

JESSICA BIRD

BEAUTY
AND THE
BLACK SHEEP



Cherish

Jessica Bird
Beauty and the Black Sheep
Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

Аннотация

THE FORCE OF THOSE EYES HIT FRANKIE MOOREHOUSE LIKE A GUST OF WIND But she quickly reminded herself that she had dinner to get ready, the staff of White Caps B&B (such as it was) to motivate. She didn't have the luxury of staring into a stranger's face. Although, jeez, what a face it was. And wasn't it just her luck that the owner of that face, Nate Walker—with his rebel attitude and distaste for authority—was the chef her restaurant desperately needed, and he was staying for the summer....And...it was a bit too tempting to let this breath of fresh air sweep her off her feet. Because all work and no play had been Frankie's motto for much too long!

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“Why are you pretending that you find me so interesting?”

He leaned in close and she felt his lips brush against her cheek as he spoke. “I’m not pretending.”

She thought about putting her arms around his neck and pulling him into her bedroom. But then she pictured the morning after. The awkwardness because she’d hope it was a beginning not an ending. She’d done that god-awful dance once before.... Nate worked for her. Was supposed to be at White Caps for the whole summer. The last thing she wanted was to be reminded daily of another bad decision when it came to men.

She stared up into his eyes and tried to read the future in the flecks of green and gold.

Pulling back, she thought there was a damn fine line between self-preservation and cowardice. “I think it’s best that we not take things any further.”

He smiled slowly. “What’s life without a little excitement?”

MILLS & BOON

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Beauty and the Black Sheep

Jessica Bird



To my mother, with love.

And thanks for moving around all those boxes of books!

JESSICA BIRD

graduated from college with a double major in history and art history, concentrating in the medieval period. This meant she was great at discussing anything that happened before the sixteenth century, but not all that employable in the real world. In order to support herself, she went to law school and worked in Boston in healthcare administration for many years.

She now lives in the South with her husband and many pictures of golden retrievers that she hopes to replace with the real thing sometime very soon. As a writer, her commute is a heck of a lot better than it was as a lawyer and she's thrilled that her professional wardrobe includes slippers and sweatpants. She likes to write love stories that feature strong, independent heroines and complex, alpha male heroes. Visit her Web site at www.jessicabird.com and e-mail her at Jessica@jessicabird.com.

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Chapter One

The only warning Frankie Moorehouse had that twenty gallons of water were going to fall on her and her desk was a single drop.

One drop.

It hit the financial statement she was reviewing, right in the middle of the page that suggested the White Caps Bed & Breakfast was dangerously close to going under.

She groaned, figuring the roof must be leaking again. The sprawling mansion had all kinds of nooks and crannies, which made for an elegant and interesting floor plan. Unfortunately, the roof covering all of these architectural treasures was a complicated warren of angles that trapped old leaves and moisture, creating little pockets of rot.

Squinting her eyes, she glanced out the window, searching the dimming light for a rainstorm that wasn't there.

She looked up with a frown, saw a darkened spot on the ceiling, and had just enough time to get out the words "What the hell—" before the torrent hit her.

The water carried with it chunks of horse-hair plaster from the ceiling and an evil tide of filth that had collected in the rafters. It hit her in a stinky mess, splashing all over the desk and the floor in a great whoosh of noise. When the torrent ceased, she took her glasses off and lifted her arms, watching brown rivulets

drip off her skin.

It smelled, she thought, like bat guano.

The sound of pounding footsteps heading her way was neither reassuring nor welcome. She shot up from the desk and shut the door to the office.

“Hey, Frankie, what happened?” George’s booming voice sounded characteristically confused. He’d worked for her for about six weeks and sometimes the only difference she could find between him and an inanimate object was that occasionally he blinked.

In the kitchen that serviced the White Caps dining room, George was supposed to be the fry-guy, the sous-chef, the pâtissier and the busboy. What he did do was take up space. At six feet seven inches, and tilting the scale at well over three hundred pounds, he was a big oaf of a man. And she’d have fired him on day two except he had a good heart, he needed a job and a place to stay, and he was nice to Frankie’s grandmother.

“Frankie, you okay?”

“I’m fine, George.” Which was her standard reply to the question she despised. “You better go make sure the bread’s cut for the baskets, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Okay, Frankie.”

She closed her eyes. The sound of dripping, dirty water reminded her that not only did she have to pull off yet another magic trick to balance the account for the month, she had to clean up her office.

At least she had the Shop-Vac to use for the latter.

Much to her dismay, White Caps had financial problems she couldn't seem to solve no matter how hard she worked. Housed in the old Moorehouse mansion, on the shores of Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains, the ten-bedroom B & B had been struggling for the past five years. People weren't traveling as much as they used to, so overnight guests were fewer and fewer and there wasn't enough local traffic in the dining room to cover the costs of the operation.

It wasn't just a general reduction in tourist trade that was the problem. The house itself was part of the reason the reservations were drying up. Once a gracious summer home from the Federal Period, it needed a major overhaul. Band-Aid fixes such as a fresh coat of paint or some pretty window boxes could no longer hide the fact that dry rot was eating up the porches, the eaves were rotting and the floors were beginning to bow.

And every year it was something else. Another part of the roof to fix. A boiler to be replaced.

She glared at the exposed pipes over her desk.

Plumbing that needed to be rehauled.

Frankie wadded up the spreadsheet and threw it in the trash, thinking she'd prefer to have been born into a family that had never had anything rather than one that had gradually lost everything.

And as she picked some of the plaster out of her hair, she decided the house wasn't the only thing getting older and less

attractive.

At the age of thirty-one, she felt more like fifty-one. She'd been working seven days a week for a decade and couldn't remember when she'd last had her hair done or bought a new piece of clothing, other than work uniforms. Her fingernails were chewed to the quick, her hands shook all the time and her diet consisted of coffee, breadbasket leftovers and more coffee.

“Frankie?”

Her sister's voice was subdued as it came through the door and Frankie had to struggle not to scream back, Don't ask me if I'm okay!

“Are you okay?”

She squeezed her eye lids closed. “I'm fine, Joy.”

There was a long silence. She imagined her sister leaning into the door, one pale hand against the wood, a worried expression on her perfectly beautiful, Pre-Raphaelite face.

“Joy, where's Grand-Em?” Frankie knew that asking about their grandmother, Emma, would channel the concern somewhere else.

“She's reading the telephone book.”

Good. That was known to quiet the dementia at least for a little while.

In the pause that followed, Frankie stood up and started to grab hunks of plaster off the floor and the desk.

“Ah, Frankie?”

“Yes?”

The reply was so quiet, she stopped cleaning up and strained to hear Joy's voice through the wood panels. "Speak up, for God's sakes, I can't hear you."

"Ah, Chuck called."

Frankie pitched some plaster into the trash can, nearly knocking the thing over from the force.

"Don't tell me he's going to be late again. This is Friday of the Fourth of July weekend." Which meant with the way things had gone last season, they would probably have a couple of people come for dinner from town. With two sets of guests in the house, there could be nine or ten expecting food. The number was nothing like it used to be, but those people needed to be fed.

Joy's voice became muffled again so Frankie threw open the door. "What?"

Her sister took a quick step back, cornflower blue eyes stretching wide as Frankie brushed a wet length of brown hair out of her face.

"Don't say one word, Joy, unless it's about the message from Chuck. Not one word."

Her sister started talking fast and Frankie got the gist. Chuck and his girlfriend Melissa. Getting married. Moving to Las Vegas. Not coming in, tonight or ever.

Frankie sagged against the doorjamb, feeling her wet clothes and her apprehension cling to her like a second skin. When Joy reached out, Frankie shrugged off the concern and snapped to attention.

“Okay, first, I’m going to go take a shower and then here’s what we’re going do.”

Lucille’s life ended not with a whimper but a bang on a back road somewhere in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York.

Going seventy miles an hour, the 1987 SAAB 9000 blew a gasket and that was game over. With a burst of noise as loud as a gunshot, she relinquished her usefulness with protest and wheezed to a stop.

Nate Walker, her first and only owner, let out a curse. When he tried the key, he wasn’t surprised when the response came from the starter, not the engine.

“Aww, Lucy honey. Don’t be like this.” He caressed the steering wheel but knew damn well that begging wasn’t going to fix whatever had made that kind of noise.

It was probably hydraulic lift time.

Opening the door, he got out and stretched. He’d been driving for four hours straight, heading from New York City to Montreal, but this was hardly the kind of break he had in mind. Eyeing the road, which was just a little asphalt and some yellow paint away from being a footpath, he figured his first move had to be getting Lucille out of the way of traffic.

Not that he had to rush. He’d seen one other car in the last twenty minutes. Looking around, there was only thick forest, more of the thin road and the gathering darkness. Silence pressed

in on him.

Putting Lucille in Neutral, he braced his shoulder against the doorjamb and pushed, steering through the window with his right hand. When she was safely on the rough, scratchy grass at the side of the road, he popped the hood, got out his flashlight and gave her a look-see. As Lucille had aged, he'd gained a proficiency in auto repair, but a quick inspection told him he might be out of his league. There was smoke coming out of her and a hissing noise that suggested she was leaking something.

He shut the hood and leaned back against it, looking up at the sky.

Night was coming on fast, and being far to the north it was cool even in July. He didn't know how much walking it was going to take to reach the next town so he figured he better be prepared for a hike. Going around to the front seat, he threw on his battered leather jacket and collected some provisions. Stuffing the bottle of water he'd been nursing and the remnants of the turkey grinder he'd had for lunch into his backpack, he reckoned he had enough to last him.

Before locking up the car, he grabbed his knife roll. The heavy leather bundle, which was tied tightly with a strap, felt good in his hand. Inside were six pristine chef's knives made of carbon and stainless steel, and taking them with him was second nature. A chef's knives were never to be left unattended, even locked in a car on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere.

The rest of his crap he couldn't care less about, not that there

was a lot of it. He had some clothes, all of them old, most of them repaired in one manner or another. Had two pairs of boots, also old and repaired. And he had Lucille. Who was old, and repaired but now not so usable.

His knives, however, were not only new, they were state of the art. And they were worth more than Lucille.

Which probably wasn't saying much anymore.

Kissing his palm, he laid it on Lucille's still warm hood and started out.

His boots made a heavy noise as they hit the asphalt and he settled the backpack comfortably on one shoulder. While walking along, he looked up at the sky. The stars were incredibly bright, particularly one dead center above him. The thing was flickering like a broken light and he started to think of it as a companion.

Mailboxes soon sprouted at the side of the road. Mailboxes and imposing stone gates. He figured he was getting close to one of the old-fashioned resort areas where the Victorian wealthy had once escaped the heat of New York and Philadelphia in the days before air-conditioning. The rich still came to the Adirondacks, of course, but now it was strictly for the area's rugged beauty rather than from a lack of Freon in their life.

He tilted his head back to the sky.

Man, that star was alive. Maybe it wasn't even a star. Maybe it was a satellite, although then it would be moving—

Nate felt his boot tip and the next thing he knew he was

ass over elbow, falling into a ditch. On his way to the ground, he made himself go limp as he prepared for a rough landing. Fortunately, the earth was soft, but a shooting pain in his lower leg told him he wasn't going to walk away from the fall without a limp.

He lay on his side for a minute. He couldn't see his star anymore from the new vantage point, although he had a good shot at the ravine he'd almost rolled into. He sat up, brushed some leaves off his jacket and felt okay. When he got to his feet and tried to put weight on his left leg, however, his ankle let out a howl of protest.

Great. Out in the middle of nowhere. Car dead at the side of the road. And a mission-critical body part that was not passive aggressive in its opinions.

Nate grit his teeth and started walking. He knew he wasn't going to make it farther than a quarter mile on the ankle. And that was if he had crutches.

The next mailbox, the next driveway, the next car was going to be it for him. He needed a phone and maybe a place to spend the night. By morning, he figured his ankle would feel better and he'd be able to get Lucille going somehow.

Hobbling along, pain shooting up his calf and down into his foot, Nate thought this was not exactly where he'd planned for his drive to take him.

Frankie caught the burning smell first and raced for the oven.

She'd been so distracted trying to clean pears for poaching that she'd forgotten all about the chicken she'd put in to cook.

When she opened the oven door, smoke poured out and she grabbed two folded side towels for the evacuation. Holding the roasting pan away from her body, as if the thing was radioactive, she threw it down on the counter.

The sound of a pot on the stove boiling over drowned out most of her curses.

"That don't look right," George said.

Frankie let her head fall forward, trying to keep from cursing again. The temptation was nearly irresistible, especially when he followed up with, "Maybe you should try that one more time."

Joy rushed into the kitchen from the dining room in mid-sentence. "The Littles, that couple whose bureau wouldn't open when they went to unpack, they want their dinner now. They've been waiting for forty-five minutes and—oh."

Frankie took a deep breath. Even if the Littles hadn't been rude as hell about the bureau, the lumpy pillows on the bed, the cleanliness of the windows and the fact there were wire hangers in the closet, she didn't see how she could serve them the desecrated carcass.

But now what? If White Caps was closer to civilization, she would have called for take-out from some other restaurant in the first place rather than take a chance on her cooking skills. Deep in the Adirondacks, though, the closest food emporium with anything ready to eat was the Bait Shoppe.

Although feeding the Littles night crawlers disguised as gourmet cuisine had some appeal.

“What are we going to do?” Joy asked.

Frankie reached over to turn off the oven and saw that she’d put the thing on broil, not bake. Of all the stupid mistakes...

“Frankie?”

She could feel Joy and George staring at her and to avoid their eyes, she looked down at the chicken. Her mind went blank. She was aware of a humming in her ears and that was about it. Except for her feet. She could feel them pounding inside the ancient running shoes she had on, as if someone had a vise to her toes.

How old were those shoes, she wondered idly. Five years?

“Frankie?”

She looked up at her sister whose face was wide open. Joy was ready for direction. Ready to be saved.

God, what she wouldn’t give to be able to look at someone with that kind of expectant hope.

“Yeah, okay,” she murmured. “Let me think.”

Like a tired lawnmower, her brain started to churn again. Options, they needed options. What else was in the meat locker? Only big cuts. And the freezer—no, there was no time to defrost anything. Leftovers. What could she bash together out of—

The sound of someone pounding on the back door brought her head around.

Joy looked to the noise and then back at her.

“Answer it,” Frankie said, heading for the walk-in

refrigerator. “George, take the Littles more bread.”

She was searching the shelves and seeing nothing that offered a solution when her sister let out a startled hello.

Frankie looked over her shoulder and lost her train of thought.

A man the size of a barn had walked into the White Caps kitchen.

God, he was as big as George, although not built the same. Definitely not built like George. This guy was hefty where you wanted a man to be: in the shoulders, in the arms. Not in the stomach.

And he was almost too handsome to look at. Wearing a black leather jacket and carrying a beat-up backpack on one shoulder, he looked like a drifter but carried himself as if he knew exactly where he was. He had thick dark hair that was on the long side and his face was stunning, though it seemed as if it belonged on someone else. His features were a little too patrician to be attached to a man dressed the way he was.

But his eyes—his eyes were what really stood out. They were extraordinary—dark as the night, deep set, with thick lashes.

And they were totally focused on her sister.

Given how slight she was, Joy looked like a child standing in front of him with her head tilted up. And Frankie knew exactly the kind of resplendent astonishment that would be showing on her sister’s face, so it was no wonder the man looked poleaxed. Any guy worth his testosterone would be snared by that expression alone, much less the fact that it was shining out

of such a garden of female delights.

Great. Just what she needed, some tourist lost and looking for directions. Or worse, a wanderer looking for work. She could barely keep Joy and George on the straight and narrow. The last thing she needed was another big lug kicking around.

“Hey there, Angel,” the man said. A bemused expression was tinting his handsome features as if he’d never seen anything like the girl standing in front of him.

“My name is Joy, actually.” Even though Frankie couldn’t see it, she heard the smile on her sister’s face.

Flattening her lips, Frankie decided it was time to get involved. Before the stranger melted onto the damn floor.

“Can we help you?” she said sharply.

The man frowned, looked over at her and the force of those eyes hit her like a gust of wind. She swallowed through a tight throat. There was nothing dim-witted or slow about him, she realized. He was downright shrewd as he scanned her from head to foot.

As a flush came up into her face, she reminded herself that she had dinner to get ready, a staff, such as it was, to motivate, a business to run. Unlike her little sister, she didn’t have the luxury of staring up into some man’s face for days on end.

Although, jeez, what a face that was.

“Well?” she said.

“My car broke down about two miles back.” He gestured over one shoulder. “I need to use a phone.”

So he was headed through town. Good.

“There’s one back in my office. I’ll show you the way.” She shut the door to the walk-in.

“Thanks.” As he stepped forward, he sniffed and grimaced. When he caught sight of the desecrated chicken, he laughed. “So your chef moonlights as an arsonist? Or is it the other way around?”

Frankie found herself measuring his carotid artery and thinking things that could lead to her arrest. While he was making fun of her failure, he was wasting time she didn’t have to spare.

She was holding herself in check and about to lead him out of the kitchen when the door from the dining room swung open. George came back with a full breadbasket in his hand, looking like he was on the verge of tears.

“They’re hungry. Really hungry, Frankie,” he said, staring down at his shoes. “And the Littles don’t want any more bread.”

She tightened her lips in a grim line again. Considering what those two entitled big mouths had tried to do to her over the various inadequacies of their room, she could only imagine what they’d done to George.

Which was totally unfair, she thought. The poor man didn’t deserve to be the salad course. It wasn’t his fault she’d burned the entrée.

“I tried to tell them it wouldn’t be long,” he said.

“I know, George. I know. Why don’t you go get a cookie,

okay?” She went over and stared at the chicken, willing it into edible condition while George put the basket down and headed for the pantry.

She picked up a knife and thought she could salvage something. Cut off the black skin, maybe. But then what?

She heard a thud and realized that the stranger had thrown his backpack down on the stainless steel island next to her. Next, he tore off his jacket and tossed it across the room where it landed beautifully on a chair.

Frankie glanced over at the faded black T-shirt he was wearing. It was tight on him, leaving little to the imagination. To get away from the view of his chest, she looked up, way up. His eyes weren't black after all, they were hazel. Dark green with flecks of yellow.

And they were incredibly attractive, she thought. Could probably melt paint off a car door if they looked at you with passion.

She shook her head to clear it and then wondered why he was crowding her space.

“Excuse me,” she said, holding her ground. “The phone’s through that door and take a right into the office. Oh, and don’t mind the water.”

The man frowned. And then nudged her out of the way until he was standing in front of the chicken.

She was too dumbfounded to respond as he reached into the pack and pulled out a leather package. With a deft flip of the

hand, it unrolled to reveal half a dozen knives that gleamed.

Frankie jumped back, thinking she might be the one who needed the phone. To call the police.

“How many?” he said in a voice like a drill sergeant.

“I beg your—”

His eyes were sharp, his tone bored. “How. Many.”

Frankie was aware that no one in the room was moving. Joy was frozen to the spot near the dining room door, George had stopped with the cookie halfway on a return trip to his mouth. They were obviously waiting for her to explode.

She looked at the chicken and then back at the man who by now had picked up a long knife and was poised over the carcass. With that tool in his hand, he was all business.

“You’re a cook?” she asked.

“No, a blacksmith.”

As she stared up at him, the challenge in those hazel eyes was as clear as the bind she was in.

She had a choice. Rely on her skills, which had already resulted in the incineration of a sizable hunk of protein. Or take a gamble on this stranger and his flashy set of knives.

“Two parties of two. One six top,” she said briskly.

“Okay, here’s what I’m going to need.” He looked over at her sister and when he spoke next, his voice was back to being gentle. “Angel, honey, I need you to take one of those pots over there and put it on the gas with two cups of water in it.”

Joy leaped into service.

“George, is that your name?” the man asked. George nodded, happier now that the tension had dispersed and his cookie was finished. “I want you to pick up that head of lettuce and run it under the cold water, stroking each leaf like it was a cat. You got it?”

George beamed and started on his job. By this time, Joy had filled the pot and put it on a burner.

The stranger started in with the chicken, peeling off the skin with deft movements of his fingers and the knife. He worked with such speed and confidence, she was momentarily captivated.

“Now, Angel—” back with the soft voice “—I want you to bring me a pound of butter, some cream, three eggs and all the curry powder you can find. And do you have any frozen vegetables?”

Frankie cut in, feeling ignored. “We’ve got fresh Brussels sprouts, broccoli—”

“Angel, I need something small. Peas? Cubed carrots?”

“We’ve got corn, I think,” Joy said enthusiastically.

“Good. Bring it over and get some twine.”

Frankie stepped back, feeling more panicked now than when things were disorganized and she had no options.

She should be doing something, she thought.

George came back with the lettuce and Frankie was impressed. Chuck, the former cook, had never been able to get him to do anything right, but here he was with perfectly cleaned romaine leaves.

“Good job, George, that’s perfect.” The stranger handed George a knife. “Now cut it up in strips as wide as your thumb. But do not use your thumb to measure. It doesn’t have to be exact. Do it across from me so I can watch you, okay?”

Joy came up to him with the bag of corn and the twine. She was smiling, so eager to please. “Do I put the corn in the water?”

“No.” He lifted his left leg. “Tie it on to my ankle. The damn thing’s killing me.”

Chapter Two

Less than ten minutes later, Frankie took out the salads. They had a dressing on them that the man had whipped up out of some spices, olive oil and lemon juice. George, bless his heart, had cut up the crisp lettuce perfectly and had triumphed with the strips of red, yellow and orange peppers as well.

By this time, the local diners had left because they had perfectly good kitchens of their own to go home to, but the B & B's guests were like zoo animals they were so hungry. She had no idea what the stuff tasted like, but figured the Littles and the other couple were so hypoglycemic they probably wouldn't have cared if she'd served them dog food.

After she put the plates down in front of them, the Littles glared at her as they stabbed at the salad.

"Glad you finally got around to it," Mr. Little snapped. "What were you doing, growing the leaves back there?"

She gave him and his anemic, stressed-out wife a frozen smile, glad she hadn't sent George or Joy out. She was bolting back for the kitchen when she heard the man say, "My God. This is... edible."

Great, Chef Wonderful got the raw veggies right. But what about the chicken?

As she pushed through the kitchen door, she wondered why she was being so critical of a guy who seemed to be saving

her bacon, but she didn't dwell on the thought. She was too astonished at the sight of George laying out a row of his favorite oatmeal and raisin cookies on a sheet of cheesecloth.

The stranger was talking, in that calm voice.

"And then you're going to hold them over the boiling water when we're ready. Okay, Georgie?" he was saying. "So they get soft."

All Frankie could do was watch in amazement as the man, in a whirling dervish of motion, created dinner out of disaster. Twenty minutes later, he was spooning onto White Caps plates a curried, creamed chicken mixture that smelled out of this world.

"Now, it's your turn, Angel. Come on, follow me."

As he worked his way down a row of four plates, Joy was right behind him, sprinkling on raisins and almonds. Then the man packed couscous into a series of coffee cups and tapped out the mounds onto each plate. A sprig of parsley was put on top and then the man called, "Pick up."

Frankie sprang into action, scooping up the plates at once, as she'd done since she started waiting tables when she was a teenager.

"Joy, you clear," she called out.

Joy swept into the dining room with her, clearing the salads as Frankie slid the entrées in place.

It was over two hours later. Against all odds, the guests left happy and raving about the food, even the godforsaken Littles. The kitchen was cleaned up. And Joy and George were positively

glowing with the good job they'd done under the stranger's direction.

Frankie was the only one out of sorts.

She should have been falling on her knees to thank the man with the fancy knives and the quick hands. She should have been delirious with relief. Instead, she was crabby. Having always been the savior, it was hard to accept a demotion in favor of a man she didn't know, who'd come out of nowhere.

And who still had a bag of frozen corn tied to his ankle.

The cook finished wiping off one of his knives and leaned under the overhead track lights to examine the blade carefully. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he slid it into the leather roll and tied up the bundle. When he put it into the backpack, she realized he'd never gotten to make his call.

"You want to use the phone now?" Her voice was gruff because what she needed to do was thank him, but gratitude was something she was rusty with. She was used to giving orders, not praising initiative, and the role reversal felt uncomfortable.

And maybe she was just a little envious of how easily he'd pulled everything together.

Which was a perfectly ridiculous way to feel.

When he looked at her, his eyes narrowed. Considering how relaxed he was with Joy and George, Frankie figured he must not like her very much. The idea irked her even though she knew there was no reason to care what his opinion of her was. She wasn't going to see him again. Didn't even know his name, as a

matter of fact.

Instead of answering her, he looked over at Joy who had one foot on the stairs that led to the servants' quarters. "Good night, Angel. You did a really good job tonight."

Frankie wondered how he'd known that Joy was yawning and about to disappear up to bed when he'd been focusing on his knives.

Joy's charming smile flashed across the kitchen. "Thanks, Nate."

And that was how Frankie learned his name.

Nate zipped his pack closed and regarded the woman staring up at him evenly.

Behind her vague hostility, he could see exhaustion lurking. She looked worn down and had the drooping mouth of someone who had barked too many orders to too many people in an enterprise that was going under.

He'd met a lot of managers just like her over the years.

Failure was everywhere around the White Caps Bed & Breakfast. From what he'd seen outside, in the kitchen and through one quick look into the dining room, the place was a ball gown with sweat stains, a once beautiful mansion on the long fade into a junk pile.

And the business was taking this woman down with it.

How old was she? Early thirties? She probably looked older than she was and he tried to imagine what was under the long

bangs and sensible glasses, the loose white waitstaff shirt and standard issue black pants.

She'd probably been full of hope when she'd bought the old ark and he imagined that optimism had lasted only until it became clear that servicing rich weekenders was a thankless job, a low-praise zone in the extreme. And then the first fix-it bill had probably come for a boiler or a roof or major piece of equipment, giving her a sense of how much old charm cost.

As if on cue, a wheeze came out of the walk-in. The noise was followed by something close to a cough, like there was a little old man dying in the compressor.

He watched while she closed her eyes as if deliberately ignoring the sounds.

If Nate was a betting man, he'd guess in one year White Caps would either be under new management or condemned by the state.

Her eyes flipped open. "So. The phone?"

She was definitely a fighter, though. Tough as nails, maybe even prepared to go down with the ship, although where that trip would take her he couldn't imagine. More debt? Less sleep?

Or maybe she was just tending the pile of wood for her husband. Nate eyed her ring finger and didn't see anything on it.

"Hello? Nate? Or whatever you call yourself. Use the phone or move out. It's closing time."

"Okay. Thanks," he said, turning around and heading in the direction she'd pointed to earlier that evening. He walked into a

darkened office and frowned when his feet made a sloppy noise, as if there were water on the floor.

He hit the light switch.

Good Lord, the place was soaked. He looked up at the ceiling, seeing a gaping hole that exposed pipes old enough to have been laid by God Himself.

Shaking his head, he reached for the phone, thinking he'd be lucky to get a dial tone. When he did, he punched in his buddy Spike's cell phone number. He and Spike had been friends since they'd gone through the Culinary Institute of America as classmates and they'd decided to buy a restaurant together. Their business interest was behind Nate's trip. After four months of searching, they couldn't seem to find what they wanted in their price range in Manhattan so they were looking at other cities. Spike had found a place for them to consider in Montreal, but Nate wasn't getting his hopes up. He didn't think the situation was going to be any better over the border in Canada.

He absolutely believed they could make it as owners. Between his skills at the stove and Spike's masterful work with pastries and breads, they had the fundamentals covered. But money was growing tight. Because Nate was living off the savings he was going to put toward their down payment, he was thinking it might be time to get a job for the summer and suspend the search at least until the fall. By then, new prospects would surely be on the market.

When he hung up with Spike, he looked toward the woman

waiting in the doorway.

“What happened to your cook?” he asked.

“He quit tonight.”

Nate nodded, thinking that was the way of the kitchen world. You never got tenure as a chef but the trade-off was you didn't have to give notice.

She began to tap her foot impatiently, but he wasn't in a hurry. Taking a look around he saw a desk, a computer, a couple of chairs, some closet doors. There was nothing particularly interesting about the room until he got to the bookcases. To her left, he saw an old photograph of a young family smiling into the camera. Two parents, three children, clothes from the seventies.

He went over for a closer look but when he picked it up off the shelf, she snatched the frame out of his hand.

“Do you mind?”

They were standing close and he became curiously aware of her. In spite of the bangs and the Poindexter glasses, the baggy clothes and the bags under her eyes, his body started to heat up. Her eyes widened and he wondered if she felt it, too—the odd current that seemed to run between them.

“You looking for someone in your kitchen?” he asked abruptly.

“I don't know,” she said, clipping the words short.

“You sure needed someone tonight. You'd have been up the creek if I hadn't walked through your door.”

“How about this, I don't know if I need you.” She put the

photograph back, laying it face down on the shelf.

“You think I’m not qualified?” He smiled when she remained silent, figuring she probably hated the fact that he’d saved her. “Tell me, just how did I fail to impress you tonight?”

“You did fine but that doesn’t mean I’m going to hire you.”

He shook his head. “Fine? Man, you have a hard time with compliments, don’t you?”

“I don’t waste energy playing spit and polish with egos. Especially healthy ones.”

“So you prefer being around the depressed?” he retorted mildly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nate shrugged. “Your staff’s so beaten down it’s a wonder they can put one foot in front of the other. That poor girl was ready to work herself to death tonight just for a kind word and George soaked up a little praise like he hadn’t heard any in a month.”

“Who made you an expert on those two?” Her hands were on her hips now as she looked up at him.

“It’s just obvious, lady. If you took your blinders off once in a while you might see what you’re doing to them.”

“What I’m doing to them? I’ll tell you what I’m doing to them.” She jabbed a finger at him. “I’m keeping a roof over Joy’s head and George out of a group home. So you can back off with the judgments.”

As she glared at him, he wondered why he was arguing with her. The last thing the woman needed was another battle.

Besides, why did he care?

“Look, ah—why don’t we start over,” he said. “Can we call a truce here?”

He stuck his hand out, aware that he’d just decided to take a job he wasn’t being offered. But hell, he needed to spend the summer somewhere and she clearly needed the help. And White Caps was as good as any other place, even if it was sinking. At least he could have some fun and try out some new things he’d been thinking of without the food critics chomping at him.

When she just stared at him, he prompted her by looking down at his hand.

She tucked her arms into her body. “I think you better go.”

“Are you always this unreasonable?”

“Good night.”

He dropped his hand. “Let me get this straight. You have no cook. You’re looking at one who’s willing to work. But you’d rather shoot yourself in the foot just because you don’t like me?” When she kept looking at him, buttoned up tight, he shook his head. “Damn, woman. You ever think this place might be going under because of you?”

The strained silence that followed was the calm before the storm. He knew it because she started to shake and he had a vague thought that he should duck.

But what came at him wasn’t angry words or a slap or a right hook.

She started to cry. From behind the lenses, he saw tears well

and then fall.

“Oh, God,” he pushed a hand through his hair. “I didn’t mean —”

“You don’t know me,” she said hoarsely and, somehow, regally. Even through her tears, she faced him squarely as if she had nothing to hide, as if the crying jag was a temporary aberration, nothing that spelled the end of her inner strength. “You don’t know what’s going on here. You don’t—don’t know what we’ve been through. So you can just put your pack on and start walking.”

He reached out for her, not sure what he would do. Not take her in his arms, certainly. But he had some vague idea he could... pat her on the shoulder. Or something.

God, how lame was that.

Nate wasn’t at all surprised when she shrugged him off and left him alone in her wet mess of an office.

In the pantry, surrounded by canned vegetables, bags of George’s cookies and jars full of condiments, Frankie pulled herself together. Wiping her eyes with the palms of her hands, she sniffled a couple of times and then tugged her shirt into place.

She couldn’t believe she’d cracked like that. In front of some stranger.

It was better than crying in front of Joy, sure, but not by much.

Boy, he’d nailed her vulnerable point. The idea that White Caps was failing because of her was her biggest fear and the mere

thought of it was enough to make her start tearing up all over again.

God, what was she going to tell Joy if they had to leave? Where would they live? And how could she earn enough to take care of both her sister and Grand-Em?

What would she tell Alex?

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the shelves.

Alex.

She wondered where her brother was. Last she'd heard from him, he'd been training for the America's Cup off the Bahamas, but that had been back in February. As a competitive sailor, he traveled all over the world, and tracking his movements would have required a good map and a lot of patience.

Neither of which she had.

Considering the terrible events on the lake, which had left the three of them orphans when Frankie had just turned twenty-two, the fact that Alex lived on the sea was a perennial source of heartache. Like all families of sailors, however, she'd learned to live with the fear and work around it.

You can do a lot of things if you have to, she thought. She'd turned into Wonder Woman thanks to getting trapped by fate.

An overworked, cranky Wonder Woman maybe, but she was still doing it all.

Frankie took a deep breath thinking, just once, she'd like to share the load. Have someone else make a decision. Take a direction. Lead.

She felt her shoulders sinking toward the floor as she tried to imagine Joy doing anything other than float around. George knew when he needed to eat and when it was time to sleep and not much else. Grand-Em thought it was still 1953.

But then, with the vividness of a movie clip, she had a vision of Nate's hands flying around the chicken she'd burned.

He was right. She did need a cook and he was, evidently, available.

And the man was good, she thought.

There was also the reality that there wasn't a long line of people applying for the job.

Wheeling around, Frankie burst out of the pantry, prepared to run after him, but she jerked to a halt. He'd been waiting, leaning casually against the island.

"I didn't want to leave until I knew you were okay," he explained.

"Do you want the job?"

He cocked an eyebrow, apparently unfazed by her turnaround. "Yeah. I'll stay until Labor Day."

"I can't pay you much, but then again, there won't be much you'll have to do."

He shrugged. "Money's not important to me."

At least he had one good trait, she thought, naming what sounded like a pathetically small salary.

"And I can offer you room and board." She straightened her shoulders. "But I want to be clear about something."

“Let me guess, you’re the boss.”

“Well, yes. More importantly, stay away from my sister.”

He frowned. “Angel?”

“Her name is Joy. And she’s not interested.”

His laugh was short. “Don’t you think that should be her choice, not yours?”

“No, I don’t. Do we understand each other?”

A small smile played over his lips, but she couldn’t divine what he thought was so amusing.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Yeah, I understand you perfectly.” He extended his hand and raised that brow again. “You going to touch me this time?”

It was a taunt, a challenge.

And Frankie never backed down from anything.

She grabbed his hand like it was a door handle, in a tough grip meant to tell him that she was all business. But at the contact, she lost her pretensions. A shiver of awareness prickled across every square inch of her body and all she could do was blink up at him in confusion.

His eyes narrowed, the lids falling down over that fascinating spectrum of color. She felt him squeeze her hand and had a ludicrous image of him pulling her forward so he could kiss her.

God, what he could do to her, she thought, if they were naked and in a bed together—

Frankie stepped back quickly, thinking maybe she needed to get hit with some more water.

“Remember what I said,” she ground out. “Don’t go near my sister.”

He scratched the side of his neck casually and put his hands into his pockets. She had a feeling that he didn’t take orders well, but couldn’t have cared less. He was working for her, which meant she called the shots. Period. End of story.

And the last thing Frankie needed to worry about was Joy getting her heart broken. Or being left pregnant and alone at the end of the summer. God knew, they couldn’t afford another dependent.

“We’re clear?” she prompted.

He didn’t answer but she knew he understood her by the way his jaw was locked.

“Then I’ll show you to your room.” She walked around, flipping off lights, then headed for the back stairs.

When the Moorehouses had been rich, before generations of dandies enjoying the good life had drained the bank accounts and caused the stocks, jewelry and the best of the art to be sold off, the family had stayed in the big bedrooms in the front of the house that faced the lake. Now that they were the servants, they stayed where a fleet of maids and butlers had once slept. The staff wing, which stretched behind the mansion, had low ceilings, pine floors and no ornamentation. It was hot in the summer, drafty in the winter and the plumbing groaned.

Well, that last one was actually happening in the rest of the house by now, too.

At the head of the stairs, the corridor went off in both directions and there was no question where the new cook was going to sleep. Frankie didn't relish the idea of him being close to her, but at least if he was she could keep an eye on him. She headed left, taking them away from Joy's room.

As Frankie pushed open a door, she figured he'd be untroubled by the sparse accommodations. He looked as if he might have slept in cars and on park benches on occasion, so a bed was no doubt luxury enough.

"I'll go get your sheets," she said. "You and I are sharing a bathroom. It's right next door."

She went to the linen closet, which was down near Joy's end of the house. On the way back, she heard the man speaking.

"Actually, ma'am, I'm the new cook."

Oh, God, not Grand-Em.

Frankie hurried up and burst through the door, ready to peel her grandmother away from the stranger. The idea of insulating him from her family was an impulse she didn't question.

"Cook?" Grand-Em looked up at him imperiously. "We have three cooks working here already. Why ever did Papa take you on?"

Grand-Em was tiny and ornate, a five-foot-two-inch waif dressed in a flowing, faded ball gown. Her long white hair, which hadn't been cut in decades, fell down her back and she had the unlined face of someone who had never been outside without a parasol. Next to Nate she looked as sturdy as a china figurine.

“Grand-Em—”

Frankie was astonished as Nate cut her off with a sharp hand. Bending at the waist, with his head properly bowed, he said, “Madam, it is my pleasure to be of service to you. My name is Nathaniel, should you need anything.”

Grand-Em considered him thoughtfully and headed for the door.

“I like him,” she said to no one in particular as she left.

Frankie sighed and watched her grandmother drift down the hall. The dementia that had curdled that once-active mind was a terrible thief. And to miss someone, even though you saw them daily, was an odd sort of hell.

“Who is she?” Nate asked softly.

Frankie snapped to attention, unsure how long she’d leaned against the doorjamb with the towels and sheets in her hands.

“My grandmother,” she said. “Here are your linens and there are some toiletry packets in the bathroom. Washer and dryer are outside to the right, in the closet. I’m across the hall if you need anything.”

As she gave the pile of whites over to him, she made the mistake of looking into his eyes. There was intrigue in them, as if he were interested in her family.

Knowing it would sound downright rude to warn him off of Grand-Em, too, Frankie kept her mouth shut as she turned away.

“I’ve got a question,” he said.

“What?” She didn’t look back at him, just stared at the pale

pine floorboards as they stretched out down the hall.

“What’s your name? Other than Boss, of course.” The last bit wasn’t mocking, more affectionate.

She’d have preferred he made fun of her.

“I’m Frankie.”

“Short for Frances?”

“That’s the one. Good night.”

She walked across to her room and when she went to close the door, she saw he was standing in his own doorway, watching her. One arm was raised above his head with the elbow propped on the jamb. The other was balancing the linens on his hip.

He was a very sexy man, she thought, measuring his hooded eyes for an instant.

“Good night, Frances.” The words were like a caress and she looked down at herself, thinking he had to be crazy. Her shirt had salad dressing spilled on it, her hair was a stringy mess by now and her pants fit her like two trash bags that had been sewn together.

She didn’t reply and shut her door quickly, leaning against it and feeling her heart pound. She let her head fall back and hit the wood.

It had been so long since a man had looked at her as something other than a repository for complaints, a source of money for work he’d done or as someone who’d do his thinking for him. When was the last time she’d felt like a real woman instead of a shell that held in boiling anxiety and not much else?

David, she thought with a shock. She had to go all the way back to David.

Frankie tilted her body around until her cheek laid against the door panel.

How had time passed so fast? Day to day, dealing with the fight to keep White Caps alive, she'd been unaware that nearly a decade of her life had been eaten up.

For some stupid reason she felt like crying again, so she forced herself to cross the shallow length of her bedroom, undressing as she went. She was exhausted but she needed a shower. Throwing on a thick robe, she poked her head out into the hall.

The coast seemed clear. Nate's door was shut and she didn't hear any running water. Hightailing it to the bathroom, she jumped under the hot water, shampooed her hair, soaped herself down and was drying off in under six minutes.

As she scooted back to her room, she could have done without the stress of having to share a bathroom with the new cook. But it was sure as hell a lot better than having those hazel eyes devouring her sister.

Chapter Three

Nate woke up, feeling like someone was tickling the side of his neck. He brushed his hand over the spot a few times and then cursed the irritation.

Cracking open one eye, he wasn't particularly surprised by the fact that he didn't recognize the room he'd slept in. He wasn't sure whether he was in New York or New Mexico or what he'd agreed to do to earn the bed under him, either.

He sat up, yawned and stretched his arms out until his shoulder cracked and began to loosen up. It wasn't a bad room. Simple pine dresser, two small windows, squat ceiling. Its main selling points were that it was clean and quiet. Bed was fully functional. He'd slept like a baby.

Nate leaned forward, looking out of a window. In the distance, through a hedge, he could see a lake.

And everything came back as he pictured a woman with brunette hair and heavy framed glasses.

Frankie.

He laughed softly and tried to push off whatever was still on his neck.

Man, that was one frustrating woman but damn, he liked her. That lockjaw tenacity and take-no-prisoners, my-way-or-the-highway attitude piqued his interest something crazy. All that strength and defiance made him want to get under her hard-

driving exterior. Go behind those glasses. Take off those baggy clothes of hers and let her unleash her aggression all over his body.

He shook his head, remembering the vehemence with which she'd warned him off Angel. There was no need to worry there. If he'd seemed taken by the girl when he'd first walked in the kitchen, it was because her fragile beauty was unusual, not because he was attracted to it. In fact, the strawberry blonde made him think about food, not sex. He wanted to sit her down and feed her pasta until she put on a few pounds.

No, Angel wasn't for him. He liked women, not girlie girls, and Frankie's kind of strength, even if it could get annoying, was a virtue he couldn't get enough of.

He wondered what it would take to loosen her up so he had a chance with her. She didn't strike him as the drinking kind, somehow. Much too self-controlled. And she probably wasn't into jewelry because she didn't wear any of it. Flowers? Having faced off her level stare, tender blooms seemed frivolous.

Maybe she wouldn't mind a good, hard kiss or two.

Nate let out his breath in a whistle as he imagined the possibilities and swung his legs over the side. Putting his feet on the cool floor, he scratched the side of his neck and the delirious relief instantly made him suspicious. He stood up, felt his ankle check in with a shot of pain, and limped over to the mirror. As he leaned in, he cursed. Running from his left ear down to above his collarbone, there were three rows of tiny blisters, a little plow

field of misery.

Poison ivy.

Those leafy greens cushioning his fall had seemed innocent enough, but he should have known better. In the Adirondacks, the stuff grew like a carpet at the sides of roads and trails. He was lucky that most of him had been covered by the jacket and none of the leaves had connected with his face, but it was still going to be a pain in the ass to deal with.

He grabbed a towel and hit the bathroom. Frankie had mentioned there were two parties staying overnight, so he figured he better hustle downstairs to make breakfast. Ten minutes later, wearing the same clothes he'd had on the day before and with his hair damp, he headed for the kitchen.

The first thing he did was crack open the walk-in refrigerator and take inventory. There wasn't much. Eggs and milk, generic cheeses like cheddar and Monterey Jack. Some fresh veggies of the diner variety like iceberg lettuce, cucumbers, and carrots. As he was heading out, he saw a lone box of fresh blueberries.

At least breakfast would be covered, he thought, grabbing the carton.

As for the rest of the meals, he was in trouble. If he were cooking for a bunch of five-year-olds, he was good to go because he could whip up a fleet of grilled cheese sandwiches. But those guests snoozing away in the front bedrooms were not going to be satisfied with kiddy chow. He was going to have to order some supplies, nothing flashy, but enough to make some real food. He

needed feta and goat cheese, some cilantro and scallions, heads of cauliflower and cabbage. Artichokes.

He went next door to the meat locker, figuring he'd find a graveyard. Instead, there was a good-looking side of beef, a hefty leg of lamb, and a turkey. That all gave him hope.

Nate resisted scratching the side of his neck and took the cardboard box over to the stove. It was close to 6:00 a.m. so there was plenty of time to make some killer blueberry muffins. A half hour later, he'd just taken the first batch out of the oven when he heard footsteps. Frankie's sister appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

He smiled. "Well, good morning there, Angel."

"Those look wonderful," she said, coming over to the muffins. She leaned down and breathed deeply.

"You should try one."

Joy shook her head. "They're for the guests."

"This is only the first batch. And you look like you could use breakfast." His eyes flickered over the bathrobe that hung off her like a tent.

She brought the lapels closer together and crossed her arms over her chest, as if trying to conjure bulk out of the terry cloth.

"Is there some way I can help you?" she asked, as if to distract him.

"You can make the coffee. Were the tables set last night?"

"No. But I can do that, too."

"Great." Nate frowned, moving his head around and wincing.

That itching was going to drive him nuts.

“Are you okay?”

“For a guy whose neck is on fire, I’m fine.” He pointed to the left side. “Poison ivy.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.” Joy came in for a closer look.

“Can’t say I’m crazy for it myself.”

Frankie stretched, feeling unusually well-rested, and glanced at the clock.

“Aw, damn it!”

She’d forgotten to set the alarm the night before and it was now nearly a quarter of seven. Moving fast, she leaped out of bed and changed into a fresh white shirt and a clean pair of her standard black pants. She needed to get prepped for breakfast, the tables hadn’t been set and there was a vegetable delivery due soon that would have to be accepted and inventoried.

She was pulling back her hair and twisting it into a ball when she froze. There was a delicious smell in the air, something that seemed to suggest muffins or scones.

Nate must be up already.

Frankie moved even faster.

She flew down the stairs and was running into the kitchen when she stopped dead in her tracks.

In the shallow space between the stove and the island, the cook and her sister were standing close enough to be kissing, his head bent down low, Joy balancing up on her tiptoes as if she were

whispering something in his ear. Was her sister touching him? On the neck? Wearing nothing but a bathrobe?

“Sorry to interrupt,” Frankie said loudly. “But maybe we should be thinking about breakfast?”

Joy stepped away from the man with a blush, while Nate looked over calmly.

“Breakfast is ready,” he said, pointing to a tray of beautiful muffins. “The guests aren’t up yet.”

“Joy? Would you mind giving me and Mr.—” she paused, not even knowing his last name “—ah—him a minute alone?”

Her sister left the room as Frankie glared at Nate. “What part of stay away don’t you understand?”

He turned and opened the oven, inspecting what was inside. “You always this cheerful in the morning?”

“Answer me.”

“How’d you like some coffee?”

“Damn it, you want to tell me what you were doing with my sister?”

“Not particularly.”

The more forceful she came at him, the calmer he seemed to get and irritation fanned the brushfire in her chest. “I thought we had an agreement. You stay away from her or you get out.”

He laughed and shook his head while reaching for some side towels. He began folding them up into thick squares. “Just what do you think I was going to do? Take her down on this floor, rip open that robe of hers and—”

Frankie squeezed her eyes shut and cut him off. “There’s no reason to be crude.”

“No reason for you to be worried, either.”

She looked at him, thinking she wasn’t about to fall for the denial. When it came to women, a man who looked like him was probably about as trustworthy as a thief facing an open door. And, if he was capable of melting even her with those hazel eyes, Joy wouldn’t stand a chance.

God, what had she brought into their house? And she hadn’t checked his references...What if he was a convicted felon? A serial rapist?

Frankie began to imagine all sorts of terrible, America’s Most Wanted scenarios with her sister as the victim. If anything ever happened to Joy, Frankie would never forgive herself—

“Poison ivy,” he said dryly.

She forced herself to halt the spiral of paranoia. “What?”

“She was looking at my poison ivy. See?” He pointed to the side of his neck and she squinted at him. “You can come closer, I don’t bite. Unless I’m asked to.”

In spite of his half smile, Frankie sidled up to him and leaned in. Sure enough, there were the telltale streaks of blisters running up his skin to just under his hairline.

“That must itch terribly,” she said, by way of offering an apology.

“Yeah, it’s no fun.” He turned back to the stove and took out another tin of the most gorgeous, golden-topped muffins she’d

ever seen. The smell was something north of heaven.

“You want one?” he asked. “I tried to get your sister to have a go at them but she shut me down.”

He took a muffin out and pulled it apart even though it steamed with heat. Spreading butter on the inside, which quickly melted and glistened, he offered her half.

She paused and then took the piping hot piece. Unlike him, she had to shuffle it around in her hands, and when she put some in her mouth, she had to cool it off by breathing over it.

She chewed a little and then closed her eyes so she could savor the taste.

He laughed with satisfaction. “Not bad, huh?”

He was one hell of a cook, she thought. But she was still going to check his references.

“They’re—ah, wonderful.” She paused. “Listen, I’ll need the name and number of your most recent employer. And your last name. I forgot to ask last night.”

“Walker. Last name is Walker.”

Frankie frowned, thinking she’d heard of the name somewhere. And no, not on Court TV.

Before she could ask about it, he said, “And the last joint I worked at was down in New York. La Nuit. Ask for Henri. He’ll give it to you straight.”

Frankie widened her eyes. Now, La Nuit she’d definitely heard of. It was one of those four-star restaurants that got featured in the glossy magazines the guests left behind in their rooms. How

had someone like him come to work in a place like that?

“Now, about supplies,” he said. “When do deliveries come?”

“Saturday and Wednesday noontime for veggies and meats. Dairy comes Mondays. Fridays also, if we need them to.”

They hadn’t for the past year.

“Great. What’s the number? Maybe I can catch the produce guy.”

“You want to talk with Stu?”

Nate frowned. “Yeah. Unless he’s a mind reader.”

“I do the ordering. Tell me what you want.”

“I won’t know that until I have a sense of what I can get.”

She gestured sharply over to the walk-ins. “You can get what’s already in there.”

There was a pause and then he crossed his arms over his sizable chest. “I thought you wanted me to be the cook.”

Facing off at him, Frankie found there was plenty of steel behind his laid-back facade—which made it seem a little more plausible that he could have worked in a place like La Nuit. “I do.”

“So let me take care of business.”

She was tempted to ask just whose kitchen he thought he was standing in, but took a deep breath instead.

“As you’ve so graciously pointed out, White Caps isn’t exactly thriving. I have to make sure we stick to the budget and that means I don’t want some guy in the kitchen throwing money out the door indiscriminately.”

Nate pointed to the dining room. “You want to put asses in those chairs? You want those guests to come back? Then you need to set good food on those tables, not serve stuff fit for a nursery school. You’ve got to spend money to make money, sweetheart.”

She laughed and eyed his well-worn clothes. “What would you know about money? Or running a restaurant, for that matter?”

He leaned in close and she stopped smiling. “You might want to dial down the attitude, considering you don’t know much about me. Other than the fact that you really need me over your stove.”

She could feel her eyes widen of their own accord. It was a new experience to have someone stand up to her and she took a step back as she collected herself.

“All I need to know is that you work for me. Which means you do what I say.”

He stared at her long and hard and she thought for a moment he was going to walk out. She had a flash of anxiety as she thought about last night’s chicken fiasco and what would have happened if he hadn’t shown up when he did. Still, she knew if he couldn’t take orders she didn’t want him in the kitchen. His theory about spending money was probably sound in a lot of situations but not when she had less than five thousand dollars in the checking account. Running a business that was teetering on the edge was a balancing act and that meant she had to know where every penny was. He could no doubt blow the whole wad on fancy stuff that would only go to waste, leaving them with

nothing to cover the food costs of the following week.

Or the plumber who was coming in an hour.

Frankie blew out her breath and noted his hand was creeping up his neck as he stared at her. “Look, why don’t you pull together a wish list and I’ll see what I can do, okay? And don’t scratch that neck. When I go to town this morning, I’ll get you some calamine lotion.”

Frankie turned away, thinking she had no more time to waste arguing. She had to try and locate some invoices in her damp office. And figure out where she was going to find the money for the plumber.

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