
Chapter 1

"**Y**our brother's coming home."

 Ia bit into a piece of homemade shortbread, not looking up. "Bully for him."

Taffy Waite Baldwin put the phone back in its cradle, turning to continue fiddling unsuccessfully with the antennae on the TV. "Dammit! Now I'm going to miss *The Edge of Night!*" She smacked the side of the TV sharply, hoping it wouldn't be enough to cause any harm but just enough to put the fear of God into it so that she didn't miss her stories. She certainly didn't want to break the thing, knowing that there would definitely be consequences to having broken the very expensive machine. It had an enormous fourteen-inch screen and a beautiful black and white picture, when it came in. And, it—unlike the set in the living room—had a big handle on the top that made it portable.

Her generous, loving husband had given it to her for her birthday, knowing that when she was in the kitchen making dinner or whatever, she couldn't see the soap operas she dearly loved.

But Taffy knew that neither the fact that he loved her nor the fact that it was a gift from him would stop her from exacting a

painful price if she damaged it in any way. It was of little use to her, though, when she couldn't get the channel she needed, with it sitting on the kitchen counter.

"You don't need to sound so excited about the prospect," Taffy commented absently, more involved with the TV than the conversation. "And don't talk with your mouth full."

"Oh dear. Was I sounding excited?" Ia droned in a monotone, ignoring her sister-in-law's warning. "Bully for him."

Slipping down off the snack bar stool, Anna Maria—long since shortened to "Ia" when she could only say that part of her own first name—headed for her room, nose buried in a well-worn copy of *Jane Eyre*, having just gotten to the thrilling part where Mr. Rochester was finally acknowledging his feelings toward Jane. Her heart began to ache in what she imagined to be much the same way Jane's would have—if she'd been real—when she began to read those unbearably romantic lines about how his heart was connected to hers by a string.

Nothing like that was ever going to happen for her. She was quite sure about it. For one thing, as much as her mother used to tell her that she needed to modify her tendencies, she was smart, and she refused to hide that one light she did have under a bushel.

But it wasn't as if she was downright ugly—she was just average looking, at best. So much so, that she'd managed to grow up, graduate from high school, go to college, and had even found a job for herself without anyone of the opposite sex noticing much of anything about her that wasn't in relation to her football quarterback, straight A, student body president, all round annoyingly successful brother Daniel.

Even though he'd preceded her through school by more than ten years—his father having married her mother when he was twelve, and them producing Ia a year later—he was all she heard about from the faculty as well as the students. Not only had he gone on to play college ball for the Vols—nearly being drafted

into the NFL—but he was a bit of a business whiz, too, of course. After interning throughout college at a local business that was involved in communications engineering, he'd struck out on his own and had built an amazing company that had brought commerce to their small town, jobs to its residents, and had lined his own pockets nicely in no small way in the process.

She'd been so glad to finally get to college, having deliberately chosen one that he had not attended, despite the fact that he'd suggested that as an alumnus, he might be able to help her get into the University of Tennessee. UT would have been closer, and she could have lived at home, he'd suggested one of the many times he'd talked to her about her college choices.

Ia had known that he was probably on the verge of it many times, but he'd never tried to mandate where she went, and she knew him well enough to know just how hard that must've been for him.

Their parents had died when she was ten, and he had slipped frighteningly easily into the parental roles that void had left—better as a father figure, of course, but he did his best to deal with the side of things that were much less comfortable to him, too. She'd idolized him as a little girl, but by the time she'd been orphaned, they were good friends. He was gone a lot and had his own place by that point, but he had immediately moved back into the house in which he'd grown up, too, not wanting to uproot Ia and cause her any more upset than she was already feeling.

The truth was that he'd been amazing with her while she was struggling with the loss. Big he-man that he was, he'd never flinched from comforting her, and the first thing he'd done once he'd gotten home after finding out about what had happened was to lift her into his arms and hold her while she wept. He didn't try to stop her from crying, didn't rush her or chastise her for her tears, then or ever.

He had given her a week out of school to help her adjust,

then he'd taken her back to school himself, developing a habit of dropping her off and picking her up, and keeping a close eye on how she was doing, academically as well as emotionally. All those things brought them much closer. She didn't know it, of course, but he consciously arranged things so that he spent less time away than he might have if he hadn't had her to look out for.

Not that he resented it in the least. He was genuinely glad to be in a position to take care of her. And, as such, he had to maintain a delicate balance between spending the time to make sure that his company was a success and making certain that he had plenty of time to spend with his little sister, too.

Unfortunately for Ia, Daniel was much more of a disciplinarian than either of her parents had ever been with her. As a result, when she became his responsibility, she was a bit spoiled. It wasn't anything awful or even overt. She never threw tantrums or was prone to histrionics, but she wasn't used to having much expected of her in the way of complying with rules or doing chores and was generally used to getting her own way. Their parents had indulged her too much as far as he was concerned.

Daniel loved her—and quickly came to adore her as he became her defacto parent—but he was not going to put up with any kind of spoiled or bratty behavior. Ia had to find out about that the hard way, and in a manner which caused her great embarrassment.

Being spanked by him was horrible—horribly painful, yes. Even though he no longer played football, he maintained his athletic physique, and he was strong as an ox, with wide shoulders and well-muscled arms and legs. And that enormous hand was utterly unbearable when there was that much strength behind it.

But as far as Ia was concerned, the humiliation she felt when he spanked her was almost worse than anything he could do to her.

As a result, several things happened. She learned to be quite

sneaky, and when she did something that she knew might well get her in trouble with him if she was caught; she made damned sure not to get caught. It wasn't as if she disobeyed him all the time; it was very occasional and never in an overt manner. He never checked up on her—he was too busy, and thus Ia became quite expert in covering her tracks. She was very careful never to push things too far, knowing that if he found out she was being so devious, it would go that much worse for her, on top of the punishment she'd earn for doing whatever it was that he didn't want her to.

As a result of her careful machinations, Daniel found that he rarely had to punish her. In the years since she'd lost her parents and he'd lost his dad, he'd only actually spanked her three times.

One of those times was relatively recent—or much more recent than she was comfortable with, even though it had happened more than three years ago.

She'd assumed that, once she was a legal adult—twenty-one—and had graduated college, too, that he wouldn't continue to discipline her. But she was wrong about that assumption—very, very wrong.

When she left high school, she had a curfew of eleven. She hadn't spent much time at home during the summers between college years, preferring to spend it with friends she had met, some of whom were extremely well off, and spent their summers travelling. She often went along with them, with Daniel's permission, which he gave without her ever having to ask as long as it was someone he knew and trusted, and she made sure that those boxes were checked before she mentioned her plans.

That should have told her something, but she preferred not to confront the fact that he was still acting toward her as if he was her father. So the issue of whether or not she still had a curfew remained unaddressed for four years.

The summer after she'd graduated and came home to live, she'd stayed out one Friday night with a group of guys and girls

who had stolen under the fence at a local state park in order to night swim, drink, smoke, and party around a campfire.

She hadn't gotten home until almost two in the morning, but he was awake, mostly because he'd been worried sick about her.

Ia didn't like to think about what had happened next, and she really hadn't forgiven him for it, either. Not only had he spanked her—first with his hand, then finishing with the wide leather belt that he had been wearing at the time—but he'd also grounded her from going out for a month because she'd broken the law by trespassing at a state park.

Since he owned the house she lived in, the car she drove to get to work, bought all of her clothes and food and everything else in regards to the household, plus giving her a generous allowance, there wasn't much she could do.

It drove a bit of a wedge between them for a while, and it still stuck in Ia's craw. That night when she was still standing in her bedroom, where he usually spanked her, afterward, she surprised him by declining his offer of a comforting hug.

Daniel had frowned darkly at that, brows drawn. It was the harshest punishment he'd ever doled out to her. He'd never used his belt on her before, and if anyone needed a hug at that moment, it was her. But she actually took a step away from him, with her hand up.

"No. No, thank you," she'd declined coolly, not looking at him as she pulled her pants up, refusing to give any sign that doing so was incredibly painful.

"I hope you really understand why I punished you, Ia. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't bother."

There was no response from her, so he left, although he hated to leave things like that between them.

As soon as the door closed, Ia allowed herself to fall apart in the way she couldn't in front of him, crawling onto her bed to lie on her stomach, breath hissing in through her teeth from even just those small movements. She was still fully dressed. He never

bared her completely for a spanking, and this time was no different, but he did expose her panties, which might as well not have been there.

As she lay on her bed sobbing, Ia made the decision to take some steps to become more independent from that moment on.

It helped that she found out the next morning that she'd gotten the job she'd applied for at a small, regional bank. It was an entry-level position that didn't pay much, but she knew that—even for a woman—there were a lot of chances for advancement. The person who had interviewed her was a woman, and her hopes had been buoyed to see that.

The bank gave her a free checking and savings accounts as an employee perk, and she'd already closed out her small savings at another bank and deposited the money at the one where she was working. It was annoying that they only paid once a month, but that first Friday of the month after she'd started, she'd gotten her paycheck and felt like she could conquer the world.

That evening, when Daniel handed Ia her allowance for the week as usual, she'd refused to take it, saying a coldly polite, "No, thank you."

Daniel had continued holding the money out to her, looking confused. "You don't want your allowance?"

"No, thank you."

He'd sighed in exasperation but didn't force it on her. "You can't be making that much at the bank, honey."

"No, thank you."

"Well, it's here for you if you should ever need it."

"Thank you," she answered stiffly.

AS HIS LITTLE sister walked away from him, he sighed again, putting his hands on his hips. He wished for the thousandth time that he could find a way back to the closeness they'd had

before. But he wasn't going to apologize for disciplining her for something she should have known better than to do in the first place. She wasn't a kid anymore, and they had been trespassing and could have been brought up on charges if they had been caught.

She hadn't sat comfortably for a week, but he didn't regret his behavior in the least, except that it seemed to have driven a wedge between them that he couldn't get around.

Still, he had to admire her for wanting to stand on her own two feet. Most women would have been just as happy to get two paychecks—one from the bank and one from him. Hell, most women wouldn't have gone out and gotten a job in the first place. She knew she didn't have to—he'd told her as much—but she had gumption and guts, his little sister, and he was very proud of her

He wished he thought that telling her that would make any kind of a dent in the cold shoulder she'd been giving him for what seemed like forever.

EVEN THOUGH IT was harder to do without her brother's money, she managed to save enough money to buy herself a second-hand car, which was the next step in what she saw as her liberation—her path out from under her brother's thumb.

It wasn't much, but she'd had the family mechanic check it out, and he said it was sound—if old. She didn't care if it was old, as long as it would get her to work and back.

"You didn't tell me you were looking for a car," Daniel had said one night at the dinner table as Taffy had set a beautifully done roast down in front of him to carve, and Ia brought up the rear with the scalloped potatoes and peas. He stood to carve off two slices, one for his wife and one for his sister. "Is there a problem with the Chevy?"

"No, I'd just like to own my own car," she replied, going back for the rolls, butter, and corn.

"That's very admirable of you." He smiled. "But you didn't have to bring it to Skip to have him check it out. I would have been glad to do it for you."

"You're very busy, and that's what Skip does for a living."

Daniel tried not to frown at her flat tone. Instead, he smiled and said, "I always have time for you, buttercup."

They passed around the bowls of food with the efficiency of long acquaintance, then Daniel sat down, putting a hand out to his wife and the other to his sister, palm up. Each of them took it unquestioningly, bowing their heads as he did his.

"For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly grateful."

"Amen."

"This looks delicious, Taff. Another winner!" He smiled broadly at his wife, who preened under his praise. As he dug into the meal, he mentioned, "Don't buy anything without consulting me first, though, Ia. I want to make sure you don't get taken."

"Thank you, but I'm neither an idiot nor a helpless female, and I'll do my homework. And since it's my money, I'll buy what I want."

Their grandmother's milk glass butter dish that her brother had been holding landed loudly on the table at that pronouncement. Not that he'd dropped it, really, but rather he'd put it down with a certain amount of force. Daniel stared hard at his sister, but he didn't say anything further about it. If she didn't want his help, she didn't have to accept it, he guessed. It was uncomfortable for him that she was so adversarial, but he hadn't made any headway into changing how she was feeling. She wasn't doing anything wrong, and she wasn't being disrespectful—very carefully, so he thought, so he didn't feel he could spank her, and that might just make it worse, anyway.

She clearly resented the fact that he was continuing to disci-

pline her, but as long as she was under his roof, that wasn't going to change.

A few weeks later, she bought a car that Skip had said checked out. He'd also told her that the price was a good deal, so she did it all without her big brother's help. One goal down, more to go.

The next step toward independence was to find a place to live. Since she already had a job, she wanted it to be reasonably close to the bank, and she was also keen to find someone to share the rent with. But her friends from school had either moved away or were married, or planning to be married soon, so there really wasn't anyone she knew who wanted to go in on it with her. She could have advertised for a roommate or answered one of the few that were in the paper, but Ia was shy enough that she wasn't at all sure about living with someone she didn't know. There was a girl at work whom she had become friends with who might fit the bill, but she, too, was living at home, and having to pay rent, buy groceries, clean, and cook wasn't looking like much fun to her when she could keep all of her paycheck instead.

Still, Ia spent her lunch hours—when not eating slash gossiping with her coworkers—pouring over the apartment for rent ads and dreaming. While she was waiting for a good opportunity, she was saving as much money as she could, eschewing new clothes and trips to the movies in favor of her dream.

Someone she had spoken to about looking at a place had called home one day, though, and Daniel had answered it. He'd handed her the phone but hadn't moved once he did, standing there in the open area between the kitchen, dining room, and living room with his arms crossed over his chest, looking unhappy. Since the cord wasn't very long, Ia couldn't get very far away from him while she spoke, but then she straightened her back, knowing he was right there.

Let him watch and listen. She had every right to move out, if that was what she wanted to do.

"Mr. Cooper? Yes, this is Anna Maria Baldwin. Yes, I'm very interested. Tomorrow at nine sounds fine. Thank you very much. I'll see you then."

She hung up the phone and tried to walk away, but his deep voice stopped her automatically in her tracks, even though she didn't want it to. "I didn't know you were planning on moving out."

Forcing herself to turn around, she bravely met his eyes. "I'm just in the planning stages at the moment, but yes, I am."

He took a breath and opened his mouth, as if he was going to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, he shoved his fists into his pockets. "I want to look at the place before you rent it."

As much as she didn't want it to, that made sense to her. Unlike their friendly mechanic, she didn't know anyone else who might be able to evaluate the soundness of the apartment for her, and Daniel was very handy around the house. He would be able to tell her what might be wrong with the place, and he knew even more people than she did in the small town—business people—so he might well know the reputation of the person who was renting it, too, as well as knowing whether or not it was a reasonably safe part of town.

She inclined her head. "All right. Can I go now?"

"May I—" he corrected.

But she interrupted, "May I go now?"

"Yes, you may."

Daniel had frowned after her for a good long time after she'd disappeared into her room before he grabbed the evening paper and sank down into his easy chair to watch the latest episode of *The Milton Berle Show*.

That place hadn't worked out, and now, many long months later, she was still stuck here with her brother and his wife. She didn't mind Taffy so much, and even suspected that he spanked

her, too, but that didn't bear thinking of, and it was of absolutely no comfort to her, anyway.

Daniel had tried to talk to her—not about why she wanted to move out, which he thought might lead to an argument—but instead trying to emphasize the fact that she'd be wasting money.

"Think of how much of your hard-earned dough you're saving by living here! Why would you want to waste your money like that when you don't have to? I don't understand it. You would have so much more to spend." He was reaching for something she might spend her money on. "Like filling up your hope chest or buying clothes and makeup or whatever."

She'd laughed at that, but not in a humorous way. "If I had a hope chest, it would be old and dusty by now."

He looked uncomfortable at being reminded that his little sister was an old maid. "Well, you never know."

"Yes, I do, Daniel. I'm twenty-five, and I've never even been on a date."

"Yes, you have! I fixed you up with..." He frowned. "...well, I forget his name."

"Ernie Parker, whom we both know went out with me to try to score points with you toward a promotion. He barely looked at me the entire night. And his mother, with whom he lives, came with us to the movies and made us dinner at their house later. That does not count as a date."

"Did he pay for the movie?" he asked, as if he'd found a loophole in her logic.

"She paid for the movie, Daniel. You have to face facts—I have. Men don't have any interest in me. They never have, even when I was younger. I wear glasses, I'm bookish, and I won't act stupid just to make them like me, and I'm nothing special to look at whatsoever. Marriage and children just aren't in the cards for me, and that's okay." She swallowed hard at that lie but forced herself to continue with her timid little speech. "And this is your house—yours and Taffy's. You'll have kids one day, and what am

I going to be then? The pathetic maiden aunt, still living with her brother and his wife? No, thank you; I need to find my own way."

She had to give it to him. He looked appalled at what she'd just said. "We would never see you that way."

"You don't have to. I'm doing it for you," she admitted, on the brink of tears and desperate not to cry in front of him, even though he'd never made her feel bad when she did.

Daniel was at a loss for what to say. "Can I at least hug you?" he asked, arms already out to her as he took a step toward her—as if he'd never considered that she might refuse his request.

Knowing that his genuine kindness would break her down into a pile of disagreeable fluids, Ia shook her head, then turned tail and literally ran away from him, down the hall to her room as fast as she could.

And that was where she had spent the majority of her time until, one afternoon when she was holed up in her bedroom with yet another Barbara Cartland novel in her hand, and she heard a knock on her door.

"He's gone. You can come out now," Taffy said, wandering back toward the living room as if she didn't care whether or not the younger woman followed her or not, which wasn't necessarily the truth. She liked Ia but didn't want to get between a brother and sister, so she let them work things out as much as possible. And she wasn't much interested in spending the time he was away on business alone in the house, either.

At first, her friendship with Taffy was just due to the fact that they lived in the same house, and Daniel was their only common bond. But as they spent more and more time together, they found they liked a lot of the same things, and while the cat was gone, the mice played. Surprisingly, though, with all of their late-night chats and the booze that inevitably accompanied them, they had never discussed the fact that they had each spent time with his hand blistering their bottoms. That said a lot about how

embarrassed they each were about that state of affairs, she assumed.

When Ia appeared in the living room, her sister-in-law informed her, "He went on some big overseas trip—England? Ireland? Somewhere in that vicinity," she mused, wrinkling her nose as if having to think about the geography of it hurt her head. "He'll be gone for a couple of weeks. Wanna go get a pizza and some beer?"

"I admire you, you know," Taffy said as they slipped into one of the few empty booths at Alfredo's Pizzeria fifteen minutes later.

Ia snorted. "You do? Why? I haven't done anything whatsoever to deserve admiration."

"Yes, you have. You're not waiting around to get married. You've got your degree, you've got a good job and a car and Daniel told me that you're even looking to move out. Good for you!"

Ia couldn't decide whether it was actually good for her, or good for Taffy, but she gave her the benefit of the doubt. "Thank you. I-I'm not what men want, apparently, never had been, so I figured I should make my own way."

And get out of a house where my brother feels he has the right to spank me, she thought but didn't say.

But Taffy did. "Yeah, and living alone means that Daniel won't be enforcing a curfew, either." The older woman stared into Ia's eyes boldly "And spanking you when you break it, I mean."

She knew that her complexion was an unbecoming shade of red, and her face was already unbecoming, and that knowledge just made her blush even harder. It was a vicious cycle.

"Uh, no. He won't." Ia wasn't at all sure that she wanted to talk about this.

But Taffy wasn't giving her the option. "I wish I could get him to lay off that stuff!" she moaned. "I mean, jeez. Most

nights, I can barely sit in those damned wooden dining room chairs. I asked him if we could replace them, and he said no!"

Ia shrugged. "So replace them yourself. You get an allowance, don't you?"

Two beers were placed in front of them and they gave their usual order—a large pepperoni and sausage with extra cheese.

Taffy took a swig of her beer. "Can you imagine what he'd do if he came home and they were gone—especially after I've already asked him to get rid of them? I'd never sit down again!"

Ia had to laugh at that. "You're probably right about that. I withdraw my suggestion."

It didn't go any further than that, but it was a nice icebreaker, too, something they'd been dancing around for too long. It drew them even closer to each other than they had been while he was gone. Having a sister-in-law whom she'd had to adapt to kind of gave Ia a bit of insight as to what it might be like to live with someone else, and it reinforced her feeling that she really didn't want to move in with someone who was a complete stranger.

On Saturday night, they decided to treat themselves by going out to dinner and a movie. They debated about several of the films but ended up going to see "Jailhouse Rock" because Ia wanted to drool over Elvis, on whom she'd had a crush since the first time she'd heard *Don't Be Cruel*.

She rhapsodized over him during dinner. Taffy thought he was all right but said that her husband was much better looking, and better built, too.

Ia frowned at that, mostly because she wasn't wrong. Among the other many ways in which her brother had won the genetic lottery, were his all-American man good looks. She tried not to be resentful of him but, especially now, was failing badly.

But Taffy's comment set her to thinking about what she liked in a man. Elvis was great but unattainable—not that any other man in her life had seemed attainable, but he was less so than most. She did like her brother's physique—tall, broad and

muscular. She didn't give a hoot about hair color, although she didn't much go for redheads. She was not a fan of freckles or paleness, not that she'd be picky if a ginger asked her out. And she had to admit that, even though she'd commit a multitude of sins with him if he but asked her, in all honesty, Elvis' build wasn't what she preferred, either.

Once they finished dinner, the two of them stopped at a small variety store for the best foods to console them in their loneliness, chips, ice cream, and chocolate—a handful of Sky bars for Taffy and Mallow Cups for Ia—and more beer, not that there wasn't a well-stocked bar at home.

Once there, they got out of their prim dresses and into their robes, nightgowns and slippers, meeting in the big living room that separated their bedrooms.

Taffy already had drinks poured for them, as well as a beer on a coaster next to her, and all the snacks had been placed on the coffee table in pretty bowls she'd gotten from someone as a wedding present. Even the candy bars were strewn artfully around the bowls, and there were big, fluffy throw pillows on the couch that didn't usually reside there. There was even a fan of small napkins available, so that it looked as if she was expecting to throw some kind of combination cocktail and slumber party.

"You are such a good decorator," Ia complimented as she grabbed a candy bar and a handful of Cheetos.

"Use a bowl," Taffy reprimanded, pointing at the cereal bowls she'd pressed into service. "I'm not having your orange powdered fingerprints all over my sofa."

"Yes, ma'am," Ia teased while reaching for one.

Taffy got up and turned on the TV, standing there thumbing through the guide while it warmed up enough to show a picture, asking, as she flipped the dial around, "*Lawrence Welk* or *Gunsmoke*?"

"*Gunsmoke*, please."

It wasn't either of their favorites, but it was always great to

watch something that they didn't have to pay to see and could watch in their pajamas, so they settled back, snacking absently and drinking more avidly until it was over.

"*Your Hit Parade* or *The Joseph Cotton Show*?" Taffy crossed to the TV again.

Ia wrinkled her nose. "Neither."

"Then let's play some music."

"We can't. My player needs a new needle."

Taffy gave her a somewhat fuzzy grin. "Then let's use the console! It's so much better than your player—we can stack some forty-fives and just dance and sing for a long time!"

Ia's eyes grew wide. "But Daniel told me that I was never to touch that stereo when he wasn't here!"

Her sister-in-law's eyes rolled. She got a lot braver when she was drunk—and Daniel wasn't there. "Yes, he said the same thing to me, too. But we're not children, and we're not going to break it. We're just going to listen to some music. You go get your case of forty-fives and I'll get mine, and we'll put them on."

Considering that she wasn't any too sober, Ia thought that was a stupendous idea.

And it was.

It was an eclectic mix. *Jailhouse Rock*, *Sentimental Journey*, *Come and Go with Me*, *It's Been a Long, Long, Time*, and *Wake Up, Little Susie* were all sung—badly—and danced to even worse. At one point, the *Blue Danube* came on, and they waltzed together, giggling the whole time as an unlikely Ia took the lead.

When it was done, Taffy was more than wobbly, and Ia wasn't far behind her.

"Ya know, we have brownies left over and homemade hot fudge. We could make sundaes!" Taffy headed to the kitchen on that note, and Ia followed her—weaving a bit but able to make it there without incident—while the older woman already had a pot on the stove to heat up the hot fudge.

Ia wasn't too drunk to notice that as Taffy became more and

more relaxed, she became less and less fussy-neat. The evening had started out with her chiding Ia about napkins, but by the time they got to the sundaes, she'd just left the kitchen as it was while they inhaled their sundaes, without making the slightest motion toward cleaning it. There was hot chocolate on the fridge and the counter; the remainder of the ice cream was left melting on the counter and the dirty pan never made it to the sink to soak.

And the living room was worse. *Much* worse, not that she seemed to care in the least.

"I still wish there'd been whipped cream for this," she said later when they were so stuffed, they could barely move.

Ia thought she was going to throw up, but Taffy was still going, refilling her drink every time she refilled her own, whether it needed it or not.

"I don't know how you stay so slim when we eat like this."

Taffy rose at that as if she'd issued a direct challenge. "We don't eat like this..." She motioned to the bags of chips that had spilled on the floor, the candy bar wrappers that were strewn everywhere, and the empty sundae bowls perched precariously on the end tables. "...very often. But I'll show you how I do it normally, as long as I can trust you to keep it a secret from your brother." Taffy gave Ia a somewhat threateningly speculative look that was expectant at the same time.

It prompted Ia to respond mindlessly, "Of course, you can," without knowing what it was that she was agreeing to keep from Daniel.

She returned from her bedroom with something Ia never thought she'd see in this house—a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"Oh my word, you smoke? How could you possibly? You know how much Daniel hates smoking!"

"Don't I just!" Taffy shrugged. "I picked up the habit before I met him, when I was working as a secretary, because if you didn't

smoke, you didn't get a break. I've cut down a lot—because I enjoy sitting—but I keep a pack for times like this, when he's gone." She offered the pack to Ia. "Want one?"

Ia hesitated. If Daniel found out, he would spank her again—or even give her the belt—and she wasn't at all sure that the reward was worth the risk.

But then, in her newfound spirit of independence, she decided to throw caution to the wind. "Yes, please."

"Okay, but we can only do this outside. Never, ever, ever in the house. We have to be sure to collect the butts and flush them down the toilet and wash and clean the ashtray. And when we're done, we're going to take off our nightgowns and our panties and I'm going to wash them. You'd do well to wash your hair, too. That man has the nose of a bloodhound. He's not due home until next Friday, but I'm really paranoid about him finding out."

For someone who was drunk enough to uncharacteristically allow a bomb to go off in her kitchen and living room, she was positively obsessive about the rules surrounding smoking when she knew her husband didn't want her to.

And Ia absolutely understood—and subscribed to—that level of paranoia. Daniel's punishments were to be avoided at any and all costs, and nothing was going to be seen as too extreme in that pursuit.

Ia nodded, saying, "I understand."

Taffy stopped abruptly on their way out onto the deck that overlooked the backyard. "I know you do. Have you ever smoked before?"

"No."

"Not even in college?" She sounded dubious.

"Uh-uh."

"You really are a goody-two-shoes, aren't you?"

Ia sighed. "Guilty as charged."

"Well, who can blame you, I guess, with him raising you. It's a wonder he didn't put you in a convent."

"Might as well have."

It turned out that she didn't like smoking, or it didn't like her. The more she tried to inhale, the worse her cough got, until she'd coughed so much, she thought she was going to be sick. So, she handed the rest of her half-smoked cigarette back to Taffy. "I don't want to waste it. I don't think smoking is for me." She grinned. "I'll just stick with liquor and bad boys."

Taffy laughed at that. "Well, liquor, anyway. I'd be willing to bet you haven't even had a good boy!"

Ia didn't laugh at that at all, and, to her credit, Taffy noticed.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry! I didn't mean for that to sound...well, you know, mean."

"I know, I know," Ia reassured her automatically, really trying not to think about what she'd said, or she was going to burst into tears.

But Taffy saved the day by stubbing out her cigarette and guiding Ia back into the living room, where she produced a game that turned out to be absolutely hilarious when played drunk—Life. When they were supposed to go to Millionaire Acres, they started over instead, so they never really finished the game and declared a winner. Instead, each of them ended up literally having a carful of children trailing them around the board, and they had both been most of the possible careers—although Taffy kept saying that she didn't want one, but she did it for the money.

Surprisingly, drunk Mystery Date was even better, but they didn't finish that one, either. By then, they were getting sleepy.

Taffy did manage to ask Ia which one of the men—as she cheated and looked through the pictures of the possible dates—was her type.

Ia colored. "I'm not sure."

"Well, the the first thing you need to decide is what kind of man you want. Then you know who to set your sights on!"

She said it as if that was all Ia would need to do to have hordes of men knocking down the door to date her.

Her sister-in-law was determined to help her, but by that point, it was the middle of the night, and they were hammered. Taffy fell asleep with her cigarettes in her hand, having intended to go out and smoke one last one before retiring. Ia passed out on the couch with her slippers actually on it, which was a testament to just how polluted Taffy was, or she would have been screaming bloody murder at her to get her feet off the couch.