

~ The Paramilitary Handbook to Table Dancing and Surveillance Countermeasures in Detecting Threats With Proper Bathroom Etiquette ~ by Aurelia

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This is the second installment, and sequel, to **The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Bathroom Fixtures, Non-Corporeal Manifestations & You**, which can be found at:

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FEEDBACK: I'm always open to comments, preferably nice ones, so let me know what you think at: aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au

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"Damon, I... I'm pregnant. It's your baby, Damon."

The large attic room was empty. Well, mostly empty except for a large, brand new flat screen television blaring out the melodramatic news from one of the more popular soap operas. Splashes of muted color bounced around the dim room, highlighting the vacant chair directly sitting in front of it. The only other source of light came from the single window at the end of the long room, partially blocked by a lace curtain and a lone figure standing in front of it.

The large padded shoulders of the bold pin-striped suit were made even bolder by the broad shoulders under them. The material tightened as muscle and sinew moved to draw back the curtain. Suddenly the empty room brightened, shards of rare winter sunlight stretching in to touch the room's dark heart.

The figure finally came into full view, the light finding areas that once belonged to the dark. But the old fashioned clothing was about as much out of place as the flat screened TV sitting alone in the middle of the room on a stack of packing boxes. A gust of chill wind came in through the small crack of the partially opened window, sending the lace fluttering in the air like angel's wings, touching the dark menacing figure as if blessing it.

"That's impossible, Brooke! I cannot father children. Not since.... not since.... the accident..."

The broad shoulders rolled in frustration.

Switch the damned thing off...

The suit did not move but just stood silently observing the street outside looking for its elusive target. The fedora-topped head bowed in frustration while large hands were restlessly shoved into the baggy trousers, fidgeting within the material in agitation. Unable to stay still any longer, the figure moved, pacing with unresolved anticipation.

The sound of the old boards creaked in protest as the two-tone brown shoes crossed the floor with monotonous regularity. Four steps forward. Turn. Four steps back. Look out the window.

Okay. What's wrong honey?

The shadowed face cast a nonchalant look over one shoulder at the small woman now sitting in the vacant chair. She had watched her partner pacing back and forth, noticing the suit coat riding over the tall frame with the rolling gait. Those same broad shoulders flexed and twisted as the hat came off and a hand ran through the lush dark collar-length hair in frustration. The action separated the tie which had hidden the row of whalebone buttons on the front of the shirt. The gaping hole showed what the young woman already knew.

This was no man. It was a woman.... a very attractive woman.

What is taking them so long? Why aren't they home yet?

Honey, you've got to learn a little patience.

But I'm supposed to get my present now!

What present? Who said anything about a present?

Priory did, of course.

Ahhh, so it's Priory now, huh?

Ya want me to keep callin' her 'Hey you' all the time?

I see you've come around to her way of thinking pretty quickly.

Like I had a choice? You shanghaied the conversation.

You always had a choice, honey. I always value your input.

Value? My input? According to you, I wasn't so valuable at Halloween.

Dylan, you broke the toilet.

I DID NOT break the damned toilet. It did it all on its own. Maybe it's that pesky demon you keep talking about.

*Oh, for the love of God, Dylan! For the last time, **honey**, there is NO pesky demon.*

Says you...

The sound of the familiar SUV pulling up in the driveway halted any further conversation.

Ooooh hot dog... present time!

Stop being a baby...

What did you say?

I said... stop! Be a lady...

I am ALWAYS a lady, Rhea.

Uhhh Hmmm...

"Hey guys, I'm home!" Jacey smiled. How easy that had rolled off her tongue. Life had taken a left turn after Halloween, throwing everything into turmoil. Her boss, Priory McAllister, had suddenly become her girlfriend. While this was not a wholly unpleasant state of affairs, work was... well, work was what it was. The fine employer-employee line kept getting tripped over at inopportune times. Taking dictation took on a whole new meaning, often leading to hurried and frustrated moments. She didn't want to look too close at the work situation, holding her breath waiting for Priory to finally snap. Today was bad enough.

So! Ahhh... where's the Big Cheese? You know... the other one.

"Nice to see you too." Jacey replied with a smirk as the tall figure materialized in front of her.

Just ignore her, Jacey. How was your day?

"It may have been half a day but I gotta tell ya, it was completely shitty!"

Shitty? Was the toilet acting up there too?

"Sorry. I've got to watch my mouth. It was a truly nasty day. The harpy was back today and she was seriously pissing me off."

Harpy?

"Ms McAllister."

Who is Ms McAllister?

"The woman I work for... you know, Priory."

Okay, cut the hooey. Quit beatin' your gums, you two. Where is she?

"Still in a meeting. She's taking a cab home. I'm here to mind the store."

So she's been shopping, huh?

"Ah... yeah, I guess. I had to come home early to wait for the delivery. Why? What's going on?" Jacey looked from one apparition to the other.

Delivery? Huh. It's that big?

"Errrr... ah, yeah. I guess it is." Jacey caught a glimpse of Rhea as she rolled her eyes at the none-too-subtle prodding of Dylan.

A truck pulled up in the driveway, sending the tall ghost into a frenzy of excitement. She skittered around the room, her feet barely brushing the carpet in passing.

Oh brother....

Rhea didn't know where to look. Would the woman ever grow up? Then again... she liked Dylan just the way she was. After all, that was the woman she fell in love with.

"Geez, I've never seen anyone so excited about a Christmas tree before."

A... Christmas... tree? Tree? You said tree?

Ohhhhh, this was gonna be good. Rhea placed herself in a good position to watch her partner when she found out what the man was delivering.

As the doorbell rang, Jacey whispered, "Hey... Hey! Dylan! Shoo!" She waved her hand to send the woman into invisibility. No point in giving the poor delivery guy a heart attack. "Oh, ah, hi!! Just bring it on in. You can set it up in the living room." She watched as he wrestled in the pine and set it up in the stand in a nearby corner.

"That okay?" Jacey looked at it with a practiced eye. Her first real Christmas tree since she had left home. More importantly, it was going to be her first Christmas with Priory.

"Can you move it just a fraction towards the fireplace?" Completely focusing at the task at hand, she ignored the exasperated look she knew was on the burly delivery man's face as he shuffled the massive tree to her liking. "That's it... a bit more... now back a bit... can you twist it around a little? Yes! That's perfect. Thanks." She studied the tip of the tree which nearly brushed the ceiling. It was gonna be a tight fit to get the angel on top.

As he left to get the other boxes, the house expressed its opinion about the tree, the pipes shuddering through the framework. "I kind of like it too..." Jacey muttered.

After she had signed for the delivery and wished the delivery man a Merry Christmas she turned to face the living room with its half-filled boxes of varying sizes. It seemed her boss was going all the way this year, even going so far as to have the office Christmas party here. Despite her efforts to thwart the oncoming disaster, Priory was adamant that she was going to have it in her new home. The only problem now was trying to make their two houseguests behave while the visitors were here. Jacey had a bad feeling about this.

Dylan was hopping around like a kid that had to go to the bathroom as she watched all the boxes pile up in the living room. She had waited long enough and it was time for action.

Okay, so where's my present?

"Present?"

It seems Priory has promised the kid here a present.

"Ohhh. Well you've got me for now. Sorry."

See? You're just gonna have to wait a while longer. Meanwhile... if you'll excuse me, I have my soaps to attend to.

Why did you have to buy Rhea that picture box?

"Box? You mean the TV?"

Yeah. That thing. It's 'Days of Our Lives' here and 'General Hospital' there. Yakety yakety yak!

You would think she loves Luke and Laura more than me.

Jacey brought her hand up to cover her mouth, trying not to laugh at the forlorn look on the dapper-looking ghost. "Hey, look at it this way. At least one of you is happy." She chuckled as she walked away, her lips curving into a wide smile at the sound of a mournful 'Awww...'

The blonde slowly ascended the stairs. She looked down into the living room, amazed at how quickly it looked 'lived in'. In a few short weeks her boss had turned the empty house into a home, and while it didn't exactly scream 'welcome' it had a more 'what do you want' look about it. She hoped that her influence in the future would push it up to 'hi, howya doin'!' Priory had a lot to learn about sharing.

Jacey knew she had a couple of hours before her boss would be out of her meeting, so she had time to kill. She had always adored the claw foot bathtub ever since she saw it and decided to sneak a relaxing bubble bath while the boss was away. Her own apartment only had a shower so this was a decadent luxury.

As she turned on the taps to fill the tub, the toilet joined in, merrily burping in time to the water. The pipes squealed occasionally as the water pressure rose and fell. It was almost like a symphony, whooshing, gurgling and squealing at each other in a musical conversation.

Jacey remembered her boss's anger when the plumber couldn't find anything wrong with it. She had threatened the two house guests with Van Halen twenty-four hours a day if she caught them messing with her pipes again. Despite the threat the noise continued, at times sounding like the house was talking to itself. It got so bad even the ghosts complained about the noise. Go figure.

She looked over Priory's supplies of bubble baths and other bath time smell-goods. It wasn't looking promising when each aroma made her nose itch. It wasn't until the final one that she found what she was looking for. Liberally sprinkling in the pale orange crystals, Jacey watched the water foam until the bath was full and the bubbles plenty.

She went to the linen closet for a towel and returned to the bathroom only to find that she was too slow. Pale eyes blinked once, and then again. If she had a camera it would have been a Kodak moment. Argghh, probably for the best she didn't. It wouldn't have come out anyway. Sitting in the tub were a naked Dylan and Rhea, laughing like a couple of six year olds. Opaque hands carefully surrounded the bubbles, lifting them into the air and letting them fall.

A gentle smile formed on Jacey's lips as she watched the two women at play. At that moment, Rhea grabbed a handful of fluffy soap and plopped it on her partner's head, sitting back and laughing out loud.

"*Why... why you.*" Dylan grabbed her own handful of white foam only to have Rhea slap the back of her hand, sending the bubbles into her face.

Jacey made a move to leave.

Jacey?

"Yes, Rhea."

Thank you.

The look of genuine happiness on those two faces was more than enough payment for the bath. "You're welcome." With those two words, she quietly closed the door behind her, leaving them to their privacy. A fit of giggling echoed around the house as the two ghosts continued to play.

Now what? Her happy little plans had gone down the drain and she was left to fill in her time until Priory came home. She didn't know if she really wanted to see the woman today after what she had put her through. Just like old times...

Jacey took a broom to the attic, working out her anger in a frenzy of sweeping and dust. "Damn that...." A number of choice words sat on the tip of her tongue but she couldn't voice them. She had lived with that perfect ass for six weeks and she wasn't about to give it up so easily. Her mental checklist had so many little gold stars on it that it obliterated the words. No, she would bite her tongue for the sake of her ass demon.

By the time she had finished cleaning the room, the activity had bled off her anger and most of her frustration. Work was becoming a problem, just as Priory had said it would. There was an obvious solution but it was not an acceptable one. The woman paid her an outrageous salary that she knew no one else would match. The other solution was just as unacceptable. She had tasted paradise and anything else would seem ordinary.

What's wrong honey? Things not going so good?

Jacey hadn't noticed that she was being observed. "So you're Dear Abbey now, huh?"

Looks like you need a shoulder to cry on. I thought things were going well between you two.

"They were... are. I don't know."

Give her a boot up the ass. It always worked for me.

"Oh great! I can just see her reaction to that..." Jacey clicked her tongue in mock disgust at Dylan's devilish grin. As much as she wanted to do just that, somehow sticking your foot up your girlfriend's ass did not bode well for a loving relationship. Besides, she wasn't about to bruise that small piece of perfection. "And that's how you won Rhea's heart, huh?"

Sure...

Roses... she got me with roses... and a glib tongue.

Oh great! Give away all my secrets!

Hush you! What about you, Jacey. Has she done anything really romantic for you?

"Besides that lovely Chinese takeout on Halloween? Not a thing. I don't know what to think. Maybe I should be grateful that I don't live here full time. If things get out of hand I can always take a step back."

Do you really want to do that?

"No! No... but I'm feeling a little under-appreciated at the moment. I know it's the holidays and everything gets crazy. Everybody is stressed out. But damnit, she doesn't have to take it out on me, you know?"

Do you want us to stay?

"Do you want to leave?"

No! Of course not. I meant, do you want some time alone? The bath is free, if you want it.

"Nah, it's a little late now. She should be home any minute. Speaking of which, I better go clean up the mess you two made." She gave them a wicked smile, pleased to see answering smiles.

Priory watched her house come into view as the taxi zipped up the street, coming to a screaming halt outside the manor. "That's forty bucks, lady."

"FORTY...!?" Priory snapped her mouth shut and just paid the damn man, barely getting clear of the car before it sped off. Will it ever end!? It had been one hell of a day. A big deal had fallen through and the CEO was eyeing her suspiciously. She knew she had been a louse to Jacey but rumors had been flying thick around the water cooler. Didn't the woman realize she had been acting like an ass to protect them? She sighed deeply. Probably not. Now it was time to face the music. She juggled her briefcase with the other things filling her arms, feeling the cool winter air filter through her heavy coat. Priory just knew there was going to be hell to pay. Helloooooo hell.

"Hey, I'm home!" Home... what a delightful word. The purchase of the house had been more than merely an acquisition. It had been a life-altering decision, one that hopefully had a steady relationship in the middle of it. Priory was met with silence. "Where did everybody go?" She felt the shift of air as one of the ghosts appeared. "Hello Dylan. How was your day?"

I got a bone to pick with you, buster.

"Great. I haven't even shut the door and I'm already in trouble?"

You were in trouble the day you walked through that door the first time, cupcake.

"Okay Dylan. What's up your butt today?" Priory was really not in the mood for Dylan's irritating humor. The thorns from her 'apology' roses were sticking in her fingers while the petals were stuck up her nose. One particular box was jabbing her in the stomach and an expensive piece of jewelry was slowly sliding off the top of the pile.

You are... you... you've been, ahhhhh, busy. Busy shopping.

"Yep, sure have."

Looks like there are lots of them. Plenty to go around.

"Yep. None of them are for you, so stop digging."

Hey! You promised!

"And I delivered...." Priory looked into the living room. "...or rather had delivered. Over there." She swung her head in the direction of the tree.

What? The.... That? That! The tree!? That's it!? Hrrrrmp.

Priory had never seen a ghost sulk before so she had to try very hard not to laugh at the comical sight. "Ah, where's Jacey?"

Upstairs... not that you would care... or she would want to see you anyway.

"What is the matter with you? And why wouldn't she want to see me?"

Because you were a jackass today. You are in soooooo much trouble! As for me, I'm just ducky! You, sir, are a pooppyhead!

Dylan disappeared abruptly with a snap of her fingers, giving the impression of a good magician's assistant.

"And I am a madam, thank you very much!" She hollered to the thin air.

So that's what you do for work. You admitted it! Ha!

Priory moaned as echoes of ghostly laughter bounced off the walls. *Awww, I didn't see that one coming.... Just ggrreeaaattt. Outdone by a ghost.* Priory had moved from one war zone to another. "Jacey? Honey? Are you up there?" The silence was nearly painful. "Come on down, Jace. I've got something for you." This was her penance.

Priory stared at the vacant stairs. Well, if the mountain ain't comin' to Mohammad... She began

the long climb up the stairs feeling a bit like a condemned man. "You're gonna get it..." she swore the walls were whispering but, then again, it could just be her losing her damn mind. Her shrink was still trying to decide on that one.

"Jace? Honey?" It was looking like the spare bed was hers tonight. "Come on, Jace, talk to me."

Jacey had taken refuge in the bathroom, her tiny ass perched on the toilet seat lid. She could hear Priory moving around the house but she refused to answer her calls. No amount of sweet talking was going to make her budge. But now she had been betrayed. The toilet hiccupped a number of times, drawing the brunette to the door. "Jace? Are you in there?"

She watched angrily as the door slowly creaked open. "What do you want?" she growled, pale eyes boring into the woman standing at the door.

"Awww, come on Jace. You know I didn't mean it."

"You made my life complete hell today, Ms McAllister." Stormy eyes pinned her boss in place.

Ms McAllister? Oh oh. I wonder if there is a motel around here somewhere....

"It was all for show, honey."

"Don't call me honey. You crucified me today!"

"But I did it for us..."

"US!!?!... US!!?!" Jacey made a mental note to increase Priory's psychiatrist visits to twice a week. "I don't believe this! How the hell did yelling at me help us? You are some piece of work, you know that?"

"Look, you know rumors have been flying! The board was watching every move we made today! Unless you want both of us looking for a new job, it was necessary! Okay?" Now Priory was getting defensive. "I, for one, would like to keep my job, considering I now have a mortgage to keep up. Besides, it was the only thing I could think of at the time!"

The toilet burped at the wrong time and was met with hostility. "SHUT UP!!"

"Jace, I..." *Oh boy.* "I'm crazy about you, honey."

Awwwww.....

"Butt out!" Vibrant blue eyes looked to the ceiling. "This is private!" Prior turned her attention back to the woman on the toilet seat. "Here..." she murmured, handing over the bouquet of apology roses. "I know it's not much but I still really, really want this to work."

Jacey could feel her resolve slipping, a lone tear sliding down her cheek as she brought the roses to her nose to inhale the sweet scent. "Is this what it's going to be like all the time? I don't know if I can deal with this."

"God, I hope not, Jace. That spare bed is very lonely. And cold!"

See? What did I tell ya!

Dylan, pleeeeze...

First the flowers, then the tongue.

Dylan! You can be so crass sometimes.

What? They can't hear us.

"Oh yes we can!" Priory couldn't help but let a tiny smile cross her lips. "Sheesh..." She turned her eyes back to Jacey. "So... where do we go from here?"

"For starters, why are you carrying all those packages? Shouldn't they be, oh, I don't know, under the tree?"

"Nope. They're all for you." Priory smiled a gentle entreaty.

"Me?" The taller woman handed over her armful of gaily wrapped presents, forcing Jacey to drop the flowers. Priory picked them up and filled the basin with water, putting the roses in it until she could find a vase to stick them in.

The corporate executive lowered herself to her knees, ignoring the discomfort of trying to do so in a business suit and high heels. "So..." she watched as Jacey just stared at the parcels. "You gonna open them or what?"

Stunned eyes looked up. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry, Jace, I really am. Hopefully that circus act today will put an end to the rumors. I... I don't... I can't lose you over this."

Jacey was torn. That scene at the office today had really affected her. It had really hurt. "And what about next time?"

"I hope there won't be a next time."

"But you can't guarantee that."

"No, I can't. That's why I think we should try real hard to keep things platonic at work. No hanky panky missy!"

"I seem to recall that you started some of those."

"Yeah, yeah. Guilty. I can't help myself sometimes. It's gonna kill me to restrain myself." She could see the beginning of a smile on the seated woman's face. "So be fair warned! As soon as we cross that front door no smilin' at me, you hear?" She waited impatiently for Jacey to make a move. "Come on, open them."

As if in a dream, Jacey slowly unwrapped the first present. Opening the small box she found nestled in satin a single pearl set into a tiny pendant. "It's beautiful..." She could feel her eyes tearing up.

"I would have gotten you a diamond but I figured you wouldn't wear it to work."

"You're right. I wouldn't."

"Would you wear this one... for me?"

"Let me think about it." Jacey was trying, really trying, to stay angry but one look in those impassioned eyes and her resolve melted away. "Yeah, I'll... think about it." Her eyes returned to the gold jewelry in the box. "But honey, I honestly don't know if I can handle you like that again."

"What do you want me to do? Quit my job? Fire you? Move you to another department? Split up? Let me tell you, none of those options are acceptable. I have finally found you and I'm not going to give you up without a fight."

"And what about what I want?"

"What do you want?" Priory was bracing herself for the worst. "Do... do you want to leave?"

Jacey sighed. "No."

Atta girl!

Shush up!

But Priory ignored them, leaning closer to the seated woman. "What do you want?" she whispered gently.

Jacey glanced at all the presents resting in her lap. "Me?" She thought for a moment or two, giving the question serious thought.

"Come on. Tell me baby."

Yeah, speak up. We can't hear you...

Oh dear Lord, Dylan. You are such a pickle head.

Who you calling a pickle head? Me?

You have been out of it for way too long honey. You've forgotten how to be sneaky.

Oh? Oh. Ohhh... I get it! Shhhhhh, right?

Yeah, shhhhhh...good golly.

"See? They want to know, Jace, nearly as much as I do. So where do we go from here?"

"We can't go where I would like for us to go."

"Unless you tell me, I can't help you otherwise."

"You said you were nuts about me. Well, I feel the same. What is that going to accomplish? We have to hide but I... I want more, Priory. This situation... our situation... is making me crazy."

"Hmmm. Let me think about it, okay? Let's see if I can come up with a happy solution." She smiled at Jacey, a smile full of promise and affection. "In the meantime, would you like to have dinner with me... please?"

Yeah, dinner is good! Go have dinner with her!

Will ya look at who's talkin' now RHEA!

"Yeah, look who's talking Rhea." Priory couldn't help but butt in since they seem to do it on a regular basis. "Somehow I don't think we're going to get a moment's peace around those two."

"We?"

"Yeah, we."

Wooooo hooooo! Atta girl You the bees knees!

"I don't know what is more damn annoying, that yakky toilet or you Dylan!" Priory was seriously re-considering her decision about the two ghosts. The thought of everything they did being witnessed and commented upon was slowly driving her insane. *Oops... already there.*

"Come on, let's get outta here..." Priory murmured as she struggled to stand, feeling pins and needles in her legs as circulation returned to her lower half. "And if you're a good girl you can have my ass for dessert..."

Dinner at the small Italian restaurant up the road was just what they needed. Jacey was just glad for the private time with no arguments or extra company. "Look..." Sitting in the SUV Priory picked at a non-existent piece of lint on her tailored pants. "...It's getting late. Too late to be driving back to your apartment. Why don't you stay tonight? You can swing by your apartment in the morning and get ready for work." She could see the indecision in the shadowed face. "Hey, come on, I won't even yell at you for coming in late. Promise."

"I gotta tell ya, today just flat out exhausted me."

"All because of me. The least I can do is tuck you into a nice warm comfy bed."

"With you in it?"

"Only if you want me there. Look Jace, it's not about that. I want more out of this relationship than that. A lot more. I want that sweet little body of yours, sure, but I also want your mind, your laughter, your heart.... your love." She hesitated. "I, ah... I wanted to ask you if you could come by the house Friday afternoon for me. I've hired a guy to put up the outside Christmas lights and I need someone here to supervise him. There is no way in hell I'm leaving those two in charge." She nodded towards the house, realizing what a ridiculous statement that was.

"But what I really want to ask you... is if you would like to spend the weekend with me. You know, like all weekend."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I want to wake up with you in my arms, Jace. To feel your warm body next to mine, not an empty space where only your scent survives."

"I'll be here Friday afternoon. As for the weekend, I'll think about it, okay?" Despite her words, she knew she would be here, but she was not going to let her boss know that quite yet.

Well you took your sweet time getting home... I was about to come looking for you.

"I didn't know I was lost... Did you Jacey?"

"Nope. I knew where I was."

Alright already! So where did ya go? What did you eat? Did Jacey get her dessert?

"You sound just like my mother... well, sort of like my mother. She wouldn't have asked about my... dessert."

And if I were your mother, I'd spank your butt. Then again, you might enjoy that.

"Where do you come up with these ideas?"

Well, since I don't know nothin' from nothin' I gotta use my own imagination.

Believe me, Priory, that's a dangerous thing.

Hey, you're supposed to be on my side!

Dylan, you don't have no side, baby, only a front and a back.

Really. Really? Huh. How come you never mentioned that before? You turn sideways, let me see you!

"Can we come inside please!? It's freezing out here!" Shaking her head, Jacey resorted to walking straight through the two houseguests since they wouldn't move out of the way. "That was weird." While she felt nothing, the thought of passing through them was a little freaky.

"Yeah, get outta the way, Dapper Dan!" Priory chuckled as she stepped through Dylan, stopping momentarily to shake her behind within the specter. She chuckled as she heard the answering growl from the tall woman.

"So, what have you two been up... holy crap." She had just wandered into the living room and seen exactly what they **had** been up to while they were away.

"Ohhh... errrrrahh... that's... very... **nice**, ah, guys."

"Nice? **Nice**?! It looks like Christmas threw up in here! And then all of the twelve tiny reindeer dashed through it! In case you didn't know, Dylan, those little shiny multi-colored thingies on the floor??? They're supposed to be hanging on the **tree**!"

Hey, it ain't as easy as it looks cupcake! You die and give it a try!

"What? Not as **sharp** as you thought you were, huh Dylan?"

Smarter than you are, Convent. At least I ain't in the doghouse. Woof. Woof.

"Oooooo, now you wait just a damn minute, Casper!"

"Hey! Hey! Good God. Let's get some coffee. Now, Priory." Jacey pushed Priory in the back towards the kitchen, intent on separating the two combatants.

"And the tree looks like it's been decorated by an elf on crack...!"

"Priory! That was uncalled for!" Jacey shoved the woman into the kitchen, turning back to the two apparitions. "I'm so sorry... Rhea, Dylan. I don't know what's gotten into her lately."

I can tell ya....

Dylannnnnn...

She said she could see my crack!

I think she said you WERE cracked, darling.

Yeah! Crack this ya... Ouch!

You did NOT feel that!

If I coulda, it woulda hurt!

Tsk....

"I know you guys put a lot of work into it." Jacey looked out the corner of her eye at the tree. If she was honest, well, it looked... okay, it was a miserable attempt. Half the bulbs were on the floor, scattered around, broken, as Priory had so bluntly put it, like Christmas had...well. Geeze, was that a bulb hanging off Priory's prize Tiffany lamp? The lights... ohhhh, the lights, well, they were in there somewhere. They had to be. She located the cord and the plug but that was it. The tinsel sat haphazardly in thick clumps over the branches, like a large tinsel crapping bird had done a couple of fly-overs. Maybe one had. And knowing Dylan as she did now, the woman probably just threw the bulbs at the tree, hoping they would stick where they landed.

Jacey, I'm so sorry. We tried. We really did. We wanted to give you a nice surprise. I think we're out of practice moving things.

"Oh I don't know. You moved stuff around pretty well on Halloween. That chicken certainly had a life of its own. And the toilet...well that was..."

The toilet wasn't us.

"Maybe Dylan did something to it by accident."

I keep telling her that she broke the toilet but she keeps denying it.

Will ya just drop it! I did NOT break the toilet! I did NOT touch the toilet! I had nothin' to do with that caper!

"The chicken? Come on! Pure Dylan."

Yeah. He he he. All MINE.

"Look. I'll tell you what. I'll get a coffee or two into my friend in the kitchen then we will all decorate the tree. How about that?" It looked like she was here for the night.

Oh, I'd like that, Jacey. That would great fun!

That means I got to work next to... it?

Yep, sure does. Just like she has to work next to you. And if I have to kill ya again, you'll do it!

"They are so much alike, it's almost scary..." Jacey muttered to herself as she walked towards the kitchen.

Hey! That is NOT true! I.... you.... Hrrrumphf.

Honey, you have got to learn that we are no longer alone in this house. We gotta share.

I don't like sharing.

I know that HONEY, but you've got to try. Will you do that... for me?

Okay I'll try... for... YOU.

Don't make it sound like it's MY fault if something goes wrong!

Baby! I would NEVER.....

Yeah, but I got my eye on you!

Priory pattered around the kitchen, trying to bleed off her frustration while making coffee for the two of them. What on earth made her agree to this wacky arrangement? Because Jacey had asked her to. Why did she let that happen?

"So, we've come to a compromise. I don't want any arguments or complaints, you got me?" Jacey made the statement with a certain amount of authority.

Just when it looked like Priory was going to baulk at the command, she relented. "Okay."

Jacey did a double take. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I just gave you an order and you said okay. Who are you and what have you done with my boss?"

"What? I said okay."

"Yeah, but I at least expected some sort of resistance."

"We could always forget the tree and go right to the dessert." Priory waggled her eyebrows in invitation.

"We could also get the tree done now and have dessert later." Jacey gave the woman an eyebrow waggle of her own. "I could work up quite an appetite with all that decorating."

As Jacey teased her with her words, a lone silver bulb rolled into the room. It bounced up onto the table and swiveled until a tiny face appeared, drawn on with a black marker. "Pleeeeze..." the tiny helium-filtered voice cried. "Pleeeeze... helpppppppp meeeeee....." it pleaded, "Hellllppppppp mmmmeeee....."

"Geez, what is this? Vaudeville humor? When do we get to see the fan dancer? Please say it ain't Dylan. I couldn't handle that particular image burned behind my eyelids." Priory brought her hands up to her face, briskly rubbing her cheeks in frustration and tiredness. "Alright! Alright! Let's get this fiasco on the road." Jacey quietly chuckled as Priory stood up to return to the living room. "What?"

"Just look at yourself."

The brunette detoured to a mirror. "Just grreeaat! I better fix myself up before she sees me." In her effort to rub away her lethargy, she had managed to smear her makeup over her face.

Too late, bucko! Now that's an improvement!

Dylan! Not nice.

Hey, you giggled, I heard ya!

I was, ah...giggling...at....ah, Jacey...giggling. Yeah!

As if on cue, Jacey let out a little snort of sorts, "Don't bring me into this!"

"Everybody's a friggin' comedienne." Priory muttered to the thin air. "Don't quit your day jobs people!" She looked over to Jacey who stood there with a hand over her mouth. "I'm getting changed first." She looked the woman up and down. "Maybe you should too."

"No point. I've got nothing with me."

"Come on. I might be able to find you something." The older woman didn't look back to see if

her assistant was following as she ascended the stairs. "In the meantime, make yourselves useful. Take all that crap off the tree and we'll start again."

Hey, it's not crap...

"It's crap, Dylan."

"Priioooooorry..." The low rumble warned the woman that Jacey was not amused.

"Okay, okay. Don't get your knickers in a knot. It was just a friendly suggestion."

And I gotta friendly suggestion for you, pal. Why don't ya go shrrrupppuuu...

Super! We'll be waiting!

Reel roo rake ro rand roff mr moff?

Oh. How did that get there?

Yeah. I wondered that myself.

Shush.

Hey!

Shush now.

Grrrrrr....

Hey!

Gr...

"You just can't keep your comments to yourself, can you?"

"Hey, it's who I am."

"And it just keeps getting you into trouble. One of these days it's gonna turn around and bite you in the ass."

"Nah. You'll be protecting that little piece of real estate."

Jacey sighed deeply. Damn her little ass demon. "Yeah, probably."

"I restrain myself at work. I've gotta let it out somewhere." Priory searched through her closet for something to wear.

"Running your hand up my thigh the other day and whispering in the ear that **wasn't** connected to the phone...and telling me to pretend your fingers were your tongue.....that was restraint?"
Good Lord, the woman has no idea...

"Heh... yeah, well. Here, try this on. It's a little small for me now so maybe it'll fit you." Priory held up the dark sweatpants, mentally measuring it against the blonde leaning against the bedroom wall. She placed it on the bed then moved to her chest of drawers to find a sweatshirt.
"Ah ha! There you go!"

"Thanks." Jacey grabbed the clothes and headed towards the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom to change."

"What for? You ain't grown anything new since the last time I saw you naked, have you?"

Jacey smiled wickedly. "Let's just say it's **punishment** for today." She threw the words over her shoulder as she sashayed out of the room, knowing very well those azure eyes were riveted to her ass. "I'm fast losing my appetite for dessert too...." Like hell she was. The day she lost her appetite for Priory's ass she would have one foot in hell. The telltale moan emanating from the bedroom told her she had made her point.

"Okay, let's get this show started." Priory looked at the assembled pile of decorations. "Where are the lights?"

In there. The tree ate them.

"The tree did not eat it."

I know it didn't eat, EAT them, smart ass, but still... it ATE, ate them. They're in there....somewhere.

"How the hell you get them in there in the first place?"

I dunno! I sort of flew around it a few times and when I looked back the tree had... ate them.

"Jesus, I'm gone for two hours, TWO hours.... and look!"

"Priory..." Jacey growled at her, her anger simmering below the surface. "Stop it now!"

Surprised, she looked at her assistant. "Yes ma'am!" She grumbled and muttered as the top half of her burrowed into the branches in search of the elusive Christmas lights. "How the hell did you get it to do that?" The muffled voice was filled with mirth. "Oh... my... God! Jace... you just gotta see this!"

Green eyes turned to the two ghosts, trying to impart a silent 'I'm sorry'. If Jacey had been them she would have been so outta there before now. "She's not housebroken yet." That got a smile out of the two women. "Give me time."

So you're gonna stay?

"Looks like it. Someone should chaperone."

Thank you, Jesus! If ya weren't here I'd hafta kill her myself. She is makin' me bananas.

"Hey! Are you looking at this?" Priory pulled herself out of the tree, pine needles and bits of branch hanging off her at all angles. "What?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all." Jacey was quite content to have the woman look like a human Christmas tree. She picked up two of the balls off the floor and attached the hooks to them, hanging them over her boss's ears. "There. Much better."

Ha! You have made my day Jacey. And let me tell you, after seventy years that ain't easy.

"What's going on?" Priory looked around. "It's me, isn't it? That's the only thing that would make her laugh." She wandered over to the mirror. "Thank you very much! I see I have a traitor in my midst." She scowled at the blonde. "No dessert for you tonight, Missy!" But the puppy dog look Jacey gave her melted her resolve to be angry. "Awww.... Hell!" Priory stomped away into the kitchen, muttering expletives Jacey was sure the ghosts had never heard before.

What did she say about her mother?

Hm. It didn't sound very nice.

When Priory didn't return, Jacey followed her. "Now come on, Priory. Can't you take a joke?"

"Since when did you take their side?"

"Hey! If you give 'em, you gotta take 'em!" But Priory was not convinced. "I know she drives you nuts, Priory, but you gotta realize that you are driving her nuts too. If you want her to behave you've got to cut her some slack."

"I don't need this right now, Jace."

"Relax. Christmas is only days away."

"I'm 'bah humbug', remember?"

"Well, keep this up and you will have a lonely old Christmas, Ms Scrooge."

"Speaking of which...have you given any more thought to staying the weekend?"

Jacey didn't know why she said what she did. "I can't boss. The weekend before Christmas, you know?"

"Ah... oh." Priory didn't know where to look. "Okay. Never mind then." Before her body could respond to the rejection, she stood. "Let's get this tree decorated then."

Jacey watched her boss leave, taking in the slumped posture and the air of defeat. She had wounded her, she knew that, but there were too many stresses in this household for her to manage right now. She tried to justify the decision to herself by listing all the things she still needed to do before Christmas, but none of them were essential this coming weekend. It was all a sham, and she knew it.

"Okay, Rhea, Dylan. Can you please put the balls on the tree?"

Okkkayyyy...

"Jacey, please give me a hand with the hooks." She was already reaching for the small packet, aggressively tearing the plastic open and scattering the pieces over the table. "Damn it to hell...!" The brunette muttered and cursed as she tried to gather up the spilled hooks. "I just knew... why do I bother... my life really sucks."

I liked her better all loud and obnoxious. This... this is just pathetic. What did you do to her? Fix it... err, her.

"I can't just fix it!"

You broke her, you fix her.

"Just like you fixed the toilet?"

You're not gonna let that rest, are you? I've had it up to my ears with all this busted toilet stuff. Did ya ever stop to think it might be that pesky demon? Huh?

Dylan had removed her jacket while speaking and poor Jacey couldn't help herself. She stood stared at Dylan's overstretched shirt. "Holy cow."

Where?

"And you got away with being dressed as a man with... those??" Jacey was flabbergasted. She looked over at Rhea to see the apparition gently smile. "It looks like someone was happy."

Oh yesssss.

"And she won you over with a glib tongue, huh?"

Oh yeah...that too. She was... is a woman of many skills.

The blonde's eyes returned to Dylan's chest. "I can see that." Her eyes moved up to the woman's face seeing a knowing scowl there. "Hey! It's nothing to be upset about." Her eyes flickered down to her breasts. "No. Nothing at all."

"Pesky demon? We have a pesky demon?" Dylan's words finally sank into Priory's foggy brain. "I've got two poltergeists, now I've got a pesky demon? What's next? An angel with an attitude?" She sat down on the sofa with a thump. "I don't know if I can handle this..."

For the last time, there is NO pesky demon!

I ain't no poler-guess!

"Poltergeist!"

Yeah! What she said!

No poltergeists! No pesky demon! Good golly!

And I didn't touch the nabblasted toilet!

"Okay then. What's going on? Is it the house or is it something else?"

Ya asking me? I'm the one who thinks it's the pesky demon!

"Maybe it's a punctilious pixie? A mad monster, or maybe a felonious fairy? How about a tenacious troll?" Jacey knew the conversation had gone off the rails, her own mind offering the absurd as an explanation.

"You are not helping matters here woman."

"This is just ridiculous. Who cares? Just treat the toilet as you do these two and things will be fine."

"Are you asking me to be civil to the toilet?"

"Sure, why not? What have you got to lose?"

"My mind?"

Jacey pursed her lips. It was just too easy...

"Don't say it, any of you!" Priory glared at the hovering Dylan, knowing very well she had placed herself in the firing line for the woman.

Awww! Pleeezzzzeee.... You're beggin' for it!

Dylan. Not....

"Look, I'm going to bed. I've gotta work tomorrow. You three can finish it up." Jacey was getting a headache... and heartburn... from all this back and forth bantering. As she ascended the stairs, the bickering started again.

"Now look what you did!"

Why is it my fault?

"Cause it usually is, Dylan. You just can't help yourself, can you?"

Stop it you two! Let's finish this decorating then we can call it quits, alright? Dylan... Priory...no pouting either. Children. I'm surrounded by children.

Jacey lay in Priory's large bed staring at the ceiling. This just could not continue. It was like a goddamned war zone. Day in and day out. Bitch. Moan. Squabble. Argue. Work was bad enough. All she wanted to do was to come home and chill out, not be a constant referee to all these arguments. She was just so damned tired of it all and it was giving her a permanent headache. Until they all learned to get on better she vowed she was going to keep her distance. Now all she had to do was break the news to her girlfriend...

The silver SUV pulled up at the curb, parking several houses down from the old manor. There were a number of cars already taking up any spare parking, most she assumed were for the party she was about to attend. Jacey pulled her overcoat around her as she climbed out of the vehicle. Winter had settled in and she wondered if they would get some snow this weekend.

Apprehensively, she approached the front door. The weekend came and went and she had achieved nothing, not that she had expected to accomplish anything in the first place. The last few days at work had been more stressful than she could have thought. Her boss had been civil at work as they tentatively stepped around each other. Priory had been a modicum of propriety, and she should have been happy about that, but it just left her feeling empty.

The blonde pushed the doorbell, shifting from one foot to another in anticipation. The door opened and she looked into those azure eyes. "Hi..."

"Hi." Priory smiled sweetly at her assistant. Finally, she was back at the house where she belonged. Now she had to convince the woman of that fact. It was just too lonely without her. "Come in. Please." The brunette backed out of the way to allow her companion to enter.

"This is for you. It's just a little housewarming gift." Jacey looked shyly at her boss as she handed over her small offering.

"You didn't have to do that."

"It's a little late. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It was very thoughtful."

"And...ah... how have... they been?" She lowered her voice.

"They miss you Jace. Almost as much as I do. Dylan has been almost polite. I'm kinda worried about her."

Jacey smiled and said nothing. Certainly not what Priory desperately wished to hear. "Well! Come on in! You have a party to host!" She stepped through the door, removing her overcoat in one familiar smooth motion and hanging it on one of the hooks near the door.

"I suppose I do..." the brunette murmured, but any enjoyment of that fact had been lost. She looked at the colorful package in her hands. "So...", Priory tried to sound bright, "...what did you get me?"

"Open it and see." A slow smile crossed her face as the paper was torn away to reveal a dancing Santa about ten inches high. "When you switch it on..." her finger brushed the small switch at the base of the figure, "...he plays Christmas tunes....AND shakes his groove thang."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Jacey. Thank you."

"Don't. Please."

"What do you want me to say?" Priory kept her voice low. "I don't know how to respond to you any more, Jace."

"Just treat me like you always do, boss."

"Everything has changed. I can't." Her eyes dropped to the ground. "What do you want, Jace? What do I have to do to get you back?"

"You haven't lost me... Abbey," calling her by her childhood nickname.

"Haven't I? Then why did you leave?"

"Because I had to take a step back. All the constant bickering was really getting to me, Abs. I didn't know how to cope with it."

"And now?"

"Now? I don't know, honey." Jacey looked into those pleading eyes. "Let's get through tonight first, okay?"

"Okay." A gentle smile came to Priory's lips. There was a chance. Priory led the way through to the kitchen, putting the Santa on the table in the midst of plates of food. The caterers were busy moving the *hors d'oeuvres* into the living room and a group of hungry people. Out of curiosity Priory switched the figure on, laughing as it jiggled along to the strains of 'Santa Claus Is Coming To Town'. A tinny bass voice began to sing, the bulbous torso swaying from side to side. "Thanks, Jace. It's..."

"Stupid? Kitsch? Tacky?"

"Wonderful."

"Wonderful?"

"Yeah. Because you took the time to buy it. I appreciate it..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "...hon." Their eyes met, expressing sorrow, longing and hope. "Now let's get this party rolling."

"I'll just put my stuff in your bedroom. That okay?"

"Sure. I don't think I need to show you where that is."

"Errr... nope. I think I know my way."

They went their separate ways, Priory walking through to the living room while Jacey headed up the staircase.

A pair of dark brown eyes watched the young woman ascend the stairs before moving towards the corporate executive emerging from the kitchen. Serena Carruthers had been watching these two for some months wondering. She had been under Priory's management for a while now and thought it was about time for her to move **up**. One way or another. When her boss was suitably occupied, Serena wandered into the empty kitchen. Amongst the clutter left by the catering staff, the cute little Santa caught her eye. She knew that it had not been there before, so it must have been a present from that secretary of hers.

She studied it distastefully, tipping it over to look at the base.

Hey ya toots, whacha think you're doing? It ain't nice to try and look up Santy Claus' britches!

The bass voice took her by surprise. She tipped the Santa back, looking at the face.

Yeah you, ya sap. Put me down before I slap ya on my naughty list!

Serena nearly dropped the Santa in her effort to put it down quickly.

She brought her hand up to rub her temple in confusion. Had she heard what she thought she heard? She located the switch near the base and the toy sprung into life, dancing around to the music and singing along animatedly. Serena waited for the words to emerge but nothing extraordinary happened, only Santa Claus is Coming to Town. The figure stopped at the end of the song, standing there awaiting its next activation.

"Too much damn eggnog..." The Clairol blonde started poking around in the cabinets.

Did your mama teach ya no manners?! Get your nose outta there!

Serena swiveled around to face the plastic face, frozen in a mask of Christmas joviality. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the figure, looking for some imperfection to give away its secret. When she could find nothing, she investigated the wall behind, looking for maybe one of those little computer cameras with a little microphone. It was obviously a Christmas joke. Yeah... that was it. "Verrrry funny!" She gave up and wandered out into the party, re-filling her drink along the way.

Jacey stood alone in the familiar room, placing her purse on the large bed. She couldn't help but run her hand over the coverlet as images of some sweet times came to her. It was going to be a very long evening.

She emerged into the hallway and immediately looked at the stairs leading to the attic. Unable to stop herself, Jacey was ascending those stairs before she was aware of it. "Knock knock..." she said quietly as her hand rose to rap on the door. Before she completed the motion the door opened, both apparitions vying for space in the doorway.

Hello stranger. You're a sight for sore eyes.

Yeah. You've been making yourself scarce these days.

We've really missed you Jacey.

Yeah. What she said.

"I've been... busy."

Busy? Uh huh. So are you back for good huh?

Dylan, honey, please.

What? You wanna to know as bad as I do.

But you just don't... BLURT... it out, Dylan.

Hey. Nobody never tells me nothin' so I gotta ask.

And there are more subtle ways to ask, honey.

Subtle, huh? Yeah. I can do subtle. I'll show ya subtle.

Uh huh.

What did I do now? Break some subtle law or somethin'? Didn't cross my legs before speaking? Didn't paint my butt pink and then howl at the moon?

Now you're being ridiculous!

"Hey! Remember me?" The two ghosts turned to the woman standing by the door. "Let's just say we're working it out, okay? I certainly missed you two." Despite the aggravation of the constant bickering she did miss this house and its inhabitants. Hell, she even missed that damn yakky toilet.

Soooo... there's a party going on down there, huh?

And we're not invited, hon.

Why not?

It's Christmas, honey. I am not the ghost of Christmas Past and you aren't Aunty Scrooge. Sometimes you slay me, Dylan.

What are you trying to say? I'm some dumb Dora or somethin'?

Of course not, hon, but we're dead. Sometimes it kind of limits what we can do. Attending Priory's office Christmas party isn't one of them.

"Hey, hey! Guys! Please! Behave tonight, okay?" Exasperated, Jacey looked from one ghost to the other. "Christmas is only a couple of days away. Can't we get along for now?"

Jacey, sweetie. For you, we'll be little angels.

I ain't no angel.

No, you're not, honey. You're my little devil.

I am?

Oh yeah, hon. A sexy little devil too.

But it's been so long... you know.

I know, Dylan. Oh yeah, I know. I remember every day what we had.

You know, I wish...

Me too, baby. Me too.

Jacey felt like an intruder on such an intimate conversation so she backed away and gently closed the door. The slight creak as she descended the stairs was the only sound revealing her passing, a noise that she had learned to ignore. The door to the bathroom was closed so she continued her journey down the stairs to the party.

Serena heard the creak of the stairs and knew who it was. A gentle breeze blew across her butt as she pulled up her underwear, unaware that the window wasn't open. She took a few moments to wash her hands before opening the door. If the secretary went up there then she would go too. This was her best chance to confirm her suspicions, and she wasn't one to waste this rare opportunity.

The door creaked open to reveal a darkened room. Serena found the light switch and flipped it, illuminating the empty room. She was confused. Why would that little worm come up here? Was there a secret? Why would there be a TV sitting all by itself in the middle of the room and a chair like someone watched it regularly? Hmmm.... Selena's mind shuffled through a number of possibilities, latching onto the most obvious one. The woman was hiding someone, but who? The mystery screamed of potential disaster for her boss and she was intent on finding it.

She was pissed. No amount of rapping and stamping could find a hidden door or panel or anything anywhere. The few packing boxes held nothing but junk. She did discover a nice piece of lingerie that set her mind racing along the lines of a rendezvous with the guy from personnel. But maybe it had possibilities. Damn that woman. Now if she could only find some evidence to support her suspicions. "Why the hell was she up here?" the dark voice muttered to the cool air. "Shit!" Defeated, she left and returned to the party.

That was a little childish, don't you think?

What did I do now?

That...! Is nothing sacred to you?

Hey, it's a full moon tonight!

Dylan, I swear....!

Aww Applesause! So she accidentally got her dress stuck in her panty. It happens everyday.

Especially if she had some assistance in the matter!

But..... he he he... It IS amazing what secrets are revealed in a bathroom, Rhea.

ARGH! You've been spying!

Well... errr... ah crap. Rhea, baby, it was only because I was bored. It didn't mean anything... I promise.

I... I'm not enough?

Of course you are. I'm with you for eternity... you haven't forgotten my promise, have you?

No, no I haven't, but looking at other women Dylan... well, it hurts, you know?

Awwww, Rhee baby, I'm sorry. It's just... you've got your soaps and I got nothin'.

Was that the same woman who was sneaking around and trying to cause trouble?

Yep. Well, things happen.

Obviously. Well, don't let Priory or Jacey catch you in there peeping. If you weren't already dead, they'd kill you for sure.

Serena was miffed. She had a grand opportunity to stick her nose into her boss's private business and she couldn't find a damned single thing to trip this woman up. She wandered into the gathered crowd, pretending she hadn't heard the soft snickers erupting around her. The CEO of the company had finally made her entrance. Serena quickly wound her way through the maze of bodies to hover nearby to offer a friendly piece of advice every now and then to the boss. She

knew her place in the company even if the CEO didn't.

Rayann Stephenson was bored. It was necessary that she attend these functions as part of employee morale. Tall and willowy, she stood half a head above most of the people in the room. She could, therefore, see that particularly obnoxious bottled blonde heading her way. "Ahh, Christ..." she muttered. Serena Carruthers was a bigger pain in her ass than most of this group collectively... and she was a lousy suck up. Her eyes quickly darting around the room, the CEO frantically searched for the hostess of this delightful soiree. She then began slowly wending her way through the people to approach her corporate executive.

"Ahhh, Rayann." Priory tensed at the presence of her CEO next to her. "What can I get you?"

"Getting Serena's nose out of my back side would be most helpful." Priory glanced over her boss's shoulder to see Serena glaring back at her, her painted face reminiscent of the sideshow clowns that rolled their heads from side to side. Could she get a prize if she popped a ball in that viper's mouth?

"Oh. I'll see what I can do." Priory sipped her brandy and dry. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

"George found it just fine." Dark eyes scanned the room. "Not bad, McAllister. A bit of a drive to work for you though." Not quite her taste, but it had a certain old-world charm about it.

"I think it's worth it." It took a little getting used to but it was hers and she rather liked that idea. Priory's eyes drifted back to Serena, who happened to turn around at that precise moment. Her eyes widened at the sight, a smile widening to reveal white, even teeth. "Oh...My... God...."

"What?" Rayann looked over her shoulder to see what had distracted her underling. "Where is a camera when you need one...?" The woman chuckled, then laughed louder as Serena proceeded to chase her tail as she tried to see what everyone was laughing at.

As much as Jacey wanted to leave the woman like that, she approached the twisting body. "You might want to pull your dress down..." *asswipe*. She just didn't like the woman.

"What? My dress...what...?" Serena felt behind herself and finally found the source of all the merriment. "SHIT! Oh shit...shit...shit!" She ran out of the room adjusting her clothing. How the hell did that happen? She was sure her dress had been down properly. Apparently not.

Sheepishly, she returned to the party, heading to the food table instead of trying to engage anyone in conversation. Oh God, she was so embarrassed. At her approach the crowd around the food dissipated, as if she had lost control of her bodily functions. "Great...fucking great..."

Serena surveyed the food deciding what to take first. Just as she reached across for some dip a half dozen little cocktail weenies plopped onto the tablecloth, lining up one after the other and

proceeded to travel around in little circles like a choo-choo train. Her mouth dropped as they rolled along on their little invisible track around the punch bowl and pastry dish, finally ending back where they started, at their little cocktail weenie station.

"Hey...hey...HEY!" She looked away to attract someone's attention, coming face to face with Jacey. "The... the..." Her shaking finger pointed at the food, but the explanation would not come out. "There! Look!"

"What? Look at what?" Jacey could have taken a wild guess at what could have happened knowing the circumstances of this particular household. Remembering how crazy it had made Priory, she might actually enjoy it if the 'temporary insanity' took Serena down a peg or two... or three. "Tsk. If you want some more of those things, just ask. I'm sure we've got more in the kitchen."

"What are you talking about?" Serena turned back to find her plate full of cocktail weenies, piled high into a little cocktail weenie mountain. "Argh! I didn't do that."

Jacey made a point of looking around. "Hmm...maybe Santa Claus did Ms. Carruthers." She turned away chuckling. *Or someone by the name of Dylan the Dangerous...he he he.*

"What the hell is going on here?" Dark eyebrows rose as far as her skin would allow. Serena was fast working her way beyond confused.

Rayann watched the woman with a certain amount of disgust. "Can she not get her drinking under some socially acceptable control?"

"Oh? Serena has a problem? I wasn't aware."

"It's not common knowledge, of course."

"Of course."

"And do not let this little get-together go on too much longer, McAllister. I want these people at work tomorrow... on time."

"Ah, sure, but, ah, couldn't we...?" She would have liked the day off.

"No... **we** could **not**. I am not paying them for any more holidays than I absolutely have to." The auburn-haired woman placed her glass down on a nearby table. "Now, where is your bathroom?"

"Top of the stairs, second on your right." Priory watched her go, disappointed that she couldn't get her group time off before Christmas Eve at least. Six weeks ago she would have agreed with her boss, and now...well. Now, this old Scrooge was seeing the light, thanks to two ghosts of Christmas past and a little blonde soul that made Tiny Tim seem like an obnoxious six year old.

A smile crossed her lips.

Rayann was thankful for the break, relieving herself from the constriction of a full body girdle. She stood there sighing as she tended to her needs, studying the wall in front of her. A gentle breeze lightly brushed her cheek. Old houses tended to have holes and leaks and cracks and she paid them no heed. What on earth had possessed the woman to buy this old thing? She would have bulldozed the place into the ground and built a multi-storey manor with every mod con in existence.

She washed her hands, looking closely in the mirror at the heavily made-up face looking back at her. Hmmm... not bad for a fifty-something year old. She had worked hard to get where she was and she was at the height of her business prowess. A long fire engine red fingernail came up to her lips, vainly trying to wipe away the smear of lipstick on her skin. She sighed, secretly wishing this whole thing was over and she could go home to a warm bed and an even hotter bedmate.

"We got a little problem, boss." Jacey sidled up to Priory, whispering in her ear.

"Why, what's going on?" Now Priory was concerned.

"Serena is poking around the place. I don't know what she's up to but you know it can't be good."

"Damnit. I better try and distract her then."

"Don't worry. There's nothing of mine here to give her any ideas." Why did Jacey's words hurt her so? She knew why. She made a mental Christmas wish to Santa that her assistant's... her girlfriend's things... were scattered everywhere in the house, and that Jacey was indeed a real part of her life.

"Let's go see what she's up to."

"I'm telling you, Ms Stephenson, your executive is carrying on with her secretary and I've got proof!" Serena didn't really have any evidence but she was the only one who knew that. This was a game of chicken to see who would crack first.

"Ahh, there you are, McAllister. Ms...err..." The older woman looked at the accuser for a name.

Serena sighed. She obviously wasn't making enough of an impression on the woman.

"Carruthers, Ms Stephenson."

"Ah, yes! Ms Carruthers here has made a serious allegation against you. Here is your chance to set the record straight."

Serena's eyes nearly bugged out of her head as she glanced over the CEO's shoulder. The door to the room across the foyer was open and on a low table stood... well, dancing... a quite naked woman. "Ay yi yi yi..." she muttered, her eyes like dual saucers as the figure beckoned her near. "Who...you see that...it's....?"

The CEO turned to see what had distracted the little weasel. "See what?"

"That! That! That woman! On top of the table! There! Across the hall. Wow. Now **she's** had too much egg nog."

Jacey looked. Jacey blinked. *Holy crapola!* Dylan was naked. On top of the table kind of naked. Well, not quite. She had on a pair of men's white boxer shorts covered with big red polka dots and she was still wearing her socks. With those old ass sock suspenders no less! The blonde had to take a second to observe the ghost in her natural glory. She had to admit that the woman was a looker. She could have easily been a top runway model in this day and age. Her breasts weren't quite as large as she first thought, still riding high on her chest despite their size. It was the small waist that accentuated her attributes so well. Jacey was interested to see that ass that was hidden away from sight. Then again, it was probably better not to then she wouldn't be making comparisons with Priory's beautiful piece of anatomy.

"Ms. Carruthers, have **you** been in the egg nog? I want to see you in Human Resources after Christmas to get this little problem sorted out. Do you understand me?"

"But I know they see it too!"

"Well?"

Priory had been staring, no doubt about it. She felt a tinge of jealousy that her nemesis looked so damned good. But this dressing as a man thing had her stumped. Hell, if she looked like that she would have been dressing to kill, not trying to play with the boys. "I'm sorry. I have no idea what she's talking about, Rayann," Priory replied with a deadpan face.

"And what about you girl?"

Girl? Jacey tried very hard to school her expression to one of mild disinterest. "No, ma'am. I don't see what she is talking about either. It's a room with a table." At that moment, Dylan turned her back and flashed her rear end at them for a second.

"Oh dear God, did she just....? Ah! No she didn't!"

Priory tried so hard to look out of the corner of her eye to see. Damn! She missed it!

"Really. Back to business. Since Ms. Carruthers here seems to have had a little too much to

drink, I'm dismissing the allegations as the ravings of someone who's intoxicated."

"Hey! I am **not** drunk. I know the rules of the company and that includes no same-sex relationships! Those two are a couple."

The CEO turned her attention to her subordinate "To put her mind at rest, McAllister, will you please answer these allegations so she will cease and desist this nonsense."

Priory looked at her assistant seeing the sadness and resignation there. Jacey was expecting her to deny it. Her eyes moving from one woman to another, her mind finally clearing as she made her decision. "She is correct, Rayann." Priory's eyes lifted to meet Jacey's just before she added, "And I am completely in love with her to boot." The answering smile took her breath away. There, it was out, in more ways than one.

Rayann couldn't have been more surprised than if she had been hit in the face with a dead trout. "Really? Well, I'm disappointed to hear you say that, McAllister." She was about to lose her staunchest supporter. "You leave me no choice but to terminate the both of you."

Priory felt the shift in air as the words tumbled from her boss's lips.

He he he, how did ya like those cupcakes? Huh?

She so wanted to tell the apparition to piss off but she couldn't open her mouth.

"I shall expect your offices to be cleaned out by end of business tomorrow." With those final words the CEO turned on her heels and walked away... with Serena stuck to her left ass cheek like an ugly large giggling boil.

Ohhhhhh, Convent. I got some news for ya, slick. She AIN'T no lady.

"Yeah, well, tell me something I don't know, Dylan," Priory muttered under her breath.

She ain't even got the RIGHT plumbing for it. The ol' chassis' got some, errrrah, EXTRA parts.

"What? What the hell are you going on about, Dylan?"

GEEZE, you are such a pecker-head sometime! SHE'S...a CLYDE!

"Huh?"

No lady. Wrong plumbing. EXTRA parts. You - are - workingggggg - for - a - mannnnnnnnn.

"You are working for a man? I don't...I... I am working for a ma....," Priory almost choked.

Now you're on the trolley!

"You... are you sure... how did you...?!"

I dunno. I was hanging out in the john and here she comes... or it...she's a funny old bird anyway...but damnnnn! Gave me the Heebie-Jeebies I'll tell ya!

"Dylan, if you will excuse me." Despite the dire circumstances, Priory grinned wickedly. This was just too delicious for words. "Rayann, may I have a private moment of your time?" Priory directed the CEO's attention to the vacant 'showroom' across the hall.

"What's all this about, McAllister?"

"Well, I think it's time that the Morals Clause in the company contract be amended. Immediately. After all, we all have our secrets now, don't we?"

"I do not have the patience for this. Will you just spit it out!"

"Fine. You want me to be blunt? I know who... or maybe 'what' is better word... what you are, Ray."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You're as bad as that other woman. I suggest you seek professional assistance before pursuing another career, McAllister."

"I wonder what the Board of Directors would think of this **very** interesting revelation, **Ray**. Better yet! Let's allow Ms. Carruthers there to deliver the company update! I'm positive she would be tickled to death to oblige."

"Okay. Why are you doing this? What's your angle?"

"I'm getting a nasty little taste of that Morals Clause first hand, Ray. It ain't nice. That clause is antiquated as all hell and you know it. What a frigging hypocrite you are!" Priory turned away but was stopped with a hand wrapped around her wrist.

"I don't understand. What has happened to you?"

"Happened?" Priory gave the matter a little thought. "You know, I think I'm happy for the first time in a very long while." Her eyes met the CEO. "So, what's your decision?"

"You know goddamned well that I can't say no!"

"Well! Glad you agree! Then let's get this settled! Now, if you please..." Priory walked over to the two waiting women. "Tell her."

"After some discussion and consideration..." It was just chewing Rayann's ass to have to say this. "...It has been decided to amend the Morals Clause."

"That is **so** not fair! We all have to abide by it and she gets out of it?" Serena could feel her

future slipping away.

"That is **my** decision, Ms Carruthers."

"No! I want the Board to reconsider the decision."

"Of course, I could also point out to them your own little 'problem'. Do you still wish to pursue the matter?"

Reluctantly she agreed. "No...Ma'am."

"Excellent. Positive decision-making at its finest! I think we should make an announcement! Don't you agree, Rayann?"

Jacey thought she could hear the grinding of teeth coming from the CEO but she wasn't sure. "Yes." The clipped word came out nearly as a bark.

The ensemble entered the living room, drawing the attention of the other partygoers. "May we have your attention, please!" Priory's voice cut through the cacophony of sound. She wanted this change of policy in stone before the boss had a chance to figure out a way around her maneuvering. "We have a very special announcement to make! The Chairwoman of the Board has informed me that there has been a major change in the company's Morals Policy! From now on... employees' private lives will not be under scrutiny, including inter-office personal relationships, so long as it doesn't interfere with their work environment." Priory turned to look directly at Serena, making her point to the woman with her hardened expression.

There was a happy murmur of approval from the assembled crowd with a polite applause. "Secondly, Ms. Stephenson has graciously given every one the day off tomorrow... with pay!" She dare not look at the woman, knowing that the CEO would be simply glowering with rage. "Isn't that correct, Ms. Stephenson?"

"Yeessss..." Rayann ground out the word. "I... will... see... you... all... after... Christmas." The woman found her drink and finished it off in one swallow, trying to wash away the distaste sitting on her tongue.

"So, everyone, Merry Christmas! But, for now, everyone please enjoy themselves." Priory found her assistant. "Jacey? Can you turn the music on please? I think we need some dancing in here."

Rayann left not long after that, her Christmas spirit had plummeted to zero with the deception. Serena gave up and just went the hell home... alone. It took some time before anyone realized she had gone. The party was a success, garnering a number of compliments about the house and a complaint or two about the bathroom plumbing. All in all, it had turned out alright. A few

times Priory actively sought out Jacey, sidling up to stand beside her. She could feel the stares but she just didn't care any more. She had made her stand and now it was time to move on with her life.

"I don't know how you pulled that one off but I am SO proud of you." Jacey's face beamed at the public declaration.

"Actually, you're gonna have to thank Dylan."

"Dylan? Oh?"

Did someone call for me Madam?

Dylan materialized, once more dressed in her suit. When she saw the looks of disappointment on the two women's face, she laughed.

That's all you get to see! Ya pree-verts, ya! A one time deal, Lucille!

"Hey now...!" Priory felt deprived. "I didn't get to see it! Aww c'mon Dylan. Jacey saw it all. That butt-wipe saw it too! What about me?"

Nah, you got your Christmas cookie, Convent.

"You gotta tell me though, Dylan. Why? Why did you do it? Here was your big chance to get rid of me... of us."

You said it! I'd have to break in the next clown that moved in here. 'Sides, Rhea kinda likes ya and what makes Rhea happy, makes me happy. Savvy?

"You're a mushball. A big weird mushball.... but, you know."

Only Rhea, you got me? Not me toots! What you see is what you get.

"Yeah. I saw quite a bit there Dylan." More than she ever hoped she would see, thought Jacey as her eyes dropped to chest level.

They got your attention, didn't they?

"I nearly swallowed my damn tongue there." That brought a smile to the apparition's face.

It's still nice to get a compliment or two. Whodda thought, huh?

"So..."

"So..."

"Cup of coffee?" Priory was now distinctly nervous. Here was the moment of truth.

"Sure."

As they entered the clean kitchen Priory was glad she had hired caterers. All evidence of the party had been removed and the house was now settling back to its normal state. They sat at the kitchen table waiting for the coffee to brew. The plastic Santa sat there inertly in the middle of the table. "Thanks for your help tonight."

"I didn't do much." Jacey watched her boss's finger idly wander over the tabletop. "Why did you do it?"

"Well, I wanted to show off my new home..."

"Very funny. You know what I mean. You could have easily denied it all, you know."

"I guess I could have." Priory's eyes focused on the toy, trying to gain some insight as to why she took such a brazen step. It could have so easily all fallen apart. Moments passed before she spoke again. "I don't know. The opportunity was there so I took it."

"That's not the real reason, and you know it."

"Alright! I just couldn't look into your eyes to see the hurt, okay? It was a betrayal and you know it!" Why was it upsetting her?

"It wouldn't have bothered you if it was a business deal."

"Yeah, I know. That's what I don't understand."

A gentle hand crossed the table and rested on her own. "I do. This is not a business deal to you."

"Why should it be? It's much more important than that!"

"Is it? How much?" Jacey had to know.

Priory reached into her pants pocket and drew out a small wrapped box. "Here," she murmured.

Jacey's mind flew off in a number of different directions. "What's this?"

"It's a small box... d'uh!" Priory watched her assistant smile. "God, I miss that..." Her hand came up to trace her lips. "You want to know what you mean to me? Open it."

"I thought the public declaration was pretty good."

"Yeah, I finally did something right."

Priory rose to make the coffee while Jacey opened the gift. She just couldn't watch her reaction in case she didn't see the reaction she was so hoping for.

"What's this?" Jacey repeated, holding up a key. "It's a very nice key, a very nice gold key, but I already have a key to the house."

"It's the key..." Priory paused, her breath blowing out between pursed lips with a rush, "...to my heart." A single tear slowly traveled down Jacey's smooth cheek. "Will you... will you at least spend the next few days with me... with us... here? Celebrate Christmas?" She wanted more but didn't know how to ask for it.

"Of course I will... Abbey." Jacey saw the look of indecision. "What? Is there a problem?"

"No."

"There's more, isn't there?"

"Ahhh.... yeah. I know things have been... rocky... in the last week. I want..." Priory carried over the two mugs to the table, sitting down nervously.

"What? What do you want?" Jacey was hoping against hope it was the same thing she wanted.

"Would you... God, I don't know if I can do this..."

"Just tell me."

"Would you live with me?"

Hallelujah! About time!

"What a great day..." Jacey said dreamily, lying quietly in Priory's arms.

"Hmmm..." The brunette pulled her precious bundle close, bathing in the afterglow.

"It was a little disconcerting though eating Christmas dinner with two poltergeists hovering nearby watching you eat. The Santa Claus hat on Rhea and that reindeer antler thing on Dylan's head was worth the price of admission though."

"Did you see their eyes light up at the presents? That was a great idea of yours, soap opera magazines for Rhea and some preproduction newspapers from the Thirties for Dylan. I don't

think they were expecting real gifts. They were in heaven!"

"And that video game for Dylan should keep her busy for at least five minutes. I have one question though."

"Hmmm...?" Priory could feel herself slowly slipping away into sleep.

"You **do** know that there is only one television upstairs."

A quiet chuckle broke the silence of the darkened room. A low rumble replied "I know..."

THE END

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