



**An Excerpt from Book One of the
Valentine Mysteries**

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Chapter One

I think I'm going to puke. Tess studied her face in the 19th century Louis XV style mirror in Asa Worthington's foyer. Pale but not green. Still the rolling in her stomach told her things could get worse. Why she'd let Daniel Showalter talk her into attending his uncle's dinner party she didn't know. It had disaster written all over it even before her stomach threatened to embarrass her in front of the town's most elite family.

Recently, Daniel's actions suggested he wanted more than friendship. Not that Daniel was a bad guy. He was handsome, down to earth and Tess loved his parents as if they were her own. But she was as committed to living as celibate of a life as one could get short of joining a convent. She'd given up on the idea of love ever after, preferring sensual delights of chocolate, Marvin Gaye tunes and Carine Gilson underwear instead.

But it wasn't Daniel's affection for her that threatened to ruin the night. It was his uncle. Asa Worthington was a volatile, intolerant, self-serving man whose gatherings usually involved patronizing or humiliating everyone in attendance. Even Asa's sister Helen found him so distasteful that she hadn't been to a family function in over twenty-years.

The night was proving worse than Tess anticipated when Daniel's cell phone rang calling him back to duty as a police detective just as they arrived. So she stood abandoned and stranded in the foyer hoping her lunch didn't reappear and mess up the beautiful Italian marble floor. The things one did in the name of friendship.

She pushed a tendril of chestnut hair out of her face and hoped that the glass of water the butler was bringing would settle her stomach until she could figure out how she was going to get home.

"You look beautiful."

Tess lifted her gaze to find a pair of brilliant blue-green eyes reflecting back at her through the mirror. She hadn't thought the night could get much worse. She'd been wrong.

Was it too much to hope to go through the rest of her life never seeing those eyes again or anyone else from her old life? After all, Jefferson Tavern, Virginia was a long way from Washington, D.C., not so much in distance as in social importance. There was no reason for him to be so far from home. Perhaps the man whose reflection she watched move toward her was an apparition. Maybe the mirror was one of those commonly found in historic homes in which ghosts appear through the reflection. The only problem with that idea was that most ghosts in Virginia were from the revolutionary or civil wars. This man was very modern.

So maybe her brain was as addled as her stomach and conjured up the vision. Her head *was* feeling a little foggy. The only way to find out for sure was to turn around and face him.

Gawd! He was even more stunning than she remembered. "Jack."

He grinned displaying a single dimple. "I was beginning to think you forgot who I was."

That was laughable. No one ever forgot Jack Valentine. Particularly women. Even a woman like Tess who'd given up on men. He was a romance novel's alpha male come to life; gorgeous, rich, arrogant, and yet somehow endearing. There was a time she would have liked to indulge her attraction to him. That time was long gone.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

His brows grew together. Clearly he expected a different reaction. He probably thought she'd throw herself at him like she did the last time they were together. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

He gave her an affable smile. "I'm doing well. Thanks for asking. You look good. Really good."

"Still a charmer, I see."

"You don't believe me?"

She gave a snort. He should have been a politician the way he could talk and make you feel it was genuine. She didn't look good compared to when she last saw him nearly three years ago. Aside from the fact that she felt like crypt keeper, she'd also put on ten pounds, which on a five foot three inch frame was significant. "I think you're being nice to an old friend."

"I'm glad to hear you still think of me as a friend. I was worried you were still mad about the last time we -"

"What are you doing here?" she asked again impatiently.

She saw a flash of annoyance on his face. It was so fast that she would have missed it if she wasn't staring at his mesmerizing eyes.

"Asa invited me."

"I didn't know you knew Asa."

"I don't very well. It's business."

"You're doing business with him?"

"Not yet. I probably won't." He shifted, moved closer. "Are you here alone?"

"No...Yes..."

One dark brow lifted.

"I came with someone, but he was called away," Tess clarified.

"Too bad for him."

"He'll be back."

"Too bad for me."

He was standing close, too close. He was studying her and she did her best to hold his

gaze without giving away her unease. Or worse, blushing. He didn't need to know that after all these years he still made her insides flip-flop.

"There you are!" Asa Worthington's booming voice echoed through the foyer followed by his immense body. "Appointed yourself the official greeter of beautiful women, eh?"

"Only this one," Jack said maintaining his gaze on Tess..

Asa laughed and like everything else about him it was large and loud. His blue eyes twinkled with delight as he reached out and slapped Jack on the back. "That's what I like about you! You see what you want and you go after it."

"Tess! You're here. Good. Where's Daniel?" Tom Showalter asked of his son as he came to stand next to Asa. The two men were complete opposites. Asa's presence in a room remained even after he left while Tom could go unnoticed in a crowd of two. He was average in every way from his lackluster mud-colored eyes, to thinning brown hair. It always struck her as odd that as different as they were, Asa and Tom were good friends. Perhaps having married Asa's sister, Helen helped. Or maybe it was that Tom was Asa's lawyer.

"He got called away as we got here," she said.

"Oh. Well hopefully he won't be long. I see you've met Jack Valentine," Tom said.

"Jack is thinking of expanding his business in this area in anticipation of a joint venture we're negotiating," Asa said. "He'll certainly want someone local to represent him when he does. If Ms. Madison is as good a lawyer as you say she is Tom, perhaps she'd be up to handling Jack here."

"I'd enjoy being handled by Ms. Madison," Jack said, his gaze still on her.

Tess' eyes grew large, then narrowed with suspicion. It wasn't unusual for Jack to be brazen. What was disturbing was that it was directed at her. "Have you ever been handled by a

woman Mr. Valentine?" she said with bravado she didn't feel.

A wicked smile spread on his face. "Not one like you."

Chapter Two

"Damn it's hot in here," Asa said with a look to Tess and then Jack. "Let's get a drink and move this party into the parlor."

Tess followed Asa with Jack and Tom behind her. Although she'd been to Asa's mansion before, she always marveled at the exquisiteness of his home. The Georgian styled structure was built in the late 1800's by Asa's great-great grandfather and it held many original pieces. With a fire to off-set the February chill, the room looked warm and inviting, but it couldn't quite overcome the stiff coolness that was the Worthington family.

"Where is Walter?" Asa asked in a clipped tone. An older gentleman looking like he stepped out of a 1930's whodunnit-novel complete with a black butler suit and white gloves appeared.

"There you are. Champagne for everyone," Asa said with a wave of his hand.

Walter made no acknowledgment of his boss. Instead he handed Tess a glass of ice water.

"Thank you."

Walter gave her a brief nod in response and then headed to the bar in the corner presumably to get the champagne.

"We're waiting for a few more people," Asa said. Despite the abundance of seating, everyone remained standing in the middle of the room. Ready to flee at a moment's notice, Tess thought.

"While we're waiting you can tell us what this dinner meeting is about," Jack said.

"In time, Jack. In time."

Jack's eyes narrowed and he looked as if he were going to press Asa.

"You've got a beautiful woman at your side who has been stood up by my nephew. Why

not take the time to enjoy the company?" Asa added.

Tess didn't much like being pimped out. She could only hope that Jack wouldn't take the bait.

He glanced her way. "Just don't draw this out too long, Asa."

Tess rolled her eyes.

"Finally," Asa said as Walter handed out flutes of golden bubbly. Tess passed on the champagne. She was beginning to feel even more wobbly and didn't need people to think she was drunk.

"More water, Ms. Madison?" Walter asked.

"No. Thank you."

"Stop flirting with the guests," Asa said.

Tess bristled at Asa's treatment of his butler. She looked to the others to see their reaction, but there was none. That's how it was, Tess reminded herself. Few people ever really looked at or noticed the help. Her own parents treated the servants more like furniture; functional when needed, forgotten when not in use.

"To big business and even bigger money." Asa held up his glass. Everyone joined him, raising their glasses then sipping the champagne.

"As usual Asa, the champagne is wonderful," Tom said.

"I'd never be able to serve less than the best champagne."

"Oh I don't know. I imagine you could get away with whatever you wanted," Jack said with a hint of accusation.

"He usually does," Tom said.

Asa laughed, "You know me too well, Tom. But as my lawyer and brother-in-law you've

shared in the fruit of my efforts. I don't hear you complaining. You know there's way too much of that in business today. I marvel at the new breed of entrepreneur pushing the business envelope. Too bad government keeps poking its nose in with regulations and anti-trust acts."

"Seems to me that without the anti-trust act, young entrepreneurs would have a difficult time being allowed in the game," Tess said trying to sound matter-of-fact instead of annoyed. It always bothered her how rich people felt entitled to special treatment.

Asa's smile was patronizing. "I believe Darwin's theory exists in business, Ms. Madison. The strongest succeed and survive no matter what. That's the point I was making earlier. Too many whiners running large business today."

"Good evening everyone," a young man said as he entered the room alongside a woman who did the Posh Spice look better than Posh did.

"Philip," Asa said looking at his watch. "I'd have thought with you and your wife staying here for the weekend that you'd be on time."

"Mother called as I was coming downstairs." Philip's eyes asked his father not to embarrass him.

"Needed more money no doubt," Asa said in disgust.

Philip was a duller version of Asa with lackluster gray eyes and black hair. Even the sophisticated wife with the severe haircut and pout did little to enhance Philip's presence.

"What does it matter to you, Asa?" Posh's look-alike said.

"I would think it matters to you, my dear. The more she takes, the less there is for you."

"There's plenty for everyone," Philip said.

"That's why you'll never run the business!"

There was a noticeable silence at the venomous tone of Asa's comment. While it was

known that Philip wasn't the bulldog in business that his father was, he did work alongside his father, and as a family run business since its founding by Asa's great-grandfather, it was assumed that Philip would be the next leader. The only Worthington to not run the company was Asa's father who instead had gone into politics. He'd been a Virginia senator for over 30 years and would likely die of extreme old age in his DC office.

Or maybe everyone's shock was the fact that Asa made no attempt to hide his contempt toward son. But anyone acquainted with Asa, knew that he had high expectations and low frustration when those expectations weren't met even by his family. Especially by his family.

"Have you met everyone, Philip and Shelby?" Tom interceded. "You remember Tess Madison, Daniel's friend. This is Jack Valentine from D.C." Everyone exchanged pleasantries.

"Philip's wife and mother, and Helen, my wife, along with a few other of their friends just got back from New York on their yearly girls weekend out. I understand y'all made out pretty good this year," Tom said clearly trying to steer the conversation into a more pleasant direction.

"We did alright." Shelby said in a tone that made Tess think she didn't make out as nearly as well as she would have liked. She wondered if Asa had them on a tight allowance.

"Just what is it that women do when they're together?" Asa asked looking at Tess.

"I couldn't tell you." Tess forced a smile. "I've been too busy with my practice to socialize much."

"Damn right!" Asa boomed. "You're dedicated to your career. Good for you! You prove my theory. Hard work will make you a success no matter what." He glanced at Philip. "You aren't riding someone's coat tails to get to the top."

Asa was right, Tess conceded. She was where she was now because of her own efforts.

At 29 she had built a modest private practice in a town in which lawyers were a dime a dozen. She felt she should be proud, but pride wasn't what she felt when her past came to mind. She gulped down the last bit of her water and immediately regretted it.

"Looks like you need a refill, Ms. Madison," Asa said. "Jack, why don't you escort her to the bar and get her something?"

"Ms. Madison," Jack said extending his hand to lead the way.

"I just need to sit down a minute. Don't let me disrupt your meeting," she said excusing herself. She hadn't gone two steps when she felt a hand on her lower back. The zing in her blood let her know it was Jack. She felt him lean toward her, his breath tantalizingly warm on her ear.

"You don't really think I'm going to let you go now that we're together again?"

Chapter Three

Tess moved away from the group and Jack hoping for respite from the tension. She wasn't sure which was more irritating, the hostility of the Worthingtons or the sensually charged energy emanating from Jack. Her nerves were unable to take any more of either.

She sat in a love seat near the fireplace, shivering even though the warmth of the fire embraced her. She wondered what accident or crime scene Daniel had run off to and how long he was going to be. If he didn't call or come back soon, she'd have to ask Tom to drive her home or get a taxi.

"I could drive you home."

She looked up to find Jack handing her a glass of water. He'd replaced his champagne with something that looked more potent.

"What?"

"You don't want to be here anymore than I do," he said. "I could drive you home and solve both our problems."

She took the glass, but didn't dare take a sip. "I should wait for Daniel."

Disappointment he didn't try to hide showed on his face. She wondered if it was because she wasn't giving him an excuse to leave or because she was waiting for another man. She shook her head at the latter thought. The Jack Valentines of the world weren't attracted to the Tess Madisons. She knew that for a fact.

"So you're seeing Asa's nephew?" Jack sat next to her on the love seat crossing one ankle over his knee.

She nodded.

"Is he anything like them?" Jack gestured to the group bickering in the middle of the

room.

"No. He's more like his mother, Asa's sister. He shuns the lifestyle of his uncle."

"Like you did. I guess that makes him perfect for you."

He was, she thought, except for the fact that she didn't love him.

"I hope he's good to you. You deserve that, Tess. You always did."

She thought the same thing too. That's why she'd left Washington D.C. and moved back to Jefferson Tavern. She had suffered too much betrayal and rejection to stay. In Jefferson Tavern she'd built a new life, a new career and didn't appreciate having reminders like Jack invading her world.

"He is," Tess said. She knew Jack wouldn't be serious about a woman like her, but on the off chance he was thinking of taking her up on a long ago offer, she decided it was better that he think that Daniel was her boyfriend. She hoped that Jack wouldn't share this news with Daniel. It was hard enough to keep the relationship at the friendship-only level as it was. Daniel didn't need anything to suggest that it could be more.

"How's Ava?" Tess asked.

Jack grinned. "You've kept tabs on me."

"Not really. The tabloids were hard to avoid." In truth, she had kept tabs for a short time. Until he started dating the Hollywood starlet Ava Dumont. Tess suspected her real name was something like Jane Dinklemeyer, but of course a Hollywood star needed a fancier name. And it fit her. Ava was tall, curvy and gorgeous.

"That ended awhile ago." He watched the bronze colored drink as he swirled it in his glass.

"So who is it now?"

He laughed, but there was a sadness behind it. "No one now."

"Losing your touch with age?"

"No." He looked at her then. "Just being more discriminating."

Tess didn't want to know what he meant by that so she didn't ask. They sat in silence, Jack returning his gaze to his drink. Finally he said. "Asa is right. If I do decide to join him on whatever business venture he has planned, I'll need a lawyer in town."

"I thought you weren't going to do business with Asa."

Jack shrugged. "I may change my mind."

"I'm sure one of your army of lawyers would be more than able to make the trip here. We aren't that far from D.C."

"Probably. But you don't seem to have trouble standing up to Asa. And with your connection to Tom and Asa that could give me an advantage too. You know a bit of how they think and work."

"What are you working on?" Tess asked trying not to sound too interested. The truth was that while her practice was surviving, she really could use the money and clout Jack's business could bring her.

"I don't know."

Looked at him in confusion. "I thought he said you were working on a joint project."

"That's what he keeps saying, but so far he hasn't given any details. I don't like it. He's been checking up on me." He swallowed the remaining contents of his glass.

"Don't you usually investigate each other before entering into a partnership?" Tess asked.

"Yes. But Asa's latest digging is deeper. More personal. It feels underhanded."

"Sounds like paranoia."

"Maybe." Jack looked directly at Tess. "I do well in business, but I don't have the benefit of thirty years experience in the tactical aspects like Asa does. What I do have are my wits and a healthy amount of paranoia. I don't trust Asa and to be honest, my intention tonight is to find out why he's been poking around in my past, not to learn about a business venture. But if I have to do business with him to find out what's going on, I'll at least hear him out. Which means I could use a good lawyer."

Tess nodded. She knew of Asa's reputation in business and figured Jack's caution was justified. On the other hand, Jack was no babe in the woods when it came to business. He'd built an empire in computer security and technology, and had vast real estate holdings. His offer felt like a hand out, but he was kind enough to veil it in need.

"I guess you'll find out this evening. If you do decide to partner with him, you can let me know."

"Fair enough."

"You bastard!" The shrill voice interrupted the relative calm in the room "What are you up to now?"

"Jesus, boy, did you invite her?" Asa said turning on Philip.

"He didn't invite me," the woman said as she charged towards Asa, swinging her long silver hair over her shoulder. "But he told me you were having a business meeting. I may not be your wife anymore Asa, thank the lord, but I *am* on the board."

"This doesn't concern you, Lauren. Leave before I have Walter escort you out."

Walter looked up from his place behind the bar. He picked up a tray and left the parlor. Tess couldn't blame him. Lauren Worthington was as much of a force as Asa.

"If it's business it does concern me."

"Tonight is for family only."

Lauren scanned the room. "Family my ass. They aren't family," she said pointing towards Jack and Tess.

"I wasn't aware there would be entertainment." Jack whispered to Tess.

"It makes you think twice about doing business with them."

He nodded.

"I'm not going to ask again Lauren. I *will* have you removed even if I have to do it myself."

"What's going on?" Senator Worthington said as he entered the room in the distinguished way that older southern gentlemen did. "Ah Lauren you're looking lovely this evening. I didn't realize you'd be here."

"She's not staying," Asa said.

"Oh. well..."

"Tell me what you're up to Asa. You know I'll find out eventually and then I'll make your life miserable," Lauren promised.

"You've already made my life unbearable." Asa moved towards her.

"This could get bad." Tess said.

"My money is on Lauren," Jack said.

Tess snorted. "I don't think I'll take that bet."

"Asa. Lauren." Tom moved between both of them. "You're making a scene."

"He's making a scene," Lauren said pushing Tom aside.

"You'll see that Helen isn't here." Tom made a second attempt to get between the couple.

"Maybe you can stop by the house and visit with her."

"Just because she doesn't care about her inheritance, doesn't mean I don't."

"You don't get an inheritance." Asa said tightly as he shouldered Tom out of the way.

"Philip does, and I intend to protect him."

"You are well planned for," Tom said.

Asa grabbed Lauren's arm jerking her towards the door.

Jack stood. "Asa-

"Get your hands off me." She yanked her arm from his grasp. "You're a bastard you know that!"

"You've told me enough times. Now get out!"

The two stood, eyes glaring, The guests held their breath as they waited to see who would make the next move and what it would be. Tess hoped it didn't involve bloodshed. Her stomach was already uneasy.

"This isn't over," Lauren said throwing her scarf around her neck. "It's not over."

"It will be over soon enough." Asa said under his breath.

Lauren ignored the remark. She spun away from Asa, her scowl replaced by a shallow smile. "Kiss, kiss kids," she said towards Philip and Shelby. Then with one last glare towards Asa, she turned and left. The room stayed quiet until the front door slammed shut.

"I apologize for that outburst," Asa said as he headed to the bar and pulled out a bottle of amber colored liquor.

Tess noticed that Asa's near brawl with Lauren had cost him. His face was red and sweat beaded around his hairline. Downing a single shot of his drink, he took out a handkerchief and wiped the wetness from his brow.

"Get yourself a drink," Asa said to his father as he headed towards the foyer. "I'll find out

how much longer it will be until we eat."

Chapter Four

"Nice see you again Senator," Tess said when he greeted her. She stood to shake his hand and felt the world tilt.

"You too, young lady. You're the one who's captured my grandson's eye?"

Tess took a deep breath. "Yes sir."

The Senator looked at Jack and then to Tom. "Where is Daniel?"

"He was called to work. This is Jack Valentine. Jack this is Senator Arthur Worthington."

"Senator," Jack said as he shook his hand.

The Senator studied Jack. "You're the one who helped catch the Army hacker at the Pentagon a couple years ago."

"My company, yes sir," Jack said.

"Quite a feat. Your country owes you a debt of gratitude."

Jack shook his head. "He would have been caught sooner or later. He wasn't that good."

"Modesty. It makes me wonder why you're doing business with my son."

Tess couldn't tell if the Senator was joking or not. Apparently neither could Jack as he didn't respond.

"Are you alright young lady? You're looking a little green around the gills," the Senator said.

Tess did her best to smile and assure him all was well, but failed. "Actually, I'm not feeling well. Tom, do you think you can drive me home?"

She felt Jack stiffen next to her. "I told you I could drive--"

"No one should be out now," Walter said as he picked up glasses around the room. "Freezing rain."

Tess sank into the love seat. How did worse get to doomed?

"Dinner is ready." Asa stood at the parlor door. He'd regrouped and looked every bit like the man of the mansion.

Tess's breath hitched as the mention of food sent a burning sensation from the pit of her stomach to her chest. She pressed her hand over her mouth willing her water and her lunch to stay down.

"Perhaps there is a place she can lie down until the weather is better," Jack suggested.

"Yes. Daniel should be back shortly. He'll be able to take her home regardless of the weather," Tom said.

Tess wasn't sure Daniel's car was any more equipped to drive in freezing rain, but maybe he was better trained to drive in it. Like the post man, rain, sleet and snow can't stop the police.

"There's a day-bed in the library next to my office," Asa said absently. Clearly he was more interested in his business dinner than a sick guest.

Jack bent down in front of Tess. "Can you walk or should I carry you."

"You're kidding, right?" His grin told her otherwise. "I'll walk."

Jack's arm reached under hers and helped her to her feet.

"Why don't you all go to dinner? I don't want to keep you," Tess said hoping to get rid of the audience as she made her way through the room.

"Yes, dinner is getting cold," Asa said.

"You can go too," she said to Jack. "I'm sure Walter can show me."

"Yes miss," Walter said. "I'll ask Agnes to fix up something to settle your stomach."

"Thank you Walter, but I don't know if I can keep it down."

"I'll help you." Jack said. "Walter, you can check with Agnes."

"Yes, sir. The room is just across the foyer."

"You don't have to do this," Tess said as they made their way across the foyer.

"Worried about Daniel? What will he think that a former -"

"We're not former anything!" The outburst was nearly her undoing.

Jack wrapped his arm around her to keep her upright. "Worried he'll get the wrong idea?"

"No."

They entered the room and Jack guided her to the day bed. She couldn't remember ever feeling more relieved to sit down. Now if the room would stop spinning.

As he'd done in the parlor, Jack bent down in front of her. The amusement in his face was gone, replaced with bewilderment. And maybe hurt. "Why is it so upsetting that I'm here? I thought we'd been better friends than that."

Until you rejected me, she thought. "I'm just not feeling well."

Jack made a sound that suggested he didn't believe her.

She lay down while Jack took the throw blanket folded at the end of the day bed and covered her.

"Ms. Madison," Walter said. "Here is some fizzy drink. Agnes says it's what you need."

Tess could hear the fizzing drink from across the room and it nearly sent her stomach over. "Oh, uh... thank you Walter. Just set it on the table."

"Do you need anything else?"

"No. Thank you." She appreciated his attentiveness. Her parent's butler would have been more likely to put her in the shed so she didn't ruin her parents' expensive oriental rug.

Walter nodded and left the room.

Jack walked across the room, picked up a waste paper basket and brought it to her.

"Just in case," he said setting it next to the daybed. "I can sit here with you."

"No. Asa will be here any moment wondering where you are. You go eat and enjoy the dinner."

"I don't know about enjoy."

"I'll be fine. I just need to rest."

He nodded. "I'll be back to check on you soon."

Tess hated naps. She always had weird dreams and woke up not knowing where she was. This time she was on the verge of being sick, but couldn't find the waste basket or make her way through the darkness to a restroom. Any minute she was going to ruin her family's rare Oriental rug.

She heard arguing. At first it sounded like her parents, but then it changed to two men, one threatening, the other sounding unconcerned. She didn't want to interrupt them, but she needed a bathroom. Now.

It was dark. The world was wall-less as she groped in the darkness, but found nothing to help her find her way. Since she couldn't see, she listened, trying to find the voices. But they'd stopped. She was lost in a black world. And tired. So tired. Giving up, she curled into a ball.

Tess woke to the sound of movement in the room. "Daniel?"

"It's Jack. How are you feeling?"

"You don't want to know. Is dinner finished?"

He came and sat on the day-bed next to her. "We're on a break of sorts. We're supposed to meet Asa in the front room in five minutes. But I've come to take you home."

"Asa won't be happy about that."

"The hell with Asa! You're not feeling well and I'm sick of his games."

Asa must be drawing out the anticipation, Tess thought. He was like a cat that enjoyed toying with the mouse before going for the kill. She could understand Jack's frustration and desire to leave. She wanted to leave too. Enough so that she was willing to let Jack take her home. Unfortunately, she didn't trust her stomach to remain calm enough during the trip. "I'm not ready to get up yet."

"I'm leaving. I can carry you out of here or you can stay with this pack of wolves."

Her body wouldn't comply. Any movement made her stomach feel like she was on a ship in troubled waters. "I need a little time to pull myself together. Why don't you go hear him out and hopefully by then I'll be up to moving."

He didn't say anything at first. The room was dark that she couldn't see his face to guess at what he might be thinking.

"You said you wanted to know what he's up to. You're about to find out," she added.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. And if you're not ready, be prepared for me to carry you," his annoyance toward her sounded like it equaled his irritation at Asa.

"So leave then. Don't let me stop you."

She couldn't see him, but imagined he was inwardly groaning. "Just be ready when I come back."

When he left, Tess closed her eyes again. Now she wished she was in a dream and that any moment she'd wake up in her own bed at home and that this night, especially the part about seeing Jack again hadn't happened. She knew she needed to get herself upright or suffer the indignity of Jack's carrying her out. But she was so tired. She'd found the one position in which

she could lay and nothing would hurt or threaten to come up. She closed her eyes, and drifted.

It could have been minutes or it could have been hours. Tess wasn't sure how long she'd been out when she heard movement again.

"Jack?"

The figure stopped. "No miss, its Walter. I was just checking if you needed anything?"

The room was dark except for the light that slipped beneath the doors on two sides of the room. She heard him move away from her. One of the doors opened letting in a stream of light that flowed around Walter's figure and forced Tess's eyes shut.

"Is Daniel back?"

"No miss. But I think Mr. Showalter heard from him. Shall I go get him?"

"No. I'm just going to lay here a minute longer and then I'll get up and join the others. Are they still in the parlor?"

"They're just gathering there now."

So she'd been out only a few minutes. She breathed a sigh of relief. She still had time to pull herself together before Jack hauled her out of there.

"Thank you Walter."

"I'll let Mr. Valentine know you're up. He seemed keen to take care of you."

Leave it to the help to notice the nuances of the people they work for. "That's okay. I don't want to disrupt Mr. Worthington's meeting."

Tess lay in the dark thinking about hiding until Jack showed up. She could stay where she was and avoid the Worthington angst. It was a good idea. Too bad her pride had other ideas.

Determining she needed to salvage her image, Tess risked opening one eye. It was dark

again except for line of light under the doors. She knew one door led to the foyer and figured the other one led to Asa's office.

Slowly she rolled to her side and pushed herself to a sitting position. Her stomach lurched reminding her that her situation was still precarious. She reached out towards the coffee table in search of the fizzy drink. It was there, but no longer fizzing. Deciding it still might help calm her stomach she picked up the glass and took a sip.

"Ugh!" She nearly spit out the chalky brew, but caught herself before she could ruin the day-bed or carpet. They were probably 19th century antique originals. She didn't need the night to get any worse by ruining priceless pieces of history.

After a few deep breaths, she worked her way up to a stand and made her way to the nearest door. She'd never been in the room before. She couldn't remember which door she'd entered from. She reached for the handle hoping it was the door she'd just seen Walter exit. She was sure Asa wouldn't appreciate it if she invaded his inner sanctum. She pulled the door towards her and peeked into the room.

The dark colors of the room along with the long mahogany desk with the white light glowing from a laptop told her she'd found the wrong door. She started to leave when the smell of smoke caught her attention. Stepping inside the room she saw a pillar of smoke being drawn outside to the frigid February air by the open door behind Asa's desk. But what worried her most was seeing Asa slumped over his desk.

She moved towards the smoke first, and discovered the dwindling fire was contained in his waste paper basket. She wondered what sort of evidence he'd been trying to burn. She went to check on him, remembering his flushed face after his altercation with Laurel. Perhaps his heart was bad. Tess tried to remember the CPR she'd learned. Was it two breaths and ten

compressions? Or one breath and fifteen compressions? Why were they always changing it? She was in the process of determining that maybe it wouldn't matter so much as long as she did something when she saw the blood. It pooled on the desk around his head and was dripping onto the floor. Oh God, was her last thought as her world spun away into darkness.