

Chastity's Charm Book Excerpt

At the front door, Cassie mentally prepared herself before knocking. Just take what they say with a grain of salt. You know how they are.

Alaine opened the door, looking unusually somber. "Hi, c'mon in."

From the foyer, Cassie saw her brother and Kara at the kitchen table - the oak veneer barely visible under reams of paper. Frank's brow furrowed as he glanced up. "Hi," he mumbled. He didn't look happy.

Cassie hung her purse on the coat rack in the entry hall and cautiously approached. "Should I be worried?"

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" Kara offered.

"From the looks on everyone's face, I think I might need something stronger. But coffee will do, thanks." The legs of the chair squealed against the Spanish tile as Cassie took a seat.

"So, what is it you want to show me," she asked, although not sure she wanted to know.

Frank took a deep breath. "This isn't easy for us. We want you to know that we did a little investigating because we love you and want to keep you from being hurt."

"Investigating?"

"Yes. You see Evan" Alaine chimed in, looking from Frank to Cassie. "There's just something about him, Cass. He's too smooth. I can't put my finger on it, but Frank and I—"

"You and Frank never like anyone I date. Why should this be any different?" Cassie's blood boiled. She knew her neck was red. It always turned that color when she got angry.

"This doesn't have anything to do with liking or not liking anyone. Frank and I just had suspicions and acted on them," Alaine insisted.

"Then show me what dirt you've dug up on Evan," Cassie said sharply. "Let's get this over with."

Frank pushed a piece of paper in front of her. "This is from Maricopa County, Arizona. You'll notice that the name on the complaint is Evan Dennis. This person embezzled over three hundred thousand dollars from customers under the guise of landscaping contracts."

“There must be a million people with that name.” The information didn’t persuade Cassie.

“Yes, but how many are in the same business?”

“One piece of paper doesn’t prove anything. I’m certainly not going to approach Evan with accusations based on such flimsy evidence.”

Alaine pushed another paper toward her sister. “This one is a complaint filed in Reno, Nevada. Evan Robert Dennis bilked this man out of another three hundred thousand plus, claiming to be a construction contractor, taking money and then not completing the jobs for which he was paid. What’s Evan’s middle name?”

Cassie chewed her bottom lip, fighting the growing suspicions. “Okay, so that is his middle name. There could be others.”

“Sure, it could all be coincidence, but there’s a lot more,” Frank replied.

By the time Cassie had viewed all the documents her siblings had found on the internet, her mind spun in confusion. Evan couldn’t possibly be the person in all these fraudulent cases. Her hand shook as she picked up her cup and downed the last sip of cold coffee. She hung her head, tired from the day’s work and spent from the exhaustion of fighting what appeared to be obvious.

“Well?” Frank waited for a response.

“I don’t know what to say.” Cassie’s throat felt swollen and the word came out choked. “This is just too much to take in all at once. I can’t believe that Evan did all these horrible things. You don’t know him.” A tear trickled down her cheek.

“We didn’t do this to hurt you, Cass.” Alaine reached over to brush the wetness from her sister’s face. “We just want to protect you.”

“I have to go home. I’m tired and confused. I need to think.” Cassie pushed Alaine’s hand aside, stood, and without further conversation, took her purse and walked out the door.

Her hands trembled as she buckled her seat belt and started the car. She took a cleansing breath and backed out of the driveway. Alaine’s words echoed in Cassie’s mind. Protect me? Tears blurred her vision. She wiped her eyes and tried to focus on the road. How did causing her to question Evan - confront him with their suspicions - offer her any degree of protection? It only baffled her. If Evan did these things, what did he hope to gain through her? She thought of the money she loaned him for his ticket, but quickly remembered his excuse for asking. It was logical that he hadn’t been paid for his work ... wasn’t it? She pushed her fears aside. Her Evan R. Dennis was certainly not the

person Frank and Alaine claimed him to be. She wasn't going to lose him on false allegations. She would wait until he came home and discuss it calmly.

After a cynical laugh, she muttered, "How do you question someone's honesty calmly?" She pulled into her garage and turned off the engine.

Inside, she locked the kitchen door behind her and leaning against it, took a deep breath. Her mind couldn't absorb all the things Frank and Alaine had thrown at her. How could she believe that this wonderful man who gave up his life in Texas, moved to California, and swore he loved her with all his heart might be using her? Those nights he held her in his arms and made love to her ... wasn't the look in his eyes sincere? What she really wanted was her mom ... someone to kiss her booboo and make it better, but she didn't want to share this, especially not with her mother. Cassie pounded the kitchen counter in frustration and let loose the flood of tears she'd been holding back. How she longed for the safety of Evan's arms and his assurances that Frank and Alaine were wrong. Wearily, she trudged upstairs.

She didn't even bother to remove her make-up or shower. She just wanted to sleep - to forget for a while. She quickly changed into her pajamas and climbed beneath the blankets. Was there a law against her being happy? It seemed that way. Something bad always happened to overshadow the good in her life.

Despite being physically and mentally exhausted, sleep wouldn't come. After turning over for the fiftieth time since getting into bed, Cassie sighed loudly. She stared into the blackness, barely able to see the familiar ceiling fan, and pondered the evening's events. Evan hadn't called. Maybe it was a good thing he didn't - worry would have shown in her voice. Things like accusations were better made face-to-face, not over the phone. Sleep - she needed sleep, and she needed to mute her brain. She plumped her pillow, pulled the covers up to her chin and tried desperately to summon a peaceful slumber.