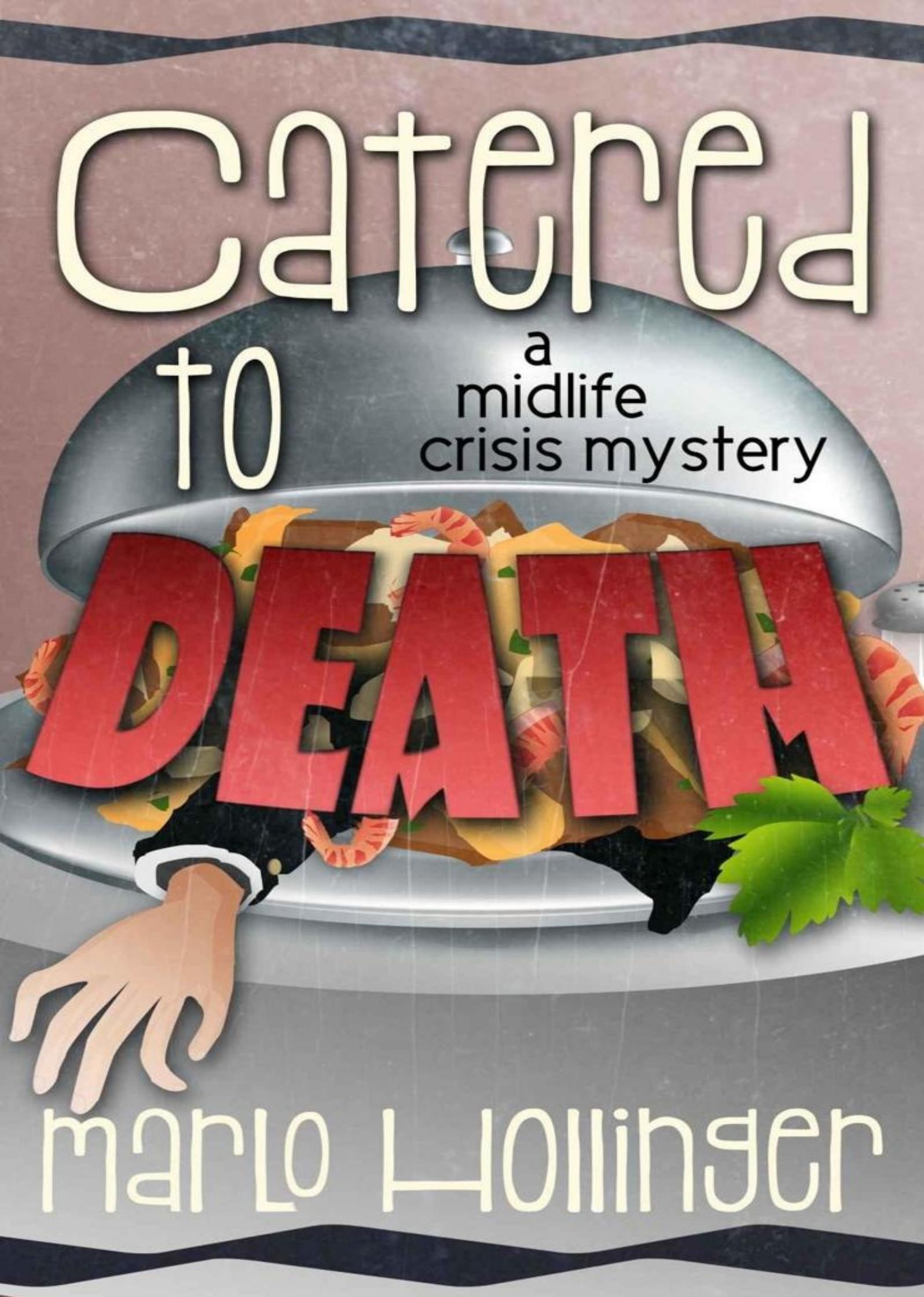


Catered

to

a
midlife
crisis mystery



DEATH

marlo hollinger

CATERED TO DEATH

A Midlife Crisis Mystery

by

Marlo Hollinger

To my husband Mark, who will always be my Steve Lawrence and I'll always be his Eydie Gorme.

Chapter One

There wasn't a hit of murder in the air that Friday afternoon. If anything, the entire outdoors had the cool, crisp scrubbed feeling that only days in mid-October seem to have, before all the leaves have fallen and after summer has started to fade into a treasured memory.

Murder was the very last thing on my mind when I put on my favorite red jacket, applied one last dab of Blushing Berry lipstick and smiled just a wee bit nervously at my reflection in the small mirror that hangs in the front hallway of the brick bungalow I share with the love of my life, my husband Steve. For several long seconds, I squinted at the woman looking back at me before deciding that I looked all right. Not stunning but I'd left stunning behind a few years back so I was more than OK with all right. One of the biggest blessings of hitting middle age, in my opinion anyway, is no longer being quite so obsessed with the size of my thighs or the way my bangs made me look as I'd once been. I've heard that with age comes wisdom but I also think that with age comes a healthy wallop of reality.

I was a semi-bundle of nerves that afternoon because in about two minutes it was going to be time to leave for Eden Academy, the site of the inaugural catering job of my brand new business, Classy Catering, and my first step toward a new career, a new lease on life and hopefully-maybe-please-God-please a touch of financial breathing room before retirement reared its ugly head and I'd be too old to do anything but sit on the front porch in a rocking chair trying to remember the names of the celebrities in the *National Enquirer*.

Feeling like I was floating, I locked the front door and headed for my mini-van that I'd already loaded with supplies. *First thing on my list once I make some real money: buy a new car.* The van served me well back when Jane and Tyler needed to be carted from activity to activity but now it just seemed as big and as bulky as those shoulder pads that Joan Collins used to wear on *Dynasty*. I wanted to drive something fun and cute but with a lot of trunk room. Most of all, I wanted to drive something new because I felt like I was starting a new chapter in my life. A brand new, wonderful chapter that was going to read like a best-seller.

Being my own boss already felt so much better than working at the book store at the mall with all those pretentious intellectuals who talked about Faulkner in the break room and looked down on me because I preferred mysteries, or my playground supervisor job where I'd frozen to death from ten until noon every day helping kindergarteners get their boots on and off, or the nightmarish direct sales position I'd attempted before that, the one where I tried to sell free trade candles to every neighbor and relative in our phone book. It had taken all of one party for me to realize that Willie Loman had nothing to worry about from me when it came to selling.

"DeeDee!" Helen Sirott, our next door neighbor, called to me from her porch just as I was getting into the van. "Where are you going?"

"I've got a catering job!" I called back. "My very first one!"

Helen looked surprised. "Already? You just started your business a week ago."

"Isn't it wonderful?" I asked. "I never thought it would happen so fast. It must be the flyers I put up everywhere."

"Where is it?" Helen asked.

“Eden Academy.”

Helen made a face like she'd just smelled a skunk in her petunia bed. “You're cooking for those snobs? I hope you came up with a fancy-pants menu. Those people think they're better than everyone else in town.”

“I'll cook for anyone as long as they hire me,” I responded, meaning it. I knew that Eden Academy had a reputation for being elitist and I'd heard a few horror tales about how rude and snooty the staff could be. But that didn't scare me. Well, not too much. The fact that a school as prestigious as Eden Academy would hire me, DeeDee Pearson, former stay-at-home mom and brand new caterer, was extremely flattering. I didn't care if they were such snobs that they made Queen Elizabeth look as warm and fuzzy as Big Bird. They could have had any caterer in the whole town of Kemper and they'd called *me*. “I'll drop off some of the leftovers later tonight,” I promised Helen.

“Thanks, DeeDee! Good luck!”

Waving good-bye to Helen, I carefully backed out of the driveway and headed for Eden Academy. Anticipation filled me as I drove through the quiet streets toward the private school. This was how Rachael Ray and Martha Stewart had to feel every single day. This was how it felt to be in charge of my existence completely. For the first in a long time, I had the thrill of being at one with the universe.

At a stop light, I glanced down at the outfit I'd chosen to wear that afternoon. I wanted to look professional but also needed something that I could feel comfortable in so I settled on a navy blue cashmere cardigan over a clean white T-shirt and freshly washed and pressed blue jeans plus brand new sneakers. The sneakers seemed a touch casual but my feet have been killing me lately. Besides, I knew I'd never be able to set everything up, dish out the food and then do the cleaning afterwards in heels.

Before he left for work, Steve had assured me that I looked not only professional but gorgeous to boot. “Have fun and knock 'em dead,” Steve instructed after kissing me.

“I don't know if that's what you're supposed to tell a caterer,” I told him with a laugh.

“Break a leg?”

“That's for actors.”

“Then how about have fun and I'll see you tonight. I can't wait to hear how it goes.”

Steve has to be the best husband ever, I thought as I pulled into the Eden Academy parking lot. He's always supported me in whatever I wanted to do, always made me feel like the choices I made were the right ones and always made me feel loved. When it would have killed me to leave the kids in daycare, Steve encouraged me to stay home with them until I got over my separation anxiety. When I was finally ready to go back to work, Steve was my rock, no matter what kind of crappy job situation I found myself in—and there had been plenty of those over the years. That's why I started Classy Catering. More than anything, I want to be able to contribute to our retirement fund more than I have in the past so that maybe we can both quit the rat race when we turn sixty-five and enjoy whatever time we have left together, ideally in a little house on a big lake where the kids and grandkids can visit us. This job at Eden Academy was the first step in making my plan happen.

After parking near the school's back door, I turned off the ignition and tried to make my hands stop shaking. My nerves were pulled as tautly as strings on a banjo and I

knew that I really needed to calm down before I unloaded the van because I sure didn't want to drop my seafood casserole all over the asphalt pavement.

"I can do this," I said loudly. "This is what I want to do and I can do this."

Feeling better, I drew a deep breath and looked out the car window at the school as I slowly exhaled. I had been there years before, back when it was in a transitional period between its former tenant, a Catholic grade school, and Eden Academy. It had been an arts center then and I'd taken a class on glazing. I remembered that the school had been dark and gloomy on the inside with stained glass windows at the end of every hallway that looked beautiful but let in very little light.

Looking out at the imposing building, I was glad that I'd brought along the sterling silver flatware that my grandmother left me. It wouldn't have done at all to serve the staff at Eden Academy with cheap plastic forks from the Everything's a Buck Store that had too short tines that would most likely break the moment they hit my seafood casserole. I was up until two in the morning polishing the silver but the end result had been worth it. The old pieces had the gleam of good taste that I hoped my very first clients would quickly associate with Classy Catering.

I pulled the key out of the ignition, a flutter of apprehension washing over me like a light spring rain. Truth be told, I was a little worried about that seafood casserole and I was also afraid that the brownies I'd made for dessert might be a tad dry, but everything else had turned out perfectly. Now if only the teachers agreed with me.

Climbing out of the van, I smoothed some strands of hair off my face before I began unloading, willing myself to remember that I was a grown up woman and didn't need to be intimidated by anyone, not even the people who worked at Eden Academy. For a second, I wished I had a partner with me. It wouldn't be nearly so daunting to walk in and start setting up for lunch if I wasn't alone. Maybe when the business got rolling I'd be able to hire someone to help. Maybe even Tyler. Of course, he'd have to take out his lip ring and I'd insist on long sleeve shirts so no one could see the band tattoos on his arms but it might be a nice way to get him interested in my new business and also in working for a living. After all, Paula Deen's sons helped her out and just look how successful they'd become.

After taking all the cartons and containers that I dared to lift in one trip out of the van, I slowly walked to the back door of Eden Academy. By holding the boxes in with my left arm and pressing down on them with my chin so they wouldn't fall, I managed to try the door handle with my right hand. It turned a quarter of the way and then stopped. I tried it again but it still wouldn't budge. Quickly, I reviewed the instructions Claudine Markham, the woman from Eden Academy who had hired me, had given me over the telephone.

Use the back door off the parking lot. Don't park in the first slot even if it's empty because that's reserved for our director. Be at the school by 12:15. Please don't be late. We are very big on punctuality at Eden Academy.

Claudine Markham had an accent that wasn't quite British but had a definite foreign flair that made her sound both imperious and scary. After thanking her for the job, I assured her that I wouldn't be late, that I'd park where I was supposed to and that I'd use the proper door. I even used that word—"proper"—a word I seldom use in my everyday life. There was something about Claudine that made me want to sound posh too. But now, as I looked around the parking lot, I felt a little helpless and slightly

impatient. If Miss Punctuality Claudine Markham had told me to use the back door, then she should have made sure that it would be open when I got to the school so that I, and all my canapés, wouldn't be late.

"Need some help?"

I turned toward the sound of a male voice. A short man wearing a blue down vest, a maroon sweater, a black beret and saggy grey pants grinned at me from a few feet away. He was totally bald in a shiny Mr. Clean way and was apparently making up for the lack of hair on the top of his head by growing it in abundance on his face because in addition to a long, flowing beard he also had the biggest moustache I'd ever seen other than on a walrus. At that moment though, I didn't care if he was in fact a talking walrus. Maybe he could get the back door open. "Oh, yes, I sure could use some help," I said gratefully. "I'm DeeDee Pearson and I'm here to cater lunch today."

The man stepped forward quickly. "Let me get the door for you and then I can take some of those containers if you'd like."

"That would be great," I told him as I wondered just where'd he'd come from. I hadn't seen him when I parked the van. He had sort of appeared in the parking lot, like a genie or an optical illusion. "Do you work here?"

"Sure do. I'm Jack Mulholland. I teach art at Eden Academy or as I've been told to put it by the powers that be, I'm the 'artist in residence.'"

Jack leaned past me to unlock the door. As he bent over, I got a faint whiff of marijuana emanating from Jack's down vest, a smell I recalled from long ago rock concerts and also an odor I occasionally detected coming from my son Tyler's room. That didn't bode well—a teacher who smelled like pot. I forced myself to turn the judgmental switch in my brain to the off position. Jack had just told me that he taught art. Everyone knew that artists always have and always will walk on the wild side. Still—on the school grounds?

It's none of my business. I stopped sniffing the air and waited until Jack got the door open. I didn't care if Jack smelled like the interior of a sold-out stadium during an Eagles reunion concert. Once he had the door unlocked, Jack turned around and reached out for a stack of containers. I handed them over to him with a smile. "Thank you so much."

"No problem. I live to serve attractive women." Jack winked at me from behind tinted round glasses. It had been a long time since anyone other than Steve had winked at me. No one had ever winked at me in the bookstore or on the playground.

We walked into a poorly lit hallway and I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. The school was still as gloomy as it had been when it was an arts center and the stained glass windows were still at the end of the hallway. "Claudine told me that the lunch would be served in the faculty lounge. Would you mind showing me where that is?"

Jack snorted and laughed at the same time. "'The faculty lounge,'" he repeated. "Claudine would call that dump 'the faculty lounge.' It sounds like some place with a roaring fire where you'd be served high tea, doesn't it? I swear, that broad thinks she's teaching at Oxford. It must be a major let down for her to haul her royal ass out of bed and come to work with us peons every morning."

I felt my eyebrows go up toward my hairline as I tried to think of an appropriate response but couldn't come up with anything other than a weak "Oh?"

Jack must have caught the surprised look on my face. “Don’t mind me. I’m well aware of the fact that it isn’t very nice to trash a colleague to a relative stranger—even a good looking relative stranger like you—but I can’t help myself when it comes to Claudine. The two of us have a love/hate relationship. I love her and she hates me.” He laughed loudly.

“I see,” I responded because I had to say something, although I didn’t really see at all because it didn’t sound like Jack Mulholland liked Claudine in the least, much less loved her.

“No, I doubt you do but that’s OK. Just be glad that you’re only here for lunch and feel sorry for the rest of us who are stuck with Queen Claudine and her creep of a king all day long. The ‘lounge’ is at the top of the stairs. Follow me.” Jack began climbing the steps, breathing heavily as we moved upwards on a staircase that seemed more like a very steep ladder. “What are you serving today? Rocks? These things weigh a ton.”

“Oh, a lot of different things,” I said, feeling somewhat breathless myself as I followed Jack up the steps. Glancing around, I noted that Eden Academy was looking a little down on its heels. The terrazzo floor looked as if it hadn’t been mopped in ages and there were marks and fingerprints on walls that were painted a depressing shade of slate grey and little piles of dust in the corners of each step. But in spite of the rundown feeling, the school had still retained its basic good bone structure, like a high fashion model who had gotten a bit beat-up looking with the passage of time but had held onto a remnant of her beauty. “What a great old building,” I remarked as we neared the first floor. “Steve would love to see this.”

“Steve?” Jack asked.

“My husband. He’s an architect buff.”

Jack stopped. “Your husband’s name is Steve and your name is Dee Dee? Like Steve and Eydie?”

“Yes.” Ever since we started dating, people have taken great joy in pointing out how close Steve’s and my name are to the famous singing couple of the 1960s. I didn’t mind. I think Steve Lawrence is adorable and I love Eydie Gorme. Besides, I’d much rather be compared to Steve and Eydie than, say, Bonnie and Clyde.

“That’s priceless. Maybe you’ll sing for us after you serve the food. Steve and DeeDee. Now I’ve heard everything.” Jack started climbing up the steps again. “Why are you catering lunch today, Dee Dee?” he questioned. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but it isn’t often that we get a catered meal around here.”

“I was told that the lunch is in honor of the teacher who’s retiring. I’m afraid I didn’t get a name.”

We had reached the lounge. Opening the door with an old-fashioned skeleton key that he removed from a thick gold chain hanging around his neck, Jack frowned. “The only one who’s old enough to retire around here is Junebug but I hadn’t heard that she’d finally decided to call it a day. So Claudine is actually springing for a lunch for the old bag? Well, why not? We all know she’s happy to see her go.”

“Um, why is that?” I ventured.

“Most of us are smart enough to let Claudine think she’s the world’s foremost expert on everything from the mating habits of anteaters to how to make the perfect Sex on the Beach but not Junebug. Junebug never quite figured out that if you want to be left alone at Eden Academy, let Claudine think she’s our answer to Mensa, which I

kind of suppose she is. She is smart—just not as smart as she thinks she is. No one’s that smart.”

“Junebug. What an unusual name,” I said.

“It’s a nickname,” Jack explained as he set the containers down. “She told me about it once. Her real name is Hazel or Myrtle or something like that but apparently her parents called her Junebug because she jumped around so much as a kid. Still does. Probably a classic ADHD case but they didn’t have labels like that back when Junebug was growing up.” Jack smirked. “I don’t know if they had electricity back in those days.”

I set the containers I was holding down on the square table that filled the center area of the staff lounge. “Thank you for your help,” I said to Jack.

“Want me to unload the rest of your van? I’m free right now.”

I accepted his offer immediately. “That would be great! Would you mind?” If Jack finished getting the food and supplies, I could start setting up the room.”

“I wouldn’t offer if I minded,” Jack told me. “I’ll be back in a flash. If the rest of your food smells as good as the boxes I carried in for you now, this lunch is going to be fantastic.”

After he was gone, I shrugged off my coat and placed it in a corner. Then I pushed up the sleeves of my cardigan and took a long look around the room. Like the hallways outside, the faculty lounge at Eden Academy had a neglected, dusty look to it. The floor obviously hadn’t been swept in awhile and the garbage can next to the door was perilously close to overflowing. Along one wall, a row of windows in dire need of washing overlooked the town square and on the opposite wall was a whiteboard filled with a list of names written and followed by what looked like chores that needed to be completed.

I poked around in a closet and found a broom and some trash bags along with a can of furniture polish and a clean rag. Five minutes later, the room looked and smelled much better and I could start setting the table. First, I spread the white embroidered tablecloth I’d brought with me over the freshly polished table and set a vase of sprays of berries in the center as a centerpiece. I decided that I’d put the food out on a side table under the row of windows.

My nerves were settling down. This wasn’t hard. As a matter of fact, it was quite enjoyable. I’m a thoroughly domestic creature who loves to cook and entertain. I also like to clean and decorate so as a caterer I was getting to do everything I enjoyed and best of all I was going to get paid for it.

“Man, you’ve already done a number in here.” Jack Mulholland returned with the rest of the containers from the van. “It looks great!”

“Thank you. It does look nice, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll say. As you might have noticed, keeping things nice and tidy isn’t too high on anyone’s priority list around here. I wish we could put you on the staff full-time.”

Oh, yes. This was way better than working at the book store where compliments came about as often as blizzards in July. “Thanks again.”

“What time are we eating?”

“One o’clock.”

Jack raised his arm and looked at a watch anchored to his wrist with an enormous leather band that was straight out of 1972. “Great. Just half an hour to go. I’m

starving.” He turned to go but I stopped him with one more question before he got out the door.

“Do you know where I could find Claudine? I should probably check in with her since she’s the one who hired me.”

Jack gave a fake shudder from the doorway, a move that made his well padded midsection shimmy like a gigantic bowl of Jell-O. “Don’t say her name when I’m not wearing a string of garlic around my neck. I let you get away with it before but twice in ten minutes is too much for me.”

I laughed a little uneasily. I assumed Jack was kidding but it was hard to tell. “Do you know where she is?”

“Check the freezer. She’s probably taking a nap in the icemaker. If she’s not there, check the workroom in the basement. She might be sharpening her fangs with one of the files we keep down there.”

I tried to smile. “You’re scaring me.” He was, too. Claudine had sounded frightening over the phone and the image Jack was painting of her was pretty close to what I’d pictured during our conversation.

“And rightly so,” Jack replied. “That one’s got an icicle inside of her where her heart’s supposed to be—like the Grinch. Just pretend you like her so she pays you. She’s been known to hold a grudge if she senses that people aren’t giving her the homage she thinks is her due.” Chuckling to himself, Jack backed out of the room. “I’ll see you at one, pretty lady. Until we meet again.”

Jack vanished, leaving me alone and unnerved. I hoped he was teasing about Claudine but he didn’t seem to be. Well, even if she was as scary as Count Dracula, it didn’t really matter to me. I had a job to do. I began to set the table. As I worked, I kept looking toward the doorway, expecting Claudine to come in and say hello at any moment. Claudine was most likely a very proper older woman who was used to having things done the way she wanted them done. That was also probably what irritated Jack Mulholland so much. The man practically had *free spirit* all but tattooed across his forehead. But as the clock continued to tick and Claudine didn’t appear, I began questioning myself. Had I showed up on the right day? Jack hadn’t known about the lunch. Maybe I’d gotten the time or the date wrong. And if I did, how on earth were Steve and I ever going to be able to finish two enormous seafood casseroles before they went bad?

I refused to psyche myself out. Claudine had said Friday the eighth and that was today. I carefully folded the white damask napkins that had been a wedding present and put one at each place setting, glancing repeatedly toward the door but it remained empty. After I set the last napkin in place, I walked over to one of my coolers to get the herb butter so it would have time to soften up before the lunch. Everything was going perfectly except for the fact that no one seemed to know or care that I was at the school.

“How’s it going?” a low voice suddenly asked from the doorway, making me jump a good six inches into the air and almost causing me to drop the herb butter on top of my brand new right sneaker.

Chapter Two

“My goodness, you startled me.” I put a hand to my chest and tried not to look like I was going to pass out. An extremely attractive man stood in front of me, his arms crossed across his chest as he leaned against the frame of the door. He was dressed in khaki slacks and a light blue V-neck cashmere sweater with the sleeves pushed up. He was wearing the sweater alone without a shirt or T-shirt under it, a look that was both sophisticated and oddly macho on him. He had piercing green-blue eyes, a head of thick silver hair and a slim athletic build with very broad shoulders. I guessed that he was a few years older than me, somewhere in his middle fifties. It was easy to see that in his prime this man had been very good looking in a Burt Reynolds, lady killer kind of way. He was still quite handsome and looked nothing at all like any teacher I had ever had when I was in high school. All the male teachers I’d had were paunchy and constantly harassed looking. This man looked like he wouldn’t know the meaning of harassed.

“Sorry I scared you,” he said but his eyes told me that, on the contrary, he wasn’t sorry in the least. If anything, my jumping up into the air when he said ‘hello’ had amused him quite a bit.

“That’s all right. It’s good for my heart to have a shock every so often. I’m DeeDee Pearson. I’m the caterer.”

The man straightened up and stepped forward into the faculty lounge with one hand extended, fingers spread in an open, friendly style that reminded me of someone running for public office. “Frank Ubermann. Director of Eden Academy.”

So he wasn’t a teacher; he was the boss. “I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Ubermann.”

“Frank, please. And I’ll call you DeeDee, if that’s all right. Such a cute name. It suits you.” Frank Ubermann’s blue-green eyes twinkled at me and I felt my cheeks turn red.

“Thank you. It’s short for Denise.”

“I like DeeDee better. I’ve heard through the grapevine that you’re going to be serving up a gourmet meal for all of us today.”

“That’s my goal,” I told him. I was about to add that I was a little nervous because this was my very first catering job but I caught myself in the nick of time. There was no point in advertising that I was a newbie. As a matter of fact, I’d way prefer it if Frank and the rest of the staff saw me as an old hand in the catering game. After all, no one wants to eat a meal prepared by somebody who’s still wet behind the ears.

“So you’re here to give Junebug a fitting send off?” Frank’s voice was deep and velvety, like a late night disc jockey’s.

“Yes, I understand that she’s retiring.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Frank said dryly.

I looked at the food I had spread out. “It’s too late now but I suppose I should have brought a cake for dessert since this is a retirement party but I made triple chocolate brownies instead.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it. Junebug will be grateful that we’re doing anything for her. We really aren’t too big on celebrating at Eden Academy. Christmas, Valentine’s, Easter—I’m not a fan of any holidays.”

Wow. How could anyone not be a fan of Christmas? To each his own, I supposed.

“How long has Junebug been teaching?” I politely asked.

“At Eden Academy for about ten years. Before that, who knows? She’s one of those ageless types.” Frank dropped his voice so that it was even lower. I had to lean over to hear what he was saying. “Between you, me and those brownies you just mentioned, it’s about time she hit the dusty trail, if you know what I mean.” He tapped a silver temple. “Not fully loaded anymore. Sad, really.”

“That is sad,” I agreed.

“I hope that when my time comes, I’ll have the good sense—not to mention the good taste—to leave gracefully. Personally I can’t wait to retire.”

“It does sound nice—provided you can afford to.”

“Money is always the kicker, isn’t it? Have you been catering for a long time? I’ve never heard of your company before.”

“Actually,” I began a little reluctantly. I have an annoyingly wide honest streak so I was about to tell Frank that he was my very first customer but before I could get started we were interrupted by the arrival of a tall, thin redhead entering the lounge.

“I see you found us.” The redhead nodded coolly at Frank as she walked toward me. “I’m Claudine Markham. You must be the caterer.”

“Yes. I’m DeeDee Pearson.” I tried not to stare but Claudine Markham didn’t look at all like what I had expected. Instead of the prim and proper school marm type that she sounded like over the telephone, Claudine was dressed quite seductively. She had on black leggings and a long, low cut black sweater that was so tight that it could have easily passed for a skin rash. What appeared to be five thousand thin gold bracelets covered her spindly arms and the black boots she was wearing had the highest, skinniest heels I’d ever seen. Her makeup was heavy and her hair was thick and curly like someone who sang backup in a metal band. As she came closer to me, I couldn’t help but shiver. It felt like a draft had entered the room along with Claudine and I remember what Jack Mulholland had said about Claudine having an icicle where her heart should be. “It’s nice to meet you,” I told her.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you too. I’m very pleased that you were able to help us out on such short notice. Junebug’s retirement announcement came as something of a surprise to all of us and I wasn’t sure if we’d be able to do anything for the dear woman.” Behind her, Frank coughed softly. Claudine ignored him. “Let me fill you in on the agenda. We plan on having a brief ceremony for Junebug where we’ll give her a token gift. Then we’ll eat. I imagine we should be ready to eat by one-fifteen if that works for you.”

“That works perfectly for me,” I said. “I planned a meal that doesn’t have to be served promptly at one just in case there were any late arrivals.”

“What ‘token gift’?” Frank asked. “We’re paying for a catered meal for Junebug. You didn’t say anything about buying the old bat something too. I want to make it clear right now that I’m not kicking in for it.”

Claudine looked pained. “Frank, it’s customary to give long-time employees some kind of going away present. In the old days it was usually a gold watch. I assure you that I haven’t been nearly that extravagant.”

“Those ‘old days’ happened when the economy was rolling and people had money to spare on sentiment. Claudine, you’re on the finance committee. You know how strapped we are for money right now.”

Claudine spoke through gritted teeth. “We didn’t get her a new car, Frank. Our gift to Junebug is quite small. Tasteful, but small. And not expensive.”

I wanted to disappear but since that wasn’t an option, I began refolding the napkins I’d already folded although it didn’t really matter what I was doing since neither Frank nor Claudine seemed to remember that I was in the same room as them.

“What’s your idea of ‘not expensive’?” Frank demanded. “Under fifty bucks?”

“Under ten,” Claudine said between gritted teeth. “As a matter of fact, it hardly cost us a thing. I found something perfectly lovely at the Hospital Volunteers’ Thrift Shop. Junebug will never know where it came from and I know she’ll adore it.”

“She won’t even remember you gave her *anything* tomorrow morning. I really wish you’d knock all this la de da crap off. You’re the only one who cares about it, Claudine, and we both know it’s just all for show.”

Claudine turned to me. “What do you think, DeeDee? Aren’t presents customary at retirement parties?”

“Yes, usually,” I said.

“See?” Claudine asked triumphantly. “I bet DeeDee’s been to hundreds of retirement parties so she knows what she’s talking about.”

Since I had attended many retirement parties—although not catered them—I didn’t correct Claudine. Besides, she was right; presents to the retiree were customary. It was hard to believe that someone as seemingly sophisticated as Frank Ubermann didn’t know that.

“Well, *I* think it’s stupid!” Frank said in an annoyed tone of voice.

“And *I* think it’s in good form!” Claudine snapped back.

Frank looked disgusted. “What is wrong with you? You’ve been itching to get rid of Junebug for years and now you’re acting like we’re having a send off for your own mother to San Quentin.”

“Frank, there’s no need to use that tone with me,” Claudine said sharply. “I’m not your secretary, remember. I have a master’s degree—”

“Spare me your resume. Everyone in the entire town of Kemper knows that you have a master’s degree. My *dog* knows that you have a master’s degree! And I’m not using any ‘tone’ with you. I’m simply trying to point out that you’re blowing things out of proportion, as usual.”

“I am *not* blowing anything out of proportion,” Claudine said, her own voice getting louder in response to Frank’s. Glancing in my direction, she caught herself. “Really, Frank, squabbling like children in front of the help. What’s DeeDee going to think of us?”

“If she has any sense at all, she’ll think I’m right and you’re an idiot.”

Claudine didn’t seem insulted, which impressed me. “Oh, Frank. How you run on. Now let’s leave DeeDee alone so she can finish getting set up,” Claudine said. “I have some school matters to discuss with you. I’m sure Dee will excuse us.”

“Of course,” I quickly assured her. I couldn’t wait for the two of them to leave.

“Now? It’s almost time to eat and I’m starving.”

“Now,” Claudine intoned. “These are things that can’t be put off, as much as you might want to. Someone has to make sure things are running smoothly at Eden Academy and once again, it looks as if the ball has landed in my court.”

“What are you talking about? I’m the one who keeps this boat afloat and we all

know it.”

Claudine sighed deeply. “I’d say we’re both responsible for running Eden Academy. Now will you please come with me, Frank? These are matters that simply will not wait.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Frank roll his eyes toward the ceiling and then pull them back down to glare at Claudine. “Will you excuse us, DeeDee?” Frank asked. “Is there anything you need?”

“I’m fine,” I told him. I smiled politely at both of them and watched with a huge sense of relief as they made their way for the door. Claudine walked out of the room first with Frank close behind her. They were almost gone when I saw Frank’s hand graze Claudine’s backside in a familiar manner, cupping her bottom with a quick, intimate move that seemed quite practiced. I continued to watch, half expecting someone as seemingly hostile as Claudine to either turn around and bite him or start beating him over the head with her gold bracelets. But Claudine didn’t seem to respond to Frank’s touch at all other than to put the slightest hint of a wiggle into her walk and I could have sworn she arched her fanny upwards so that he could get a better feel.

A second later, Claudine and Frank vanished from sight, their voices low and hushed as they walked down the hallway.

I was confused. The two of them had been grousing at each other like a pair of grumpy old men and yet Frank seemed to know his way around Claudine’s legging-covered fanny quite well. It didn’t make sense. Had they just been acting like they didn’t like each other in front of me, their audience? Why would either of them care what the caterer thought? I had the strong feeling that I wouldn’t want to work at Eden Academy full-time. The school’s employees were a little strange.

I went back to my preparations, reminding myself that so far I’d only met three of the people who worked at the school. Surely some of the employees at Eden Academy had to be pleasant and normal.

Time would quickly prove me wrong on that one.

“Seafood casserole! How marvelous! I could smell it all the way from my office down the hall! It smelled exactly like the waterfront when there’s a dead fish rotting in the sun.”

I looked up from the salad I was tossing. A plump woman with shiny platinum hair entered the faculty lounge. Like Claudine, she had on very high heels along with a bright neon green wrap dress that didn’t quite close over her large breasts. She was what my mother would have called ‘flashy’ and what Steve’s mother would have termed ‘trampy.’

“I adore seafood casserole,” the blonde announced. “Everyone says I make it better than anyone.” She looked at me as if she expected an argument.

“I’ll have to get your recipe,” I said. “I’m always on the look out for new recipes.”

The blonde shook her head. “Sorry, but it’s an old family secret. The Webbers never give out recipes and we never sleep with anyone on the first date.” Seeing what I’m sure was a shocked expression on my face, the blonde laughed loudly. “Just joking, sweetie. Of course I’ve slept with people on the first date. I’m Monica Webber.”

“DeeDee Pearson. It’s nice to meet you, Monica.”

“I’ve never met anyone actually named DeeDee before. It’s so quaint, so old-

fashioned. I love those mid-century names like Debbie and Linda and Sharon. So 1950s.”

“It’s short for Denise. Denise Deborah, actually.”

“How alliterative of your mother,” Monica replied. She peered at me closely. “Do you know what ‘alliterative’ means, sweetie?”

“Yes—”

Monica ignored me. “It’s when two words start with the same letter. Like ‘Robert Redford’ and ‘black beauty,’” she explained in a slow, patient tone of voice that instantly made me want to dump the salad on top of her platinum head. “I know I’m just an administrative assistant but I feel it’s my mission—no, it’s my *duty* to educate everyone I meet. We *are* a school and we should take education seriously. At least, that’s how I feel.” She sniffed. “Although I know not everyone employed here feels the same way.”

“How noble of you,” I said.

Monica looked pleased with my response. “Well, *I* think so. I wish some of our other staff members would get with the program and understand what I’m talking about. Everyone here should care about education. Even the custodian.”

“I’m sure you all do an exemplary job,” I murmured.

“Some more than others,” Monica replied. “So, are you all set for today’s *soiree*? That’s French for ‘party.’”

“Yes, I am,” I said as I tried to remember how to say *I know* in Spanish.

“We’ve all been looking forward to this lunch ever since Claudine announced that Junebug was finally retiring. Yum yum and all that. We are a gang who loves to eat so I do hope you won’t disappoint us with whatever you’ve whipped up.”

“I think you’ll be pleased,” I said as I tried to convey the impression that I was able to cater meals almost in my sleep. Interesting. Frank Ubermann had made a point of saying that the staff at Eden Academy didn’t like to celebrate special occasions and now Monica was saying that they loved to eat. Who was telling the truth?

“It’s just wonderful that Claudine was able to get you on such short notice. You must have a very open calendar,” Monica said, raising a penciled eyebrow. “Not a lot of dates?”

“I just started my business so I’m quite open at the moment,” I admitted. I had the feeling that someone like Monica would pounce on the news that I wasn’t a seasoned caterer with the glee our cat had when pouncing on a baby robin.

“You’re a brand new caterer?” Monica’s eyes lit up. “Oh, dear. That means we’ll be your guinea pigs. It would be awful if someone walked away with a bad case of botulism today.”

Not so awful if that someone was you, I thought. “That won’t happen.”

Monica patted my arm patronizingly. “I wish you all kinds of luck, dear. We wouldn’t want your first catering job to be your last, would we?”

“Being your usual charming self, Monica?” A short, round man with dark hair and a neatly groomed beard came up behind Monica.

“Hello, Simpson.” Monica’s voice became flat. “I didn’t expect to see you here—although I suppose I should have. We all know you’d walk through a downpour in your pajamas to score a free meal.”

Simpson turned to me and smiled. “Don’t mind her,” he said. “Monica hasn’t been

in a good mood since Jimmy Carter was president.”

“I was in preschool when Jimmy Carter was president,” Monica snapped.

“Exactly my point. You never quite got over the fact that milk and cookie time ended that year, did you, dear? Such a blow.”

“Simpson, you are a jerk,” Monica said before flouncing off.

“Simpson Ingalls,” the young man said after Monica left. He had a beautiful smile with perfect white teeth.

“DeeDee Pearson,” I told him.

“It’s nice to meet you, DeeDee Pearson. Sorry about Monica. She doesn’t particularly like me,” he said. “It’s because I’m gay.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m gay and Monica can’t stand it. You see, our dear Miss Monica comes on to every man who comes into her radar but it doesn’t work with me,” Simpson explained. “She could flirt until the cows come home and it wouldn’t get to me. Never has, never will. It drives her nuts.” He picked up a croissant from the basket that I set out and broke off a piece. “I don’t know why she gets so upset. She has all the other guys around her going gaga over her. Jack thinks she’s the next best thing since Play-Doh and Frank is banging her more regularly than Big Ben. Every hour on the hour. But for some reason it makes her crazy that I don’t fall for her oh so obvious charms.”

I couldn’t think of a thing to say, a state I was finding myself in a lot that afternoon. Finally I settled for, “Well, that’s too bad, I guess.”

Simpson shrugged. “It doesn’t make for a good working relationship. I’m sure if I gave into her once, we’d get along a lot better but I just can’t seem to bring myself to take one for the team.”

I decided to change the subject. “I have homemade marmalade for the croissants if you’d like some.”

“I’d love some,” Simpson replied. “These are good. Did you really make them or did you buy them at the Walmart bakery?”

“I really made them. I made everything. I was going to make popovers but I decided on croissants instead.”

“They’re too good for Junebug and the rest of our illustrious staff so I’ll just have to eat them all myself,” Simpson said, helping himself to another croissant. Looking up, he must have seen the shocked look on my face. It was hard to believe that these people were able to work together without someone ending up killed. “Don’t mind me. We’re all so jealous of Junebug for being able to retire while we’re still stuck at Eden Academy that you can be sure that some bitchy comments are going to pop out today. Honestly, though, I wish her all the happiness in the world,” Simpson said so insincerely that I half expected to see his nose start to start growing right in front of my eyes.

“I’m sure you do,” I told him.

“When are you going to start serving the real food? These croissants are delicious but I want something with a little more substance.”

“As I understand it, Claudine’s going to give a little speech and then it will be time for lunch.”

“Fantastic! The sooner we eat, the sooner we can get away from each other.” Simpson leaned over until his mouth was next to my head. I could feel his breath

warm against my ear and could smell the buttery scent of the croissant. “Want to hear a secret?”

For once in my life, I really didn’t but I didn’t know how to refuse politely so I shrugged noncommittally instead. Simpson took that as a yes.

“No one here likes each other,” Simpson whispered. “We only tolerate each other because we have to but most of the time we can’t stand to be in the same room together.”

It took all of my self-control not to blurt out *No shit, Sherlock!* Instead, I smiled weakly. “How about another croissant?” I inquired.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Simpson said.

At ten after one, I did a fast head count of the people sitting around the square table in the Eden Academy staff lounge. Jack, Frank, Claudine, Monica, Simpson, and a pretty girl in her late twenties. That made six. It seemed that everyone had arrived with the exception of the honoree, Junebug McClellan. The other teachers were getting impatient. They kept glancing over at the food and noisily scraping their chairs back and forth while waiting for Junebug to put in her appearance.

“Well, where is she?” Frank Ubermann asked from his seat at one fifteen. “What’s keeping her?”

“She’ll be here when she gets here,” Simpson said, sounding bored. Simpson was playing with a few croissant crumbs that had fallen on the table in front of him. From where I was standing it looked like he was making a small picture of Hitler out of the crumbs.

“I don’t want to wait that long,” Frank said impatiently. “Someone go and see where she is!” Frank barked as he glared at the other members of the staff. No one moved. Instead the other Eden Academy staff members looked around the room as if they were seeing it for the first time, each one avoiding eye contact with the rest. “Emily, you go,” Frank ordered.

The younger woman sitting next to Jack Mulholland looked up like she’d just been poked. “I’m sure she’ll be here soon,” Emily said.

“Would you calm down, Frank?” Jack suggested. “What’s the rush?”

“The rush is that I’m about to faint from hunger.” Frank leaned back in his seat and fell silent. The whole room was silent, the only noise the ticking of the large electric clock that hung on one wall. I glanced around the room, taking idle note of where each staff member was sitting. Frank Ubermann sat at what was more or less the head of the square table. Claudine was on his right and Monica was on his left forming a cozy tableau. Frank reminded me of a movie mogul from the 1930s with two fawning starlets flanking him, each vying for his undivided attention. Next to Claudine sat Simpson and then there was an empty chair followed by Jack Mulholland and Emily. In spite of the pretty centerpiece and the smell of food in the air, even I could see that Junebug’s party had all the joy of a picnic in a funeral home.

I began to circle the table slowly, refilling coffee cups and glasses of iced water and iced tea while we waited for Junebug. As I moved around the table, I couldn’t help but overhear snippets of the various conversations.

“Claudine, we’ve been over and over this same old ground,” Monica was saying during one of my passes. Monica was leaning over Frank, practically falling into his lap as she hissed at Claudine. “It’s out of the question. You know we can’t afford it.

I'm not quite sure how more plainly I can tell you that."

"I know that's what *you* think, Monica, dear," Claudine responded in a chilly voice. "Is it really necessary for me to remind you that you don't have any real say in what 'we' can afford?"

"I am Frank's administrative assistant," Monica told her, glancing at Frank for support. None was forthcoming. Frank was drinking a glass of iced tea and staring up at the ceiling in a bored manner. "I know how much money comes into the school and I know how much money goes out. You don't."

"And as such, *your* job is to make sure the bills get paid so the electricity doesn't get turned off and that the books are balanced," Claudine sniffed. "It isn't your job to concern yourself with *educational* matters that you know nothing of."

"How can I balance the books when you want to blow thousands of dollars on a stupid trip to San Francisco? A stupid unnecessary trip?"

"How would you know if it's necessary or not?" Claudine inquired. "You aren't a teacher. You never finished college. You have no idea what an educator needs to help him or her grow in the classroom. I have a master's degree and I know what's important. The seminar that I want to attend with Frank would be highly beneficial to the students of Eden Academy."

"I know what we can and can't afford," Monica said. "And we can't afford that trip! Besides, why should *you* go with Frank? Why not Jack or Simpson? Or for that matter, perhaps I should go."

"You!" Claudine didn't try to hide her disgust. "Why on earth would you go?"

"Because I've never been to San Francisco."

"Oh, dear God—what does that have to do with anything? Who cares where you've gone or haven't gone over the course of your dreary little life?"

"Ladies, ladies, let's not get into this right now," Frank said, his deep voice pouring a little oil on the troubled water between the two women. "We're here to celebrate a colleague's retirement, not argue. Can we drop this? Please? The two of you are giving me indigestion and we haven't even eaten yet."

Monica made an obvious attempt to calm down but her cheeks remained red and I could see her hands shaking. "You're right, Frank; we should be dancing on top of the table to celebrate Junebug's retirement. It's about time that dinosaur retired."

"Kindness, dear. You'll be the one getting honored before you know it," Claudine murmured. "Retirement is just around the corner."

"You'll be there before me," Monica shot back.

Frank looked up and noticed me standing behind them. "Yes?"

"More iced tea?" I asked.

Frank smiled. "I'm good," he said in his low, sexy voice that made me feel like throwing myself into his lap. I'm the most married person I know and I could almost see why Monica and Claudine were clutching at Frank like a couple of preschoolers fighting over a Ken doll. The man oozed sex appeal.

"I'm fine," Claudine snapped.

"I don't care for your iced tea," Monica informed her. "I prefer sweet tea."

I forced myself to move on although the conversation between Claudine, Monica and Frank was definitely the most interesting one happening in the room. Next I paused behind Jack Mulholland and Emily. "More coffee?" I asked. "Iced tea? Iced

water?”

“Don’t you have anything stronger?” Jack questioned..

“Sorry,” I replied. “Nothing with any kind of a kick.”

Jack sighed. “Okay, I’ll take some more coffee.” Leaning back, Jack stretched his thick hair covered arms up into the air, a move that made him look a lot like an orangutan. I had never seen such furry, muscular arms on a human being.

“How about you?” I asked the woman sitting next to Jack.

“I’d love some more iced tea. It’s delicious. I’m Emily Abbott, by the way. No one’s bothered to introduce us.”

I smiled at Emily. Emily looked nice, like the kind of girl I’d like my son Tyler to date. She also looked completely out of place with the rest of the teachers, the way a lamb might with a group of jackals. “I’m DeeDee Pearson.”

“And her husband’s name is Steve,” Jack added. “Isn’t that great? Steve and DeeDee—just like Steve and Eydie.”

Emily looked confused. “Who are Steve and Eydie?”

“Ah, youth,” Jack said. “Never mind. Emily is our student teacher this year,” Jack explained. “We hit the jackpot with her.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Emily replied modestly. “I have a lot to learn.”

“You’re the best, babe, and you know it.” Jack looked impatiently toward the door. “Geez, when is Junebug going to show up? I’m starving and I want to eat. Can’t we start without her?”

“Jack, this party is for Junebug. No, we can’t start without her. Just relax, she’ll be here soon,” Emily chided. “It takes people longer to walk down the hall when they get to be her age.”

“That’s why I don’t plan on getting old,” Jack announced. “As soon as I hit seventy I’m going to go on the Jack Mulholland Old Age Special plan.”

“What’s that?” Emily asked.

“I’m going to eat every single meal at a buffet. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. I’m going to eat about five thousand calories a day and I’m going to take up smoking again. Plus I’m going to drink around the clock. I figure it will knock me off within a few months.”

“That’s horrible!” Emily said. “You’ll have a heart attack or a stroke!”

“And die fast with any luck at all. It beats the hell out of ending up in one of those places where they feed you gluey oatmeal, make you talk about your bowel movements all the time and force you to participate in bingo tournaments. Now *that* sounds horrible to me.”

“You won’t see seventy,” Frank said to Jack, joining the conversation from his end of the table. “You don’t need to start eating at buffets. You already have an unhealthy lifestyle and some very bad habits.”

Jack obviously didn’t appreciate Frank’s input. “Look who’s talking,” Jack replied.

“I have a very healthy lifestyle.” Frank patted his flat stomach. “I’m not carrying around an extra ounce of flab unlike some people.”

“You can look healthy but still be rotten on the inside,” Jack shot back. “Happens all the time. Joggers, marathoners, people like that *look* fine but they drop dead for no apparent reason. The doctor does an autopsy and it turns out that they are filled with bile. That’s what will probably happen with you.”

“Highly unlikely, Jack.”

“You never know,” Jack said darkly. “When was the last time you had a check up, Frankie?”

“Last month and I’m in tip top shape. My doctor actually said that I’m an exceptional specimen,” Frank said.

“Undoubtedly because of the excessive amount of exercise you get,” Jack said, looking from Monica to Claudine knowingly.

“Good for the heart, Jack. You might want to try to get more ‘exercise’ too,” Frank replied. “If you can find anyone willing to spot you, that is.”

“Now children,” Simpson said, “try to get along with each other. This is supposed to be a celebration.”

“When I want your opinion, Simpson, you’ll know,” Frank informed him.

“And that will be a cold day in hell, won’t it?” Simpson looked in DeeDee’s direction beseechingly. “Are we ever going to eat? Some of us have plans for the afternoon.”

“You know,” Emily said thoughtfully, “There’s always the possibility that Junebug forgot about this lunch.”

“How could she forget?” Claudine demanded. “This lunch is for her! It’s in her honor.”

“Well, she does seem to be getting a little...senile lately.”

“Now, Emily, be nice,” Jack said. “She’s not senile; she’s probably pickled. You know how Junebug likes to have a shot of vodka in her OJ every morning followed by a healthy splash of Jack Daniels on her corn flakes.”

Emily laughed. “You’re terrible.”

Although I hadn’t yet met Junebug, I felt sorry for her. Unless Junebug was a complete nincompoop, she’d have to know how her fellow teachers felt about her and that they were all happy to see her go. I glanced discreetly at my watch. It was almost one-twenty. Where was Junebug?

The door to the faculty lounge flew open. Everyone’s head turned to see the latest arrival. Standing in the doorway was a tiny white haired woman wearing blue jeans, a red and yellow plaid Western style shirt with green piping and the smallest red cowboy boots I had ever seen. They looked like something out of a toy catalog. My eyes dropped to the newcomer’s waist, half expecting to see a leather holster and a pair of pearl handled pistols but instead the woman was wearing a rope in place of a belt, a rope that was probably all of twenty-five inches long. Hands planted on her hips, she surveyed the small group clustered around the table. “The party can start,” she said in a voice that was vaguely reminiscent of vintage Bette Davis. “Junebug’s here and you can all start to cheer.”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. *This* was Junebug, the one they all couldn’t wait to get rid of? She looked as harmless as a fly.

Chapter Three

“Junebug!” Claudine got to her feet and walked toward the older woman. When she reached her, she bent over and gave her an awkward hug. Junebug responded by twisting out of Claudine’s hold. “Don’t do that! You know I hate being touched by strangers. I hate being touched period!”

“It’s just that I’m so happy you’re finally here. I was wondering when you’d get here.”

Junebug strode to the table, her legs slightly bowed like she’d just gotten off a miniature pony. “How in hell would I have gotten here any sooner when I didn’t even know there was a luncheon going on today? In my honor, I might add.”

“I did send you an email,” Claudine pointed out.

“You know I don’t know how to open my email. If Ruth hadn’t mentioned the party to me on my way out, I would have gone home and missed my own birthday bash.”

Simpson caught my eye and made a slight twirling gesture next to his forehead. “*Looney tunes*,” he mouthed. I ignored him.

“You’re here now, aren’t you?” Frank asked after exchanging glances with Claudine. “Sit down already so we can get this show on the road.”

“Where am I supposed to sit? The two best seats are already taken. You know I like to sit next to you, Frank.” Junebug became even more Bette Davis-like, playing a coy Baby Jane.

“For crying out loud, Junebug, you’re a big girl. Sit wherever you want to,” Jack told her.

“Well, if I can’t sit next to Frank, I’ll sit next to this handsome young man instead.” Junebug sat down next to Simpson, completing the circle around the table. Glancing across from her, she nodded at Monica. “I’m surprised to see you here, Monica. I thought this was just for teachers, not any of the office staff.”

“Congratulations, Junebug,” Monica said through tight lips.

Junebug blinked at her. “Congratulations for what?”

“Your retirement,” Monica replied.

“Who said anything about me retiring?” Junebug looked around the table suspiciously. “I thought this was a birthday party! My birthday’s next week, you know. I’ll take some of that iced tea, missy,” she said to me.

I glanced at the faces circling the table. Claudine’s face had turned a shade of grey that is normally associated with the color of clouds before a blizzard strikes. Passing behind Frank as I moved to fill Junebug’s class, I heard him angrily whisper, “How could Junebug *not* know that this party is for her retirement?”

“Don’t ask me,” Claudine snapped back at him in a hushed tone. “I thought she did know. You did talk to her, didn’t you, Frank? You told her how we can’t afford her salary any longer, right?”

“Of course I did,” he said gruffly. “I called her into my office and told her that we can’t continue to pay her as much as we do.”

“And what did she say?” Claudine pressed.

“For Pete’s sake, Claudine, I don’t remember what she said! But I *did* talk to her. I did what I was supposed to do, just like I always do.”

“He did, Claudine,” Monica said, jumping into the conversation with a loud