

Tessa's Wedding  
Adored Book 2

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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# Chapter I

Tessa's usual patience had completely deserted her, as she gave the offending equipment a good swift kick, which of course only resulted in a nicely-bruised toe - not the cooler's springing to life in terror. It was the week before Mother's Day, for crying out loud. Of all the times for her biggest refrigeration unit to conk out – and of course it was the one in which all of her most beautiful arrangements were on display for her customers to peruse and hopefully buy. Oh no. It couldn't possibly be the smaller – less expensive-to-replace, rattier one in the back that she'd been expecting to die at any time. Nope, it had to be the most expensive cooler in the store.

*Son of a bitch.* The repair guy had been there this morning already, and had supposedly fixed the blasted thing at an enormous cost to her budget - a cost that she really couldn't afford. Just before closing time it had begun to wheeze again, and a few minutes later had stopped dead. Of course the repair place wasn't open at this time of night. If she called someone, and she really didn't have a choice about it; she had to – she was going to have to call an all-night place from Boston, and that was going to cost her an even prettier penny. In the meantime she was going to have to cram all of the recent deliveries of fresh cut flowers into the three coolers she had left, which wasn't going to leave much room for the designs she'd been working on for Mother's Day.

She was of a mind to kick the thing again, but didn't fancy having to work with a broken toe, along with everything else that was going wrong today.

To top it all off, she was going to be home later than she'd told Sean, too, so she was going to have to make that call and hear the tone in his voice that she least desired - the one that meant that she was pushing his patience with her to the limit, and she was probably going to end up over his lap.

Not because he was an asshole who was jealous of her job - not in the least. Sean owned his own small business – an auto repair shop – and he knew what it was like to be a sole proprietor in an economic atmosphere like today's. What he'd be concerned about – not angry at all, but concerned – was that she tended to drive herself very hard, and not make any accommodation for the need to take care of herself – to take time off, occasionally, and pay attention to what her body needed, which was often times basic as a good full night's rest.

Sean did his best to take care of her, despite her own reluctance. She was certainly a helluva lot better off with him than she had been by herself. He made sure she ate three square meals a day – not just driving through a fast-food joint, or burgers from the diner across the road from her shop, which were also on the prohibited list - but real meals. He thoroughly enjoyed cooking, so he often sent her off to work with a sack lunch of leftovers from last night's supper, which was always heavy on the veggies, despite the fact that there weren't very many of them she favored.

He always made her eat a good breakfast every morning. He had been appalled at her eating habits when they'd moved in together, not more than a month ago, and during the process of getting her place ready to move had discovered her stash of brown sugar cinnamon frosted Pop Tarts, Cheetos, and Hershey's Kisses, and had thrown them all out while Tessa whimpered

audibly and stared mournfully at the trash can for a very long time afterwards.

It wasn't that he thought she was fat. She wasn't, and he didn't. Hell, he didn't care if she weighed three hundred pounds as long as she was eating well and felt well. But she wasn't doing either, and he knew that just tweaking her diet a bit – not drastically, because that would put her off, but just a bit here and there – would help her feel enormously better.

And Tessa would probably never admit it, but she did feel a lot better. She *would* admit to him – loudly and often enough that he had prohibited her from doing so within his hearing – that she felt very deprived, and missed all of her sugary treats. He would, occasionally, bring such things home to her, like a small slice of cheesecake from Helen's, or a small bag of Kisses.

Still, the eating and the sleeping and even the flower cooler weren't the biggest things that bothered her, really. It was the fact that, after he'd proposed on the day after Valentine's Day, just this past February, Sean had told her that he didn't intend a long engagement, and that he wanted her to pick a wedding date no later than this spring.

Tessa had balked at that suggestion – she knew it really wasn't one anyway – and tried to maneuver him around it, saying that perhaps they could delay until the fall, which was one of the slower times in her shop. He wasn't having any of that. He loved her, she loved him, and he wanted them to be married as soon as possible. He'd told her that she should be glad he had reconsidered the idea of eloping. Luckily for her, neither of their businesses would allow that.

Instead he'd fixated on this spring, and she had allowed that she might be able to throw together a wedding at the end of spring, so she settled on Saturday, June 16. It was bridal season, and a very busy time for her, but he had agreed that they could put the honeymoon off if she would take four days and go to New York City with him for a very short pre-honeymoon. He did still grumble occasionally about the date's being way too far in the future, but had acquiesced, and he wouldn't go back on his word. Tessa didn't know what his problem was, why he was so desperate for them to get married.

He couldn't be pregnant, could he? She wondered. No, he was much too macho for that.

She never did figure out a reason for the breakneck speed at which he wanted them to become man and wife. She knew he had been married before. She had heard that first from one of his employees, Red, who had wanted to feel her out a bit and see if she was really good enough for Sean, and she guessed she had passed the test. Sean had told her early on in their relationship that Sean had once been married, and that she had died, but he had been so overcome just by saying that much that she hadn't pushed him to talk any more about it. It was obvious that he had adored her. Tess had gleaned from what Red that Sean hadn't even so much as dated until she came along, and his wife had died ten long years ago.

Considering how sexually charged he was around her, Tess had to admit she was amazed at his restraint. She could barely get him to let her out of bed when they were together. It was hard to think that he went ten years without female companionship of any kind. Then maybe that was why he didn't want to let her out of bed . . .

Her reverie was rudely interrupted by the tinkle and buzz of her cell phone. It was Sean. She knew she should have called him first. She'd found that it always went better for her if she were pre-emptive about things she knew were probably going to get her into trouble.

"Hi, Honey," she said, slapping on a happy face and tone that, if he had been here, he would have seen didn't reach her eyes.

“Hello, my Angel.” That deep, dark-chocolate voice of his had her panties wet in an instant. “Why aren’t you here at home, so I can molest you and do sick and perverted things to your body?”

He was always so cheerfully unrepentant about constantly wanting her naked in his arms, writhing beneath him. It did wonders for her ego. Her last lover’s negativity had thoroughly undermined her confidence in her attractiveness.

Not so with Sean. He’d use the flimsiest of excuses just to hold or cuddle her.

Unfortunately, she hadn’t told him about the ongoing trials of the fridge, because she knew he’d want to jump in and play Daddy Warbucks and buy her a new one. His business was much older and more profitable overall than hers – after all, flowers were one of the first things people cut out of their budgets, but car repair was a necessary evil.

Accent on the evil, as far as Tess was concerned. Rubbing her bottom absently, she remembered that she’d already paid a heavy price for ignoring the mechanical condition of her car, and she didn’t intend to do that again any time soon.

She didn’t want him to buy her a new fridge. She wanted to take care of things herself. She had the phone number for the all-night repair shop, and despite the cost, she fully intended to exhaust all of the possibilities before she threw in the towel and had to buy another one. Not a new one, of course, but one that was new to her, anyway. “Buy used and save the difference” had always worked for her. She’d had this fridge since she’d opened the store, and it was ancient when she got it. It didn’t really owe her anything, but she’d sure sooner repair it than buy another one.

“I’ve got a mechanical problem to deal with before I can come home,” she admitted on a moan, wishing immediately that she could retract the sentence at the long pause before he responded.

“What kind of mechanical problem?”

“Nothing you can help with,” she stalled, beginning to talk much more rapidly so that he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. “I’m just about to call a repair place right now. Hopefully they’ll be able to come up, and I’ll be home soon. Love you. Bye!”

She disconnected the call, then shut phone off entirely and grabbed the store phone just as it started ringing; the caller I.D. number showed as his cell number. She waited until it went over to voicemail, then dialed the repair place.

To her immense surprise and relief, they were available, almost immediately, in fact, although the trip up from the greater Boston area was going to take them at least an hour. Of course there was a premium to have them come out at night, which she was more than willing to pay, hoping that it might save her from a larger expense.

Just in case, though, she busied herself with moving everything out of the big cooler and into the smaller ones, taking care not to bruise anybody – including herself – in the process.

She was so absorbed in her work that she didn’t even hear him come in.

“Need some help with those, Ma’am?” Sean asked, reaching to take the big vases full of roses out of her hands before she dropped them. “Where do you want them?”

Tessa motioned to the next largest cooler, which, along with the others, was getting packed.

“So what’s the problem?” He leaned his hip against the big center table where she did



most of her work, looking incredibly sexy. He was in a pair of jeans that were so old they had faded to a baby blue become quite soft, hugging every contour. He wore a gray T-shirt that clung to every thick, sexy muscle fiber in his broad shoulders.

Tess sighed loudly, trying not to let the fact that she loved to look at him distract her, and knowing that he wasn't going to leave without a thorough explanation. Hell, she was going to be lucky if she didn't end up leaving this room with a well-roasted bottom! She knew *that look* on his face all too well. He was *not* happy with her.

"It's my biggest fridge. It's on the fritz."

"Let me take a look at it."

Just then, there was a loud rap at the front door and Tessa went to let the repair guy in. This ought to be fun, she thought. Sean was going to be doubly unhappy at the idea that she had been planning to invite a strange man into the store after hours. He'd warned her about that early on in their relationship, and she knew he wouldn't have forgotten it.

Soon they were both down on the floor, looking at the bottom and back of the fridge, chatting together about what the problem might be and speaking in what might as well have been a foreign tongue to her. She chuckled to herself; she didn't speak repairman *or* mechanic.

It didn't take them very long before they both stood up, and she figured that couldn't mean anything good for her equipment.

"Its toast, ma'am. I'm sorry," the repair guy said, obviously reluctant to have to give her the bad news. "It would cost you a lot more to repair it than it would to buy a brand new unit."

Tessa shook hands with the man, wrote him a check for his efforts and showed him out, trudging unhappily back to where Sean had taken up his previous position leaning against the table. "Are we done here?"

She smiled at his almost prophetic choice of words. "Yeah, we are."

It was a quiet ride home. Unusually quiet. He wasn't necessarily that much of a talker, but Tessa usually was, but she seemed more than content to just stare out the window. Perhaps she sensed the fact that, the moment they got home, her bottom was, like the refrigerator, toast.

Then he saw her reach up to her cheek in the unmistakable motion of a woman wiping away tears, and he didn't hesitate, pulling well over onto the side of the road and gathering her into his arms. "What's the matter, Honey Bunch?"

Didn't he know that it was never a good idea to acknowledge that a woman was crying? And pulling her into your arms was just an invitation to an all-out flood, which was exactly what he got, with nearly full-on hysterics. He simply held her through it all, rocking them both gently, holding her very, very tight within his arms.

He was wonderfully patient with her about outbursts like this. He didn't act all awkward like most men did, as if he wasn't quite sure what to do with her, or get angry or even try to supply suggestions about the best way to deal with the problem. He just held her and stroked her back while she cried, letting her get it all out without interruption, letting her cry as long as she needed to, not in the least concerned that she was leaking vigorously onto his favorite shirt.

Someone had done a very, very good job with him, and she had told him essentially that one night while they were lying in each other's arms, bathed in the profound afterglow of their lovemaking.

"You're mother did a great job with you." She'd been thinking it for a while, but she

wanted to get it out.

Sean chuckled. “She did?”

“Yes. You’re not a Mama’s boy at all – you’re very independent, which is the way a guy should be. But you’re also very empathetic. You don’t fall apart when I cry, and Lord knows I cry a lot around you, for various reasons,” she added wryly. Much of the time she was in tears was because he was tanning her backside – but not all of them, to his credit. “You’re a good shoulder to cry on, and, unlike most men, you seem to be able to resist the urge to give advice when none is needed.”

“Yet you’re very dominant. That’s an interesting, downright irresistible mix of contrary characteristics.”

Sean tugged her closer against him. “Thank you, I think.”

“It was a definite compliment, Sean, and I meant it.”

“Thank you,” he repeated, sounding much more sincere about it. “Well, my Mom was a single mother – my Dad’s been out of the picture since before I was born. I guess I learned from her.”

When Sean felt that she was probably all cried-out, he kissed the top of her head and said, “Feeling better?”

She didn’t bother to say anything, but nodded from her position with her cheek against his chest. “What do you say we get home and snuggle together under the covers?”

Tessa nodded even more vehemently. There wasn’t another place on the Earth she’d rather be at this moment, than in the house they had bought together. He had surprised her by selling his own place, in order for them to find something they both liked. She would have been perfectly willing to move into his place, but he had seemed very eager to go looking, and as luck would have it, they found just the perfect little cottage at the mouth of the stream where they had both been living. They saw every day where the fresh water and the salt water combined in the tides, and both of them enjoyed seeing all the different wildlife that mixture attracted.

It was a good-sized three bedroom, with one of the spare rooms turned into an office, and the second left as a guest room. It wasn’t too big and wasn’t too small, with a nice-sized living room and screened-in deck that faced the water, as well as a roomy, gourmet-equipped kitchen for him.

He’d let her decorate any way she wanted, but she tried to keep his tastes in mind. Their bedroom was a bit frilly for him, but she’d tried to keep that tendency relatively toned down. It wasn’t all roses and floral, which was her bent, but she’d gone with a beautiful quilt in burgundy and royal blue on a cream background, with curtains that picked up the burgundy and a place in one corner for a chaise that echoed the blue in the quilt.

The furniture was a warm, gold oak, not too big and clunky, but leaning more towards delicate Queen Anne style, with a large bookcase-headboard, triple dresser and even a small vanity for her. He had insisted that there be a TV in the bedroom, so a large portion of one wall was occupied by a huge LCD TV, with the accompanying surround-sound system, so they could watch people get knocked off “Top Chef” in style.

Sean had her tucked under the covers in record time, but still managed to stay well under the speed limit, which drove her crazy. When he came to bed she vaulted into his arms, and he held her as she sniffled a bit more about her situation.

When she was just about to settle down into her usual “falling asleep” position, with her head on his chest, she looked up and said, “You left the lights on.”

“Yes,” he answered pointedly, “I did.”

Although she had been nearly asleep a second ago, she was now wide-awake. Sean’s leaving the lights on when they were supposed to be drifting off was not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

“Why?” she asked, trying to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

“Because we have a couple of things to discuss before we turn in.”

“But I don’t wanna discuss anything! I’m tired and I want to go to sleep!”

He chuckled at how contradictory she was being. Usually he couldn’t get her to bed, and now – because she sensed correctly that her butt was going to become very uncomfortable in a few minutes, that was all she wanted to do.

He hauled her up against him, cradling her in his arms. “Not until we’ve gotten a few things straightened out.”

Her exasperated sigh wasn’t winning her any points. “Look at me.”

She did as she was told. If there was anything she’d learned in the past few months, it was that that could be the difference between being able to sit down tomorrow or not being able to sit down comfortably until the end of the week. So Tessa dutifully looked him in the eye.

“Do you know what it is that I’m unhappy about?”

She had a good idea, but wasn’t quite sure whether it was best for her to admit it upfront, or try to play innocent as long as she could. “Ummmmm . . .”

“Tessa.”

Her lips pursed as she realized he wanted a confession. “Well, uh, you’re probably not too happy about me having a repair man in the shop after hours, when I’m alone.”

“Right. You should have called me and asked me to come up to be there with you.”

“But I was *going* to call you because I knew I was going to be late. You just beat me to it.”

He tucked his chin to his chest and looked at her through heavy, drawn-together brows. “Are you very sure that you want to claim any part of that phone call – which I will remind you had you stonewalling me and ended with you hanging up on me – as your saving grace, my dear?”

She had the grace to look guilty. “Um . . . well . . . no . . .”

He was just getting started. “And then, when I tried to call you back, I discovered to my surprise that you had turned off your cell phone.” Her eyes had skittered away from him to stare at an apparently fascinating thread in the quilt, until he lifted her head and forced her to look at him again. “Are you ever allowed to turn your cell off, or let the battery run down, or anything resembling that? Especially when you know that I’m likely to be calling you right back, since you’d just hung up on me?”

“Uh . . . ummmmm . . . no?” she answered with more hope than she felt.

“Are you allowed to ignore a call from me at all? As you well know, I did try the shop phone, but no one answered, when I knew you were right there. That – on top of the fact that I didn’t want you to be alone with the repair guy – is the reasons why I drove back there. I’m not about to let you get away with being so naughty, Tess, and you know me better than to think that

I would.”

She heaved a petulant sigh, which was probably not her best move, considering how much trouble she was already in. “But I didn’t want you to come. I wanted to handle it myself.”

Sean was busying himself getting ready to pull her over his lap. She knew the signs, unfortunately. He sat up and put a pillow – a small one reserved for that particular purpose – over his lap, then reached into his nightstand drawer.

That was where all the implements he used on her – minus his belt – lived.

Tessa shuddered. It was bad enough when he used his hand. But he’d recently introduced her to a hairbrush, a leather tawse, and a paddle. And she severely disliked every one of them.