



Chapter One



The swollen corner pockets of the striped, vinyl canopy overhead were near to bursting despite the protection it provided from the torrential downpour. Mindlessly, Jessica stared at the quarter-sized holes the pelting rain was carving into the ground surrounding her and the other members of her dead husband's family. She noticed how other's in attendance were failing miserably at maintaining control of their umbrellas, as the forceful winds wrestled to pull them from their grasps.

Streaks of lightning illuminated the sky above distracting her attention. Her petite frame shivered, as she looked up at the menacing sky. The chilly autumn winds penetrated her thin raincoat and whipped at the veil covering her heart-shaped face. The dark mahogany casket in front of her was beautifully draped with a blanket of white gardenias and yellow roses. Despite that her husband's lifeless body occupied its confines, she felt void of all emotion.

She wanted nothing more than to see this day come to an end. Her husband's parents, Hal and Lorraine Wilton, were playing their grieving role for the media and those in attendance impressively. It sickened her to have to stand there beside them.

What a charade, she thought, as she gazed to her right at Father Mulcahy, pastor of St. Augustine's church.

He was doing his very best to offer some semblance of closure. Jessica knew Father Mulcahy viewed her in-laws 'pretend show of grief' a complete sham as well. If it wasn't for her pastor's support and refuge at times, Jessica knew she would be the one lying there in the casket instead of Richard.

Her eyes slowly scanned the faces of the mourners standing before her. Most were merchants from town, who she knew were there more out of fear, than respect for the Wilton name. The entire front

row of onlookers shuffled forward closer to the casket, as Father Mulcahy cleared his throat to conduct the final prayer.

Another gust of wind caught the pastor's wide-sleeved surplice and puffed him up like a balloon and threatened to lift him skyward. Jessica could not help but smile, as she watched him wrestle to maintain some sense of reserve and control. He was such a witty man, who could stir someone to laughter faster than the winds that lashed about him. His soft Irish brogue could calm the most unsettling soul like a mother's lullaby.

Jessica sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly, as he raised his arms heavenward and began the blessing.

"Dearly beloved. We gath'r here befar ya t'day to bid farewell to Richard Michael Wilton, a lad loved and ..."

Jessica rolled her eyes in disgust. It was going to take every ounce of strength she could muster to get through this ceremony.

Dear God, she silently prayed, give me strength ... pa ...leez.

Absently, she reached beneath the dark veil she wore, and rubbed her bruised and swollen cheekbone. It was throbbing like a bad toothache.

Would she ever forget, she wondered, as the ache began to remind her of that terrible evening?

Her husband's rage was the worse it had ever been the night he died, driven by the alcohol he had consumed and his heinous reaction toward her evening out in the company of her Aunt without him. She had been raised to be a strong, compassionate, and independent woman. The apple did not fall far from the tree, where he was concerned though. Like his father, Richard was dominating, controlling, abusive, and a womanizer.

Their one-year marriage was a mockery of what true love was supposed to be. Richard did not prove the man he had projected during their courtship. He had only pursued her, because his father had ordained it. She was, after all, heir to the Newcombe Dynasty. It wasn't long, before abuse became a part of her every day existence.

Their argument that night, had turned terribly heated, when she announced her plans to divorce him. He had caught her off guard with a sucker-punch that had sent her reeling backward. He wasted no time climbing atop her, his hands circling her throat, squeezing until she was on the edge of greeting death.

She remembered the sneer upon his face, as he slowly reduced the pressure around her throat and then rolled off her. He had watched her crawl on her hands and knees to escape him, her eyes blinded by stinging tears, as she tried desperately to suck air back into her lungs.

When he had attempted to rise, he weaved, then stumbled, losing his balance and falling onto their glass coffee table. As it imploded, it afforded her the opportunity to seek refuge in their bedroom. She had managed to lock him out, as she retrieved the small snub-nosed revolver she knew Richard kept in his Gentleman's Chest.

She had dialed 911, and told the dispatcher Richard attempted to choke her and she feared for her life. The dispatcher knew she was in possession of her husband's gun and promised to stay on the line with her, until a police unit arrived. The dispatcher heard Richard's threats to kill her, when he broke the door down. They had recorded her terrifying pleas for them to hurry and her blood-curdling screams, when the door's panel splintered apart and the shot that went off, killing her husband instantly.

Jessica shuddered, as tears streamed from her eyes. It was over. The District Attorney exonerated her based-on self-defense. Now, all she had to do was get away from Hal Wilton, who she knew, would do everything in his power to stop her. She gazed upon the casket still feeling hopeful. Nothing was going to stop her. Not even the great Hal Wilton.

The party she had attended with her Aunt the night that Richard had died, had been a liberating and glorious reprieve for the short while they were together. What she hadn't expected, was her immediate fondness for the handsome Senator from upstate New York the party had been hosted for. However, brief their introduction was, he was a man that was hard to forget.

Sen. Gallagher was the kind of man a woman wanted to see his slippers under her bed, and his body in it. Despite his charm and formidable good looks, he stood behind a political platform she respected. Jessica understood why her Aunt supported his re-election for office so adamantly. He was a decorated Special Forces Marine veteran and a well-respected former police detective for the City of Albany. Her Aunt had confided that evening, that when she told the Senator of Jessica's degree in public relations and communications, he was interested in speaking with her about a vacancy in his executive office for Director of Communications.

Jessica never had the chance to have that talk, since he was whirled away on some state emergency. Just to know that chance was hers, gave Jessica the kind of hope for escape she could cling to. She knew that her Aunt would help her accomplish that goal.

I wish I was there right now, she admitted silently.

There was nothing she needed more, than a new start, knee deep in a position that would fill her days and many evenings, working for a distinguished senator, who was bent on changing the world. If it wasn't for her Aunt Florence being called away for an emergency board meeting, Jessica knew her Aunt would have been there right now by her side, striking fear into the likes of Hal Wilton.

She watched as those before her shuffled uncomfortably, exchanging nervous glances amongst themselves. She pitied them for the mindless puppets they had become, and detested Hal for making them that way. She shot her father-in-law a look of disgust.

Hal Wilton reined with tyranny both over the town he owned and his family. Even now, they stood high upon a dais, separating them from the "little people", as he so often referred to the townspeople as.

Jessica jumped with a start and stiffened, when Hal's left hand glided along her back and began to massage it seductively. As his palm slid to her derriere and cupped it possessively, she reached her left hand behind and dug her manicured nails into his flesh, until he released her. Even though he could not see her face, she still sent him a look of disdain.

"Stop it!" She hissed in a voice that was low, yet menacing.

She took a quick step sideways and looked about to see if any one witnessed the exchange. She wanted nothing more than to slap the snicker from his face, as he then reached his arm about his wife's shoulder, pretending to be the consoling husband and grieving father, spurring his wife to whimper even louder.

She shook her head slowly, despising the display. She didn't exactly hate the woman. She felt ... what? Not respect ... not love ... maybe, empathy. She noticed the tears streaming down the woman's porcelain cheeks, still ageless and beautiful. It was so out of character for the woman to show any kind of emotion, as emotion caused wrinkles. Heck! The woman's lips were as tight as her newly-lifted ass.

Her mother-in-law loved no one more than herself. She never once showed any signs of outward affection for her son. Jessica understood why. He was a clone of his father.

You failed miserably as a mother, Lorraine, she quietly chastised. *His death was partly your fault too, for not standing up to that bastard you married.*

Jessica scanned the faces again before her. The words spoken by Father Mulcahy did not penetrate her brain. Nothing he said mattered really. This probably could have all been avoided, if she had left Richard, when things had started to get bad. She was so naïve then, believing he would change, believing he would realize how wonderful she was and how much she had loved him.

Life had not been fair, and dealt many a lousy hand. First, her mother died, giving her life. Her dad was killed in a plane crash, when she was six. And then, her marriage to one of Maine's "Golden Boys," turned out to be a travesty.

She knew that her fate would have proved differently though, if her Aunt had been the one to raise her. Instead, her paternal grandmother was given custody and when the time was ripe, she fell prey to Hal Wilton's charm and control. Unbeknownst to Jessica, they had connived a plan to bring his son and her together in marriage.

Jessica's marriage never had a chance from the on-start. Richard did a magnificent job disguising himself as an abuser, drunkard, and womanizer.

He had cast a spell over her with his magnetic charm and striking good looks! Every debutante in New England wanted to be Richard Wilton's girl. Instead of chasing after the stable of females at his fingertips, he had zoned in on her ... a petite, green-eyed innocent with long, wavy, brown hair. What a fool she had been to have played right into his hands! She was the total opposite of the bevy of blonde amazons with lustful eyes, who did everything to catch his affection.

Why didn't I realize ... see him for what he truly was back then? It was all just a lie... a terrible, deceiving, and hurtful set up.

The minute the ink dried on their marriage certificate, Richard's true persona reared its ugly head. *It won't happen again!* She silently vowed. *I will NEVER be duped like that again!*

Jessica was snapped back to reality, when Father Mulcahy shook holy water out over the casket and a splash of it soaked through her veil and onto her right cheek. She shifted and forced herself to focus on the priest's final words, as he continued to sprinkle the length of Richard's mahogany casket.

"Father, we ask ya ta bless Richard's final resting place, as well as his soul, and ta watch ov'r his family, especially, his beautiful widow, Jessica. May the peace and glory of God's luv be with all of ye, now and forev'r, Amen."

The rain finally began to dissipate to a light mist, as the congregation began to disperse. Every one except for Father Mulcahy departed without sharing a single word of sympathy. She watched the priest hesitate only briefly, before approaching her in-laws and finishing with his pastoral duties.

After extending his farewells to her in-laws, he turned and briskly closed the short distance between them.

Jessica's heart warmed, when he sent her a vibrant smile and opened his arms wide, as he drew near. A sob caught in her throat, when he tenderly embraced her and rocked her like a young babe.

"Ah, Lassie," he cooed. "I be fearin' you'll be tormented if'n you don't get away and soon." He patted her head tenderly.

She stepped back slightly and tilted her head, so she could look up into his soft hazel eyes. He was a gentle giant of a man with handsome features. She smiled, when the wind tufted his thick pumpkin-colored locks into the air.

"Father," she sighed heavily, "I'm working on that. I'm vying for a position in Albany, but I'm afraid Hal will do everything to make my departure a difficult one."

"I may be straight off the boat, Lassie," the priest replied with a wave of his point finger, "but, we had our share of bullies like yer father-in-law too! You must promise ta call me, if'n ya need some help getting away."

Jessica looked about nervously.

The priest noted her reaction, pointed ahead and protectively drew his arm about her waist, and escorted her a few steps away from the dismissing attendees.

"Do ya have something in mind already? I'm serious now. If'n you need my help, you just say the word," he offered, patting her shoulder affectionately.

She smiled warmly and nodded.

"I do as a matter of fact." She turned slightly to look over her shoulder and make sure that Hal wasn't sneaking up behind them. "You know my Aunt Florence."

He nodded knowingly.

"Well," Jessica continued, "She just returned from a long business venture and; I'm to move in with her, until I can find a place of my own."

Father Mulcahy's smile was one of content.

"Good. I suggest ya do that quickly. We both know Hal is an awful man." He stepped closely and reached out to tenderly place her face between his brawny palms. "If'n you need ta escape in the dark of night, call. Me life is a bor'n one and could use a lit'l spice now and then."

Jessica giggled.

"I just love you, Father Mulcahy, and going to miss you so much." She drew his hands from her face and held them in front of her. "Thank you. Thank you so much for all your support."

She rose up on her toes and hugged his neck tightly, whispering softly into his ear, "I'll never forget all that you have done for me. Never ... ever."

He patted the back of her head and replied with a voice filled with emotion, "I will miss you, child."

"Me too," she squeezed him fiercely and stepped back. "I promise to call you, when I'm safe in Albany, but you mustn't breathe a word to anybody. Hal's got ears everywhere."

He kissed her forehead tenderly and tapped her nose with the tip of his finger.

"Yer secret is safe with me." He replied, as he turned and walked away.

Jessica watched his departure, until he was gone from sight. She was taken by surprise and squealed with fright as a vice-like grip encircled her upper arm and spun her about forcibly, making her fall hard against her father-in-law's chest.

His pearly whites gleaned, as he glared down at her.

"Wasn't that a touching scene?" He snarled, squeezing even harder and making her winch. "Now get your ass in the car!" He barked, shoving her in the direction of the black parked stretch limo awaiting to leave.

She stumbled and tried desperately to catch her balance, but failed miserably. She landed hard onto her right knee, skinning it and the palms of her hands against a headstone embedded in the grass.

Hal's six-foot frame towered above her.

"That's where I like to see you ... on your knees!" He sneered.

Jessica lowered her head and tried to control the rage surging beneath the surface. Slowly, she breathed in long, cleansing breaths to calm the quivering in her stomach. He was a man no one denied, as she gazed up at his hulking physique.

But, she would outsmart him, and that she did, as she flipped about, pulled off her veil and threw it to the ground, and growled. "You disgusting pig. Takes a real man to beat up on a woman a quarter of his size."

She hated the smug look planted on his face and how he stood there all arrogant with his arms crossed at his chest.

"You goading me, little lady?"

Jessica's reaction was immediate, as she drew both of her knees to her chest and kicked out forcibly, hitting him square in the shins.

"Yep!" She replied matter-of-factly and laughed aloud as he tumbled backwards.

Jessica bolted to her feet, chuckling delightedly, as she watched him land with a splat into a mud puddle.

"Your days of telling me what to do are over, old man," she yelled.

"Hal!" Lorraine screamed, darting from the limousine. "Oh, my God! Jessica, what's wrong with you?"

Lorraine bent down and tried unsuccessfully to aid lifting him, grasping him under his arms.

"It's ... okay ... dear," she grunted, as she tugged upward. "Jessica didn't mean it. She's just upset that's all."

Lorraine's frustration was evident, as she began to slip and slide in the mix of mud and wet leaves. Her tone became aggravated. "Help a little, dear! I can't ... lift you ... by myself," she moaned, as she struggled to maintain her balance.

Hal's roar echoed through the cemetery, as he pushed her away with one backward swoop of his right arm.

Lorraine whirled out of control and squeaked in shocked horror, as she too landed onto her derriere into another shallow puddle. Globes of wet mud hung from her perfectly coiffed up-do and muddied her Christian Dior ensemble.

"Back off, you stupid bitch!" Hal barked. "If I want your goddamn help, I'll ask for it!"

Lorraine's hand flew to her mouth and she gasped loudly, mud smearing across her cheek and the bridge of her nose. The chauffeur stood beside the stretch limousine frozen in his own shocked horror. He knew better than to intercede and offer his assistance. It took a few moments for her to rise with all the grace and dignity she could muster, and retreat to the car without speaking a word.

Jessica took a few safe steps backwards and watched as Hal rolled to his side.

"I gotta give it to you ... you've got balls," he chuckled as he rose on one knee. "Men die for less."

Jessica tried not to show the fear that began to rumble deep in her belly. Yes, she was gutsy, but she knew danger ... what it looked like, smelled like, and felt like.

"Another threat?" She retorted. "You may own this frigging town, but you no longer have a claim on me. When I leave here, I will no longer carry the Wilton name. That dies too, just like your son ... the son you killed rearing him in your "ALMIGHTY" image."

Hal stepped forward, his face burning red from the fury she invoked.

She took a stance and stared him down.

Hal did not move. His chest heaved from the anger raging inside of him. He shifted his weight and rose to his full height, as he wiped his palms caked with thick, wet, mud upon his navy, Armani, pin-striped suit. He took a pure silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and slowly wiped the tiny splatters of mud from his face.

"We'll meet again?" He snarled through clenched teeth. "And when you least expect it," he continued, tossing his soiled linen to the ground and rubbed his hands together. "No one walks away from Hal Wilton unless I deem it so."

She grunted and sent him a disgusted look.

"Really? I don't think so. What about my Aunt?" She jibed smugly. "You know the lady ... Florence Rochelle Newcombe. I believe she's bested you more times than you care to admit. Touch me and she'll destroy you."

If looks could kill, Jessica would have turned to dust from the maniacal glare he sent her way. His nostrils flared and a red flush slowly colored his neck and cheeks. He looked like a pressure cooker ready to blow its top.

But oh, how she relished the moment! Her eyes sparkled with admiration as her Aunt's face came to view in her mind's eye. What a woman Florence was ... all five foot six of her. She was full of vim and vigor with a regal grace and beauty that still left men breathless, when she entered a room. And how her amber eyes would sparkle like flames when her dander was up!

Yep! She thought. *Aunt Florence was one hell of a woman, who brought worse than him to their knees.* She smiled.

Hal could not hold a candle to her Aunt. Foreign heads of State, titled dignitaries and leading philanthropists held her in the highest regard. Furthermore, Hal knew Florence had the power and means to crush him like an ant.

Jessica could literally see the wheels churning in his over-inflated brain. She could not help, but laugh out loud. Truth very seldom disarmed a man, but in this instance, it cut clear to the bone. She enjoyed her moment. Maybe she was wrong not confiding in her Aunt about Richard's abuse and his father's attempts to bed her. But once she did tell Florence, God hath no fury like her Aunt and God help Hal Wilton.

Florence had quite a dynasty to attend, especially since her husband passed away after Jessica was married. Jessica just did not have the heart to burden Florence with her own problems. But, it was different now.

Hal's eyes closed to reptilian slits. He seethed, as his chest rose and fell rapidly.

Despite her newfound courage, Jessica knew she let loose the devil. He was no longer family, but a predator out to devour her.

"You think you know me well enough to mock me?" He barked as he slowly circled his left shoulder a few times to test its flexibility.

Jessica retreated a few more steps, keeping her eyes locked on her adversary.

"I know vermin when I see it." She answered softly, standing her ground. "I am not your property. Threaten all you like. I'm leaving."

His eyes never wavered, never left hers, as he contemplated a moment longer.

Seconds passed. She was certain he wouldn't pounce, for it would show weakness on his part, and that wasn't Hal. He had thugs to do his dirty work for him. Still, her nerves felt as tight as the strings on a violin.

Hal stroked his chin, as he continued to stare her down. He took a quick step forward and halted.

Jessica could not help, but gasp slightly and; she hated the look of confidence it gave him.

"Don't ever drop your guard, little lady," he sneered, circling around her and licking his lower lip in a disgusting manner.

Jessica made a face and he snapped his teeth loudly at her and then roared with laughter.

"You'll never know when daddy will strike again."

Jessica felt repulsed by his lewd gesture and cringed. The urge to strike out and leave her hand print on his tanned cheek was overwhelming, but she controlled the impulse.

"Your day will come, mark my words. And I pray to God, it's before your son's body rots in his grave!"

Her tongue lashing did not faze him. Instead, he roared with laughter, as he turned and headed towards his awaiting limo.