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Mr. and Mrs. Luke Kerrigan.

Casey rolled the names around in her head, enjoying the sound, dreaming of the day Luke would finally put a ring on her finger. Sighing, she dropped her chin into her palm. The wedding was still three weeks away. Her bridal shower, on the other hand. . .

“Casey Alexander! You are not going to be late to your own shower. I only reserved Mabel’s Bed & Breakfast for four hours.”

A smile twitched on Casey’s lips. Her best friend, Monah Trenary, was tiny—Tinkerbell looked humongous by comparison—but she was tough.

“Casey!”

And pushy.

“Coming.” Casey cast one last, longing glance at the wedding gowns she’d been admiring on the Internet before snapping the lid closed on her laptop, packing it into its case, and looping the strap over her shoulder. It was a habit, she knew, but as a person who made their living designing websites, she rarely went anywhere without it. Her bridal shower was no

exception.

She wound her way downstairs. The house was quiet. Too quiet, she realized with a start. Where was the noise and voices she'd heard when the shower guests started arriving to caravan over to Mabel's? Monah waited in the foyer, her slight figure outlined by the rays of afternoon sun glinting through the glass door. "I thought you said the shower isn't until two," Casey said. "Where is everyone?"

Monah tapped her high-heeled shoes against the aged oak floor of Aunt Liddy's hallway. "And what time is it?"

She shot a pointed look at her watch. Casey did likewise. One-forty-five. Drat. "We're late."

She grabbed a sweater and followed Monah out the door. The weatherman had been forecasting cooler temperatures, not at all unusual for late September in Massachusetts. "What about Aunt Liddy?"

"Meeting us there," Monah said as she and Casey climbed into her compact car. Casey propped her laptop on the floor behind her seat. The vehicle fit Monah perfectly—sporty, with a dash color for flair, and in a body style that screamed exuberance and youth.

A mound of gifts inhabited the back seat. Casey jerked her thumb toward the pile. "Are all of those for me and Luke?"

A funny little half-snort escaped Monah's throat. "Well, they're not for me and Mike. Not yet, anyway."

Casey laughed and buckled her seatbelt into place. "I take it Pine Mills' finest is still too busy playing detective to set a date."

"Actually. . ." Monah averted her gaze and shoved her black-rimmed glasses higher onto

her nose.

Casey gaped like a tuna in a fisher's net. "You're kidding. You're the one procrastinating? Whatever for? Last time we talked, you said you could hardly wait for the two of you to start making your own wedding plans."

"It's my deadline, Case. *Mind before Murder* is due back to the publisher by December first, and I'm barely over halfway." She shook her head, ruffling the dark tresses tumbling past her shoulders. "I haven't been able to think about anything else for weeks."

Her eyes wide, Casey pointed toward Monah's temple. "I still can't believe the True-Life Detective books come out of that head. Every time I see a person reading one, I have to bite my tongue to keep from shouting that I know the author."

"You'll believe it when the FBI shows up on my doorstep because I'm always Googling things like drug running and forensic pathology. You know those are key words, right? The FBI looks for stuff like that over the Internet. It's one of the ways they monitor drug deals and terrorist activity. The other day, I swore I saw Tommy Lee Jones in a dark suit and sunglasses, scoping me out like I was Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*."

Casey laughed. "You're too much. Not even Brandy Purcell is that paranoid."

"Then again, Brandy Purcell hasn't almost been arrested for poisoning half her neighbors."

True.

Casey's thoughts drifted to Dena Drolen and how she'd almost gotten away with murdering her husband by framing Monah. If it hadn't been for Monah's love of detective work, and the skills she picked up researching her novels, Dena might have gotten away with the crime. She shook her head. "Hard to believe that happened less than four months ago."

“Yeah, well, maybe for you,” Monah said, pulling into the manicured driveway of Mabel’s Bed & Breakfast. She shivered as she shoved the car into park and swung out of the driver’s side door. “That whole thing still gives me nightmares.”

Unbuckling her seatbelt, Casey also climbed out of the car. “But you received four new computers for the library because of it, right? That ought to count for something.”

“It does. Especially since they also sent someone to get them set up so I didn’t have to. But I still have trouble using the ladies’ room without picturing Miss Tait’s body on the floor.”

Casey joined Monah on the sidewalk, her arms extended to receive the gifts piled up to Monah’s chin. “Look at it as fodder for your writing. The whole horrible episode will more than likely end up in a book someday.”

Monah paused and tapped a small silver package with her finger. “I have thought about it.” She added the package to the bunch in Casey’s arms. “Okay, okay. So it’d make a great novel.”

Straightening, she grabbed Casey’s shoulders and turned her toward Mabel’s front door. “Go. Send reinforcements.”

“I can come back—”

“Absolutely not. You’ll get sweaty.”

A salute meant risking the precariously balanced load. Casey settled for a sharp snap of her heels. Monah’s laughter followed her to the porch.

Ivy dripped from a trellis on either side of the steps. Through the vines, someone had twisted silk ribbon and puffy white gauze. Clear lights winked among the leaves. An ornate pedestal next to the leaded glass door bore a sign that read, Alexander-Kerrigan Bridal Shower. Casey’s heart tripped when she saw her name linked with Luke’s. Suddenly the months of

planning, the lists and phone calls searching for just the right caterer and florist, every moment of worry and angst, all of it seemed worthwhile.

A tear formed in the corner of her eye. She blinked it away before juggling the packages so that she could push the doorbell.

The massive oak door flew open and Mabel, herself, bustled out. “Thank goodness you’re here. Come in, honey! We’ve been waiting for you.” Her jovial cheeks shook with mirth as she caught a box sliding off the top of Casey’s load. “Let me help with that.” Turning into the hall she hollered, “The guest of honor has arrived!”

The soft buzz of voices drifting from a large parlor off the entrance rose in volume. Old friends and new surrounded Casey, some she’d made since joining Community Fellowship Church here in Pine Mills, three others who drove from Virginia Beach to take part in her special day. One by one, the gifts in Casey’s arms disappeared to be whisked into the parlor where a ribbon and lace bedecked table waited.

Aunt Liddy swooped into the hall, her floral printed dress billowing in her wake. “There you are. I told Monah not to let you dawdle over that laptop. I just knew you’d get caught up downloading or uploading,” she waved her hand, “or whatever it’s called.”

A familiar cloud of ginger scented perfume wafted from Aunt Liddy as she enveloped Casey in a hug. Casey closed her eyes and savored the scent then pressed a kiss to her aunt’s warm cheek. “Don’t blame Monah. I was looking at wedding dresses.”

Aunt Liddy’s blue eyes sparkled. Twin dimples deepened the lines around her mouth. “Oh? Find any you like? You know you’re running out of time. Even if we drive to Boston to buy one, you still need to allow for alterations.”

“I know. We’ll talk later,” Casey whispered. Turning to the group clustered at the door,

she motioned outside. “Could some of you give Monah a hand?”

Loud chatter followed the women out onto the driveway, and within moments, Monah’s voice rose above the din as she shouted directions.

Monah had things well in hand. Casey peered over Aunt Liddy’s shoulder to the backyard. “Have you seen Luke?”

Aunt Liddy secured Casey’s hand and laid it on her arm. “Oh no, you don’t. Your young man is perfectly capable of choosing a spot for your reception without your help. You have guests to attend.” She led the way into the parlor where several of the more sedate visitors welcomed Casey with hugs and pats on her cheeks. Aunt Liddy bent to hug a tiny woman seated on a bench next to a shiny grand piano then beckoned to Casey. “You remember my friend Ethel?”

How could she not? Last spring, Ethel helped her aunt go into hiding before the truth was revealed regarding the death of Luke’s father. Casey would be forever grateful, since exposing the killer, who had been posing as an upstanding member of the Pine Mills Police Department for almost twenty years, had nearly cost Aunt Liddy her life. She grasped Ethel’s small hand. “Of course. How are you, Mrs. Dunn?”

“Just fine, dear,” Ethel said, her silver curls bobbing. Her lips curved into a mischievous grin. “Was that your fiancé I saw trudging through the backyard? And who was that with him?”

Aunt Liddy pooh-poohed her with flutter of her fingers. “Now, Ethel, that was Marlon Groff, and you know it.”

For a fraction of the second, Ethel looked confused. “Oh?” She got up and pattered away, mumbling. “Could’ve sworn it was a woman.”

“Never mind her,” Aunt Liddy said. She tilted her head and pointed to her temple.

“Mind’s going, you know. But then again, which of us doesn’t have a senior moment now and again?”

Resisting the urge to tease, Casey followed her to the next lady waiting to offer her congratulations. Before long, Monah had come in, Casey had made the round of the room, and Mabel and her staff were serving cake to the guests.

Casey savored a bite of pink icing. One thing was certain, Mabel knew how to cook. From the rose colored punch dripping merrily down a silver fountain, to the dainty sandwiches served on delicate white china, everything looked and tasted superb. She had been right asking Mabel and her staff to cater the actual wedding.

Monah moved to the center of the room and tapped her fork against her glass. “Could I get everyone’s attention?” Before long, the soft tinkling encouraged everyone to silence. Monah’s eyes sparkled merrily. “It’s time for a game.” She lifted her hand to stifle the laughter mixed with groans. “All right, all right, none of that. These aren’t your typical shower games.” She set the glass down and pulled several envelopes from her pocket with a flourish. “We’re going on a scavenger hunt. The prize is a weekend at Mabel’s.”

The excited chatter climbed to deafening heights. Leave it to Monah to plan something different. With her as maid of honor, there was no telling what Casey’s wedding day had in store.

[SB]

Luke trailed Mabel’s groundskeeper around the side of the bed and breakfast to the backyard. Clematis vines twined woody fingers around a lattice arch. Two rows of hydrangeas lined a brick path. Marlon Groff did a fair job of maintaining the landscape, but the weeds sneaking beyond the borders confirmed Luke’s suspicions. Marlon kept his position more for the paycheck than out of love for his work.

“Where did you say we were going, again?” Luke said, jamming his thumbs into his pockets.

Marlon grunted and pointed. “Good spot for weddings. Prettiest place in the area. Won’t take much to fix up this patch of yard.”

Of course he’d be thinking about how much work he’d have to do. Luke grimaced but tried not to let his thoughts show. After all, he had no idea what old Marlon dealt with on a daily basis. Perhaps his health had something to do with his way of looking at things, especially with his back all bent over and such. Or maybe it was a lack of time.

Luke felt a twinge of satisfaction. He liked the way the lessons in Sunday school about seeing others as Jesus saw them were changing his thinking. He was no longer as critical as he used to be, not so quick to cast judgment. Now, if he could just move that thinking to enthusiastic, wedding-crazed women. . .

The women’s rising chatter propelled Luke around the corner and out of sight. With all the cackling floating through the air, they really did sound like a flock of chickens. He cringed at the idea of them trying to coax him into joining their party. Bad enough his nursery business kept him so busy during the week that he’d had to plan this trip on the weekend, and on the day of Casey’s shower, no less. To have the older women in the group pinch his cheeks while the younger ones asked if he had any single brothers would be more than he could handle. He squirmed at the direction his thoughts had turned. Maybe he needed to go home and read that Sunday School lesson one more time.

He focused on the layout of the backyard. A fresh coat of paint on the gazebo would go a long way to dress up the structure, which added a great ornamental touch to the large open area. He’d have to mention it to Mabel. Maybe she’d even let him plant a few shrubs, possibly some

climbing roses—

“You ever killed anything?”

Marlon’s question, asked with gravely voice and accompanied by a sinister grin, chilled Luke’s spine into one long icicle. What kind of question was that? He cleared his throat. “You mean plants and such?”

Marlon hitched a shoulder, ruffling his dirty flannel shirt as he scratched his ribs then shrugged, never once looking Luke in the eyes. “If you like.”

Luke glanced at his surroundings. Suddenly, joining the ladies sounded infinitely preferable to spending time with this odd man, whose ragged hair thrust out in spikes from under his floppy hat. “I’ve had things die on me but not because I set out to kill them.”

After a grunt and a nod, Marlon hiked up his baggy pants. “I gotta get some fertilizer for all this stuff.” He gestured about the area. “Take your time looking around. I’ll be back soon to answer any questions you got.”

“Sure. You need help?” Luke hoped not.

“Nope. I’m good.” He shuffled away, his scuffling steps raising a cloud of dust.

Definitely a matter of opinion. Marlon muttered as he went, words like ‘city boy’ and ‘don’t know nuthin’ floating behind him. Luke shook his head as Marlon disappeared around the corner. No telling what the old coot was upset about. Bracing his hands on his knees, Luke bent to examine the side of the house. Maybe there was some way it could be decorated for the reception. A striped canopy would look nice, or a lattice covered portico that guests could sit under. Luke nodded. Yeah, shade would be good, especially since Casey wanted the wedding to be a black tie affair, and tuxedos could be unbearably hot.

Movement at the upstairs deck pulled Luke’s gaze upward. Eleanor Biggs, one of

Mabel's maid staff, stood at the rail, her snarl tainted by a touch of disdain. She didn't look happy, but whoever she was talking to was hidden by the heavy drapes hanging over the upstairs window. With a nod and brief wave, Luke ducked out of sight for the second time that day. How did someone as sweet as Mabel manage to hire such strange people? Maybe he'd just answered his own question. Mabel tried to see the good in everyone and wouldn't hesitate to offer most a second chance.

But Eleanor? The woman thrived on causing trouble. Hopefully, she was pleasant, or at the very least civil, to Mabel's guests, though Luke had yet to see that side of the surly maid. He'd been on the receiving end of her acidic tongue more than once. Not to mention the way she loved to spread rumors, whether true or not. It was this particular bad habit that would force him into facing her, or she'd spoil the surprise wedding gift he had in store for Casey. If only she hadn't overheard him telling Lydia about his plans. But either way, Casey would understand.

The thought of his future bride made him smile, and he directed his thoughts to the task at hand. In his mind's eye, he pictured where the tables could be set up, functional yet not detracting from the yard's beauty. He glanced around for Marlon. He should have been back by now. Luke had a full day to put in yet and only hours to get everything done.

When a quick tour of the sheds didn't reveal the groundskeeper, Luke overcame his dread of the bridal shower and headed indoors. Marlon was ruled by his stomach. Luke wouldn't be surprised if the groundskeeper went into the house in search of something to eat or drink.

All but tiptoeing in an effort to avoid being found out, Luke rounded a corner to enter the hall. Mabel's house was of the old Victorian style. A wide foyer welcomed guests the moment they stepped inside. Split off to the left lay a formal parlor, and in the other direction, a grand staircase swept up to the bedrooms. This hall would take him to the kitchen.

He took a peek. Apart from a house cat Mabel kept as a permanent guest, the space was empty. He should be able to zip right into the kitchen, check on Marlon, then hightail it to the backyard before anyone even knew he'd been inside. Banging and thumping stopped him in his tracks. Luke tipped his head to look. Tumbling down the stairs toward him was a mass of black, white, and flying legs.