

Artfully Yours

I glanced at Villari's sleeping form, and grinned. The man could grate on my nerves faster than anyone I knew, but he could also soothe them in a delightfully sinful manner. Of course, being Catholic, where sex and guilt are joined at the hip like Siamese twins, there were bound to be some problems. Luckily, with a little time and Villari's help, the guilt took a back seat. I'm not sure how the angels feel about my lack of shame and remorse, but I'm banking on the belief that there are plenty of heavenly inhabitants who see nothing wrong with a little romp in the sack. If the only purpose for sex was procreation, then what are we doing with genitals? I mean, why all the luscious pleasure if the only goal is to swirl sperm and egg together to produce little Johnny?

On the flip side, though, who knows how persnickety the saints are about the rules? I am currently a thirty-three year old divorced, lapsed Catholic with an active sex life. But that wasn't always the case. Until Sam Villari waltzed into my life, I was scoring very low on the transgressions barometer. I didn't drink, do drugs, or shuck my panties to walk on the wild side.

In fact, I'm positive all the angels and prophets gathered frequently in God's office, proudly holding me out as the poster child for celibacy. And even though my abstinence was not a reflection of my high moral character but of a simple lack of opportunity, that didn't change the results. Facts were facts. At one moment in time, Mother Theresa and I held the same position on chastity.

Then Villari walked into my life. At that very moment, I fell head over heels in lust. I had a sinking feeling that old St. Peter, vigilant keeper of the Pearly Gates, shook his head sadly and pocketed the keys.

But what could I do?

Admittedly, Villari didn't exactly ingratiate himself the first time we met two years ago. Being the lead detective at a murder scene, he was suspicious of me from the start because my neighbor's body was found in my front yard. The septic tank, to be exact. And okay, I admit I was less than cooperative with the cop who was asking me questions, but in my defense, the guy was a complete idiot. I'd already answered the same questions more times than I could count and he still wanted to go over it,

“One more time, please.”

Once Mr. Detective realized the guy wasn't going to get anymore out of me, he decided to take over the interrogation himself. One look at that shaggy hair and coal black eyes, my heart pumped an extra beat and my stomach did a double flip. Not a good sign. And a few minutes later, when he smiled that lopsided grin of his, even my libido blushed. Right then and there, I knew I was in deep trouble.

It hasn't been an easy relationship, but then nothing in my life has ever been easy. I don't expect smooth sailing or a free ride or anything like that. Not anymore. Not since the day my mother died when I was a little girl. That day, under a cold, steel gray sky, my brother, Andy, and I locked hands at the cemetery, lost and confused. My father stood a foot or two behind us, his arms hanging limply at his side, his face still and white, his eyes deader than the woman lying in the casket.

That day haunted me for years. Fragments of fear and bewilderment would rise, unbidden, in my brain until I couldn't breathe. All the tears that I had locked inside as I clung to Andy's hand—a boy only a few years older than me—would well up inside and spill over until I found myself sobbing at the oddest times, in the strangest places. I learned to handle all of that, to corral those feelings somewhere deep inside, to protect myself by not getting too close to anyone.

But my father's face. I never forgot the look on my father's face. How could I? He wore it every day of my life.

“You're staring at me,” Villari growled.

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“How can I sleep with all that noise?”

“What noise?” I asked.

“That voice yapping in your head,” he said, opening his eyes. “You’ve been thinking again.”

“I have not,” I started, but then gave up when I saw his mouth start to twitch at the edges. “Okay, so I have. Still, it’s not like you caught me messing around with some guy in the sack or sneaking candy from a private stash under the bed. Thinking’s not a crime, you know.”

“Depends,” he said, full out grinning now, “on who’s doing the thinking. For most people, lying back after sex and letting your thoughts drift across your brain is relaxing. For you. . .”

“What about me?”

Villari rolled over on his side, crooked his elbow, and rested his face on the palm of his hand. He slipped his hand around my waist, pulling me closer. “For you, it’s a dangerous trip through an emotional minefield. No telling when you’ll get blown to smithereens.”

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Exaggeration, that’s not true at all,” I said. “I was completely relaxed until you woke up and started badgering me.”

He pushed some errant curls off my forehead. “Your eyes are sad, Maggie.”

“I’m just a little tired, Sam,” glancing over his shoulder at the framed picture of my mother on the nightstand.

“Honey, I would love to believe you. Nothing would boost my ego more than to think you’re tired because I plumb wore you out,” he said softly in that little Texas drawl he adopted whenever he spoke of sex. “But I don’t think that’s it. My guess is you’ve been thinking about your father again.”

I couldn’t fight him. Not when he was right. “How’d you know?”

He lifted his shoulder and strummed his hand down my arm. “Doesn’t take a lot of deductive reasoning to figure out that he’d be on your busy little mind when we’re having dinner with him and Sherri tonight. As a matter of fact,” he said, squinting at his watch, “we’ll be sitting down to eat in less than two hours.”

I groaned and pulled a pillow over my face.

“Everything’s going to be fine, Maggie,” Villari said, chuckling as he tugged at the pillow and tossed it on the floor. “We’ve gotten together with your father a couple of times already and it’ll get easier over time. Andy will be there, and Sherri, of course. You know she’ll take care of carrying the conversation. All you have to do is show up, smile a little and enjoy dinner. Sherri’s not a half-bad cook, you know.”

“You don’t really know my Dad,” I began.

“That’s exactly why we’re getting together tonight. This has more to do with me than you. Your father is sizing me up, trying to learn about the man who’s messing around with his daughter.”

“He doesn’t know we’re messing around, Sam.”

“Like hell he doesn’t. In this day and age? Besides, the man’s not blind.”

“Well, he didn’t notice a whole heck of a lot when I was growing up, so why should he start now?”

“When are you going to give that up, Maggie? The man lost his wife and he fell apart. Some people love very deeply, honey. Your father is one of them.”

“It was hard, Villari. I lost a mother and a father at the same time.”

He shook his head. “I know it felt like that, but the fact is, your father was there. He was there with you and Andy at a time when living was probably the last thing he wanted to do. He stayed, Maggie. He was lousy comfort to you, I know. But the fact is, he stayed.”

“Only because my mother would have wanted him to.”

“Doesn’t matter, Maggie.”

“I guess,” I grudgingly admitted.

“And the second fact is, he’s here now. He married Sherri and he’s here. He wants to get to know you—and me—because you’re his little girl. And he’s proud of you, Maggie. He told you that at your show.”

I couldn’t deny it. My father had taken me aside at my opening, the first time since I’d left my teaching job that my artwork was put on display for the public. I had tried to avoid him, but Lisa, my best friend since college, neatly maneuvered me close to his table and then shoved me the rest of the way. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of him, watching his eyes grow moist as he told me how much I reminded him of my mother. Before that night, I had never known that she was an artist. Or had wanted to be.

Before her children. Before the cancer.

It wasn't long afterwards that the first dinner invitation was issued. They sent Andy to do the dirty work, knowing I would have invented some ridiculous excuse if they had called me over the phone. But Andy was like a bulldog. He'd decided that it was time we all got together and started to act like a real family, and if I wasn't going to make the effort to do so, then he would cart me over there himself. Of course, with Villari firmly in his camp, I didn't have a chance of refusing.

The phone rang then, loud and sharp, disrupting my thoughts and my response. I looked at Villari. "It's Andy," I said.

He met my gaze and smiled. "You sure?"

I nodded. "Yep. He's calling to see whether you need any help dragging me to dinner tonight."

"Do I?" he prodded gently.

"No. I'll go," I said, reaching past him to grab my cell off the nightstand, checking caller I.D. before answering. I was surprised to see Kelly Martin's name staring back at me.

"Hello?" There was silence on the other end. "Kelly? Is that you?"

Still no answer; just dead air. I tried again. "Kelly? Can you hear me?" I shook my head and clicked off the receiver. I hadn't heard from Kelly in months, but that wasn't really unusual. We tried to stay in contact, but now that she was in college and carrying a full load of classes, our communication had tapered off.

“Who was that?”

“An old student of mind,” I said, remembering the first time Kelly walked into my classroom. She had barely turned ten before moving into the neighborhood. With stringy, dark blonde hair and loose jeans, she shuffled into the room, her big green eyes darting left and right like a cornered animal. She looked like a rag-tag orphan straight out of Dickens’s *Oliver*. I smiled my warmest ‘*I like and accept all children*’ teacher smile, and gestured to an empty desk right in front of me. Her face relaxed a little and she slid quietly into the chair.

My heart went out to her. Starting a new school at this age could be very difficult, especially for girls who were not well versed in the unwritten rules of what to wear and how to act. Getting sliced by Jack the Ripper was a picnic compared to being attacked by a pack of prepubescent girls. The sheer inventiveness of their cruelties could fill a book—one that no woman who had already survived being labeled “different” would ever want to read.

Of course, the girls themselves weren’t really bad kids. These young ladies who preyed on the naiveté of sweet girls who still sold Girl Scout cookies, were often lost themselves. Hidden beneath thick layers of blue eye shadow and raspberry-flavored lip-gloss, were females in the tadpole stage, desperately grappling with the onset of a monthly period, seesawing emotions, and bra-snapping eleven-year-old boys. Somebody had to pay. And innocent girls on the outside fringe of ‘cool’ often made an easy target.

“Did she hang up?”

“I don’t think so. It was more like empty air, like she hit a dead zone with no reception.” The phone rang in my hand. Startled, I skipped the ID check and quickly punched the Talk button. But it wasn’t Kelly’s voice on the other end.

“Oh,” I sighed. “It’s you.”

Villari winked at me when he heard my voice, knowing it was Andy.

“I knew you’d call,” I said into the receiver.

“Of course, you did. Just like I knew you’d be sitting there nursing your grudge against Dad. I just wanted to make sure Villari was strong enough to ignore your complaining this time and get you over there.”

“I wasn’t complaining,” I insisted.

“How about clinging to your sad sob story about the trauma of emotional neglect?”

Andy was the only one who could get away with talking to me like that and he knew it. Anybody else, I would have punched in the nose. But how could I say anything to the guy who lived through the lonely years right alongside me? “I still don’t see how you can be so cavalier about it.”

“Because I’m all grown up, Maggie,” he answered. “Do I wish it had been easier? Sure. I wish a lot of things. I wish he’d seen me hit my first home run. I wish he’d coached my baseball team. I wish he’d encouraged me to play pro ball. But he didn’t and there’s not a thing I can do to change that. But now, I do wish one thing more than anything else.”

“What’s that?”

“I hope like hell that someday I love someone as much as he loved Mom.”

The phone clicked in my ear. I blinked back the tears and turned to Villari. “Let’s get ready. I don’t want to be late.”

