

## Chapter One

"We're here," Carla sang.

"Oh joy," Sela Wilson muttered from the backseat of Robin's Euro sedan. *What have I gotten myself into this time?* She peered out the window at the towering stone façade, replete with gargoyles, buttresses and, oh God, a moat.

*Here* was the site of her latest adventure with her friends. *Here* was a "Castle" in Saratoga, New York, where rich, bored and, quite possibly, desperate women flocked for the seasonal Fantasy Weekend. *Here* you could supposedly choose your ultimate romance hero. At least that's what the glossy brochure said.

Apparently, *here*, actors were ready and waiting to bring your most breathless fantasy to life – be it with a fireman, doctor or tycoon. Ostensibly, these were chaste weekends, but the small print in the brochure mentioned a discreet don't ask/don't tell policy that'd made Robin and Carla wet their panties. Sela too, to be fair. But she generally approached these things with less hope.

"Valet parking!" Carla enthused.

"Did you expect anything less?" Robin asked drily.

"This is a class A joint," Sela added.

Robin tooted into the rotunda where uniformed lackeys swarmed to open doors, retrieve luggage from the trunk and hand the ladies out onto the smooth, possibly fake cobblestone. Ahead of them, a sleek, black limousine purred expectantly, as if anticipating extreme pleasure in its future occupant. Sela wondered idly who it could be before turning her attention back to her bustling friends and their slavering minions.

Carla grabbed Sela and Robin by their elbows and herded them inside a curlicued brass and iron revolving door. In her black polka dot bubble skirt,

with her skippy blonde curls and tight white tank, she looked like a legal Lolita. “Time to meet our heroes at the Friday Mixer.”

Robin hovered elegantly in a green satin halter dress, her glimmering auburn hair in a French twist. Sela’s general style tended to Sporty Spice. Combined, the three women always caused a male buzz. This time was no exception.

Immediately a gaggle of male eyes locked and loaded. Costumed heroes glanced from the three women to print-outs they had in their hands. Some looked disappointed, but two – a cowboy and a Navy SEAL – smirked and puffed out their chests.

“There be your boys,” Sela said. Robin patted her perfect hair while Carla repressed a squeal. Nothing to be disappointed with there, she thought. But where was hers?

She tossed a glance about the room. She’d chosen a Gothic hero, picturing a tortured, brooding man like Lawrence Olivier in Rebecca. What she got was...nothing? But wait. Off in the corner, leaning casually against the reception desk, stood a likely candidate.

He wore a shimmering, charcoal summer wool suit, dark hair slicked off a high forehead and sporting eyes so blue Sela felt the light from where she stood. Her chest constricted around a pounding heart. He made no move toward her and after a nanosecond, her gaze skipped off the intense waves coming from his like a stone off a pond.

As it usually did whenever she felt nervous or unsure of herself, her yap unhinged and made lots of noise. “Of all the wacky weekend escapades we’ve indulged in, this takes the cake. I can’t believe you’re serious about this sideshow.”

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*Sideshow?* Daniel Bond's head exploded. No one called his multi-billion dollar project--a towering testament to what women were willing to put out for a foolish fantasy -- a sideshow.

And lived.

Especially not mouthy brunettes. Mouthy brunettes with hot bodies. Mouthy brunettes with long, lean legs, glistening lips and clear, intelligent eyes.

He willed the scattered pieces of his brain back into formation.

At least no one had the gall to utter that word in front of Daniel Bond. In his hotel. In his hotel where there were too many beds. Too many luxurious beds with 700 count Egyptian cotton sheets.

Elevators too. Hidden elevators.

And closets. Closets stacked high with 700 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets.

*Christ.*

He shifted his weight as anger slid out of his chest and into his dick.

The front desk clerk slithered out from behind his podium and scurried to Mouthy's side. "Is there a problem ma'am?"

"You're joking, right? *Ma'am?* Tell me you're joking."

*This broad, er, this woman, seriously needed a good, hard...*

The front desk clerk played his role just as he'd been trained at the Daniel Bond School for Sycophants. Obviously a gold star pupil. He bowed slightly and clasped his hands. "Ms. Wilson, correct?"

"Yes. And I want to know where my hero is." Bright hazel eyes scanned the room, landing on Daniel. He straightened. They skipped away without focusing and something inside him tightened and expanded.

His fingers clawed the reception desk, meeting a glossy piece of paper and kneading it into a crumpled wad. He glanced at it. *Her face* beneath his grasping fingers, his thumb between her lips, grazing her white teeth. With his

palms he ironed it smooth, noting the tan frame his thumb and index made around her creamy, dewy cheeks.

Another impending detonation in his cranium. He blinked to defuse it.

Underneath the photo was a short bio. He skimmed the smart aleck remarks and sped straight to the bottom line. Wanted: Tortured Gothic Man.

*Why, so she could torture him some more?*

Gothic. Who usually played gothic? "Sheila," he clipped. The delicate blonde Social Director hurried over. "Where's Paul?" *So I can make him disappear.*

"Sick. Costume just got around to telling me. One SNAFU after another today."

SNAFUs usually pissed Daniel off. "What else?"

"All handled."

This SNAFU didn't. Curious. "But no replacement?"

"Not unless I go out and stand naked on Main Street."

She probably would too, to get the job done. Daniel reminded himself to fatten her bonus this year.

"I'll go stall her."

He laid a hand on her arm. "I'll handle her."

"You'll miss your flight."

"I'll handle her."

He strode into the staging room, rummaged through some props, slapped on a disguise and headed back into the lobby.

Mouthy saw him coming. She did a double take. He must look good, but then, Daniel Bond didn't mess around.

He hesitated a step when he saw her cover that mouth and giggle. Then she elbowed her friends and they turned away from their heroes, toward him, eyes widening.

Daniel smiled to himself. They were acting like schoolgirls in love. Perfect. Maybe he should do this more often. "Good evening, my lady," he intoned with a slight bow.

Mouthy just stood there, blinking. Obviously overwhelmed with his charm.

"This has got to be a joke." She snatched her suitcase off the floor and hightailed it to the elevator, leaving her friends glancing from him to her in confused disbelief before skipping after her in their high heels.

The anger left his dick and marched right back into his chest. His cheeks felt hot.

Nobody made Daniel Bond's cheeks feel hot. And lived.

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"He wore an eye patch, Robin. An eye patch. I'm not going back down there."

Sela tugged her push-up bra out through her sleeve and tossed it into the open suitcase. She scratched her back where the bra strap had been and practically had an orgasm – the only kind she was likely to get here. "You guys go have fun with your heroes and I'll stay here and read."

"Oh, come on," Robin hollered through the door of her adjoining room. "Maybe it was his first time. Give him another chance. You never give anyone more than one chance."

"No." She'd been willing to play along when Robin suggested they actually participate. Sounded cheesy, but you never knew. Could've been fun. And it might've been if she had gotten a cowboy, like Robin had, or a Navy SEAL, like Carla. What she got was a man wearing an eye patch and a rubber scar on his cheek.

Why in the world would she give him a second chance? Might be worth it for a laugh. But she hadn't really come here for that.

Why *had* she come?

She shook her thick, brown hair out of a ponytail and scratched her scalp. Man. That felt almost as good as the bra-strap-scratch. "I'll pass on the Friday Mixer. I'm afraid his scar might peel off in my drink."

"Eew." Carla wrinkled her nose. "I can't believe that. Did you call down and request a different guy?"

"Yes."

Robin arched a brow. "And?"

"There is no one else."

To be fair, the guy himself wasn't the problem. He'd have been hot enough if she liked his type. She recalled a tall, lean body, dark hair, square mouth and pale blue eyes – at least the one she could see. But Sela couldn't get past the dollar-store eye patch, hence, she couldn't stop laughing. Oh, and his wooden emo voice, too. He'd been a really bad actor. She seriously hoped he didn't earn his living this way.