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## Chapter 1

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**M**arla Majestic sat at her desk her scarlet fingernails drumming a tattoo on the polished surface. It was simply too much! This was taking things too far, her brain insisted as she stared at the photograph in her copy of the local newspaper. And to think, it was her own father; her own flesh and blood that owned this rag. She wondered why she hadn't been given her copy to proof yesterday morning. Now she knew. A strangled hiss escaped her clenched teeth as she continued to fume.

An engagement announcement and a picture of the happy couple slapped her in the face as soon as she opened the paper, and she nearly wore her hot coffee when she slammed the cup down on her desk. So he was going to marry the little twit! It wasn't possible. Chas Mackenzie was supposed to marry her, God damn it!

Everyone knew that, everyone who mattered, anyway. How had that little nobody managed to breeze into town and steal him right out from under Marla's nose?

Looking at the photo, Marla didn't get it. She supposed the

girl was cute enough in a juvenile sort of way, but she had nothing going for her. Marla laughed as she read the details.

Roberta Swancott, Babe as they called her, God, that was a sickening nickname, she thought with a sneer, was employed at Sally's Diner. How quaint, a poor little waitress struggling to make her way in this cold and wicked world. Obviously, she'd somehow managed to appeal to Chas' knight in shining armor disposition. Hell, he was always stopping on the side of the road to give someone a hand, change a tire or rescue some kind of pathetic animal or other.

Apparently, this waiflike girl had triggered the same response with her long hair that looked as though she'd never seen a stylist.

Oh, Marla knew about her, she'd heard the rumors flying around town but she never really took it seriously. He'd come to his senses soon enough after he had his little fling and was tired of babysitting. The word from some of Marla's friends was Babe was immature and slightly underdeveloped. Chas would tire of her penchant for getting herself into one scrape after another. Imagine getting her hair caught in an old wringer washer, she thought with a spiteful laugh. The girl was a joke, a miniature woman playing at being a grown-up, and Chas liked his women full-grown, that was for damn sure.

Well, it had gone on long enough. Marla had been stewing for nearly three months, her anger simmering just below the surface as she rolled her eyes, and she'd stated publicly that it was ridiculous that Chas would prefer someone like that little tart over her whenever anyone brought up the subject of his new romance. It would soon fizzle out she insisted, sort of a last hurrah before he put a ring on her finger and decided to settle down.

No one seemed to know where Roberta came from or why. What did her people do, for instance? Did she have any social pedigree at all? Marla doubted it. For sure she wasn't some rich

heiress trying to prove to daddy that she could make it on her own. There were even rumors she'd been involved with that sleazebag Roger Thomson before meeting Chas. Now there was a disgusting specimen if she ever saw one. Why would Chas want Roger's leftovers?

Even now Roger was being investigated by several law enforcement agencies. They hadn't been able to pin anything substantial on him yet, but Marla figured they soon would. The man was a worm.

Glancing back down she looked at the smiling couple her eyes narrowing as she picked up a pen and gave little Babe some horns and a mustache. So, a September wedding was being planned, was it? That was still five months away and a lot could change in a short amount of time. She'd been holding on to her temper by a thread. Perhaps it was time to pay a visit to Sally's Diner. Maybe she'd feel better once she got a real look at this troublemaker who was screwing up all of Marla's carefully laid out plans.

Grabbing her blazer she picked up her purse and the keys to her red sports car.

"When my father comes in, tell him I have something important to discuss with him," she snapped as she left her office and sailed by their shared secretary. "I'll be back in a little while."

"Yes, Ms. Majestic," Mary replied. "I'll let him know. If he asks where you are, what should I tell him?"

Marla paused. The smile did not reach her eyes.

"Tell him I've gone to take care of a matter that's been on my radar for quite a while," she replied coolly. "And tell him to make sure he has bail money," she finished before going out the door and slamming it behind her.

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MARY STARED AFTER HER, unable to hide her grin. So Miss

Majesty had seen the interesting item in the paper, she thought breaking into a full smile. Too bad it wasn't closer to lunchtime, she thought with a sigh. Well, no matter. She'd have lunch at the diner and get the scoop from Sally herself. Or, if she were lucky the melee would still be going on.

Her boss' daughter could make quite a scene when she chose to and apparently this was the day. The entire town had been waiting for this confrontation with bated breath. Most were rooting for Babe, but a few diehard friends of Marla's were hoping for a different outcome. Mainly the society bitches, Mary thought with a grimace. Well, she for one hoped the little waitress kicked Marla's ass and if Babe needed bailing out Mary would be happy to start the collection, anonymously of course.

Mary liked Babe Swancott. She was sweet and even-tempered and her love for Chas was obvious. However, she doubted Babe was a match for the furious woman who'd just sailed out of the office. No sir, she wasn't, but Sally was, and Mary prayed this was not one of those days when Sally said screw it and decided to go to Bingo, which happened periodically.

Maybe Chas would be there. Usually, he brought Babe to work and met his buddies for coffee. They'd probably be gone by now, but maybe not. Lord, what she'd give to be a fly on the wall at Sally's today!

Looking at her watch she sighed and tried to get some work done while she counted off the minutes till lunchtime.

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PETE BENEDICT OPENED the door of the diner more than ready for a coffee break. The morning had already yielded three speeding tickets, a no turn on red and a domestic disturbance out at the old Marshal farm. No surprise for a Monday morning

when the couple typically spent the weekend drinking themselves into oblivion.

After breaking up the scuffle he threatened both of them with appearance tickets or worse. When he'd left they weren't speaking. Good! He hoped it stayed that way. Thank goodness they no longer had any stock to tend and Pete figured it wouldn't be long before Matilda Marshall would be too frail to lift that heavy, cast iron skillet she always threatened her husband with.

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THAT WOMAN WAS one of the most quarrelsome creatures it had ever been his misfortune to arrest, and he'd arrested her more than once. Pete couldn't imagine being married for fifty-plus years to such a cantankerous bat. Truthfully, he could well understand why Henry tipped the bottle now and then. They'd talked about it once.

"Hank, why the hell do you put up with that woman?" Pete had asked, shaking his head.

"For one thing, I got nowhere to go," the old man admitted scratching his head. "The kids cleared out as soon as they were able and not one of them settled nearby."

"There are senior apartments," Pete pointed out. "Places you could live alone in peace."

"This is my home, Pete," Hank explained. "Why I can't imagine leaving here."

"But she's so... mean," Pete replied, trying to state the obvious as kindly as he could.

"That she is," Hank agreed. "Believe it or not Tildy was a beautiful woman. Oh, the dreams we had when my granddaddy left us this place. I couldn't wait to marry her and start our life together," he said with a faraway look in his cataract-clouded eyes.

"What happened?"

“The usual, too much work and not enough play. She changed, starting arguments and fussing over every little problem.”

“Why didn’t you take a stick to her butt when it started?” Pete asked.

“I thought about it, more than once, but the life I’d given her was not the life I promised. Keeping this farm running and getting it to pay was hard work. Tildy did her share. Then the kids started coming along and there was even more to do. One day she looked in the mirror and she saw the old, work-worn woman she’d become and blamed me. I can’t argue.

“After that, there was no reasoning with her. She became a mean-spirited wife and mother and the kids couldn’t get away from here fast enough. I don’t blame them either,” he said with a sigh. “Eventually I started hitting the bottle trying to drown out the sound of her bitchin’. Soon she was doing the same.”

“Do you think if you’d taken her in hand when she was younger things might be different today?”

“Maybe. Can’t say but it’s too late now anyway. It’s water under the bridge.”

Pete had no more to offer.

He was never getting married.

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TAKING a seat at the counter Pete smiled as he watched Josie scurry around. A minute later she placed a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll in front of him and went on about her business. She was a pretty little thing, quiet most of the time and sassy when she needed to be. Occasionally things could get a bit rowdy at Sally’s Diner.

“Where’s Sally today?” he called out to her before picking up his cup to take a sip.

“She took the day off, being it’s Monday and all. Said she

had important business to take care of,” Josie called over her shoulder as the little bell rang and she hurried to pick up her order from the window. “I suspect that business has something to do with Bingo,” Josie whispered with a grin as she passed him.

Pete laughed, heard the bell on the door and turned to see who was coming in. Crap, Marla Majestic, he swore softly. She was, as usual, dressed to the nines, her high heels clicking rapidly across the tile floor.

“Where is she?” she demanded loudly, taking a napkin and wiping the counter fastidiously before setting her purse down.

“What brings you to this side of the tracks, Marla?” Pete asked smoothly. It seemed smart to let her know he was there. Her face was flushed. Marla was armed for bear and gunning for a little cub Pete was particularly fond of, Babe.

“Who, Sally?” Josie asked glancing up at the woman in surprise.

“No, not Sally, you idiot,” Marla shouted. “Roberta, Babe, whatever the hell you call her, the little bitch who stole my man!” she demanded.

Josie looked at Pete, obviously confused. She’d only been in town a month, showing up with two little children and nowhere to go. Her blonde head tilted to the side and her mouth dropped open.

“I’ll handle this,” Pete said, rising and moving toward the irate woman.

“What do you want with Babe,” he asked calmly.

“What do you think I want?” Marla sneered. “I want to kick her ass and send her packing.”

“Now, Marla,” he began. “Let’s sit down and talk about this,” he suggested, kindly but firmly taking hold of her arm. “You don’t really want to start trouble, do you?”

“Yes, yes I really do,” she insisted as he steered her to a table and all but planted her ass on the chair. Folding his big body onto the chair across from her he signaled to Josie for his coffee and

held up two fingers. Quickly she appeared beside them with his cup and another for Marla.

“Thanks,” he said shooting her a reassuring smile. Immediately he turned his attention back to the furious woman across from him who was rapidly drumming her fingers on the table and tapping her foot impatiently. Lord, he couldn’t seem to catch a break today.

“Now what seems to be the issue?” he asked.

“Don’t be an idiot, Crunch,” she snapped, calling him by the name he’d picked up in high school as her eyes darted around the restaurant looking for her target. “You know exactly what the issue is.”

Pete studied her closely. She’d done something different with her hair, he noted. It was longer than the last time he’d seen her, and her dark tresses now had a hint of red. It suited her, he decided.

“No, I don’t. Apparently, you have some sort of problem with Babe.”

“Only that she sailed into town and stole my fiancé,” Marla stated loudly. “Where is she?” she called out to Josie who was wiping the counter with an eye on the drama that was unfolding.

Josie ignored the demand and went about her work. Pete knew she heard; hell, half the town probably heard and spread the word. The diner seemed to be rapidly filling up with customers, curious customers who seemed to want to sit at the tables around them.

Pete wasn’t surprised. This day had been coming for a while now, ever since his buddy, Chas Mackenzie had fallen for a virtually homeless young woman who’d run her rust bucket of a car into Chas’ brand-new pickup.

“I don’t recall that you and Chas were ever actually engaged,” Pete pointed out.

“Well, we were,” she insisted glaring at him.

“Did he ask you to marry him?”



"Not in so many words, but it was understood," she said in her defense. "We've dated for years. It was assumed we'd marry one day."

"That's hardly a proposal," Pete said with a snort. "Perhaps you thought more of yourself than he did."

Her hand flew out to slap his face and he caught her wrist in a strong grip.

"You really don't want to do that," he advised sternly. "Assaulting an officer of the law is a crime."

"And you'd love to arrest me, no doubt," she countered tugging against his strength.

"No, not really. I can't imagine having you locked up for an hour, much less endure a day listening to your endless harping," he informed her truthfully. "What I'd really like to do is pull you over my knees, flip up your sassy little skirt and teach you a lesson in manners."

"Are you threatening me?" she demanded with an outraged gasp.

"Think of it more as a fantasy, a daydream if you will. I've always thought a good spanking would give you a whole new attitude."

"Well, we'll never know, will we," she sassed, her eyes flashing. "For one thing, you don't have the balls, despite how big and tough you are, and it would put your entire career at risk," she pointed out with a challenging laugh. "I'm not worth that, am I?" she asked.

"Honestly, Marla, I don't know what you're worth," he admitted. "If it would make a decent, reasonable woman out of a spoiled brat who has always gotten her way I might be pleasantly surprised."

"You're beautiful, but you already know that. I've often wondered if having your ass blistered by a man who knows what he's doing would reveal there's more to you than meets the eye."

"Let go of me," she hissed softly lowering her gaze.

“Are you going to behave?” he asked sternly.

She didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she turned her head and observed the rather large crowd taking in every word.

“Yes,” she finally replied, rubbing her wrist when he immediately released her. “But this isn’t over, not by a long shot,” she informed him stiffly.

“It better be,” he warned.

Pete leaned forward, his voice low and unmistakably frank.

“Lately, I’ve been wondering if it’s time for a career change, so don’t think you can hold my job over my head. Stay away from Babe. Chas loves her and she loves him. Keep your nose out of it and try being rational for once in your life. You can’t have everything you want. Nobody can and I don’t particularly care how much money your daddy has.

“You wield a lot of power in this town, but be aware that you have a number of enemies as well. Most would not convict me of giving you exactly what you deserve. Leave Chas alone, and if you do anything to hurt Babe, either physically or personally I’m planning on having your ass on a platter. Do we understand each other?” he asked darkly.

“Boy, she’s got you under her spell too,” Marla snorted.

“It’s not a spell. She’s the real deal, loving, kind and genuine. Instead of trying to destroy her why don’t you give emulating her a shot? Maybe you’d find out honey is a lot more tempting than vinegar.”

“Kiss my ass, Crunch,” Marla replied haughtily as she rose regally from the chair. “I’m not afraid of you and I’m certainly not afraid of that little interloper. Her day’s coming, you mark my words.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he responded rising as well. “I fear your day is also on its way and you might want to think about that.”

“You don’t frighten me,” she repeated. “You’ll never follow through on your threats, which are obscenely ridiculous by the

way," she added, holding her head high as she strolled to the counter and snatched up her purse.

Pete followed her.

Leaning in and rising to her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek, shocking him to the core.

"I wouldn't want anyone to think we hadn't parted as friends," she whispered in his ear. "Don't bother walking me to my car, darling," she cooed for all to hear. "You worry about me far too much as it is. Never assume I can't take care of myself."

Pete watched her walk away, noting the exaggerated wiggle of her ass. What game was she playing now he wondered as he resumed his place at the counter? Josie brought him a hot coffee and replaced his cinnamon roll without a word.

"What just happened here?" he asked aloud to no one in particular.

"You've been had," Josie replied with a grin.

Pete frowned at her, gulped down his coffee and tossed a few dollars on the counter. He had to think about this.