

## Prologue

John Benton carefully spooned a serving of stuffing onto the tray held in front of him, smiling at the man standing there. “Merry Christmas, Bird Man. I’m glad to see you joined us today.” He automatically looked up, when the door at the far side of the gym slammed open with a loud bang against the wall, and frowned.

“I win! I found you!” Edith shouted.

“Close that door before too much cold air comes in and come here quietly. You are disturbing our patrons’ fine dining experience,” he said in a calm voice that carried easily across the large room.

Edith looked surprised at the admonishment, but did as he bade. “That little elf said that I wouldn’t be able to find you by Christmas, but I did! I win!” she crowed softly as she approached, blocking the line as she stood in front of John.

“If you are here to eat, you need to take your place at the end of the line. If you are here to work, come around the side over there and I will give you an apron. There are lots of dirty dishes to be washed.” He saw the look of distaste cross her face and sighed. *She was going to take a lot of work!* “If you just want to talk, you can go sit over there in that chair and wait for me. I should be done here in another couple of hours.” Her eyes followed his nod and realized that there was a solitary chair sitting in the nearest corner, turned so that when seated, its occupant would be facing the wall. He knew just what she was thinking. “If you decide to walk out, don’t bother to return,” he said softly and then shook his head. “I have to say Edith, that I am very disappointed that you weren’t able to find me without depending on my Christmas Day track record. You obviously have a lot to learn.” He made a shooing motion with his hand. “You’re holding up the line for these hungry folks. Step back out of the way while you decide your future.”

She moved back a few paces to allow the line to proceed and nibbled her bottom lip as she studied him. She knew he hoped that she would accept the apron and work washing dishes, but she hated how wrinkled her hands would look after being in the hot water for very long. She looked at the positioning of the chair. Had John placed it that way on purpose, or was it always

like that? Had he expected her? Apparently he had known she wouldn't want to work and had created another choice for her. Was she insulted that he knew she wouldn't want to work? Then in her mind she heard his speech again, 'If you are here to eat, you need to take your place at the end of the line...' Well, there it was! She didn't have to wash dishes or sit in the corner, she could get a tray of food and sit with the... with the... patrons. Tossing her head defiantly, she moved to take her place at the end of the line.

John, while seeming to focus his attention on each person as he served them, had been watching Edith to see what she would do. When he saw that she intended to stay, he felt the tension ease in his shoulders and his smile grew a little brighter. "Good choice," he said softly when she reached him and held out her tray. Her triumphant smile faltered a bit as she realized that she hadn't outsmarted him. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt on this one and congratulating you on picking the option that has the best story potential. I want to see what you come up with twenty-four hours from right now." He casually glanced at his watch.

"How many words?" she asked automatically and then mentally kicked herself for going along so easily.

He shrugged, "It's just a starting point. No set number, I want to see what you can do when time is your only limitation; although you may not leave until I give you permission. You will stay for the entire time and see this through to the end, understand?" He waited for her nod of agreement. "Good. Go and get to know the stories of the people you eat with and remember to mind your manners. You're off to a bad start there –slamming doors and shouting across the dining room. What would your granny have to say about that, I wonder."

She paled as her mind automatically fed her the information of just how quickly Granny would have been reaching for the Board of Education. And then she blushed as she realized that John's comment indicated that he knew all about the one person who had kept her in line. Her eyes flew to his face to see what he was thinking.

He smiled gently. "You're holding up the line again, Miss Edith Ruth Morton."

An hour later Edith was smiling as she stepped back slightly from the group of people standing in a semi-circle around the old upright piano tucked in the far corner of the gym. It was the first time in years that she had sung Christmas carols. She was surprised at how the words had automatically returned to her and how much meaning some of the songs had held for her. She swiped at a tear that was threatening to fall from the corner of her eye and gave a quiet sniff.

Maybe next year she should make the trip home for Christmas. Her family always accepted her excuse that she had to work over the holidays, but she knew they missed her and, for the first time, she allowed herself to realize that she missed them as well.

When she had successfully disengaged from the group who were surging eagerly towards the Christmas tree placed next to the piano and the Santa who had just entered, she was surprised to feel John by her side.

“How are you holding up?” He dropped a casual arm across her shoulder and felt her tension. “Are you tense because I’m touching you or are you having some problems with your experience here? I saw your tears a minute ago and I want to make sure you’re okay.”

She rolled her shoulders and he immediately dropped his arm away. She was surprised to discover that she missed that brief intimacy. “A little of both, I guess,” she said in answer to his question. “I haven’t made a lot of time in my life for men. It’s always been my experience that when they touch, they don’t want to stop.” She smiled up at him. “Thank you for respecting me on that.” He nodded in response and raised an eyebrow encouraging her to finish her explanation. She sighed. “I haven’t been home for Christmas in several years, since I finished college and got this job, in fact. I’ve told my family that I have to work and they’ve been supportive; but I know that if I asked, my boss would probably give me a few days off to go home, especially since I’ve worked so many other holidays. Standing around singing Christmas carols just made me feel a little homesick.” John looked steadily at her. “Okay!” she said with a small show of temper, giving just the tiniest stamp of her foot, “It’s made me feel guilty that I’ve been neglecting my family and not appreciating how lucky I am. Are you happy now?” she huffed.

John chuckled, wrapped his arm around her and pulled her in tightly for a one armed hug, releasing her immediately afterwards. “There’s the Edith I know! I promise to respect your wishes on stopping when you tell me to stop, but you should know that I tend to be a toucher when I want to connect with someone. And if Santa is right, and so far he has been on everything he’s told me, you’re going to need to accept the fact that at some point you will be feeling my hand on at least one part of your anatomy. And when that happens I will not stop when you ask me.” He gave her bottom a not-so-gentle spank. He leaned down until she could feel his breath on her ear. “And it will be without any clothing between my hand and the point of contact.” She gasped and turned red, but to his satisfaction, she did not move away from him.

“So this is it, Edith. Now is the time when we decide whether we commit to this mentorship and promise to see it through or whether we go our separate ways. I gave you a writing assignment and I believe you accepted it. But I just want to confirm that this is really happening. From now on when I tell you to do something, you will accept that I have my reasons for it and you will obey me without argument, even if it is washing dishes or sitting in the corner. When the time is right, I will be happy to explain the reason for each order I give you, but don’t expect to have that conversation at your will. All disagreements are automatically settled in favor of my opinion and arguments will be handled in the time-honored manner that your granny has proven to be successful with you. Temper tantrums will not be tolerated. I promise that no matter how frustrated you make me, I will not give up on teaching you everything you need to know to succeed in this business.”

She gasped and turned towards him at his last words. “No matter how frustrated I make you! Well, doesn’t that just take the cake? You’ve just told me that you plan to beat me and then try to sound all magnanimous that you won’t give up on me!”

He took her by the arm and pulled her further away from the group receiving presents from Santa. “Keep your voice down, woman! This exact behavior is one of the reasons that you aren’t respected by your colleagues, you have no sense of place. Now is not the time to make a scene, these people are having the only bit of happiness they are likely to get for a long time in their dreary lives. Be respectful!”

“But you said that now was the time to commit!”

He nodded. “Yes, I did. Because Santa is here and wants an answer from us.” He gestured towards the man handing out presents and Edith was surprised to recognize him as the Nickson’s Department Store Santa. “I don’t think you realize how hard this is going to be for me, Edith. I’m freelance for a reason; I hate conflict and I tend to remove myself from anything that makes me feel frustrated or angry. Santa has set up this mentorship for my benefit too, you know. He wants me to learn patience and to stick with something I find unpleasant until I succeed and reach the goal. I have gone through my life doing everything I can to avoid setting goals because I know I won’t stay with it when things go against my opinion of how they should be. I walk away. Santa has made it clear to me that this time I can’t walk away. He has made a believer out of me and if he says this is what I need to do, then I am willing to commit to it. For

the first time in my life I am making a commitment to something that I know will drive me crazy.”

“You just told me that all disagreements will be settled in your favor and that you will spank me when I argue. How is that learning patience or sticking with something when it goes against your opinion of how it should go?”

“Because you will change me as much as I change you,” he answered simply. “I’ve just stated the rules as I want them to be, but we both know that I am not going to get my way every single time. I believe in fairness and I know for a fact that there will be times that I will want like anything to give you a good paddling, but I won’t be able to do it because I won’t be able to justify it to myself. I expect that there will be times when I lose my temper with you and I will have to apologize.” He chuckled. “That’s something that we’re both bad at; but I have learned the value of a well placed apology and you still don’t get that.”

He touched her hand. “I wish that you had found me earlier so we could have had more time to hash this out, but the fact that you couldn’t find me says volumes about what you need to learn. All you had to do, you know, was ask any senior editor or news director in town how to get in touch with me. They all know. If you had done an Internet search on my byline you would have found all the articles I’ve written and who published them. Again, they all know where to send my paycheck and how to contact me if they have stories they want me to do. I bet you just kept hoping that I would show up at some news event, even though I know Santa told you I was planning on changing my career course. You had to wait until you could find me at a soup kitchen on Christmas Day. How many did you check before you found me?”

She blushed bright red and looked away. He had been right about everything he had said and she was embarrassed when she realized how easily she should have found him. Why hadn’t she thought of doing the things he mentioned? She really did need to learn or get out of the business!

“Edith, I’m waiting for an answer. How many did you check?”

She hung her head, still refusing to meet his eyes. “Three,” she whispered.

“You did it all today? You ran all over the place checking soup kitchens looking for me? You didn’t think to call any of the organizations that were sponsoring soup kitchens and ask if I was a volunteer for them?” She shook her lowered head, miserable that here was yet another

easy method that she just didn't think of using. John sighed, "Are you sure this is the business you want to be in?"

At that, her head snapped up and her eyes blazed with determination. "Yes!" she hissed. "I want to be the best darn reporter there ever was! Teach me, please!"

He looked at her. "I've made my statement of commitment to you. I want to hear yours to me."

She gulped and bit her lip. "I promise I will do my best to do as you tell me and to learn what you have to teach me." She could see that he expected more and she grudgingly gave it. "I acknowledge that you will use corporal punishment at times and I will submit to it." Still he waited. "I don't know what else you want from me!" she wailed softly.

"I want to know that you won't give up and walk away when things get tough. You are not exactly known for your work ethic, Edith Ruth Morton."

"Why do you keep using my full name?" she wailed again. "How do you even know it? Did Santa tell you?"

John shook his head, smiling. "No, I did what you should have done, I did an Internet search on you and read everything I could, to get to know and better understand you. I learned your middle name that way, although I will admit that Santa told me that your granny was the only person to have successfully taught you anything that stuck with you. I've been using your full name to see how you would respond to it, a well-trained country girl like your past indicates you should be, knows to pay attention and be obedient when she hears her full name."

She slumped. "I don't know anything about you except that Santa told me you've been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize three times."

John flushed and turned away. "I try to keep that quiet. No one likes a braggart also ran."

"I was impressed." She gathered herself and made eye contact. "I was impressed, not only by the fact of your multiple nominations, but also by the fact that you are modest about it. I know I would have been finding a way to slip it into every conversation I had with anyone in the business. And your statement just now points out why you are the person I need to learn from. I would be the biggest braggart also ran you ever saw and everyone would hate me and make jokes about me behind my back. You knew to avoid that." She dropped her voice. "Please teach me, be my mentor. I promise I won't give up when I feel frustrated."

“Edith Ruth Morton, I don’t know how you are on keeping promises. But I’m sorry to say that from what I do know about your past history, I don’t feel confident about accepting one from you. I need something more, I’m afraid.”

“You can spank me if I give up,” she offered.

“There is no doubt that I should handle it that way, but I know that it wouldn’t work. If you decide to leave this mentorship before it is finished and I try to spank you into staying, you will report me to the police. And I wouldn’t disagree with that. No woman should be physically hurt to make her do something she really doesn’t want to do. You need to give me something that will bind you to your promise and I have no idea what it is. You will have to figure that out for yourself.”

She stared at him, shaking her head wordlessly, at a complete loss of ideas on how to solve the impasse.

“There you two are!” Santa said cheerfully as he joined them. “Merry Christmas! I am glad to see that you have finally gotten together. How are things working out?”

“Merry Christmas, Santa,” John responded. “We’re working on it, but we haven’t gotten there yet, I’m sorry to report.”

“Oh my, that is sad news. How about you, Edith? What do you have to say for yourself?”

She turned her stricken look on him, but couldn’t speak around the lump that had formed in her throat. Tears welled up, but wouldn’t fall.

“Poor little Edith,” Santa murmured. “Your past behavior has come home to roost, hasn’t it?” She nodded and docilely moved into his arms as he spread them in an invitation for a hug. “I warned you that you would have to convince John and to be prepared. I imagine that you expected that he would be so eager to teach you that he wouldn’t present any problems.” She gave a wordless wail and the tears finally fell. Santa held her for a brief moment longer and then took her by the shoulders and moved her away from him. “You need to fix this, Edith. Crying to me isn’t going to make this happen, you know. You think about promises that you have given and kept and then about how to give one to John that he will know you will keep.” He lifted his velvet sack, which was decidedly thinner than when he had entered the room. “I’ve given out all the presents to everyone else, but I still have a few left, for you two.”

John looked surprised. “No, Santa! I don’t need anything, give your gifts to those who can really use them.”

Santa chuckled and held out two wrapped packages to him. “These are for you, because you will really need them, premature as they may seem right now.”

John took the gifts and tore the paper to reveal two books, one was about mediation and yoga techniques and the other was a humorous work suggesting creative ways to vent frustration. He opened it at random and laughed out loud when he read the suggestion. “Build a snowman and knock it down.” He looked up. “I’ve always been suspicious of snowmen, so cold and unmoving, leering at you with those eyes of coal. I love this! Thanks, Santa.”

“You’re very welcome, John. Edith, here are your gifts. Open the smaller one first.”

She obeyed and uncovered a beautifully embossed leather-bound journal with her initials worked into the design in gilt lettering. She gasped and looked up sharply at Santa. “This is exactly what I’ve always wanted! I mean, EXACTLY as I pictured it in my mind. This is the journal I was going to buy for myself when I knew that I had succeeded.”

“If you can picture it strongly enough, Edith, you can make it happen. Write your dreams for your career on the first page and then go over them with John.” Santa held up an admonitory finger. “I don’t mean the job you want, I mean the person you want to be.” He leaned over and gave her a wink along with the second gift. “Once you have everything settled in the journal, I think loaning him this will seal the deal. There is nothing more special than the love of your granny.” He patted her on the shoulder. “You can do this, Edith. Make it happen!” Then he turned to the other man. “She needs your help, John. Don’t let her flounder.” They shook hands. Santa waved to the room at large and with a loud “Merry Christmas!” left as a chorus of ‘Thank you’ and ‘Merry Christmas’ echoed through the room.

John looked at Edith, wondering just what Santa expected him to do. She looked up from the blank page and smiled. “If I write a statement of purpose here of what I want to achieve, will you accept that with my promise to not give up? Every time I get frustrated I can read these goals again and be reminded of why you are making me do things I don’t want to do.”

John returned her smile. “It’s a start. Get your notebook so you can work out the exact wording before entering it in the journal. Such a work of beauty shouldn’t be marred by scratched out words and scribbled additions.”

Her smile faltered and she looked down. John had come to recognize this as her ‘I’ve failed again’ look and vowed that by the time he was finished with her he would never see it again. “You don’t carry a notebook, do you?” he asked quietly. She shook her head. “Add that to



your assignment for tomorrow. Always, *always* have paper and pencil available to take notes. Here, use mine for now.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a worn spiral bound notebook with a pencil stuck through the wiring. He handed it to her. “I’ve found that spiral bound are good because your pages don’t tear out and get lost as easily and it’s a handy way to keep your pencil with it. Notice I said pencil; pens have a much higher failure rate, so stick with pencils when you have a choice. But once you’ve got your goals all figured out, they should go into your journal in ink to remind you of their permanency.”

“Will you help me?” she asked shyly.

“I’m happy to be your sounding board as you work your way through it, but you’re going to have to talk to me while I work. There are a whole lot of dirty dishes that need washing!”

By the time the teetering stack of dirty trays had been washed, dried and put away, Edith had honed her list of attributes down to wording that she felt was concise and complete. By the time all the dirty cooking pots and pans and utensils had received the same treatment as the trays, Edith had decided how she would rank each item and list them in her journal.

John read them over and nodded his approval. She didn’t realize it, but what she had created was a basic blueprint for living a good life as a decent human being and had very little to do with reporting. John had no intention of dissuading her from valuing the list she had created, instead, he handed her a pen and pointed her towards a worktable off to the side in the kitchen. “Sit down and copy it into the journal in your best handwriting please. I’m going to sweep the gym floor and then we can head out.”

She sat where he indicated and set to work. When he finished sweeping and returned to check on her, he was amazed that he felt a protective concern for her. How had she gotten so far off course? He knew that she did a decent job of reporting for her employers, not outstanding in any way, but also not anywhere near the worse he had seen, either. And she was doing it without half the basic skills she should have. Once he drilled those into her, her stagnant career should finally take off. He chuckled as he realized that she was sitting as she must have been taught when she first learned cursive writing, her back straight, her legs aligned with knees pressed tightly together, her journal at a slant, and one thing he was certain hadn’t been taught, but had undoubtedly still been a part of her schoolgirl posture, the tiny pink tip of her tongue was protruding slightly between her lips. Her concentration was intense and she wasn’t aware that he was standing next to her. He placed the second gift from Santa, which remained unopened, near

her and moved away slightly so that he wouldn't cause her to startle and spoil her careful writing.

"Done!" she finally pronounced and looked up with a smile of pleasure. "Thank you for being patient and waiting for me. Want to see?" She offered him the journal and he took it and solemnly read it over.

"You've done a beautiful job with this, Edith. Shall we sign this together as an agreement of your goals for this mentorship?"

"Yes, I was hoping that you would accept this with my promise."

John sighed and shook his head. "I'm not sure this is sufficient, Edith. A few declarative sentences and a promise from someone with a history of always putting her selfish needs first, isn't quite what I was looking for."

"But you'll sign it with me as a start?"

"Yes."

"But you still need more from me?"

"Yes."

She sighed and pulled the final present from Santa towards her. "He said that loaning you this should do the trick. I was kind of hoping to leave this out of the equation." She pulled the paper off the rectangular box and lifted the lid to reveal a worn hickory wood paddle nestled in tissue paper. Faint lettering was barely visible and John leaned closer to try to make it out, chuckling when he finally did decipher it.

"It says Board of Education," Edith offered helpfully. "When Santa said something about the special power of a granny's love, I knew what was in this box. I don't know how he did it, but this is the very paddle that my granny used to teach me not to swear. Look, you can see where I tried to carve my name into it. Hickory is a very hard wood and all I could do, really, was make scratches. But that's my name right there. And here's the dent that I put in it when I threw it across the patio and hit the house. Oh, she tanned me good for that display of temper! I couldn't sit down for three days." She looked up, blinded by the tears that filled her eyes, but smiling. "I really could and did sit down, it was painful, but I could. I just didn't want to let her know that I could. I tried to make her feel guilty and she was having none of that. I came close to getting a second paddling for that stunt."

She grinned. “She called it a stunt, and here I am, so many years later, echoing her words and seeing the truth in them.” She held it out to him, extending her palms flat out with the paddle lying across them as if it were tribute from a peasant to a king. “This is what you were waiting for. This is the symbol of my granny’s love for me and I would never, ever do anything to lose it. As Santa suggested, I will loan this to you until we have finished the mentorship. Here is my guarantee that I will not give up when things get tough, because I won’t walk away and leave this in your possession. Use it as you see fit, with my granny’s blessings.”

John accepted her offering, tapping it against his palm and feeling the weight the paddle carried. “Thank you, Edith. This is something important to you and I can tell that it is just what I needed from you.” He looked at her. “You know at some point I’m going to use this on you, don’t you?” She nodded. He smiled and patted her arm. “I accept your commitment. You have yourself a mentor.” Her body sagged in relief that it was settled.

John grinned. “You also have two assignments, due in..!” He made a show of consulting his watch and then looked at her. “Due when, Edith?” She blanched. He shook his head slowly. “That’s what I thought. I said it was due in exactly twenty-four hours and you didn’t check the time. I’m not going to bail you out, you know.” He carefully replaced the paddle in the box and put the lid back on, creating an innocent package that could be carried in public. Whistling slightly, he turned and headed towards the exit. “I think my life is about to get a lot more interesting with you in it.” He waved his hand in a forward motion. “Come on, I’ll buy you dinner and you can bounce your story ideas off me.” He grinned with a mock leer, “That is, if you think you can spare the time.”