

A Match Made in Heaven

By

Jodi Bella

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Chapter One

“Common, Chief, wake up already.”

The familiar voice filtered slowly through Kip Anderson’s sleep fogged brain, making his full lips turn down in a frown of confusion. A second later, there was a hard thump on the mattress near his face. Awake now, his brows furrowed, he hesitantly peeled first one eyelid open and then the other, his pale brown gaze falling on one of the well-worn sneakers he used solely now for mowing his lawn during the summer months. It was grass stained and muddy on the sole, and the stench from it was enough to make him want to pull the covers up over his head. But he didn’t do that, because its presence on his bed in the middle of the night was too unusual a thing to ignore, even in favor of going back to sleep. Even after being up damn near all night long helping one of his mares bring a new foal into the world.

“Oh, good, you’re finally awake.” The return of the voice brought Kip’s head up with a snap. He’d been sure he was dreaming it earlier. Now, he wasn’t so sure that he wasn’t still sleeping, and the dream continuing. Because there was *no* way that he was awake and actually seeing the man that stood before him. It just wasn’t possible.

Standing just inside Kip’s walk-in closet, still dressed in the same clothes he had last seen him in over four months ago was his life-long best friend, Quentin Craig. As Kip watched, Quent dropped the mate to Kip’s lawn mowing sneaker, and grinned crookedly. To Kip’s eyes, it even looked like the grin wobbled a little and he could have sworn that Quent’s eyes misted over. He had to clear his throat before he spoke again to Kip. “We need to talk, buddy.”

Never mind that it was the wee hours of the morning, or that Kip had been up for over twenty-four hours straight before finally finding his bed that night. Never mind that Quentin was a sleep whore who rarely saw the light of day before at least ten in the morning, nor the fact that he had a gorgeous wife of five years waiting for him at home. Those reasons were certainly enough, each of them on their own, to make this middle of the night visit seem a little weird. But the one reason that had Kip Anderson questioning his sanity at that moment had them all beat by a mile: Quentin Craig was dead. He’d been killed in an automobile accident over seven months ago. Kip had been in the car with him, and he’d gone with him in the ambulance to the hospital. He’d been sitting next to him when he’d died. And he’d been the one to break the news to Quent’s wife.

And now, here was his best friend, apparently back from the dead, looking exactly as he had on the day of his funeral, with the noticeable exception of the absence of the suit coat his wife Lily had chosen for him. Instead, Quentin stood before Kip in only the western cut dress slacks, pearl snap white dress shirt with its cuffs unbuttoned and rolled up his forearms, and his best pair of dress boots, spit-shined so bright they even gleamed in the dim lighting of Kip’s early morning bedroom.

Quent took a couple steps out of Kip’s closet, approaching the bed slowly. He seemed to do so deliberately and Kip had the idea he was trying not to spook him. “I’m sorry about throwing the shoe at ya,” he apologized sheepishly, removing the odorous sneaker from the rumpled flannel bedding when he got close enough. “But unfortunately I’m limited in what things I can control. I would’ve just given you a good shake, but my damn hand probably would’ve gone right through your shoulder, Kip. I haven’t figured out some of the finer points in my new... situation. Being a ghost has its restrictions...”

“*G-ghost?*” Kip whispered, staring at Quent. His best friend sat down on the edge of the bed and nodded at him. Kip’s eyes ran up and down the apparition before him, noting now the smoky quality of his image, and the way he didn’t indent the mattress beneath him at all as he sat there—truthfully, it was more like he was hovering there instead of actually sitting.

“I can control inanimate objects,” Quent continued calmly, as if his lifelong best friend wasn’t having a nervous breakdown right beside him, “but if I so much as touch something alive—especially a human being—well, my damn arm goes right through and it creates the strangest feeling...” He sighed and cocked his head to look at Kip closely. “You okay, Chief? You don’t look so good.”

Kip’s eyes bulged at him. “No, I’m... I’m not okay!” he sputtered. “You... you’re... you’re supposed to be *dead*, Q! What the hell’s happening to me?”

“Calm down, buddy, rein it in, now. Relax. Nothing’s happening to you, okay?” Kip recognized the steady voice Quentin was using now as the one he’d used in their rodeo days to both steady a fearful horse, and woo a nervous rodeo babe. “It’s really me. I’m really here. Okay? And I need you to try to get a grip and just accept that, because I really need to talk to you. And I’m not going away until I do.”

Kip gradually felt his pulse slow to a more normal rate. What the hell? he thought suddenly. Either this is one crazy dream, in which case there’s nothing to worry about because all that will happen in the end is I’ll simply wake up, or I really am going crazy in which case there’s nothing that I can do about it anyway, so why tear myself apart over it? The last possibility in his mind—that Quentin was telling the truth about it really being him there, in the flesh (or so to speak)—Kip did not even give consideration to.

“All right,” he finally said, nodding his agreement. “I’m listening. So talk already. What’s so damn important that you had to come back from the grave and scare the shit out of me in the middle of the night?”

Quent’s eyes were hard on him when he answered. “Lily.”

Kip had had a feeling that was where this was all headed. But hearing that one word, as always, did a funny thing to his insides. Briefly, he closed his eyes and counted silently to five in his head before reopening them and daring to meet Quentin’s gaze again.

“What about her?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about, Kip,” Quentin accused and the small vein in his forehead that always pulsed when he got angry became prominent. “You made me a promise, pal, and you haven’t kept it.”

Kip had to look away from his friend’s eyes. It was true, of course. And he felt bad about it. But he just didn’t know how to keep that promise. He hadn’t had a clue how he was going to do it from the very moment the words had fallen out of his mouth, but he also hadn’t been able to stop them, either.

“Do you even remember the promise you made me the night I died, Kip?” Quent asked, and his voice was dark and thick. Kip made himself meet his gaze and slowly he nodded.

“I couldn’t forget it if I tried.”

“You *promised* me you would look after my wife. Make sure she was taken care of, help get her through this...”

Kip nodded. In his head he could hear the words he had exchanged with Quent that horrific night: Promise me, Kip, please... Just tell me you’ll be there for Lily... she doesn’t have anyone else... she’s going to need you... Promise me you’ll take care of my wife, Kip. Please...

And, God help him, Kip had promised.

“I’m sorry, Q,” he said now, his gaze again on the floor beneath his bare feet. He felt like an ashamed child under his best friend’s disappointed gaze. “I know I haven’t watched over her like I should have. It’s been about two months since I’ve checked in with her in person, though I have called her a few times. She always seems fine... It’s hard... I don’t know what to say to her... how to comfort her...”

Quentin was studying him as he spoke, and the inside of Kip’s stomach flip-flopped. He wondered if ghosts had ways of looking inside a person’s soul and knowing the truth that was printed there. He wondered if somehow Quentin knew already the things that Kip was keeping to himself, those things he’d kept to himself all along, even when Quentin had been alive. The things he had never told another person.

“I’m sure it’s hard for you. I understand more than you think. But I need you to help her because I can’t. I’ve tried going to her like I came to you tonight and she doesn’t see me. I guess maybe she’s just not ready to see me like this yet; she hasn’t really accepted that I’m gone. Look, I’ve never asked you for anything before, Kip, and I hate to call in favors with anyone, but I’m calling in mine with you now. You have to do this for me. She needs you.”

Kip squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head dejectedly. He wished he knew how to make Quentin realize just how impossible what he was asking for was.

“Look man, I know I owe you... God, I wouldn’t even be alive today if you hadn’t saved my ass that night in San Antonio...” Kip closed his eyes against the memory, but he still saw the arena, smelled the rodeo animals, and felt the earth shaking as the bucking bull spun in circles, mindless of the rider hung up on its back. If it hadn’t been for Quentin jumping across that wild animal’s back that night and untying the knot of rope that held Kip in place, he would have been ground under the heels of that bull till there was nothing left of him. It had been the last night of both their careers in that dangerous sport. It had been too close, the picture of death too clear. The next day they’d promised one another to get out and they’d kept the promise. And their lives. For a little longer, anyway, in Quentin’s case.

Kip shook his head and made himself look at the man who had saved his life. “There’s no one else?” he finally asked, knowing better than to hope.

Quentin considered this for a full minute before he answered. “It’s not that there’s no one else, man. There’s no one else I want to ask.”

“Why? Because I’m your best friend?”

Quentin nodded. “There’s that.” He paused for a minute, studying Kip closely, making that topsy turvy feeling start again in Kip stomach. “But even more important than that,” he finally said, “I know that you love her.”

Kip felt like the air had been sucked out of his lungs. “*What?*” he croaked.

His best friend since childhood grinned mischievously. “You didn’t realize that I knew that, did you, Chief?”

Kip stared at him, his mouth agape, then opening and closed on words that never made it out of his throat. Quent laughed.

“It’s all right, Kip. Don’t hyperventilate on me. I’ve known how you feel about Lily all along. I’m not blind you know. I saw it that first time you two met, right before you realized that she had come to that party with me. It was stamped all over your damn face. And then you found out I had seen her first. And you stepped back. And stayed back. You let me have her. And for that I owe you an eternal debt that I will never be able to repay.”

“I... I can’t believe you... you *knew* all along?” Kip let out a deep breath and stared at Quentin. “You have no idea how the guilt used to eat me up about how I felt about her.”

“I don’t know why you’d feel guilty,” Quentin shrugged. “You never once acted on your feelings. You could have, and I imagine Lily would have gone with you—or at least she would have been sorely tempted. But you did the honorable thing.”

“I wasn’t always so honorable in my head,” Kip admitted, and was rewarded with a raucous laugh from Quentin. “God, it’s good to hear that laugh again,” he commented, watching with appreciation as his friend threw back his head and roared with his mirth.

“Look, man,” Quentin said when he overcame his laughter. “I’m asking you to take care of Lily because I know you want to, and I know you care about her. There’s no one better. You’ve been like a brother to me my entire life. And I don’t want my wife to be alone for the rest of hers. The two of you need each other.”

“So, you’re giving me permission to pursue Lily,” Kip felt the need to clarify. “Your wife.”

“Not only that, Chief,” Quent added, “but I’m promising you I’ll kick your ass for you in the afterlife if you don’t.”

Kip stared at him for a beat before realizing just how serious he actually was.

“Well, when you put it like that, what other choice do I really have?” he asked with a grin.

They spent the next hour talking about Lily and the things she had been up to since Quent had died that Kip didn’t know about it. Apparently, Quentin had been watching over her from above while Kip had been struggling with his guilty conscious, and what he had seen hadn’t pleased him.

“She’s not taking care of herself, or the farm,” he told Kip, exasperation in his voice. “She’s stopped her exercise routine, she hardly eats and when she does it’s only junk food. She stays up to all hours of the night then sleeps away the day. She’s pushed away all of her girlfriends and has taken a leave of absence from work. Every day she gets worse and worse.”

“Oh, my God, I had no idea,” Kip said. “I’m so sorry I haven’t been checking up on her better. I really thought she was okay.”

Quent gave him a meaningful look. “It’s okay. Just don’t let me down again. I need you, here, Chief.”

Kip nodded. “Anything else I need to know about?”

His friend shrugged. “It’s bad enough her not taking care of herself, but the land’s going to hell over there too. She let all of the help go and last year’s crops were a wash. I don’t think she even plans to plant again this year.

“It also worries me because she rarely goes off of the farm for anything anymore. Used to be I had to practically tie her down to keep her from going to this function or that one in town, but she’s like a recluse anymore. She has everything she needs delivered to the house, from her groceries to take out food to movie rentals. It’s just not healthy.”

“She sounds like a mess.”

Quentin shook his head. “I know she’s having a hard time, but she needs to start taking better care of herself. You know her cholesterol’s high and the way she’s eating is going to send it through the roof. She knows better than that. If I were still around, she’d be over my knee in a heartbeat...”

Kip’s eyebrows rose. “*Huh?*” he asked.

Quentin met his gaze. “That’s something else you probably ought to know about Lily,” he said calmly, as if describing the weather. “We used domestic discipline in our marriage. It was helpful, for both of us, really.”

“What are you talking *about*?” Kip half-growled, his hands clenching instinctively at what he was hearing. Not that he could punch a ghost, after all. Or at least he didn’t think he could. “Are you telling me that you *hit* her? You used to *hit* Lily?”

“No,” Quentin clarified evenly, glancing down at Kip’s fists with a wry grin. “But when the situation warranted it, I did paddle her bottom for her.”

Kip’s mouth fell open. “I... I don’t believe I’m hearing this...”

“It’s actually a lot more common than you would think, Chief. You go online sometime and do a search on the work spanking and see what you come up with. You might not believe me, but the first time I spanked Lily, it was *her* idea, not mine. She *asked* me to do it. At first I was just as blown away and wary of the idea as you obviously are, but as time went on, I saw the benefits to it.”

“*She* asked *you*... to *spank* her?” Kip repeated, then watched in obvious disbelief as Quentin nodded solemnly. “What, as foreplay or something?”

His friend’s eyes darkened. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, sometimes it was as foreplay. But the first time, and a lot of other times over the years, it was for punishment for something she had done wrong. Consequences for a poor choice in judgment. The first time she’d had a moment of weakness after a very bad day at work and had given in to the craving for a cigarette when she was trying to quit. She felt so guilty about it afterwards, and she was afraid that after she’d given in once she would continue to do so. So, she asked me to correct her actions with a good spanking. She thought it would help to deter her from smoking again. I never was very good at telling her no, so I did what she asked me to, though she had to really help me along the way that first time.” He smiled wistfully, obviously remembering what had happened, memories that he was not about to share with even his best friend, because they were simply too personal and special.

“Did it work for her?” Kip asked, still reeling from this information about the two people he had thought he knew best in his life. “Did she smoke again after that?”

Quent’s grin widened with pride at the question. “Actually, no, she didn’t. That time it worked. Though, in all honestly, there were some other times when it didn’t. And others where I had to give the lesson more than once for it to really sink in.”

“And she really *wanted* this from you? She really *asked* you for it?”

“She did in the beginning. As time went by, I got better at understanding when she needed that from me. I could read her better and I knew when something wasn’t right with her. I could tell when she wasn’t being honest with me, or when she was hiding something. I also made up a few rules of my own once we were married. I didn’t appreciate her army brat language, so whenever she got really vulgar with her mouth, she got spanked. If she did something dangerous, she didn’t take care of herself, or was acting like a brat, I spanked her. Stuff like that. Sometimes she would throw a fit like a fish wife for no reason at all, and I came to realize that was her way of letting me know she needed me to step in and take control for a while. She still confessed things to me later on in our marriage, but usually I had to do the detective work on my own to know when she had gotten herself into trouble.”

Kip was shaking his head. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“Believe it. I wouldn’t tell you all this if it wasn’t true, and if it wasn’t important. Lily is the same woman, Kip. If you really want to be with her, if you want to love her and take care of her the way I think you do—and the way I’d like you to—then, you need to realize that she’s going to need the same thing from you that she needed from me. You’re going to have to be able to do that for her when she needs you to.”

“I’ve never spanked anyone in my life!” Kip exclaimed.

Quent shrugged. “Neither had I. So what? There’s a first time for everything. And, to tell you the truth, once you get over the fact that her bottom’s going to sting for a while and maybe be a little sore to sit on the next day, it can be rather enjoyable to have that writhing little bare backside under your hand, over your lap...” He cleared his throat and swiped a hand through his hair with something like irritation. “Once you’ve done it a few times I’m sure you’ll know what I mean.”

“I don’t know about this,” Kip argued still. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Well, obviously you’re not going to go charging in there the next time you see her and throw her over your lap for a whipping. Right now all I want you to do is get your butt over there tomorrow and start making a lot more regular visits to her in person. Try to get her out of the house. See if you can get her to start taking better care of herself and the farm. Help her out. In the meantime, I’ve book marked some websites on your computer for you. Check them out, they should be helpful to you where the spanking thing’s concerned. And I’ll be around to help you with all of it, too. I’m not just going to leave you hanging after this.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Kip admitted. “This is a lot to digest in the middle of the night. Plus, I liked seeing you again, Q, talking to you again. It wasn’t fair how you were taken from us so fast like that.”

Typical of Quentin, he ignored the last part of what Kip had said. “I don’t have any other choice except to check back with you. I can’t rest till I know both of you are settled and all right. And I know you too well, Chief. In the morning you’re going to wake up and think this was all a dream, even though I’ll leave you a couple surprises to make you question otherwise.”

Kip smiled crookedly. “Either a dream or I’m losing my mind.”

“Or maybe ghosts really do exist. ‘Cause here I am, right here in front of your eyes, brother.”

As she had every morning since the day Kip had brought her home from the shelter Patch, his white spotted cat, woke him up the following morning by walking all over his chest and purring her heart out to him in a bid for fresh food and company. Kip opened his eyes reluctantly and grimaced as one of her claws dug a little too deeply through the covers over his bare chest.

He smiled at the feline and stroked her back, winking at her as she arched it and rubbed her chin against his palm. He didn’t have it in him to be mad at her for waking him up. She was the only female that had frequented his bedroom for a long time now.

He glanced at the alarm clock, which he hadn’t had to use since getting Patch, and cursed mentally. He’d overslept, which wasn’t like him. But he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised given how exhausted he’d been last night.

And then his eyes fell on the lone, grass-stained sneaker lying on the floor near the bed. And for a few brief moments, his sleep addled brain couldn’t imagine what it was doing there.

But when he remembered why it was out, a surge of panic hit him.

It was just a dream, he told himself sternly, even as he was jumping out of bed and pounding down the hallway to the spare room he used as both a computer and storage room. *I just don’t remember taking the shoes out, but I must have at some point, because there is NO such thing as ghosts!*

But the computer couldn’t boot up fast enough for Kip. And when it finally did, and he clicked on the icon for his online favorites, he let out a low curse that would’ve gotten his mouth soaped up good when he was a kid.

There had to be thirty new additions on that favorites list. And every single one of them was somehow spanking related. There was Discipline and Desire, Shadowlane, Pablo and Mija’s

Treehouse, and some newsgroup called soc.sexuality.spanking. There was even a link to a top 100 spanking website site, which only further amazed him because a top 100 implied that there were even more than that in existence.

He was thinking of plugging in a search for the word spanking, as had been suggested to him last night, when he noticed he had new mail too. Half afraid to open it, he clicked on the icon and watched as a message popped up with his own email address as the sender.

Hey Chief,

Don't wig out on me when you see all this. Just try to go along with it and accept that it was really me that was here last night. And it'll really be me in the future, when I think you need some advice with Lily.

I forgot to tell you two things last night. One, the Fall Harvest Dance is next month. Lily always did love to dance but I always hated it; I hardly ever took her, and if there's one thing I could change looking back now it would've been that. So, ask her to the dance when you see her today. Convince her to go with you.

And B, I know you're going to need more proof of what happened last night. I'm sure right now, you're wondering if you aren't doing all this yourself, losing your mind and adding the bookmarks and sending this email yourself. So the next time you're at Lily's, try to get into my bedroom closet. There's a chest in there, a wooden one. Take a look inside and see if it doesn't support the fact that my visit to you last night was real.

Talk soon,

Q

Of course, Kip had been thinking exactly that. That he'd been the one to move the shoes, add the bookmarks on the computer, and write the email. Except that he'd never obsessed about spanking a woman before. So that part didn't fit. And the email was written in Quentin-ese, right down to the 'Chief,' which he'd always called Kip, and to the 'one' and 'B' in the way he'd listed his items. And as long as Kip had known him, Quentin had never signed his full first name; he always just used the Q.

There was one way to find out for sure. If he could get into Quentin's closet and look inside that chest, he might have a more definite answer.

And he'd already made up his mind to go over to Lily's today anyway. Even if the 'visit' he'd had last night had only been a dream, one thing was clear. His conscious couldn't take this anymore. He'd made his best friend a promise to watch over his widow. And he was going to get his butt in gear and do just that. He'd wasted enough time as it was.

And whatever else followed after that he would deal with when the time came around.