

Love, Lies and a Double Shot of Deception

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PROLOGUE

The journalists have constructed for themselves a little wooden chapel, which they also call the Temple of Fame, in which they put up and take down portraits all day long and make such a hammering you can't hear yourself speak.

Georg Lichtenberg

18th century critic and scientist

“Home sweet hell,” Emma muttered as she turned off the main road and guided the Mercedes down the tree-lined drive toward the house. Her estate. Not that she had any desire to return, but what choice did she have? Drive around Philadelphia into the wee hours of the morning? No, exhaustion precluded that option. She’d thought about checking into a hotel for the night, but she doubted the small Chestnut Hill hotel would have any available rooms this late, and she had no energy left to drive into Center City. Better to slip upstairs and hope Phillip had forgotten their earlier confrontation.

Better yet, if she were lucky, he was still passed out where she’d left him and wouldn’t wake until morning.

Right.

She laugh bitterly. When had luck ever paid her a visit? Unless it was rotten luck. She had that in spades. And every decision she’d made in her adult life only compounded her problems. Phillip headed the list. First and foremost.

“Emma the Masochist, that’s me.” She coasted to a stop on

the cobblestone drive, set the parking brake, and turned her attention to the house she both loved and hated.

Only something wasn't right in Satanville.

Darkness enveloped the stately colonial, and only the repetitive clicking and chirping of the cicadas and crickets broke the stillness of the late August night. Less than two hours earlier, when she'd first pulled into the driveway and slipped inside, the house had been ablaze with lights, the air filled with raucous partying. Phillip's rowdy friends never called it a night this early.

Emma pushed open the unlocked front door and flipped on lights as she made her way down the central hallway toward the kitchen. Catering platters, still piled high with deli sandwiches, lined the kitchen counters. The back door stood ajar. Outside, half empty beer bottles and bowls of guacamole and salsa dotted the pool deck. Nacho chips and beer nuts littered the patio furniture and crunched beneath her feet. Still smoldering cigarette butts filled ashtrays. The sickeningly sweet aroma of pot hung in the air.

Where is everyone?

She stepped over a wet bikini bottom and noticed the suit's bra dangling from the diving board. Several other garments floated in the calm water. Something had disrupted the alfresco festivities mid-debauch. But what? Who? Why? She'd like to think one of her civic-minded neighbors had ratted out her husband. Maybe at this very moment Phillip was cooling his Bruno Maglis in an eight by ten cell.

Wishful thinking. Phillip wielded too much power.

She headed back to the house and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Damp towels and an occasional swimsuit littered her path. A strip relay race? Nothing would surprise her.

As she entered the bedroom, she nearly tripped over a figure sprawled across the carpet. Phillip. Right where she'd left his sorry, passed-out-drunk ass. She cast a wary glance toward the bed. Empty. Maybe her luck was looking up for a change.

But she didn't dare leave Phillip on the floor. Reluctantly, she bent to rouse him; he refused to budge. Then she noticed his face. Halfway buried in the thick pile, his features were contorted into a grotesque waxy mask, his lips pale, his one exposed eye staring blankly up at her.

If she didn't feel guilty as hell, she'd celebrate.

ONE

Five-and-a-half months later

Winter wonderland, my ass.

The stinging wind whipped at Emma's exposed cheeks and brought tears to her eyes. Lowering her head, she trudged around the enormous mounds of black snow piled along the curb, searching for a semi-safe path onto the sidewalk. Finding none, she grabbed a parking meter and hauled herself over the smallest of the soot-encrusted icebergs. Some people would go to any lengths for their morning cup of java, and she was one of them.

As she yanked open the door to Chapters and Verse, the "Spring Movement" of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* greeted her. Someone had a really warped sense of humor. Or hoped the power of positive thinking could affect weather patterns. Still, the music held a reminder that the harsh realities of early February in Philadelphia would eventually give way to sunshine and flowers come late March. Maybe. Last year they'd suffered

through one of their worst blizzards ever the first week in April.

Emma shivered, thoughts of daffodils and crocuses quickly replaced by the chill rippling through her damp body. Shaking the moisture from her hair, she deposited her coat on a chair in the café, then headed for the coffee bar.

“Morning,” said the barista. “The usual?”

“Please.”

With her morning shot of caffeine and sugar in hand, Emma trolled the stacks of books, occasionally pulling a volume from the shelves and sliding it under her arm. She needed the predictability of this daily routine. It helped her get through the rest of the day. Every day.

Why the hell do I stay?

If she had any courage, she'd leave. Sell the house. Move away. Start over. But she couldn't leave, and her reasons had little to do with a lack of courage. Life in Emmaville was just too damn complex. One part guilt, one part masochism. But how could she leave the only tangible reminder she had of life before everything had turned to shit?

So she stayed, losing herself in work that at least gave her the satisfaction of knowing her efforts helped others. She pushed herself each day until exhaustion overcame her and she fell into nightmare-riddled sleep. Tomorrow morning the cycle would repeat itself. *I'm a twenty-first century Sisyphus, eternally damned to live out an unending punishment for my sins.* Not that she had a clue as to whatever sin first condemned her years before, but she'd certainly committed a whopper since then. Whether a sin of omission or commission, it hardly mattered. The result was the same.

Still, what would be the harm in a short escape? She deserved that much, didn't she? Emma closed her eyes and conjured up a

distant memory of a sun-kissed Adriatic coastline. Hell, why not? She opened her eyes and headed for the travel section.

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Logan Crawford's mind kept drifting back to the events of last night, an evening definitely not worth remembering. Even her name escaped him. Normally not a problem, but this time he was saddled with Candi-Randi-Bambi-whatever-the-hell-her-name-was for the length of his stay in Philadelphia. As head of the city's redevelopment office, she was his official escort-slash-liaison, the person assigned to make certain he chose the City of Brotherly Love as the East coast site for his corporate headquarters. And last night Candi-Randi-Bambi, a woman who wore her ambition emblazoned across her surgically augmented chest, made it abundantly clear just how far she'd go to get him to sign on the dotted line. And it was far from brotherly. Or sisterly.

Logan doubted he was the first billionaire businessman she'd bedded in her quest up the corporate ladder, but he'd wager a good portion of his sizeable fortune that he was the biggest—the *wunderkind* West Coast urban developer who was giving The Donald a run for his money. Only Logan had better hair—as the media was quick to point out.

With a snap of his fingers, he could provide Candi-Randi-Bambi with an express elevator straight through the glass ceiling, and she knew it.

No fucking way in hell.

Last night when he stared down into Candi-Randi-Bambi's come-hither eyes, he saw the reflection of a disillusioned, unhappy man. And damn, up to that moment he hadn't even realized he'd been disillusioned or unhappy. He had wealth; he had power. So what was up with the sudden emptiness and

dissatisfaction?

Beryl would say it was because he led a shallow life devoid of emotional commitment. As much as he protested to the contrary, he knew she was right. Maybe it was time to leave the bimbos to Trump.

Struck by the epiphany, he'd bolted from Candi-Randi-Bambi's bed. They'd used each other. She spread her legs hoping to advance her career; he'd taken advantage of the offer. Sex without emotional entanglements, the pattern of his adult life. He got the release he needed, and the woman got a notch on her bedpost. Only this time it hadn't worked. After thirty-eight years Logan Crawford realized it was time to grow up. Only damn it, he didn't have a clue how.

Still reeling from the self-revelation, he'd canceled his morning appointments and headed his rental car north, needing some time alone to think. After driving for half an hour he found himself in a quiet, upscale section of Philadelphia. A bookstore on top of a hill beckoned like a siren.

For the rest of his stay in Philadelphia he vowed to spend his nights curled up with a good thriller rather than a cheap thrill. Now all he had to do was find one. At the moment he couldn't even find the damn fiction section in the boundless maze of shelves that wound around the first level of the two story megastore. Lost in the travel section, he spun on his heels and—
THUD!