

Chapter 1

“Get your hand off my boobs!” Hope exclaimed.

Judy heard her friend’s shriek and came running over to see what was going on. When she got there she noticed Hope standing beside the fruit tray with her uncle, who had his hand on her chest.

“Uncle Leo what are you doing?” Judy asked horrified.

“I’m so sorry,” Leo apologized. “I was going for the melon tray...”

He let the sentence hang.

“Well these are not melons,” Hope said removing his hand.

“No, they sure don’t feel like it. They’re softer, more supple,” Leo said wistfully.

“Uncle Leo!” Judy scolded.

“I’m sorry, I can’t see very well,” he said then took off.

Her uncle’s eyesight had been failing due to the onset of cataracts and at times he used this as an excuse for his unruly ways.

Judy turned her attention to her friend. “Are you all right?”

“I guess,” Hope said in an uptight voice.

“I’m sorry about my uncle,” Judy said. “Next time slap him hard.”

“There better not be a next time,” Hope warned.

“I wouldn’t count on that,” Judy said dryly.

Just as the words came out of her mouth the sound of a shriek resonated through the room. When Hope and Judy looked over, they saw Uncle Leo with his hand on some woman’s ass.

“See I told you,” Judy moaned.

“What’s with that man?”

“I don’t know.”

Hope was surprised to find Judy’s uncle at her family Christmas party. It appeared that Uncle Leo was dating Hope’s aunt Myrna. The two were an odd pair considering Leo was a fun loving, blind as a bat, horny guy and Myrna was a miserable, negative person.

Looking around the room Hope shuddered. Most of her relatives were miserable, negative lots that made people’s lives a living hell. The strange thing about them was they seemed to marry nice people. It always baffled her why good people would want to marry and procreate with them. What made matters worse was these desolate people outlived their significant others, which brought to mind the saying, only the good die young. She knew what that was like because her father died young while her miserable mother kept going.

“Hope, what are you wearing?”

Speaking of her mother.

“A dress, what does it look like?” Hope said sarcastically.

“Whatever it is, you look like a slut.

Hope had noticed this little black satin dress in the window at Fran’s Fashion and thought it would be perfect for her family Christmas party. She should have known her mother would not like it.

“Like I care what you think,” Hope shot back.

“Well you should. You look like a prostitute.”

“Maybe that’s the look I want. After all, prostitutes make good money and have fun while doing it,” Hope said mockingly.

Her mother glared at her before storming away.

“That went well,” Judy commented.

“Remember how I told you if I turn out like any of these bastards that you can shoot me?” Hope commented.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t happen to have that gun handy, do you?”

“Sorry, it’s against the law to carry.”

“Too bad. I could have taken pot shots at my mother.”

Judy laughed.

“Aren’t you glad you came?” Hope asked as she sipped on her drink.

“Your family functions are about as much fun as mine.”

“I wouldn’t call this a function. It’s more like a torture chamber,” Hope muttered.

“Are you wearing the hematite necklace I gave you?” Judy asked.

Hope pulled it out from under the top of her dress.

“Right here.”

“Is it helping?” Judy asked.

Hope shrugged. “I didn’t slug my mother just now, so I guess it is.”

Judy laughed. She had heard hematite was good for transforming negative energy and protecting whoever wears it from negative influences.

“I’m starting to wonder if I should have given you an outfit made of the stuff instead of that puny necklace,” Judy commented dryly.

“That might have worked better with this crowd,” Hope sighed.

Judy heard the strain in her friend’s voice and knew she was feeling the effects of being around her family. It was hard not to be brought down by this negative bunch.

“How about if I get you a drink?” Judy said, noticing her friend’s drink was gone.

“Make it a double,” Hope replied.

After Judy left, the conversation Hope had with her mother replayed in her head. She could still feel the sting of her words and tried not to let them bother her. At times like this she wished her father were still alive. He had a way of keeping her mother in line. Now that he was gone she ran amuck, not caring what she said or did.

This was par for the course since all of her mother’s relatives were like that. They would steamroll over you then had the audacity to turn it around so that they were the victims not you.

“Hey Hope.”

She cringed at the sound of her brother’s voice.

“Hi Sid.”

“I heard you and Mom had a fight.”

“We did?” Hope questioned.

“She said you got your nose out-of-joint when she gave me Dad’s school ring and that you weren’t coming over for Christmas.

Hope felt a stab to her heart at his comment. She didn’t know that her mother had given her dad’s ring to Sid. Everyone in the family knew that ring was supposed to go to Hope. As for her being mad and not coming to Christmas, this was news to her.

As she looked at her brother she saw a sadistic gleam in his eye. She learned a long time ago that Sid was a walking personality disorder who loved to stir up trouble where he could.

“Have you taken your medication today Sid?” Hope said sardonically.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Just then Judy showed up with some drinks.

“How’s it going Sid?” she asked, handing Hope a plastic cup.

“Fine,” he answered absently.

“He’s more than fine,” Hope interjected. “He’s doing great now that he supposedly has dad’s ring.”

Judy looked on in confusion. “I thought you were supposed to get the ring.”

“Well according to my dear brother, my mother gave it to him.”

“Why?” Judy questioned.

“Good question. Why did she?” Hope asked.

“I don’t know. Ask Mom,” he answered.

Hope noticed his lack of eye contact and knew what had happened. Sid had made no qualms of letting everyone know that he should be the one to get Dad’s ring, and probably convinced her mom of this as well.

“I think I will,” Hope said as she strode over to her mother. Her mother was talking with her sister Millie when Hope arrived. “Hope, how nice it is to see you,” Millie said with a smile. “I love your dress.”

“Thanks,” Hope said eyeing her mother.

“It shows off her figure nicely,” her mother commented.

Hope shot her mother a disbelieving look at her positive comment.

“Do you think I could talk to my mom for a few minutes?” Hope asked.

“Sure. I need a drink anyway.”

Once Millie was gone, Hope went on the attack.

“What was that crap about my figure?” Hope ground out.

“The dress does you justice, in a slutty way.”

Hope felt ready to explode.

“What is it you want to talk to me about?” her mother asked.

“Sid told me you gave him dad’s ring. Is it true?”

“Yes.”

“Dad wanted me to have it.”

“The ring was made for a man not a woman.”

“So?”

“So, it made sense to give it to Sid.”

Hope wasn’t a materialistic person, but this ring was important to her. It belonged to her father, a man she truly loved.

“You are such a bitch!” Hope seethed.

“Watch your mouth young lady,” her mother warned.

“By the way, Sid said you told him I wasn’t coming for Christmas this year.”

“I did no such thing,” her mother retorted.

“Well guess what? He was right. I won’t be there.”

“You will be at my place on Christmas day,” she ordered.

“Like hell.”

Hope stormed away before she could hear her mother’s outburst. Judy caught up to her friend.

“Are you all right?”

Hope couldn’t talk as the tears streamed down her face. Judy took her to a quiet corner to talk.

“I take it your brother wasn’t making things up this time,” Judy commented.

Hope nodded.

“It doesn’t make sense. Doris held onto that ring for ten years

knowing that it was to be given to you, but instead she gave it to Sid. Why?"

"For years I've bugged her for that ring. At first she used the excuse that I was too young. Then she told me that she needed to get it sized. I realized after awhile that this was some sick game to her and she relished in the power of it all. After awhile, I gave up asking. I thought that if I showed disinterest in it that she would give it to me," Hope said.

"Well it did just the opposite," Judy remarked.

"Did it ever?"

"Why don't you have Rick talk to Sid for you? I'm sure he can convince him to give you the ring," Judy said.

Hope shook her head. "I try to keep Rick as far away from my family as possible."

"So you decided to invite me instead of him to torture me. Gee thanks," Judy joked.

Hope laughed. "Rick had to work tonight. Lucky guy."

"Damn," Judy said. "I should have used that excuse."

"I wouldn't let you get out of it that easily. I would have dragged your ass here."

Judy was about to comment, but was interrupted at the sound of someone shouting her friend's name.

"Hope, is that you!"

She glanced up to see her cousin Joyce saunter over to their table. Beside her was a very handsome man. He was tall, over six feet, with a muscular build. His jaw was square with a little spattering of black stubble on it, his nose was thin, his mouth was wide and expressive, his hair was brown and fell loosely to his shoulders, and his eyes were ice blue and very captivating.

"Hi Joyce. You remember my friend Judy. "

Joyce shook her hand. "Hi Judy. It was nice that you could join us."

Hope was taken aback by her cordial attitude.

"I'm assuming you're here because Hope couldn't find a date again," she surmised.

There it was, her family uncouthness at its finest.

"You're right. She is my date. I gave up on men and have turned to women." Hope countered.

Joyce was rendered speechless at her comment while Judy laughed. After Joyce composed herself she introduced the man beside her.

"This is Jonathan Winters."

Hope extended her hand. "Nice to meet you."

When their hands touched it sent an erotic thrill throughout her body. She looked up and noticed him staring intently at her. They were locked in a visual embrace until he raised her hand to his lips.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said brushing a kiss along her knuckles.

The sensation of his lips on her hand made her lower extremities tingle in response.

Joyce's eyes narrowed at his gentlemanly ways.

"We should be going," Joyce fumed.

She turned to leave, but Jonathan didn't follow. He was too mesmerized by Hope.

"Jonathan," Joyce bellowed.

Reluctantly Jonathan let go of her hand and left.

"Whoa!" Judy whistled.

"No kidding," Hope said a bit breathless.

"I thought he was going to throw you on the table and do you right here."

She shivered at the thought.

"I bet Joyce is giving her guy an earful for the attention he was giving you," Judy commented.

"Probably," Hope agreed.

"It's a good thing Rick wasn't here to witness this, or that guy might not have walked away in too good of shape."

Hope shuddered at the thought.

Judy noticed their drinks were getting low.

"How about if I get us a refill," Judy offered.

"Sure. While you do that I need to go to the ladies' room," Hope said.

Judy headed for the bar while Hope went to the bathroom. The room was empty when she entered, which she was grateful for. She was still trying to come down from the Jonathan encounter. She touched up her lipstick, brushed her hair, and gave herself a once-over before leaving.

When she pushed open the door she walked into a man's chest. His musky scent surrounded her, as did his arms as he tried to steady her. She looked into his eyes and was caught. When his mouth claimed hers she was a goner.