



HARLEQUIN®

Temptation®

THE SPIRITS
ARE WILLING



JULIE
KISTLER

IT'S IN HIS KISS

Julie Kistler

It's In His Kiss

Аннотация

Not Your Average Honeymoon Hotel! Rumor has it that the Inn at Maiden Falls is haunted by a group of shady ladies who have a few things to atone for... Meet Rose Tate, who's determined to make up for the past when the inn was, uh, a bordello. The ghostly matchmaker is supposed to be helping Ned Mulgrew and his snooty fiancée find marital bliss. Except after one look at the sexy lawyer, Rose wants Ned for herself. Rose has more than a few tricks she could try on Ned in the bedroom. And after one sizzling kiss, Ned is ready to take on anything— including a woman who keeps disappearing into thin air unexpectedly. But can Rose ultimately convince a lovestruck Ned to accept less than a flesh-and-blood woman for life?

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The Legend of the Inn at Maiden Falls...

There are lots of rumors, but no one is exactly sure why even the crankiest twosomes get so very coosome when they spend time at the historic Inn at Maiden Falls, nestled in the Colorado Rockies. Maybe it's the beautiful vista of all that rushing water (the falls) outside the windows. Maybe it's the clean, invigorating mountain air stirring up their blood. Or maybe (as the whispers say) there really are lusty ghosts of shady ladies past floating around the rafters. Old-timers say the inn was a famous brothel more than a hundred years ago; all the "soiled doves" may have mysteriously passed away, but their spirits remain to help young lovers discover the joy of sensual pleasure. Or so the story goes...

Dear Reader,

I really enjoy working with other writers. And I couldn't ask for more creative people to work with than Colleen Collins and Heather MacAllister. When we brainstormed ideas for a miniseries, it's my recollection that Colleen came up with the concept of an old bordello now turned into a hotel, I added the ghosts of good-time girls from the past hanging around the rafters, and Heather upped the comedy and the spice when she suggested we make it a honeymoon hotel, with sassy, saucy ghosts assigned to help the new brides and grooms rev up their

sex lives. And so THE SPIRITS ARE WILLING trilogy was born.

I piped up right away and claimed dibs on a ghost as my heroine rather than just a secondary character, and bless their hearts, they let me get away with it! I've written books with a leprechaun, a hero with superpowers, Santa Claus, and a couple of sweet old ladies who thought they were witches, but this is my first ghost heroine. I hope you enjoy meeting Rose, a smart, impetuous woman who just happens to be stuck in the wrong place at the very worst time and is the least experienced fallen woman. When she sees Ned, he's a big temptation for a woman who hasn't been kissed in 109 years.

If you find the idea of a willing spirit a whole lot of fun, you're in the right place!

Julie Kistler

Books by Julie Kistler

HARLEQUIN TEMPTATION

957—HOT PROSPECT*

961—CUT TO THE CHASE*

965—PACKING HEAT*

It's in His Kiss

Julie Kistler



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Colleen and Heather, the most fun writing partners ever!

The Golden Rules for Miss Arlotta's Girls

We know rules are not your favorite things, but some things need to be written down. So here's your Golden Rules, girls. Abide by 'em and we'll all do just fine. We weren't exactly angels when we were here the first time around, but we've got another chance. So we want to do what we can to keep the idea of holy matrimony satisfying so's nobody's man will be tempted to go lookin' elsewhere for a good time. It may not seem fair, but them's the rules. We helped 'em stray. Now we're helping 'em stay.

Rule #1: You will never, ever do anything that might come between the bride and groom.

Rule #2: No visibility. You can't be scarin' the livin' daylights out of folks by fading in and out or showing up in bits and pieces at the wrong time.

Rule #3: Never, ever make love with a guest yourself. No exceptions.

Rule #4: No emotional attachments to anyone. You can't follow them when they leave, so you might as well not get attached.

Rule #5: When you have successfully put a troubled couple on the road to bedroom bliss, you earn a Notch in Miss Arlotta's

Bedpost Book.

Rule #6: Especially good or bad activities may earn you Gold Stars or Black Marks.

Rule #7: It's gonna take ten Notches before you can advance. All Advancements shall be determined by Miss Arlotta and the Council, who will consider how difficult your couples were, how much work you had to do, your level of creativity, whether your heart was in the right place and those Gold Stars or Black Marks.

Rule #8: Any girl who disobeys these rules shall be punished.

Rule #9: Any and all rules may be changed by Miss Arlotta as she sees fit.

That's it. Push those couples into as much wedded bliss as they can handle, and we'll all do fine. You're all creative ladies when it comes to what happens between the sheets. So let's get to work and show 'em what kinds of sparks can fly when the spirits are willing!

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Prologue

A Sunday in June

Maiden Falls, Colorado, 1895

ROSE ELIZABETH TATE was furious. It had been hours since she'd had that terrible argument with her father, slammed a few articles of clothing and some of her favorite books into a suitcase, spirited herself out through the servants' quarters of the Tate mansion and boarded the train. Now here she was in Maiden Falls, still shaking with anger. But it was too late to turn back now. All she could do was put one foot in front of the other.

Dragging her heavy suitcase along the wooden sidewalk, Rose stopped for a moment to get her bearings. Maiden Falls didn't look like much, did it?

"Who cares?" she asked no one in particular. "So the town looks a little seedy. Who cares?"

After all, she was a girl of the nineties and she could chart her own course, without her father's help or interference. Or anyone else's! And that included that cad, Edmund Mulgrew. Edmund might've stolen her virtue, but he could never kill her spirit.

"Stolen my virtue," she said self-righteously, poking into her pocket for her wire-rimmed spectacles so that at least she could see where she was going. "Poppycock! I'm still plenty virtuous."

As Rose began her search for a carriage to take her away from the dilapidated shack Maiden Falls called a train station, one of

the ostrich plumes on her darling new hat drooped right in front of her eyeglasses. She suddenly realized that this might be the last new hat she'd have for some time.

"I'll be fine," she said bravely, ripping the feather off completely. "Fine! Once I'm working for Miss Arlotta, grateful men will be vying for my favors, competing against each other to give me every little thing my heart desires. Why, I'll have a thousand beautiful hats."

Mentioning the notorious Miss Arlotta earned her a strange look from a nasty man with a large mustache, but Rose ignored him. If she was really going to be a soiled dove, then she'd have to get used to disapproval, wouldn't she?

She peered at the man with the mustache. He certainly wasn't anyone important. Who cared what he thought, anyway?

After all, Father had already told her in no uncertain terms that she was ruined. So she would embrace that ruination, marching into her future as a fallen maiden with her head held high. "After Edmund, what other choice do I have?"

Edmund. It was galling to admit that her father had been right all along about him. But it wasn't her fault. How was she supposed to know she couldn't trust his sweet words and even sweeter kisses? How was she supposed to know that enjoying those kisses was wrong when it felt so right?

How was she supposed to know that a man who made you swoon might still not be a good man? Just very good at making you swoon.

She'd honestly never guessed it would be like that, and she had read every "sensation" novel written by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and every dime novel by Laura Jean Libbey. They were wonderful books, full of passion and adventure and romance, but they told you straight out that the kisses of a bad man would taste like poison. As Rose now knew, that was a lie. Edmund's heart might be black, but his kisses were...wonderful.

"It's all Father's fault," she maintained. "If he'd only let me see Edmund in the clear light of day, I'd never have fallen for all the lies. I'd never have fallen under his spell. I'd never have..."

Fallen. Not that it made any difference at this point. Those few tempestuous liaisons had ruined her reputation. Now that both her father and her lover had washed their hands of her, she had two choices—to become a strumpet out in the open or the equivalent of a nun, cloistered in her father's mansion, forcibly denied any contact with sinful books, diverting entertainments or interesting men.

She'd made up her mind today, after that last argument with her father. She'd decided to become a strumpet.

"Excuse me, sir," she said brightly to the man with the nasty mustache, who was still hovering at her elbow. "Is there any sort of carriage I can hire to take me to Miss Arlotta's establishment?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her, narrowly missing her shiny patent leather boot as he shot a stream of tobacco out the side of his mouth. "You want to git to Miss Arlotty's? What fer?"

"I don't think that's any of your concern. I simply..." She

brought down her chin a notch. “Are there any carriages around here or not?”

“Not. Everybody here walks on the two feet God gave ’em. Unless they got a horse. Which I ain’t and you don’t.” With an unpleasant expression twisting his features, he ambled off, leaving Rose alone in the dust. But she jumped and almost fell off the boardwalk when a scruffy boy popped up behind her.

“Miss Arlotta’s is that way,” he offered shyly, crooking his dirty thumb toward the end of the street. “All the way to the edge of town.”

“Thank you,” Rose said politely. “I don’t suppose I could offer you a penny to carry my bag, could I? It’s very heavy.”

He ducked his head. “I’m afraid not, ma’am. I ain’t allowed to go by Miss Arlotta’s. My ma says all the ladies there is painted. And dirty. Like the Queen of Sheba. And I ain’t to look at them, not even when they parade through town, all fancied-up, headed for their Sunday picnic down by the Falls. Ma says we should look the other way, just so they’re clear how much we don’t like ’em.”

“Whatever are you talking about?” she asked.

“If you’re here next Sunday, you’ll see,” he said hastily. “They already done it today, but I reckon they’ll go again next Sunday right about noontime. But remember, if you see ’em, keep your head down and sneer.” After that last bizarre warning, the boy ran off.

“Keep my head down and sneer. I don’t think so.” Rose lifted her bulky suitcase in both hands and headed in the direction

he'd indicated. "Who cares what that child's mother thinks of the ladies at Miss Arlotta's? She probably resents them for having nice clothes and jewels, and for all the fun they're having!"

She was dusty and tired by the time she'd finally dragged her bag to the edge of town, but her spirit was unbowed. Her mood improved considerably when the dirt and dust gave way to a green, grassy lawn enclosed by a high, wrought-iron fence. A wooden sign, flapping against the fence, read Miss Arlotta's Social Club.

Why, the house was positively lovely. It wasn't just the delicate gingerbread wrapped around the big house's Queen Anne curves or the pretty turret or the porch flanking the entire roof. No, what impressed her the most was that the house was pink. Pink! How very cheery.

As she let herself in through the gate and marched up the stairs to the front door, ready to grasp the shiny brass knocker, Rose took a deep breath. She didn't want to faint dead away on the steps of a bawdy house, but she was definitely feeling skittish with nerves and excitement. She was determined to embrace this new, wicked life, and there was no turning back now. As she raised her hand to the knocker, the door suddenly swung open from inside. A large man wearing a bowler hat appeared in the opening.

"Hullo, ma'am," he said gruffly. "Guess you're lookin' for work."

"Why, yes, I—" She broke off. "Is it that obvious?" She didn't

think she looked like a scarlet woman, all things considered. Not yet, anyway.

“You’ve got baggage. I know what that means. You’ll have to come in and see Miss Arlotta. She’ll decide whether you’re fit for work here.”

“I assure you I’m fit,” Rose told him as she stepped inside, and the burly man took her satchel from her hand. Good. She was tired of carrying it, and really sorry she’d packed it full of books.

But what a strange place. Even though it was a bright, sunny afternoon outside, it was dark and smoky inside, with heavy red draperies, dripping with golden fringe, pulled tight at all the windows. The walls were dark oak, but trimmed in gilt, with chubby Cupids and curvy figures of Venus swirling around on the ceiling. So this was what a den of iniquity looked like. How exciting!

Rose edged away from her guide, too curious not to peek around the corner into the main parlor, where she could hear voices and music. Everywhere she looked, the place was awash in red velvet, with that smoky haze covering the soft glow of gaslights. She caught glimpses of overstuffed couches, an upright piano, a large fireplace, potted palms and...

And a great deal of exposed flesh. The ladies of Miss Arlotta’s establishment seemed to like to lie around, well, naked. Or more naked than anything she’d ever seen.

As her gaze swept the parlor, Rose saw corsets and filmy wraps, petticoats and stockings, and acres of skin. She’d never

seen so many voluptuous curves. Glancing down at her own modest bosom under her brown wool traveling suit, she wondered whether she was cut out to be a lady of the evening after all.

How exotic they looked, draped over low-slung settees and chairs, a few intently playing faro or poker around the card tables, one tapping out a tune on the piano and trilling along, something that culminated in an enthusiastic “Oooh la la!” every other line. Another, a tall, handsome woman with dark red hair, puffed away on a small cigar as she adjusted the pearl-handled revolver stuck in the garter strapped to her thigh.

A gun? An exposed thigh? Scandalous. And yet it was the most thrilling thing Rose had ever seen. They seemed so free, so decadent, so...lush. Who knew sin could look this exciting on an otherwise dull Sunday afternoon in a no-account mining town?

“Miss?” the doorman prompted, tugging at her sleeve. “Wasn’t you wanting to see Miss Arlotta?”

“Why, yes, I...” As his broad back disappeared down a hall to the left, Rose had no choice but to follow. She consoled herself that she could come back to the parlor and the gambling tables soon enough, once she was a full-fledged soiled dove like the rest of them. She had some lingerie in her luggage, although nothing like what they were wearing. But maybe if she stripped down to her favorite French chemise, the one with the tiny rosebuds embroidered around the neckline, with her brocade corset and her laciest knickers...

Rose started to feel warm and wicked just thinking about

strolling around in her drawers. Maybe she could get one of those guns to stick in her garter, to dramatically reveal at opportune moments.

But she hadn't counted on how intimidating Miss Arlotta would be. Quite the dragon in her lair, the madam of this establishment stood behind a large mahogany desk, staring at Rose with hard, shrewd eyes. She had pale, not-quite-yellow hair, the color of lemonade in the summer sun, coiled in high, stiff ringlets across the top of her head. A fake color and fake hair, if Rose had to guess. Miss Arlotta's dress was even more shocking, with a red satin bodice dipping low in the front and folds of the same scarlet fabric pulled back at her ample hips to reveal a shocking black lace underskirt. But that was an evening dress, and all wrong for this time of day. Not to mention the fact that she appeared to be sporting a bustle back there, when everyone knew bustles had been out since 1890.

Miss Arlotta sent Rose a shrewd glance. "Never seen a tart with spectacles before."

She'd forgotten she was wearing her glasses. Hastily Rose removed them and stuck them in her pocket.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one." She told the truth, not sure whether it was better to be older or younger for the purposes of a house of ill repute.

"You a virgin?" the madam asked boldly.

Rose gulped. "Well, as a matter of fact, no."

“Didn’t think so. That’s good. I run my place on the level, you see. Nobody too young, nobody too innocent, and nobody lying about neither,” she said in a throaty, no-nonsense tone as she came out from behind the desk, circling around Rose, eyeing her up and down and back again. “Five to one, I already got your number.”

“Five to one? What does that mean?” she asked eagerly.

Miss Arlotta ignored the interruption. “Your clothes tell me you come from money. My wager is, some handsome gent seduced you hopin’ to get his hands on your daddy’s cash. So Daddy figured out what was goin’ on and kicked you to the curb. You ran to your beau, but he backed away fast without Daddy’s money to sweeten the pot. So now you’re thinking you might like to ply your trade as a doxy to get back at both your no-good man and your pa. Am I right?”

It was disappointing to be read so easily. Not to mention being called a doxy when there were so many other more romantic choices. *Odalisque, fille de joie*...Much more interesting than doxy. “I guess it’s a tale you’ve heard before.”

“I’ve heard most all of ’em.” Miss Arlotta poured herself a shot of whiskey from a bottle on the sideboard. “A little skinny, aren’t you?”

“With different clothing I think my curves might do,” Rose said quickly, doing her best to hold her head high and slant her chest forward at the same time she pushed back her derriere.

That got a smile out of the boss. “I suppose you’re old enough

to know your own mind,” she declared. “And pretty enough to pull in some male admirers. I also think you got too much starch in your drawers and too much book-learnin’ for the likes of us, but if you want to try, we’ll give you a chance.”

“Really?”

“Pete,” she barked out, “take the lady’s bag to the empty maid’s room on the third floor.” Turning back, she added, “It ain’t much, but we’ll move you someplace better if you last any time at all.”

Pete, the large man who’d shown her in, opened the door behind her, still carrying her bag. Rose swallowed. She hadn’t expected things to move quite so quickly. “When do I, um, begin?” she asked, trying to keep the tremble from her voice. “Will you give me any sort of training?”

Miss Arlotta arched one pale eyebrow. “I figured you knew what to do when you walked into a bordello and asked for work. You sayin’ you need instruction?”

“Well, maybe a little...”

The madam laughed out loud. “You’re never going to last at this game. You’re the greenest greenhorn I ever did see. I’ll put my money down that you’ll be heading for the hills at, oh, just about one minute after noon tomorrow.”

“I’m not as innocent as you think,” Rose replied, edging toward the door. But curiosity pushed her to turn back. “Why did you pick that exact time? Why one minute after noon?”

Miss Arlotta shook her head, not dislodging her tight curls one

iota. "Because today is Sunday, we don't do any business here, on account of it being the Lord's day."

Oh, yes. The Sunday picnic the small boy had mentioned. Apparently, even shady ladies took a day of rest.

"So," her new boss continued, "I figure you'll last through tonight. But come start of business tomorrow, round about noon, when you face off with an actual, real-live man taking off his actual, real-live pants..."

Rose tried not to blush, faint or otherwise embarrass herself as Miss Arlotta finished up with, "Then, at just about one minute after twelve, I reckon you'll run screaming for the door."

"You know, I have seen a man without his trousers," she said quickly, trying hard not to let her voice tremble.

A man, to be precise. One. But thank goodness she had tonight to gather her wits before she saw another one. And then, on Monday, she would come face-to-face with her new profession as a shameless hussy.

"Right now, you might want to find something else to wear. A lot less, for starters." Her employer puffed up a little when she added, "I hired a photographer to come by this evening to make a tintype of all of my girls, something pretty for the parlor, to help gents make a choice."

Would anyone choose her? Was her lingerie scandalous enough?

Rose had never been in this kind of competition before.

"Oh, and what name should we call you?" the older woman

asked. “We like our girls to go by something a little more fancy here.”

A new name? It made her feel mysterious and exciting, to have a nom de plume. Or nom de harlot, anyway.

“Name?” Miss Arlotta prompted.

“Let’s see...”

Trying to think of a pseudonym, Rose suddenly remembered her favorite dime novel, stowed safely in her suitcase with her other most-prized possessions. Little Rosebud’s Lovers by Miss Laura Jean Libbey. The heroine of the book had also found herself ruined and abandoned. Of course, she’d come to a terrible end, it being fiction, but still...It was perfect.

“Rosebud,” she announced with a smile. “You can call me Rosebud.”

“That’ll do fine. Welcome to my establishment, Rosebud,” the boss lady said with a wink. She picked up her shot glass and tossed back the whiskey. “I’ll lay you ten to one you’ll be out of here before you get a chance to try out your new name. But maybe you will surprise me.”

“I’ll be here longer than that, I assure you, Miss Arlotta.”

“I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

Rose lifted her chin. How hard could it be?

1

A Monday in July

Maiden Falls, Colorado, 2004

“ROSEBUD? Get up here! We got a live one for you!”

Secure in her hidey-hole tucked under the eaves in the attic, Rosebud concentrated on page 203 of *East of Eden*, pretending she had not heard the ghostly call to arms from Miss Arlotta. She had no desire for an assignment, no matter how “live” it was.

“Troubled couple on the road to bedroom bliss, blah, blah, blah,” she muttered. It wasn’t her fault that the entire group of scarlet women—once so good at helping men stray—had been roped into service as celestial matchmakers for honeymooners too pathetic to know how to pleasure each other.

After all, she hadn’t even spent one day as a soiled dove herself. What did she know about pleasure? On her very first night in Miss Arlotta’s establishment, just hours after choosing her nom de harlot, she had passed into the afterlife with all the rest of them. Nobody knew exactly what happened, although the Maiden Falls Gazette had claimed it was due to a gas leak, offering the smug opinion that it was exactly what Miss Arlotta deserved for having airs above her station and making her tawdry social club the first place in Colorado outside Denver with gaslights. Whatever the cause, every girl in the place, plus Miss Arlotta and the beau who’d been visiting her that Sunday night,

had ended up as dead as cold mackerel, most still tucked into their beds.

As for Rosebud...She'd just been caught in the wrong place at the absolute wrong time.

Of course, that argument had not swayed anyone in this household. Judge Hangen, Miss Arlotta's gentleman friend, had shot back that he, too, had been erroneously stuck in Bordello Purgatory by virtue of bad timing, that there was no leniency provision for girls who hadn't technically had the opportunity for harlotry, and Rosebud was going to have to play by the same rules as the rest of them. Case closed.

"It's completely unfair!" she said angrily, slapping down her book, unable to concentrate when she thought about the terrible injustice of her predicament.

She'd only managed to make it through the 109 years since all their mortal lives had ended by keeping her nose firmly stuck in her books. She'd started with *Little Rosebud's Lovers* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, which she'd been in the process of unpacking from her valise when she passed over the threshold into the spirit world on that fateful night. But she'd tired of reading and rereading just those two, so she'd quickly learned to steal (or borrow, as she preferred to call it) interesting items from visitors to the Inn at Maiden Falls.

In the first dark years, she'd had to depend upon newspapers and the occasional dime novel left by the workmen and ruffians who'd wandered through. Thank goodness the old brothel had

been turned into a gaming house, a speakeasy, a saloon, then completely restored and polished up into a high-class honeymoon hotel. The clientele and the reading material had picked up nicely.

Years ago, someone had discarded Lady Chatterley's Lover, which she quite adored. The naughty bits in that one always cheered her up. Not to mention East of Eden, and more recently several issues of Entertainment Weekly and a DVD called Buffy the Vampire Slayer that was really quite extraordinary. Things had become so much more interesting since her day!

She used to have to sneak into empty guest rooms to use the televisions, but then one day she'd tripped over something in the Inn's business office called a computer. Which was connected to another bizarre concept called the Internet. Which opened up a whole new world of possibilities for a smart girl who found the modern world quite fascinating.

No one seemed bothered by the assortment of packages from strange and exotic merchants that arrived at the Inn at Maiden Falls. They always thought the mysterious electronic devices, movies, books and music had been ordered by the proper people at the Inn. Rosebud was very careful to fill out all the proper paperwork and purchase orders on the Accounting Department's computers. It wasn't stealing if she charged it to the Inn. Exactly.

"Well, I do bargain shop. And I return every book and movie that isn't an absolute necessity, right back into the Inn's library," Rosebud noted as she slipped East of Eden onto her bookshelf

next to Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask. “Besides, how else was a girl supposed to keep herself entertained for 109 years?”

“Rosebud?” Miss Arlotta’s voice barked. “Get your pretty behind up here! Where are you, anyway?”

She sounded perturbed, and Rosebud knew she was going to have to show up just so the boss didn’t figure out how it was possible for her to be missing and unaccounted for. As far as Rosebud knew, no one else had figured out how to master the fine art of slipping under Miss A’s radar, which was just one of her singular skills.

“As long as I have to be a ghost, I may as well be good at it,” Rosebud said tartly to no one in particular. Louder, letting her voice float over to the main part of the attic, she called, “Coming, Miss Arlotta.”

“Well, I hope so! Where ya been, girl?” the madam demanded.

“Just resting,” Rosebud returned coolly as she slid her vaguely corporeal form into place in front of the desk.

“Like you got anything to rest from. Get a move on. I got a job for you.”

Although she was only partially visible at the moment, preferring to affect a sort of shimmering, translucent look so as not to let on how very good at materializing she’d become, Rosebud offered an innocent look. “Me? I thought I was on suspension. Isn’t there anyone else you’d rather give it to?”

“The place is hoppin’ all summer. We need every hand on deck.”

“Hand? On deck?” Rosebud echoed doubtfully.

“Every girl has to pull her weight, darlin’. So far, you have one notch in the Bedpost Book. Total. One notch,” Miss Arlotta said grimly. “We been here 109 years and you got a sum total of eighteen black marks, no gold stars, and one lousy notch. And I’m still not convinced that one wasn’t just dumb luck.”

Rosebud said nothing. As a matter of fact, her one notch in the Bedpost Book, for successfully helping a guest couple turn up the heat on their honeymoon, had been an accident. Annoyed with a young woman who simply would not shut up, Rosebud had filled up the bathtub and knocked her into it. She figured the little twit had to be quiet if she was under water. How was she supposed to guess that the silly groom would find his dripping wet bride particularly erotic?

“Let’s just say you aren’t exactly hotfootin’ it on the road to that Big Picnic in the Sky,” the boss went on. “After the way you spun the bed around on the last couple I gave you, I ought to leave you on permanent suspension. Scared the living daylights out of ’em and sprained the groom’s leg when he tried to jump out.”

“I really deserve suspension,” Rosebud agreed, batting her eyelashes and trying to look contrite. The truth was, she liked being suspended. As long as it lasted, she was free to read and watch movies to her heart’s content. And she was expecting the six-hour DVD of *Pride and Prejudice* to arrive at the front desk

any day. Surely her suspension could last long enough to get through *Pride and Prejudice*.

“If you don’t ever get your ten notches in the *Bedpost Book*, me and the judge are stuck here like two pigs in tar, right along with you,” Miss Arlotta explained impatiently. “You know that. This ain’t just for you. Me and the judge can only move on after all you girls are gone.”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. Everybody knows you’re not carrying your load. That crazy Flo, who hasn’t been happy a day since 1895 on account of her corset problems, has got more notches than you. You’re a smart girl, Rosebud. I’m giving you a job that ought to be a walk in the park.”

Bad choice of phrase, considering the goal they were all trying to reach was the Big Picnic, where they looked forward to walking in the park throughout eternity. Rosebud wasn’t so sure about it, however. She wanted to be certain there was a wide-screen TV and a stack of DVDs and books waiting or she didn’t really want to go.

The madam interrupted her thoughts, snapping, “You better make this one work, Rosebud, or I don’t know what I’m gonna do with you. Get off your fanny and go see the bride. Name of Vanessa Westicott. She’s rich and spoiled, just like you used to be, so she ought to be a kindred spirit.”

Rosebud chewed her lip. Funny how she could still feel pain when she bit down, considering the lip wasn’t technically there.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way to get out of this?”

“Nope. Get to it. She’s in the lobby, looking over the place right now. While she gets showed around, you can give her the once-over and think up a plan.” Miss Arlotta narrowed her eyes. “With all those books you read, you ought to be real good at that.”

“MAYBE I CAN GET this over with and get my notch in the Bedpost Book lickety split, just in time for my DVDs to arrive,” Rosebud mused as she wafted down to the lobby.

She saw a group of the other ghostly girls lounging around in what had once been their front parlor, as transparent and indistinct as their lingerie, but she didn’t join them. The only two she’d really liked among the bunch—sweet Sunshine and cantankerous, shoot-from-the-hip Belle—the one who’d been smoking the cigar in the parlor on the day Rosebud arrived—had already passed over the threshold into the Great Beyond. And the others were so dreary.

She hadn’t realized, when she’d signed on for this job all those years ago, that hookers were not, as a rule, incredibly bright. Flo and her whining about her too-tight corset (stuck that way until someone figured out how to loosen her ghostly corset strings) got old very quickly, while Mimi and her fake French accent and Desdemoaner, nicknamed for all the caterwauling she used to do while in the throes of passion, were downright annoying. And then there was the Countess.

“Countess, my eye,” Rosebud griped, just thinking about it. “I have more class in my little finger than that chippy has in her

entire body.”

Flo, Des, the Countess, even lush and lovely Lavender... All they ever talked about was men. They seemed to enjoy helping hapless couples jump the hurdle into marital bliss, but they also whined constantly about how much they wished they could get in a few licks with the grooms they were assigned. Which was, of course, against the rules.

The rule itself didn't bother Rosebud nearly as much as all the complaining about it. She didn't have much sympathy for the hapless honeymooners they were supposed to be helping, but she wasn't going to pine over how sad it was she didn't get to engage in spectral sex with their grooms, either.

But for the moment... For the moment, she was going to have to see about this Vanessa person and make some move to help the poor, pathetic girl with her honeymoon, at least enough to earn another notch in Miss A's infernal Bedpost Book and keep the boss off her back for a while. Even Rosebud, the least successful ghostly good-time girl in the place, knew very well that Miss Arlotta and the Judge wielded mighty powers. Nobody was sure where their authority came from or exactly what they were capable of, but they all knew not to mess with Miss A.

But where was the sexually inept bride-to-be? Rosebud glanced around the check-in desk, but she didn't see her target. She saw two front desk clerks, a bellman and several couples who were clearly honeymooners. One coosome twosome was canoodling on a velvet settee behind a potted palm, while another

groom had his bride in his lap while he fed her little tidbits of crackers and cheese from the buffet set up for the cocktail hour. Everybody else was more of the same. Lovey-dovey, gooey-schmoey. Rosebud rolled her eyes. Clearly they didn't need help. Other than that...

The only other person in the lobby at the moment was a man by himself. Oooh. Yummy. Dark suit, dark hair, tall, broad-shouldered, and quite delicious to look at from the back side.

She squinted at him, wishing she knew how to get new spectacles over the Internet. The ones she'd passed over with were the best 1895 had to offer, but they left the modern world a bit too fuzzy.

Especially when there was something this good to look at.

She swooshed past the potted palm couple, making the woman shiver and cuddle closer to her husband. Rosebud ignored them, intent on getting a better look at the intriguing man by the window. But he was still facing the other way, pulling back one of the heavy drapes to gaze out the front window of the Inn.

"Turn around," she whispered, vainly attempting to plant thoughts in his head. If only Belle were still here. She was so good at that.

Unfortunately Rosebud didn't share Belle's skills. Manipulating gadgets and electronics, remembering and recreating music she'd heard only once, a knack for remaining unnoticed by Miss Arlotta's all-seeing eyes, and the ability to make herself so 3-D it would knock your socks off.... Those

were her talents. Not that they did her a particle of good at the moment.

Rosebud cocked her head to one side, trying to figure out why she was so intrigued by this man. Yes, she liked the looks of him, but it was more than that.

She felt oddly drawn to him. It was the strangest thing. She just had to know who he was, what he was doing there, and especially what he looked like. All of him, dadblast it!

“First time for everything,” she murmured. Out of all the men who’d wandered through the Inn over the years, this was the first one who’d made her feel this curious warmth, this shiver of anticipation and...And what seemed to be lust.

“It’s not lust,” she said under her breath. She wasn’t like the other girls with their constant urge to merge. “Just curiosity.”

Maybe if she blew on his neck. Or in his ear. Or flickered the lights in the parlor. How about a little jolt of electricity transmitted through a pinch to his adorable derriere? If she gave him a tiny shock, surely he would have to turn to face her.

She checked behind her to see if any of the other girls had noticed him (or her fascination with him) but they seemed to be intent on some silly bickering over a card game in the far corner. She was safe for the moment, if she could just get him to turn around...

“You’re supposed to be looking for a woman.” Miss Arlotta’s aggravated tone rang in Rosebud’s ear, making her jump. “Tell me, does that gent look like a woman?”

“Not even a little,” Rosebud responded without thinking.

“The gal you’re looking for is in the ballroom,” the boss interrupted. “She’s about decided she doesn’t want her wedding here. If she walks, your goose is good and cooked. So get a move on.”

Much as she hated to tear herself away from the mysterious man at the window, Rosebud knew she had no choice but to leave him behind. Drat.

“Miss A told me my bride was in the lobby,” she complained out loud, reluctantly floating away from the man at the window. “How was I supposed to know she’d be in the ballroom?”

“Did you hear that? I could swear I heard a female voice talking about the ballroom, right in my ear,” the woman with the crackers whispered as Rosebud swooped past. “And I can feel a chill.”

“They say this place has ghosts,” her husband told her, holding her close.

Real wizards, those two. But Rosebud had forgotten herself for a moment. Apparently her long suspension had made her people skills rusty. Inaudible, you ninny, she told herself. Neither seen nor heard. She managed to keep her mouth shut as she flashed into the ballroom to catch up with her new assignment.

And there she was. The bride du jour.

“I don’t like the looks of her at all,” Rosebud remarked as she sailed up to take a position behind the main chandelier. “She looks like the Countess, doesn’t she? And every bit as snooty.”

Vanessa Westicott looked sharp, in every sense of the word. Her hair, as dark as Rosebud's own, was pulled back into a severe knot at the back of her neck. From the pained expression on her face, the knot was too tight. She was pretty, very thin, and dressed in a snappy little black outfit with a skirt that Rosebud found scandalously short. And the woman was wearing high-heeled, pointy black boots that were not going to be comfortable as she toured the Inn.

Right now she was peering up at the chandelier Rosebud was swinging from, pinching her mouth together and making her unhappiness quite clear to one of the hotel's wedding coordinators, a sweet young woman named Beth, who was giving her the grand tour.

"Wicked Witch of the West," Rosebud whispered, swirling around the woman for a closer look. She'd watched *The Wizard of Oz* a few weeks ago, so the image was fresh in her mind. "All she needs is a green face."

"What did you say?" Vanessa turned on her guide. "Green plates? Why in the world would I want that?"

"I didn't say anything about green plates."

"Well, I don't like this ballroom, no matter what color scheme we use on the table settings," Vanessa snapped. "The lighting is terrible."

"These chandeliers are reproductions of what was here in 1895, without the gas, of course," Beth said quickly.

But Vanessa had moved on, tapping her pointy foot on the

parquet floor. “What kind of wood is this? I don’t like it. I prefer walnut.”

As if she would recognize walnut if she fell over it. Rosebud rolled her ghostly eyes. Princess Vanessa was a pain. A royal pain.

It went on that way as the tour continued, with Beth leading Vanessa on to the next space, a lovely, intimate private dining room recommended for the rehearsal dinner, and then up to the guest rooms. But the bride-to-be’s list of demands just kept getting longer, and she wanted it all at rock-bottom prices.

Beluga caviar. Cristal champagne. Special lace tablecloths from Belgium. Special caterer. Special masseuse. And on and on, down to her insistence on the Inn’s best honeymoon suite, although all the linens were going to have to be changed. She required Egyptian cotton with 800-thread counts, of course.

“This suite is the only thing you’ve got that’s even slightly acceptable for my honeymoon,” she sniffed, running a finger over the edge of a mahogany side table.

Hrmph. Rosebud might not have been the happiest hooker on the premises, but after 109 years, she had a certain loyalty to the place. Besides, she’d once lived in the lap of Denver society—during an era far more elegant than this one—and she knew there was nothing wrong with the Inn at Maiden Falls or its rooms or its chef or its linens or anything else.

And certainly not the gorgeous suite they were standing in, the one they called the Lady Godiva Suite, which reminded Rosebud of the inside of a candy box with its deep reds and pinks and

chocolaty browns. Like the rest of the Inn, it was full of antiques and featured a beautiful, sensual pre-Raphaelite painting, one of the odalisques, over the fireplace in its sitting room. Right now, there were fresh flowers, a display of fine chocolates and a bottle of excellent champagne on ice, all awaiting tonight's lucky guests.

Rosebud adored this room. She hoped Beth told Princess Vanessa to zip her narrow scarlet lips very soon, or she might just have to shove her out the window of the Lady Godiva Suite.

"But if she dies on the premises, with my luck she'll be stuck here with the rest of us into eternity," she grumbled.

The wedding coordinator was more diplomatic. "I can look into some of your other requests, but I can't promise you this suite," Beth said gently, referring back to her notes. "The Inn is insanely popular, and your dates are awfully soon. Are you at all flexible about, say, midweek? We may even be booked for those, but that's your best shot."

"You do know who my fiancé is, don't you?" Vanessa asked, raising one dark sliver of an eyebrow.

Rosebud was curious about that herself. Who would willingly hitch themselves to Vanessa's wagon?

Beth blinked. "I'm aware that his uncle is one of our owners, yes. To be honest, that's why we're trying to accommodate you. Normally you'd have to book at least a year ahead. If not two. Because your fiancé's uncle made a special request, we will do everything we can. But we can't squeeze out someone who's already reserved the space. I'm sure you understand."

“I’m not sure I want to get married here, anyway,” the bride said with a frown. “Retro-Victorian kitsch is so yesterday. The whole place just reeks of Nothing Special to me.”

“Oh, it’s very special.” As Beth led her charge into the hallway, Rosebud ignored the locked door and lazily passed through the thick wood to join them. “We don’t really advertise it, but the Inn has a unique reputation.”

The bride-to-be looked a bit more interested. “I heard that Daphne Remington got married here, but I never thought she was all that. What level are you talking? Jennifer and Brad? Gwyneth and Chris? Or real royalty?”

“Although our clientele includes some very fine names, it’s not about that,” Beth said quickly. “It’s more the atmosphere.”

Vanessa lifted her narrow shoulders in a shrug. “I’m not feeling any atmosphere.”

“Well, you see...”

“Yes? What?”

“Around the turn of the century, it was a bordello,” the wedding coordinator confided. “A fancy bordello. There’s this theory that the women who worked here are still here, sort of, um, hanging around the rafters, if you get my drift.”

“Like, ghosts?” There was that eyebrow again. “Ghosts of old hookers? Is that what you’re saying?”

“In so many words, yes.” Beth smiled as they neared the elevator. “Let’s just say that everyone seems to have a really good time when they stay here, and we think it may be because there

are some lusty spirits giving them a little boost. I've seen and heard some things—”

“I don't believe in ghosts,” Vanessa said flatly. “It all sounds ridiculous to me. And obscene. Ghost hookers. Yechhh.”

Obscene? Rosebud took issue with that. She had never done anything obscene in her entire life, and none of the others, not even the Countess, fell to that level. What was wrong with helping honeymooners have more fun?

“Just between you and me,” the bride-to-be went on, “I'm only considering it because of the family connection. But I don't know...”

“We have a lot of happy brides and grooms,” Beth put in.

“Yes, but we're no ordinary bride and groom. We're very choosy.”

Which did not come as a surprise to Rosebud.

“Well, not every property is right for every couple,” the wedding planner noted. “Maybe you'd be happier choosing a different location.”

Good for you, Beth! Give her the boot! But Vanessa didn't seem to have noticed the message behind Beth's tactfully phrased words.

Frowning, the bride-to-be muttered, “Ned seems to think this place is our only option with so little time to plan.”

Ned. So that was the name of the poor bridegroom shackled to the Wicked Witch.

“If time is the problem, maybe you should consider pushing

back the date,” Beth said helpfully. “A year, even two, would open things up. You might even want to pick your date based on when you can get your first choice of location.”

“Wait another year? Not a chance,” Vanessa declared. “I’ve been waiting for Ned to propose for two years. I know him. If I don’t pounce, he’ll back out. So I’m pouncing. If that means getting married in this dump, so be it.”

Dump? As the elevator arrived, Rosebud briefly contemplated letting Vanessa get stuck in it for a good, long time. But she wasn’t that good with elevators, plus that would trap Beth, too, and that hardly seemed fair.

Perhaps a small slip and fall... But there were no raw materials hanging around in the hallway to create any interesting tricks, so she had to let it go. For now.

“Let’s go down to my office and look at what exactly we have available in August,” Beth said soothingly as she pulled back the brass door to usher Vanessa into the elevator. “Once everything is set, I know you’ll love having your wedding here at the Inn.”

As those two rode the elevator down, Rosebud took her own route, sliding smoothly through the floors and showing up ahead of them at the sales office. As she dawdled by the door to Beth’s office, she mused, “What to do? What to do?”

There were so many dirty tricks it would be fun to pull on Vanessa when she came back for her wedding in August. “Floods and blizzards and all that good stuff were really more Sunshine’s thing, but I might be able to screw up a little plumbing and

generate a nice-size flood.”

“Don’t even think it,” Miss Arlotta’s voice admonished her sternly. “Remember the Bedpost Book, with all those black marks and no gold stars and only that one little notch? If you do anything to monkey with this bride’s happy honeymoon, you are going to be one sorry sister. Count on it.”

“Yes, but she’s extremely unpleasant,” Rosebud argued. “It shouldn’t be my job to sentence some poor man to a life sentence with that. She’ll eat him alive before their first anniversary.”

Miss Arlotta’s head popped up in front of her, fully visible. Just her head. This was not only highly unusual, but it was downright frightening!

“We don’t get to pick ’em. We just have to make ’em happy. Shape up, Rosebud,” she barked. “You’re skating on thin ice.”

At that, the head popped out of sight, just before Beth and the bride turned the corner and headed that way. Trying to forget the disturbing image of Miss A’s disembodied head hanging in the air, Rosebud focused on the task at hand. She was going to have to swallow her dislike and make this work, because the boss had made it crystal clear she didn’t have any other choice. And even Rosebud was afraid of Miss Arlotta’s powers, murky as they were.

“How hard can it be?” she asked. “I’ll make sure stupid Vanessa enjoys a torrid honeymoon, and then...”

But wait a second. Vanessa and Beth weren’t alone. There was a man with them. A handsome man. Rosebud stared. Dark hair,

dark suit. The man from the window. And yet...

If she'd had a jaw at that moment, it would've dropped to the floor. She knew him.

"Ned, I'm so glad you decided to join us." Vanessa swiped her thumb across his cheek to remove a smear of red lipstick. "Now that you're here, darling, you can tell me all the reasons you like this place, and maybe I can be persuaded to like it, too."

Rosebud was absolutely thunderstruck. Miss Arlotta's warning echoed in her mind. You're skating on thin ice...

She didn't care if she was skating on icebergs. She knew him! The clothes and the cut of his hair might be different, but his eyes and his smile and the way he carried himself, exuding confidence and charm, were exactly the same, the same as Edmund Mulgrew, the man who had turned her from an innocent girl into a fallen maiden so long ago.

Edmund?

For the first time in 109 years, Rosebud felt her heart go pitter-patter.

2

A Tuesday in August

Maiden Falls, Colorado, 2004

ROSEBUD WAS A BUNDLE of nerves. Tonight. Ned was coming back to the hotel tonight. He was due to check in at about nine o'clock tonight according to the itinerary she'd filched from Beth's desk. If she just waited a few more hours, she'd get to see him again. If she didn't expire from anticipation first.

It didn't help that the Inn was an absolute zoo and had been for weeks, with too many brides and grooms and Miss Arlotta watching her like a hawk. Here she was again, ready with a lecture.

"Your bride's comin' in any minute," the madam said grimly, one hand on her wide hip. "Her and the groom's got a fancy dinner tomorrow, stag parties the next night, wedding Friday night. They're leaving the morning after the wedding, so you'll have to get the fire blazing now." She eyed Rosebud suspiciously. "You ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She tried to keep her physical image as indistinct as possible so Miss Arlotta couldn't read her expression. She'd been so stunned when she first saw Ned that she hadn't been careful, giving away too much. Her boss had gotten the idea pretty quickly that something was weird about this one.

“So you got all your plans locked and loaded for the Westcott gal and her intended? What’s his name again?”

“Ned,” Rosebud replied, trying to sound nonchalant. “Ned Mulgrew.” She’d verified that much from the files in the Sales office.

Mulgrew. What were the odds? It had never occurred to her to use her laptop to find out whatever happened to the people she’d once known, maybe because she’d acquired the thing so long after she left them all behind. It was a different world now. Who knew there would be Mulgrews in it?

But once she’d spotted Ned in the lobby, she had to know. Was there a connection? Was her memory playing tricks on her? Could it be?

It could. Her quick search on the Internet had found very little on Edmund, but he must’ve married into the money he’d wanted so badly back then. Or perhaps he’d stolen it. However he’d managed to climb the ladder of success, his children’s children had become the cream of Denver society. Including his great-grandson Ned Mulgrew, age thirty, a lawyer with a top Denver firm, engaged to the equally wealthy Vanessa Westcott. Rosebud didn’t understand a thing about Ned’s job—something about corporate mergers and acquisitions—but his face seemed to appear in the newspaper a lot. And it was a very nice face.

A lot nicer than his great-grandfather’s, she’d decided. Ned seemed to have a sincerity about his smile that Edmund had lacked. And maybe a tinge of sadness in his beautiful blue eyes.

Of course, it was hard to tell without seeing him close up...

“What’s his problem? Too cold? Too hard? Not into the ladies?” Miss Arlotta interrogated. “Why did he and his intended land in our laps for a quick fix?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean, I, um, only saw him that once. The day they came to look at the hotel,” Rosebud said hastily. “But he looked, well, fine. Extra fine.” With a little more enthusiasm than she’d intended, she added, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with Ned.”

“Uh-huh,” her boss said with an edge of sarcasm. “So I gather you liked what you saw?”

She barely stopped herself from gushing, Oh, yesssss. Instead she murmured, “I don’t think he’s the problem.”

“So she is?”

“Vanessa?” Rosebud couldn’t keep the scorn from her voice. “She’s a piece of work, that one.”

She had now seen enough of Vanessa Westicott to last a lifetime. She might’ve forgiven the princess her tantrums and hissy fits if she’d only brought Ned back to the hotel with her. Rosebud had been on pins and needles hoping he’d come back. But no. Every visit since that first one Vanessa had made by herself.

And every time, she’d had new demands, new complaints, until everyone in the hotel was sick of her. If it weren’t for the fact that Ned Mulgrew’s uncle was one of the owners, Vanessa and her diva antics would’ve been tossed out onto the street long ago.

“I can tell you that she’s the one who wants to get married, and she’s in a hurry so he won’t change his mind.” Rosebud frowned. “What I don’t know is why he wanted to marry that ice princess in the first place.”

“If all the brides and grooms were perfect, there’d be no need for us, would there?” Miss Arlotta asked darkly. “So you need to put a little giddy-up in her gallop. Shouldn’t be too hard if the boy is as fine as all that.”

Rosebud had no idea what that meant but it sounded unpleasant. “Giddy-up in her gallop. Right. I’m on it.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Well, I’m kind of playing it by ear.”

“You’ve had a month to plan, Rosebud,” Miss Arlotta said ominously. “Don’t let me down. Make it work. Stick with the bride if she’s the problem. Feed her some oysters and a lot of wine, shove her right into his bed and turn up the heat. Tonight. Time’s a-wastin’.”

Rosebud winced. Ned in bed with Vanessa? That was an image she didn’t need infecting her brain. “I’ll do my best, but...”

“But what?”

But I don’t want him with her! I just found him, and I only got to see him once, and I don’t think it’s at all fair that I should have to help some other woman have him.

And the idea of supervising or improving their erotic activities? Eeeeeuw!

“What?” Miss Arlotta asked again, more forcefully this time.

“What’s the holdup?”

“Nothing,” Rosebud said quickly. “I’ll do my best.”

Her best what she left unspecified. She would worry about the pesky problem of how to help Ned and Vanessa in bed later. As for right now...

Rosebud felt excitement sizzle through her veins. Ned is coming. Tonight. She glanced at the cuckoo clock over Miss Arlotta’s desk. Five-fifteen. Less than four hours, and Ned would be here.

She had been waiting for this moment ever since she’d laid eyes on him. Ned. The spitting image of her beloved, that rascal Edmund.

Once he was here, she didn’t know whether she should kick him or kiss him. She had spent the better part of a month debating exactly that. Which was why she hadn’t bothered to come up with a plan for Vanessa.

She was much more interested in Ned. Who was he? Would he be anything like his great-grandfather? And what was he doing engaged to a witch like Vanessa?

She itched to find out.

“I don’t know why you’re still up here. Your bride is already checking in,” Miss Arlotta noted, making a shooing motion with one ghostly hand. “Day late and a dollar short before you even start. Rosebud, I swear, you’re gonna be the death of me yet.”

Rosebud refrained from pointing out that Miss Arlotta was already dead. Jittery with nerves over the idea of seeing Ned

later—and having to deal with the odious Vanessa first—she murmured, “I’m going, I’m going.”

But as she flashed down to the lobby, she heard Miss Arlotta’s unamused voice in her ear. “Don’t even think about botchin’ this one, Rosebud. I’m keepin’ my eye on you.”

“Don’t worry,” she responded sweetly. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Luckily for Rosebud, the hotel was packed to the gills, so she knew it wouldn’t be as easy as all that for Miss A to monitor her, especially when the other girls were providing such good cover with their own assignments. Mimi had been complaining since yesterday about a frightened virgin of a bride who kept locking herself in the bathroom, while Glory wanted everyone to drop everything and check out her groom, because she said he had the smallest equipment she’d ever seen and it was going to be impossible to strike any sparks with that tiny thing to work with. Every time she started to describe her groom and his “Wee Willie Winkie,” she dissolved into giggles, which got Desdemoaner going with the honking snort she called a laugh.

That meant there were two ghost harlots rolling around the attic, wheezing with laughter, while Mimi swore in French and stamped her tiny foot and demanded help with her fraidy-cat bride. Not to mention Flo and the usual whines about her constricted corset and the snooty Countess offering unwanted opinions on the side while everybody told her to tend to her own

assignment.

With all that, Miss Arlotta had her hands full, and Rosebud felt very comfortable that whatever tricks she got up to with Ned's bride would go unnoticed. Hadn't she always been the smartest Fallen Maiden around? Wasn't it a dead certainty she could outfox Miss A and the others long enough to have a little fun with...

Uh-oh. Rosebud skittered to a stop at the bottom of the main staircase, a few feet from the front desk.

Ned. Here. Now. Early. She wasn't ready. And yet...

She'd been waiting so long. As she saw Ned standing there in the lobby, Rosebud's mouth went dry and her knees went weak. She felt stirrings in places that hadn't been stirred in 109 years. Wide-eyed, immobile, she clasped both hands hard against the front of her corset, forgetting to breathe for just a second.

He looked amazing. No suit today, just a soft, form-fitting dark sweater and black trousers. He had his hands jammed in his pants pockets, lounging there as if he didn't have a care in the world.

She wanted to touch him. She wanted to press her lips against his. What would it feel like for him if she did? Would one little ghostly kiss trigger anything in him? And how much trouble would she get into if she tried it?

No sign of the other girls or Miss Arlotta. No one to see if she...

Out of nowhere, he turned, narrowing his gaze, staring right

at the spot where she lingered by the bottom of the stairs. And then he smiled, white teeth flashing between perfect lips, as if he sensed her presence. As if he wanted her presence.

No wonder he was a lawyer. Juries probably melted every time he smiled at them and he never lost a case.

My stars. That was potent stuff. She was a ghost, but still she began to melt from the inside out. Why did he have to be so handsome? The fascinating blue eyes, the enchanting smile, those marvelous lips...

There was a reason she had so easily lost her virtue back in 1895. And she was looking at him.

“Damn you, Ned Mulgrew,” she whispered.

“That’s weird.” He glanced around the bustling lobby. “I could swear somebody just cursed at me. Damn you, Ned Mulgrew. That’s what I heard. But who would say that?”

“Hmm? What?” Distracted with the check-in process, as well as keeping an eye on the bellman who was carting all fifteen pieces of her matching Louis Vuitton luggage, Vanessa gave her fiancé a glance. “Ned? Did you say something?”

“Nothing important.” He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, moving in closer behind her at the front desk, angling an arm around her in a cozy gesture. Rosebud decided right then and there that kicking him was definitely smarter than kissing him. One minute he was sending come-hither smiles at her across time and space, and the next he was cuddling with the odious Vanessa. Swine.

Maybe he was as greedy and insincere as his ancestor, and he was fleecing Vanessa for every dime of her trust fund. Rosebud hoped so. But it didn't look like it from here. Okay, so his smile didn't quite reach his eyes when he looked at Vanessa. And his features seemed a bit strained. Still...

He was planning to marry the twit, wasn't he?

Rosebud crossed her arms over her chest, debating whether to drop a chandelier on both their heads. Nah. Miss Arlotta would know who did it. But it was tempting.

She flitted up the stairway to get herself a little farther away from temptation, perching her frilly bloomers on the smooth mahogany banister about halfway up, where she could still eavesdrop. All she needed to do was find out what room they were in, and she could go on ahead, leaving them to their pathetic canoodling at the desk. Then she would ponder a plan of action, and decide whether it would involve pushing them together...

She smiled. Or pulling them apart. That spinning bed thing had worked nicely on the last couple she didn't like.

"You're in the Lady Godiva Suite," the front desk clerk said pleasantly. He pushed a folio across the desk toward Ned for his signature. "That's our best honeymoon suite. I have you down for four nights."

Pulling the paper over her way, Vanessa scrawled her name on it. Then she leaned over and nabbed the brass key out of the clerk's hand. "It's five nights."

"Five? I'll have to check on that. Let me just get another key

for Mr. Mulgrew,” the clerk murmured, turning back to the wide expanse of cubbyholes where the keys were kept.

“No.” Vanessa’s lips pressed into a thin scarlet line of displeasure. “He doesn’t need a key. The suite is for me.”

She wasn’t planning to share the honeymoon suite with her fiancé? Now that was interesting. Ned. Lady Godiva Suite. Both dark and delicious. Honestly, how could anyone think about those two items and not want to put them together? Immediately.

“There is a separate reservation for my fiancé,” the bride-to-be continued, starting to sound a little testy. “For a separate room.”

Well, maybe she was a virgin and she wanted to stay one till her wedding night. Rosebud gave her the onceover. “If she’s a virgin, I’m Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Rosebud grouched. “So why doesn’t she want to share her suite with Ned?”

“Hmmm.” The desk clerk consulted his computer. “I don’t see anything...”

“Get the manager,” Vanessa seethed. “Now.”

“Van, it’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“You didn’t make the arrangements, Ned. I did. I checked and rechecked everything, and that moron of a wedding consultant assured me we were all set. I am stressed out enough with the wedding plans and I need my sleep.” She shook her head. “I told you this place wasn’t good enough, but you insisted. And now they’re making all kinds of mistakes, just like I knew they would.”

“We were lucky to get in here,” he reminded her. “Uncle Jerry pulled major strings to make it happen. I would’ve been happy to wait till next year or whenever we could get whatever palace it was you wanted, but you insisted it had to be now.”

“Do not take that tone with me,” Vanessa snapped.

Oooh, goodie! Fireworks! Rosebud took a jaunty slide down the banister to get closer. It was beginning to sound as if she wouldn’t need to do much work to keep these two apart, what with the separate rooms and all the hostility.

Ned sighed. “Van, we’re getting married in three days. Do you really want to argue about this now? Trust me. We’ll fix it.”

He sounded so calm. Darn it. Fizzling all the fireworks before they got started.

To the desk clerk, Ned said, “Do you have another room you can give me? Anything is fine.”

“Well, sir... The Inn is packed, I’m afraid. All I have is a small single room tucked into the back of the third floor.”

Rosebud gulped. What? A small room tucked into the back of the third floor? There was only one room at the Inn that fit that description. Her old room. The one Miss Arlotta had sent her to on that Sunday night back in 1895.

The clerk continued. “It’s available because it’s a single, and frankly...” He grinned. “We don’t do a lot of business with singles, if you know what I mean. I think it’s a nice room, just small. Sometimes an extra bridesmaid takes it. I don’t know if—”

“It’ll do,” Vanessa interrupted. “He said anything was fine.”

As Vanessa took off in the elevator with the bellman and all fifteen pieces of her luggage, bound for the Lady Godiva Suite, Rosebud stayed where she was on the banister, her mind reeling.

How bizarre. How intimate. Ned, the instant connection, the instant longing, and now...He would be staying in her old room?

If she didn't know better, she might've thought this was all kismet or destiny or something. Impetuous, romantic Rose Elizabeth Tate had been a firm believer in those things. But Rosebud the cynical spirit, stuck floating in the rafters for the past 109 years, was not.

With his key in hand, Ned picked up his bag and made straight for the big, ornate staircase that curved around behind the desk. Straight for her. Startled, she toppled sideways, falling off the banister onto the bottom step. Ouch.

"Sir, you're on the third floor. You might want to take the elevator," the clerk called out.

"Nah, I'm good." He smiled again and Rosebud weakened, standing up and edging more toward the middle of the staircase, that much closer to his path. It couldn't hurt to reach out, to touch him ever so slightly, could it? He'd never even feel it.

But when he swept past, when she brushed her invisible fingers gently along the line of his jaw, Rosebud began to tremble. My stars. She felt warm and shaky and...That was intense. She slammed backward with a thump, hitting the newel-post.

"What the hell?" Ned paused on the stairs. With his hand

cupping his jaw, right where she'd touched him, he turned around, glancing up and down the staircase.

"Are you okay, sir?" the desk clerk asked from down below.

"I'm, uh, fine. Just fine. For a minute, I thought..." He dropped his hand. "Nothing." And then he started back up the stairs.

It took her a second or two to collect herself, but then Rosebud made up her mind. Miss Arlotta had ordered her to stick with the bride, but she didn't care. There was no way she was running over to the suite to check on the odious Vanessa, no matter how hard Miss A came down on her later for neglecting her duty.

"I'm sticking with him," she whispered, hustling along to catch up.

By the time she got to the small room at the back of the third floor, he had his suitcase open on the bed to unpack. Rosebud hung back by the door, afraid to touch him or get in his way after that scary encounter on the stairs.

Who knew what might happen if their atoms collided? Would she burst into flame?

As she looked around, she realized she hadn't been in this room in quite a while, preferring to spend her time in her hideaway in the attic. But it was a pretty room, especially since they'd renovated it along with the rest of the hotel. Now it had an antique sleigh bed in glossy cherry wood, a matching dresser and mirror and a lovely armoire that held the TV and minibar. Plus Ned. She smiled. Who could ask for anything more?

Busy unpacking, he didn't seem to notice the extra presence in the room. Rosebud flitted around the corner to check out the marble bath and sink and then back into the main room, poking her nose into Ned's toiletries and accoutrements. She told herself she was filing away information for later use, but the truth was, she was greedy for knowledge about Ned.

Ooh, he'd unpacked a tuxedo. Basic black, with a white formal shirt and a small black tie. She could only imagine what Ned would look like in that. A lot like Edmund, probably. She swallowed. She had, of course, seen Edmund in formal evening wear quite a few times, and the sight had been devastatingly handsome. But Ned...Ned was even better.

As he crossed to the phone, leaving a message for someone about picking up his tuxedo to take to the cleaners, she couldn't hold herself back. She slipped over to finger the tucks down the front of his formal shirt, leaning into the closet, inhaling the scent of him that clung to his clothes. She began to pick through the hangers. Button-down shirts, a suit jacket in a smooth wool...

"I'm losing it," he said out loud, taking a step toward the closet. "First I hear my name and there's nobody there, then that weird thing on the stairs, and now my clothes are moving all by themselves."

Ooops. She hadn't realized she'd lifted the sleeve of his suit jacket up to her nose. As unobtrusively as she could manage, Rosebud let it drop back into place. She edged her way around the outside of the room, skirting carefully around Ned to the

window next to the bed. Quietly she eased it open, letting in the cool mountain air. On the other side of the room, Ned was fixated on the closet, moving one hanger at a time, staring at his clothes as if he expected them to sprout wings.

Rosebud flailed her arms around, whipping up the lace curtains at the window. Gaining speed, she swooshed around the room a few times like the spirit of the North Wind. She even made a slight howling noise. It was the best she could think of on short notice.

Ned spun around. “Oh. The window’s open.” He sighed with relief. “Just a stiff breeze. Of course there’s a rational explanation.”

Of course. As he shut the window and pulled the curtains closed, Rosebud sighed with relief. Trying to stay out of the way and not get into any more trouble, she stretched out on the sleigh bed, careful not to squash the pillow or make an indentation.

It was strangely enjoyable simply watching Ned move around the room. The other girls were always snickering about some fine manly form or other, but she hadn’t paid attention in a long, long time. But now that she looked, she had to say, man-watching did make for a good show. The play of muscle under his shirt was very interesting. And the sight of his trousers, stretching against his tight bottom when he bent over to put away his socks... Mmmm...

Shameless, she told herself as she ogled his derriere. And not fair to Ned. Why, Rose, you’re no better than a voyeur.

He dumped the contents of his pockets on the dresser with a jingle of keys and change. Then there was a snap as he unbuckled his belt, and her breath caught in her throat. Why was he undoing his belt?

Oh, dear. Belt. Off. Tossed aside. And his hands moved to the bottom edge of his sweater, sliding it up an inch or two over his flat stomach. At the first glimpse of bronzed flesh, Rosebud's eyes widened. What was he doing? He wasn't going to undress, was he?

Why, yes he was. Rosebud went very still as he peeled off his shirt and tossed it toward the bed. Right on top of her. She didn't move, but she did finger the fine silk knit where it slid sensuously over her hip. And she hungrily drank in the sight of him, naked to the waist.

She had forgotten how gorgeous a man could be. Ned's skin gleamed, tanned and smooth in the golden light from the antique lamp on the dresser, and her eyes trailed over his hard chest and torso, ridged with muscle. There was a fine line of dark hair trailing between his ribs, disappearing into his pants. Her mouth watered. Did men look this delectable back in her day?

Ned stopped. His gaze skimmed right over her where she lay on the bed, and he frowned. "Why is there a bump under that shirt?"

Bump? A bump like her? What should she do? Slip out from under the shirt while he was watching, making it clear the unseen lump had moved away and something spooky was going on in

his room? Or stay where she was, even if he advanced on her and felt under the shirt? His hand would go right through her while she was invisible. At least she thought it would.

Her heart beat faster, and she couldn't think. Did she want him to touch her, to connect his protoplasm to her ectoplasm, to shock them both down to their toes, even if it meant some irreversible explosion of particles and electricity?

Oh, yes. Right now, after watching him undress, she was totally willing to risk it.

Foolish, foolish girl to get herself in this position. She felt her body suffuse with warmth under his intense gaze, and she had the terrible suspicion that a wash of hot color would show up there on his bed, like a reclining girl-shaped pool of pink. She glanced down but didn't see anything. She'd never blushed before when she was invisible. How did she know what might happen?

Just when she thought she might pop from the strain, Ned's phone rang. He jumped, she jumped, and his shirt slid off her hip at the exact moment he turned toward the phone. Saved by the bell. Rosebud was off his bed and safely huddled on top of the armoire, hiding up next to the ceiling, before he'd even answered it.

"Hello," he said impatiently. But then his voice changed to a much warmer tone. "Hi, Uncle Jerry. Thanks so much for setting everything up. We really appreciate you making it happen. Your hotel is wonderful."

She couldn't hear what was said on the other end, but she could

imagine. Blah blah blah best wishes on your upcoming nuptials...

“Listen, I will see you tomorrow, right? Yeah, the rehearsal dinner.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m supposed to be meeting Van for dinner tonight—some French place an hour from here—and I don’t want to be late, so...”

Something Uncle Jerry said got a laugh out of Ned. Rosebud rolled her eyes. Something amusing about the joys of coping with Vanessa, no doubt.

But Ned looked distracted as he spun back around, still holding the receiver. He peered at the bed, where the shirt he’d been wearing, the one that had landed on Rosebud, now lay flat. His expression grew even more perplexed. “Uncle Jerry, did you say there were stories about this place being...” He paused. “Haunted?”

Rosebud tried not to giggle. It was just the look on his face, as if someone were poking him with sticks and forcing him to ask that question. So Neddy boy was embarrassed to ask about things that went bump in the night. It was kind of sweet. Of course, she hadn’t believed in ghosts, either. Until she became one.

“No, honestly, I’m a total skeptic,” Ned said quickly into the phone. “I was starting to think there was something weird going on around here, but...Can’t be. That would just be stupid.”

He forced another laugh. “Aw, I’m sure you’re right. Just stress from the wedding. You and Aunt Win always have known me better than anyone else.”

Aw, how sweet. When she was young and desperate for

guidance, it would've been nice to have a kindly aunt or uncle to turn to.

“Your support has meant everything to me, I want you to know that,” Ned continued. “I know I've been strange lately. I never thought I was the marrying kind to start out with, so this is all...”

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