements have already been made,” Frank said. “Catherine is only trying to help. It’s too late to change the appointments. If you girls don’t go, I’ll still have to pay for it.”

“She went behind my back, Daddy,” Bella complained. “I was looking forward to seeing the house, and the gardens transformed.”

“It will be beautiful when we get back,” Catherine said, giving her husband a pleading look.

“Bella, is it asking too much for you to accept a gift from my wife?” Frank asked.

“Don’t put this on me, Daddy,” Bella said. “Catherine deliberately went behind my back and set up these appointments.”

“She misunderstood,” Frank suggested. “She was trying to do something nice. Do it for me, honey.”

Bella closed her eyes, and the ball of frustration in her stomach pained her. “I’ll go get my dress.”

“It hasn’t arrived yet,” Catherine said quickly. “The girls will be dressing at the spa. Your dress will be here by the time we get back, and you can dress here.”

“I’m going to call them,” Bella said.

“I already have,” Catherine said. “I knew you’d be worried when it wasn’t here when they promised.”

Bella stormed out to the limousine Catherine had hired for the day. She was furious, and she'd lost this last-minute battle. But she didn't want to disappoint her two bridesmaids or the maid of honor, who were her best friends.

"Stop acting like a brat," Catherine complained. "Anyone would think I'm taking you to a guillotine. You should be grateful."

"I'll be grateful when you stop interfering in my life," Bella said. "I did not want this! As usual, you just plowed over what I wanted, thinking that your way is the only way!"

"I was trying not to embarrass your father," Catherine snapped. "You could think of him once in a while. He has a position to uphold."

"Shut up!" Bella said through gritted teeth. "For once in your life, just shut up! This will be the last time, Catherine. The very last time!"

"How dare you!" Catherine exclaimed, and she turned furiously to face the window.

Bella entered what she knew was an expensive spa in La Rochelle and was immediately swept away into a private room. She only knew about the resort because Catherine spent a fortune there. Bella was surprised when she was isolated in a room by herself. She received three half-hour treatments and then a massage. Then she was taken for a manicure and a pedicure, and again she was isolated. A stylist came in and fingered her fox-red hair.

"Honey, whoever did your hair knew what they were doing, but this length has got to go!"

"The color is my own, and you're not cutting my hair! Not on your life!" Bella exclaimed. "It's taken me a decade to grow it back after my stepmother cut it off. I have long hair because I want long hair."

"It's terribly out of style," the stylist said with a shrug and

an attitude. “There’s only so much I can do with all this length and these curls. Maybe a trim?”

“If you touch a pair of scissors, I’m leaving,” Bella said.

“Your loss, dear,” the stylist shrugged, sounding annoyed. “I could have made you beautiful.”

“That’s it,” Bella exclaimed, getting out of the chair. “Where are my clothes?”

“I’m not finished,” the stylist said.

“I am,” Bella said. She pulled the robe tightly around her and opened the door. Bella ran down the hallway to rooms where she had been scrubbed, treated, and massaged. She found her clothing and dressed. Walking toward the main desk area, Catherine suddenly appeared, in a salon robe, with her face covered in a mud treatment.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“I’m going to find my bridesmaids and my maid of honor,” Bella exclaimed. “This was supposed to be an enjoyable event for all of us. You know, fun, chit-chat, and glasses of champagne. So far, I haven’t seen anyone from my wedding party.”

“They are indisposed at the moment,” Catherine said.

Something clicked in Bella’s mind, and she felt nauseous. “What have you done?”

“It was for your own good!

Bella shoved her stepmother out of her way and began going down the long hallway, opening doors and looking inside.

“I’ve already sent them to the house,” Catherine said. “You must complete your hair and makeup, and I’ll call for the limo to return.”

Bella turned on her heel and went to the main desk. She hailed the clerk. “Please call me a taxi before you need to call the police.”

“Is there something wrong?” the attendant asked in surprise.

“Yes, and I need a taxi before I murder this woman! Please tell them to get here as soon as possible.”

It only took five minutes before the taxi arrived, and Bella jumped in.

“Wait!” Catherine called, running out of the spa.

“Go!” Bella ordered, and the driver drove off, leaving a screaming, stamping Catherine behind.

Bella paid the taxi driver and thanked him. Then she ran around the house to discover the entire side lawn was decorated with elaborate white and bright yellow floral arrangements by an army of workers. Yellow was her least favorite color in the whole spectrum!

“Bella,” Frank Madison said behind her. “I didn’t expect you back for at least another hour.”

“She changed it,” Bella said in a shocked voice. “It’s not what I ordered.”

“Well,” her father said in a placating voice. “You know how Catherine gets carried away.”

“It’s all wrong,” Bella exclaimed, her voice cracking.

“Different, honey,” her father said. “Better.”

“No, it’s wrong,” Bella said, shaking her head. “Why are there so many chairs?”

“Well, Baby Girl, we needed to invite a few more people,” Frank said.

Bella stopped a young man carrying in more chairs. “How many chairs are being delivered?”

“Three-hundred, ma’am.”

“A few?” Bella exclaimed to her father. “Our guest list was less than a hundred. I don’t know three-hundred people!” She turned and ran through the house to the ballroom. It was a duplicate of the lawn, with round tables for ten adorned by flower arrangements matching the ones on

the lawn. On a side table was a tiered cake with far too many layers. She didn't bother to count. It wasn't what she ordered.

Bella burst into tears and ran upstairs, past her father, going to the east wing where she'd had a private suite of rooms even as a child. A dress she'd refused to try on at the bridal boutique hung on a floor-length mirror. It was a princess gown that flowed five feet outward. It was not the gown she had chosen. Now Bella was sobbing.

"Baby Girl," Frank said, following her. "It's not that bad. She only changed a few things. Stephen is around here somewhere. I'm going to go find him. Maybe he can calm you down."

Bella shook her head. "This isn't my wedding! This isn't what we planned!"

"Honey, it's getting married that counts," Frank said.

"I didn't want this," Bella sobbed. "I wanted my wedding to mean something special."

"It will be special."

"Oh, my God, what has she done to Kalie, Dana, and Liz?" Bella ran down the hall to another suite that had been for guests. She burst through the door.

"It's about time you got here," Shelby Hunt exclaimed, raising a glass of champagne. "Better late than never."

"Where are my friends?" Bella demanded.

"Honey, you must not have any friends if your Daddy's wife had to hire bridesmaids," Francine Dunlap said.

"She hired the lot of you?" Bella demanded, feeling sick.

"A thousand dollars a pop, sweetie," Rachel Fortworth said, and the eight young women dressed in yellow laughed and giggled.

"You should have charged her ten thousand," Bella said, slamming the door behind her. She felt like her heart was going to explode. Catherine had destroyed her wedding.

Bella stopped in the hallway and leaned against the wall, taking deep breaths. She swiped at her tears, and suddenly she heard whispers and moans. The door across the hall was open a crack, and she suspected what those sounds meant. Someone was having sex in what used to be Mimi's suite. She poked the door, and it silently opened a few more inches.

There was no need to open the door further. A full-length mirror was in Bella's view, and it reflected two people having sex, leaning against her grandmother's antique table. Tiffany Baxter, a woman she couldn't stand, had her bridesmaid's dress hiked up to her waist. She was being screwed by no other than her husband-to-be, Stephen Abbott.

Considering her options, Bella quietly went down the hall and entered her father's bedroom. She pulled out drawers and searched until she found what she needed. Her cell phone had gone missing the previous day. She found it in the nightstand drawer on Catherine's side of the bed.

Returning to her suite, Bella listened to several messages from her friends warning her of Catherine's duplicity. She called them back and apologized. Bella was still sitting stoically on the bed when Catherine and Stephen entered her room.

"Your father said you were upset about the change of plans," Stephen said.

"You knew?" Bella said.

"I knew of some of them, but I didn't think it was a big deal," Stephen said with a shrug. "It's nothing to get upset about. The bigger the splash, the better! Come on, sweetheart. It's our wedding day, be happy!"

"Yes, I should be happy," Bella said, and she gave him a fake smile.

"Good, I knew you would come to your senses," Catherine exclaimed. "I'll help you get into your dress."

"No," Bella said calmly. "You have done *enough*. I want to

watch the procession from my window. Then I'll come down, and Daddy can walk me to the gazebo."

Catherine checked her watch. "We're right on time. Fix your face, and ice your eyes. You don't want to appear in photographs with swollen eyes! There are reporters here from all three newspapers. This will be the wedding everyone remembers."

"You're right about that," Bella agreed stoically with a nod and a fake smile.

Bella stood behind a marble pillar on her balcony. She was out of sight of a local wedding planner she knew of but hadn't hired.

Guests were being seated, and a twelve-piece orchestra began to play music. Stephen took his place, as did his best man. Handsome young men escorted Catherine and the hired bridesmaids down the aisle. A few of them she recognized as friends of Stephen. As far as she knew, the others could have been hired. A long white carpet was unrolled down the length of the aisle. A singer she'd never heard before stepped forward and began to sing. Everyone was waiting for the bride to appear.

Bella went inside and looked around the bedroom. She hated how her stepmother had redecorated her room during her first semester of boarding school. Rather than spend holidays at Cranfield, most of her time off from school had been at summer camps and with friends. She'd spent very little time at home, always finding an excuse not to come home. Bella picked up the suitcase she'd brought over the night before and carried it downstairs.

"Bella, honey?" Frank Madison exclaimed, surprised to see his daughter still in jeans.

"Don't worry, Daddy. I have this under control," Bella said. "It might be best if you stay behind this time." She set the suitcase beside the ostentatious water fountain of naked

cherubs Catherine had installed in the grand foyer before Mimi had put a stop to her *redecorating*.

Bella walked down the aisle in deliberately tattered jeans, a tee shirt, and sneakers. Catherine looked shocked, and she wasn't the only one. Bella took the microphone from the minister.

"Sorry, folks, but the wedding is off. Thank you for coming, and I apologize for wasting your time. I also apologize if I have never met you before. The invitations didn't come from me, or I suspect, Stephen. This entire mess is a sham. What should have been the most important day of my life has been turned into a social circus!"

Bella swept her arm in an arc to indicate the pretentious decorations. "This monstrosity is not the wedding I planned. My wedding was hijacked by my stepmother Catherine Madison, and she can take full credit for it because I won't," Bella exclaimed, recognizing that she sounded a bit hysterical. She pushed the minister's hands away as he tried to take the microphone.

"Sweet, wonderful, Catherine," Bella said mockingly. "She went so far as to insult my chosen bridesmaids and my matron of honor. She replaced my friends with hired debutantes. Probably, daughters of guests we didn't invite.

"You overpaid them, Catherine. They're not worth the thousand dollars you paid them. These obnoxious, snotty bitches are not worth two cents!"

Stephen stepped forward and tried to take the microphone from her. Bella kned him in the nuts, and he hit the ground with a yelp. The brown belt she'd earned in a karate training course had just paid off!

Ignoring the gasps and the murmuring, Bella continued. "There are two reasons this wedding is being canceled. One is because my stepmother overstepped her boundaries by a million miles. The other is because I caught my intended

husband, Stephen Abbott, fucking Tiffany Baxter about thirty minutes before he was supposed to promise fidelity to me.” She looked down at her ex-fiancé, still curled on the floor. “I guess the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, did it, Stephen?”

“Folks, stick around if you want. At the very least, there should be a decent dinner, and you get cake. That monstrosity was not what I ordered, and I doubt the catered dinner is either!”

Bella handed the microphone back to the minister, and she walked down the aisle, went inside, and picked up her suitcase.

A crescendo of voices exploded behind her, and guests were already beginning to rise from their seats to leave.

“Goodbye, Daddy. I’ve had all the interference in my life that I intend to take!”

Catherine came running in sobbing. “Frank! How could she do this to me?”

“I have one last thing to say to you, Catherine,” Bella exclaimed. She closed the distance between herself and stepmother, raised her hand, and shoved Catherine backward. She was rewarded with a splash and a scream as her drenched stepmother floundered in the water fountain. “That’s for twelve years of being a bitch!”

“I am so proud of you,” Kalie said, clinking her wine glass against the glasses of her best friends, Bella, Dana, and Liz.

“I’m not supposed to be drinking this,” Liz said, looking longingly at the glass.

“Yours is non-alcoholic,” Bella said. “I know you’re not supposed to have alcohol. I got one non-alcoholic bottle for you and three with alcohol for us. You’re pregnant, very, very

pregnant!" She leaned over and patted her friend's baby belly. "When you have this baby, be sure to call me."

Liz sipped from the glass. "This isn't bad," she said.

"I still don't know why you're leaving," Dana said. "You didn't do anything wrong! Stephen was the one who was screwing that whore Tiffany Baxter on your wedding day! She's the biggest whore in town, and everyone knows it."

"True," Bella said. "But when your father owns the largest factory in town, people turn a blind eye. Don't you know... if you don't acknowledge it, it didn't happen! That's the southern way women are trained to behave!"

"Girl, you gave this town enough dirt to keep them talking for years," Dana said and laughed. "You shocked my momma, and nothing shocks her!"

"You'd better not keep quiet about what Catherine said to you and about your family," Bella exclaimed angrily. "She's a racist!" Then she looked over to her oldest friend. Liz had been one of her best friends since the first grade. "I can't believe she said you would be an embarrassment because you're pregnant. And she called you fat! The bitch!"

"Hush!" Liz whispered. "If Lenny wakes up and hears you swearing, I'm the one he's going to be upset with."

"Sorry," Bella whispered.

"Why do you put up with him whacking on your butt?" Dana asked curiously in a lowered voice.

Liz raised her non-alcoholic wine glass. "Because sometimes I actually enjoy it! And because it's what we were brought up believing. The husband is the Head of the House. I knew Lenny was a spanker long before we got married. We've known each other since I was five and he was seven."

"Church doctrine or not," Kalie declared. "No man is whooping my ass. I put up with enough of that from my momma and daddy growing up. I'm going to find a man

who doesn't believe in that crap." She turned to Bella. "Was Stephen a whacker?"

"He claimed he wasn't," Bella said. "But, since that conversation, I've learned he's a liar. That's Liar with a great big capital L. We all grew up with those beliefs because the doctrine has spread to nearly all the churches around here. I think it's a secret society, so the men can control their women. It may be part of the indoctrination of La Rochelle, but I don't believe in it."

"I don't believe in that hogwash, but I hope your Daddy sets Catherine's ass on fire!" Kalie exclaimed, and she raised her glass. Three of the four glasses clinked together in solidarity.

"I hope Catherine is voted out of every woman's club in town," Dana added, her dark eyes flashing with anger. "I've already told her what I thought of her, but she hung up on me. What's wrong with that woman? Does she think this is the old south or something?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Bella cried.

"It's not your fault, girlfriend," Dana exclaimed. "That woman is a pure, bonafide racist. None of this mess was your fault. You can bet your sweet butt I'm telling anyone who will listen exactly what that woman said to me! Everyone is going to know her for the trash she is! When I get through spreading the word, decent folk will cross the street to avoid her!"

"Hush," Liz exclaimed. "I can hear Lenny moving around upstairs in the bedroom. This is his last week working the late shift until the baby comes."

"Sorry!" Dana whispered.

"Liz, honey, I'm leaving for work," Lenny said from the doorway a few minutes later.

"I haven't packed your snack for later," Liz exclaimed.

"I already did," Lenny said, walking over. He gave his

wife a kiss and stroked her belly. "Call if you need me. Everyone at the plant is on baby alert."

"I will," Liz promised. "And you will be there when I have this baby!"

"Yes, ma'am," Lenny agreed, and then he looked around at the young women lounging on the floor around the coffee table. "You girls better crash here instead of driving drunk."

"I deserve a good drunk!" Bella said.

"You won't think so tomorrow morning," Lenny said. He raised his eyebrow at his wife's glass.

"It's non-alcoholic," all but Liz said simultaneously.

Lenny smiled and nodded approvingly.

"I'll see you, girls, later," Lenny said, kissing his wife and leaving the apartment.