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## Chapter 1

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“**N**ow there’s something you don’t see every day,” Mark Schaller remarked as he walked up the sidewalk toward the reception hall. “It has legs, well feet, but there doesn’t appear to be a head.”

“Kind of looks like a giant floating marshmallow,” Jeb, one of his best buddies agreed with a smirk. “Wonder who’s under there.”

“Shut the hell up and help me,” the marshmallow demanded as she tripped on a small crack. “I can’t even see where I’m going,” she hissed loudly as she recovered her balance.

“Gee, I don’t know,” Mark drawled, pausing and rubbing his chin. “It sounds a lot like Candace, and if it is, this is no more than she deserves. After all, from what I’ve been told she’s the one who picked out that white monstrosity. What do you think, Jeb? Do we help her?”

“Well, Chas is our friend and it wouldn’t do to let his little sister smother, and that could happen if she falls,” he pointed out thoughtfully, “especially on his wedding day. It would sort of ruin the whole occasion, don’t you think?”

“Are you two imbeciles going to help me or stand around

running your mouths?” Candace demanded in a frustrated and heavily muffled voice. One visible foot stomped.

“I guess we’d better,” Mark finally said with a sigh.

“Not that she deserves it,” Jeb added, reaching out to pluck the heavy bridal gown out of Candace’s arms. “Imagine putting a little thing like Babe in a dress that weighs more than she does. It was spiteful of you, Candy and just plain mean!”

“Yes, it was,” Mark agreed as he gathered up the dragging fabric and followed Jeb. “Does your brother realize what you’ve done?” he asked over his shoulder as they moved toward Candace’s blue Mercedes.

Candy remained quiet and popped the trunk open on her vehicle.

“I can see that he doesn’t, but he soon will,” Mark promised as he and Jeb stuffed the dress into the back end of the car. “You’ve been a class A brat about the wedding, and what’s worse you acted like you were oh so helpful and supportive. What’s your problem with Babe anyway?” he asked sternly as he straightened up and closed the trunk lid.

“I don’t have a problem with her,” Candy snapped back.

“You’re lying. For some reason, you don’t like her, either that or you’re jealous that you’re not the apple of your brother’s eye anymore, Babe is,” he suggested smoothly.

“That’s not true,” she insisted. “Chas loves me, he always has, and he’d do anything I asked,” she continued, her face flaming.

“Except maybe walk away from the woman he loves,” Mark pointed out. “By the way, what’s Babe wearing now that she’s shed of this thing?” he asked giving a short, disgusted wave toward her car as they headed back to the reception hall at a brisk pace.

“Marla bought her a dress,” Candy sneered. “All the way from Paris,” she continued in a singsong voice, “and made by a famous designer she patronizes. Her Majesty outdid herself this time, most likely trying to one-up me again.”

"It's not hard to do," Jeb inserted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Candy demanded. Stopping to turn on him, she planted her hands on her hips.

"Well, you've done a dozen little things to sabotage this wedding, all quietly of course and behind the scenes. Marla was on to you from the first, she's good at spotting that sort of thing; it's right up her alley," he said with a chuckle. "Thankfully, she did everything she could to minimize the damage. In fact, I think you'll be quite surprised by the subtle changes she's made to your reception plans."

"How do you know all this?" she asked with a red-faced gasp.

"Crunch is pretty proud of her; he likes to brag," Mark replied with a grin, referring to Pete Benedict another good friend and a local deputy sheriff.

"Marla's a snake and always has been," Candy hissed.

"So one viper recognizes another?" Jeb asked coldly.

Candace didn't answer. She swiveled on her heels and rushed toward the hall.

Mark and Jeb followed slowly.

"Do you think we said too much?" Jeb asked.

"No, she had it coming and more. That little brat needs someone to rein her in. Chas has babied her since the day she was born and if he's not careful she'll be a constant interference in his marriage. I hope her antics today wake him up."

"You're not interested in her, are you?" Jeb asked curiously.

Mark snorted.

"Are you kidding? Whoever takes her on will most likely live to regret it. Oh, she's pretty enough, but she comes with too much drama and she's spoiled rotten. Besides, I wouldn't want to do anything to jeopardize my friendship with Chas."

"What could you possibly do that would affect your friendship?"

"I imagine if I gave that meddling little brat the spanking she deserves, Chas wouldn't take it too kindly."

“Why not? He spansks Babe when she needs it,” Jeb replied in surprise.

“Sisters and wives are two different breeds. While Chas has no problem taking Babe to task when necessary. He might not feel the same way about someone taking his sister in hand no matter how badly she deserves it. After all, to my knowledge, he’s never taken her over his knee even when she got into that huge mess in college and ended up getting expelled. It cost him a small fortune to keep her name out of the paper.

“No, I’m steering clear of that particular female. I’ve sort of got my eye on Josie from the diner,” he admitted. “She’s sweet.”

“And comes with a ready-made family,” Jeb pointed out. “Not to mention there’s an ex-husband floating around and she appears to be afraid of him. Are you sure you want to step into the middle of that mess?”

“No, I’m not sure, just keeping my options open. Come on, let’s go and toast Chas and his new bride,” Mark said opening the heavy glass door.

“Sounds good to me. Jeanine had to work so I’m on my own today. I plan to have one hell of a good time. I even got my beard trimmed for the occasion,” Jeb said with a wicked grin as he tugged on his full red beard. “Lead on McDuff.”

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BOTH MEN STOPPED and stared as they entered what locals viewed as a grand ballroom. The setting was stunning and Mark could only describe it as ‘elegant’ country. While waiters in jeans, plaid shirts and cowboy boots circled the room with trays of champagne, the tables were decked out in the finest linens and crystal. The bar consisted of highly glossed wooden planks on barrels, but they were draped with tulle and flowers. Bowls of popcorn, pretzels and nuts were strategically placed along its surface.

Not far away a draped table staffed by a uniformed server offered assorted canopies and various tidbits, delicacies to tempt the palates of the guests.

"Wow, some shindig," Jeb acknowledged as they reached the bar and ordered a beer.

"Yes," Mark agreed as he looked around the hall. "You can see Marla's influence everywhere. I don't know how she managed to make both themes come together. I'm surprised there's not a pig on a spit somewhere," he quipped.

"There is, out back," a soft voice replied. "They'll be carving it soon."

"Marla."

"Hello Mark, Jeb, how are you?" she asked, nodding at each man in turn.

"Fine, and still in one piece considering we just helped Candace stuff Babe's wedding gown into the trunk of her car. She was madder than hell," Mark said with a chuckle.

"Yes, that was an unfortunate choice for someone of Babe's stature, but as you can see she's looking lovely and seems to be enjoying her wedding now."

Mark's eyes searched the room and found Babe and Chas, holding hands and mingling with guests. She did indeed look beautiful.

Mark cleared his throat.

"Marla, I know we haven't always been on the best of terms, but you've done a wonderful job today. When Babe chose you for her maid of honor, I had my misgivings, but you've come through with flying colors. I shudder to think what might have unfolded here today if you hadn't given Candace the old hip shot to get her out of your way."

"Sometimes that's the only thing that works," Marla replied with a grin. "And I hope for Crunch's sake we can put any... unpleasantness behind us. You see, I love him," she stated honestly. She waited for their reply.

"I'm not one to hold a grudge," Jeb said bluntly. "If you make Crunch happy, that's good enough for me."

"Thank you," Marla said as she reached out to gently squeeze Jeb's forearm. "And you, Mark?" she asked, tilting her head up to look into his eyes. "Are you ready to let go of the past?"

He looked at her closely, thinking over his reply.

"Marla, you've always been one to get what you want, one way or another. In the beginning, I clearly understood what motivated you to go after Pete. You wanted to make Chas jealous. It didn't work, of course. He definitely loves Babe and there wasn't a damn thing you could do about it.

"Since then you've done an about-face and seem to be devoted to Pete. I hope he's not some kind of a rebound boyfriend."

"You don't trust me," she accused with a sigh.

"This," he admitted, waving his hand at their environment, "goes a long way to change that, but no, I don't trust you, not entirely anyway. I'm sorry, but it's going to take me more time."

"Fair enough," she answered, sticking out her hand to shake his. "We don't have to be best friends. As long as you don't try to come between Pete and me, or hurt our relationship in any way, I'm good with that. However, if you ever get it in your head to... well, never mind. This is not the time or the place. Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen."

She was gone as quickly and quietly as she'd appeared.

"Wow, a handshake and a threat all in one breath," Mark noted before taking a sip of his beer.

"You weren't exactly friendly," Jeb pointed out.

"No, I guess I wasn't," he admitted. "She just rubs me the wrong way, always has."

"And there's another of your, what do they call them, besties," Jeb teased with a laugh as he nodded toward Candace. "She seems to be making a beeline toward the happy couple and

they are having such a sweet time on the dance floor. Why don't you ward her off?" he suggested.

"I think I'll do just that," Mark replied, setting his glass on the bar.

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JEB WATCHED as Mark skirted the crowd, finally slipped between a small group of people and grasped Candy's hand, spinning her into his arms as they joined the couples on the dance floor. Jeb grinned. He would have loved to have been a small fly, buzzing around, listening to the conversation.

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CANDY'S FACE flamed and she struggled for a moment before realizing she didn't have a chance in hell of getting away from Mark without making a scene, and she was just mad enough to do it too until his hand slipped down her back and gently brushed her bottom in the crush.

"Where were you going in such a hurry?" he asked calmly.

"I need to talk to my brother. Not that it's any business of yours," she huffed.

"Leave him alone. Give him some time with his new bride," he advised.

Candy snorted.

"You're determined to make a fool out of yourself, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Think about it. Everyone in town knows you picked out that dress. Hell, Babe bragged about it for weeks, and about how sweet you were to help her with the wedding plans. Do you think people are stupid? You couldn't have picked a more unsuitable dress and you did it on purpose."

“How could they know that?” she asked with a sniff before puffing a hair off her forehead.

“You are always very well put together, so to speak. You have a natural sense of style and it couldn’t be an accident that it deserted you on this particular occasion. Even if Babe is unaware of your treachery, she’s probably the only one. Now try and behave yourself for the rest of the day, or...”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll take you somewhere private and give you the spanking you so richly deserve,” he promised glancing down into her eyes as he whirled her around the dance floor.

“You wouldn’t,” she whispered.

Then she felt his hand gently pat her bottom.

“I most certainly would, and I don’t mind telling you I’d personally enjoy every smack.”

She stiffened in his arms, looked around at the crowd of curious onlookers and sighed.

“Well, hell,” she said before forcing her body to relax in his arms. “You win this round, but don’t think you can speak to me like this whenever you feel like it. Currently, I’m trapped, but it won’t always be so,” she insisted tight-lipped.

“We’ll see,” Mark drawled before spinning her again.

Then he laughed. It was a deep, throaty sound that seemed to reverberate through her. She’d always viewed him as harmless, well-mannered, fairly attractive, moderately successful in his little business, but harmless. Mark was a bit of a nerd, her brother’s friend, and not worthy of much attention. It seemed she might have to revise her opinion. Apparently, when pushed, he could be unpredictable.