

~ Three ~

The pad for the security system was located on the kitchen wall to the right of the backdoor. Sometimes I see numbers in reverse order, and I guess that's what happened when I checked the code Bob had given me and punched in the numbers. Instead of turning it off, deafening shrieks filled the room. I tried again, and got it right. Then everything was silent except for the ringing in my ears.

Considering the dilapidated condition of the exterior, we were surprised to see a bright, modern kitchen complete with a red four-burner stove and a red refrigerator. Okay, red did seem a bit weird, but everyone is entitled to their own taste. I figured the rest of the house would be upbeat like the kitchen. Boy, was I wrong!

From the kitchen we ventured into the parlor, a room that gave me the feeling of a 1920s movie set doing double-duty as the reception room for a whorehouse. Two worn red brocade sofas trimmed with heavy gold fringe faced each other. A swirl of dusty crystals dripped from an elaborate chandelier centered over a gold-leafed table positioned between the sofas. The garish table was embellished with intricate carved scrolls and shell designs. Paintings of nude women, flaunting their Rubenesque curves in extremely suggestive poses, added an air of dated sexuality to the room. The walls were swathed in deep ruby-toned wallpaper.

My gaze traveled to crisp white lace doilies atop dark mahogany side tables and crocheted scarves draped over the backs of a pair of forest green velvet chairs. Talk about a contrast. Those pieces easily could have been part of my 90 year-old Aunt Jean's living room.

"Well, if nothing else, it does have character," I said. "I can picture heavily made-up women in negligees perched on those sofas and chairs. Yeah, they're waiting for their Johns while the Madam fusses over them."

Sue's right arm swept the room in a graceful gesture. She did an exaggerated eyebrow lift and said in a provocative stage voice, "And which of these delectable damsels would you prefer, sir?" Then in her normal voice she said, "Didn't you say you met the people who own this house? What were they like, anyway?"

"I met them when Bob picked up the keys. The owner, Harry, might be pushing sixty, but his girlfriend Marla was so young and sexy, she could be a Las Vegas showgirl. About five-foot-ten with huge boobs, and she didn't appear to be much past twenty-five."

The dust tickled my nose and I stifled a sneeze. "I can see why you would ask, though. This place *is* a trip, isn't it?"

"Let's open some windows and get rid of this musty odor." Sue reached behind the green velvet draperies to unlatch a window. Fresh air poured into the living room. "Hey, what do you suppose the bedrooms are like?"

"I don't have a clue. Let's check them out."

We discovered the ever-present touch of red was evident in both bedrooms in the form of fluffy velvet comforters and pillows perched on high mahogany four poster beds. Neither bedroom had a closet, as is the case with many very old homes, but both had armoires with mirrored doors for hanging one's clothes. The windows were festooned in elaborate red brocade draperies and cornices. Fortunately, they appeared to be in better shape than the rest of the house, but I still had that feeling of being in a brothel.

I said, "Well, let's get settled. This might not be the delightful country cottage we imagined, but as long as we can tolerate all of this red and do some dusting, it's not that bad. Except, of course, for the jungle out front."

Sue ran her finger over the top of a nightstand and drew the shape of an 'S' in the dust. "I hereby claim this room as mine. What the hell. We can worry about dusting later. For now, let's rest up a little, then figure out what we're going to do next."

We deposited our suitcases in our respective bedrooms and headed back to the parlor. As a few rays of sun came through the window you could actually see dust dancing in the shards of light.

"You know, it doesn't look like the old couple who take care of this place do very much to keep it up. But then, who knows what kind of an arrangement Harry has with them."

Sue shrugged. "Obviously it doesn't include house-keeping or gardening."

"Hey, let's not be too critical. After all, this is an all expenses paid vacation, isn't it? Three great weeks to do anything we please. Bob said he would reimburse us if we stay at any hotels or spend more than he gave me in expense money." I circled the room in an exaggerated strut and put on an English accent. With a little edge to my voice, I said, "My *deah*, don't you think a few days in London at a nice hotel sounds perfectly brilliant? Bob can easily afford to treat us to that plus anything else we damn well decide to do."

“Hey, wait a minute. Did I hear a little note of hostility there? This may not be the Ritz, but he’s really been generous and I appreciate it. We shouldn’t take advantage of his kindness.”

I agonized over whether or not to say anything, but Sue is my best friend and through the years we’ve shared everything. I decided to let her know what was niggling at me about the trip.

“Well, I have a strange feeling there was more to his sending us off to England on a moment’s notice than an overwhelming desire to be generous. I can’t help wondering what he’s guilty about this time?”

“This time? What do you mean this time?”

I took a deep breath. “There’s something he can’t seem to get out of his system. You know this is the first real relationship he’s had in years and I’m sure he loves me, but he also loves being chased. That makes it hard for me. Women take one look at a handsome bachelor with scads of money and throw themselves at him. Sometimes he—well, I don’t think he always resists.”

“This is the first you’ve ever said anything. How can you be sure?”

“I saw a note from one of them. I pulled open one of the nightstand drawers to look for something, and a pink envelope was partially hidden by handkerchiefs. It was addressed to him in a feminine handwriting. I know I shouldn’t have opened it, but curiosity got the best of me. I read it and really wish I hadn’t. It’s been bothering me ever since. This woman gushed about what a pleasure it was to meet him and how she looked forward to seeing him again. There was even a picture enclosed. Pretty brunette in a very sexy pose.”

“No! You read his personal mail?”

“Unfortunately, yes, I did. I seethed for a few minutes, then decided to ask him about it.”

“How could you do that? You’d have to admit you read his mail.”

“Well, Bob leaves things laying around sometimes, so I said it was on top of the nightstand and I’d opened it because I thought it was from his niece.

And he bought it?”

“Yeah. I managed to pull it off as an innocent mistake. He was angry at first and said I shouldn’t have opened it regardless of who it was from, but he calmed down. He said he’d met her at a business meeting and she was in real estate. I guess he figured that would explain it since Bob is always watching for good investments. He claimed it was innocent, but I was sure it was a lie. The sexy photo was the giveaway.”

“Aud, it was just a photo. What if it didn’t mean anything?”

"Oh, it meant something, alright. That photo hardly looked like a real estate agent's bio shot."

What did you do then?"

"Well, I began to watch for other signs and realized that he probably did have a little fling now and then. I even thought about having one myself to get even, but never did. Anyway, I guess that's why I think he might have another reason for sending us on this trip."

"And I thought I knew everything about you. Please don't get upset with me, but I think you might be right about him having an ulterior motive."

My body stiffened, reflecting a little rush of anger as I waited for Sue to say more.

She tented her hands, flexed them and looked me straight in the eye. "A couple of weeks ago I was really feeling down and just wanted some company. I went to a restaurant on Beverly Drive for a glass of wine and some good food. Silly me. I thought being surrounded by people would make me feel better, and I only got more depressed. So there I was, feeling sorry for myself, when I realized the man's voice in the booth behind me sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. I probably shouldn't have eavesdropped, but this man and a woman with some kind of accent were speaking a little louder than they should have. I could hear it all."

"And this affects me because..."

"Oh hell! Because I just realized why the voice sounded so familiar. I'm afraid the voice belonged to Bob, and they weren't talking about the weather. Just before I got up to leave, he'd said something about clearing his schedule in the next few weeks so they could spend time together before she left Los Angeles. Um, her accent sounded sort of Scandinavian. He called her Bevica."

The flush started somewhere around my collarbone and pretty soon my whole face was on fire. I shouted, "Bevica!"

Sue looked at me in surprise. "You know her?"

"Not personally, but, I know of her. He told me she was a friend of his brother Donnie and his wife. He said Donnie asked if Bob could put her up for a few weeks as a favor since they don't have a guest room. You know how he caters to his brother. I pictured some aged woman who was going to be a pain in the ass and I was fine with it. I'm not fine with it now. I'm really pretty pissed."

"Oh, Aud, I'm so sorry. I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't be sorry. As far as I'm concerned, that cinches it. He offered to pay for everything we do, so Susie my friend, we're gonna have a ball and anything goes!"