

Touched by an Angel

Chapter One

With the bare tips of my fingers, I lifted the red thong from my husband's suitcase, slowly, deliberately as if it were a pit viper. My lips parted into a wide O as I stared at the lace underwear, panties that I'd never seen before.

It wasn't like I was searching for trouble; in the twenty-three years of my marriage to Sheldon, there had never been anything close to drama in our relationship, especially not this kind. The two of us were solid, the kind of couple that Ashford and Simpson sang about back in the day when as a teenager, I dreamed about the man who would take my hand after my father walked me down the aisle. That man had been Sheldon Hudson - and he'd kept every single one of the vows we'd shared on our wedding day.

At least that's what I'd always thought.

I took a deep breath, just to make sure that I was still alive.

Why am I still holding onto these, I wondered.

But even as I had that thought, I could not release the death grip the tips of my fingers had on the panties. In my mind, I imagined the woman who owned this strip of material and I could almost see myself - twenty years younger. I could hear myself - with a high-pitched tone that belonged to someone who had not yet fully stepped into womanhood. And worse - I could see

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Sheldon - grinning as the tramp sauntered toward him wearing nothing more than these five inches of silk and lace. And maybe a pair of matching stilettos.

I snatched myself from that nightmare and shook my head. How in the world had I ended up here? After all, it wasn't like I was sneaking around, rummaging through my husband's bag as if I was a wife with no trust. No, I was doing what I'd always done when Sheldon returned home from a business trip.

Like all the other times, the car service had dropped him off in front of the house less than an hour ago and he had dragged himself and his bag across the trace of snow that sprinkled the path to the front door of our Capitol Hill townhouse. His eyes were blood-shot with exhaustion from the red-eye flight he'd taken from Los Angeles.

But even though he was tired, he'd kissed me with every bit of energy he had left and I followed him as he dragged his suitcase up the spiral staircase to the second level of our home.

Inside our master suite, Sheldon had dropped his luggage at the foot of our bed, tossed his briefcase and cell phone onto the bed, then staggered into the bathroom.

While he relaxed under the double heads in our steam shower, I had eagerly unzipped his bag in search of my gift. Years ago, he'd given up hiding my surprise - now, he laid it on top for me to uncover quickly. From perfume to pearls, he always brought

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home something that put a smile on my face and gratitude in my heart. And today, just days away from Christmas I couldn't imagine what I would find.

And...well, I had never expected to find this!

The sound of the shower shutting off, snapped me from my shock and my head twisted toward the bathroom. Through the closed door, I heard Sheldon singing his favorite song.

I believe in you and me...

I believe that we will be...

In love eternally...

When the movie, *The Preacher's Wife* had hit the big screen, Sheldon had declared that this song was our song.

As he sang, I could tell he was rejuvenated and refreshed; inside the richness of his tenor, I heard his anticipation.

I did the only thing I could - I stood still and waited until the door opened and Sheldon stepped out. His damp skin glistened and his smile was just as bright. The towel tucked at his waist was loose as if he didn't plan for it to stay there long.

"Hey, baby." His greeting was filled with the lust that always came from being away from home for five days.

Still grasping it with just my fingertips, I held up the thong. "What is this?" I asked. I didn't even recognize my own voice - my tone was as deep as my husband's.

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His smile rolled upside down and he squinted, trying to see what I held. "What's what?"

My heart pounded with a pain that made me want to fall to my knees. But, I pressed through it and held the underwear higher - straight in front of his face for his eyes to see what mine had seen.

His frown deepened. "What's that?" he asked again as if he didn't know.

I had hoped for more from the man who had promised that he would forsake all others. I had expected my upstanding husband to confess right away that he'd fallen and quickly beg for my forgiveness. Maybe then, there would have been a slither of a chance that I would forgive him and we could somehow find a way to move on.

But now, there was no chance of reconciliation. Not if he was going to play me like this. Not if he was going to lie and deny.

The words of my three-time-divorced best friend came to me now.

"Men cheat, and then they lie. That's what 'man' stands for - men-admit-nothing."

Theresa had lost her faith in men a long time ago, even though I constantly worked to get her to see that all men weren't the

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same. And, I always held up Sheldon as Exhibit One. But now it seemed like Theresa was the one who needed to be schooling me.

"Savannah, sweetheart." His voice was full of the same confusion that was etched deep in the lines on his face. "What is that? Why are you showing me those...."

"Don't you dare do that, Sheldon," my voice quivered as I interrupted him. "Don't you dare stand there and tell me that you have no idea what these are." I shook the cloth between my fingertips.

"I don't."

Raising my hand high, I tossed the satin and lace toward him; the thong hung for a moment in the air before landing at his toes. "Whose are those?" I screamed. "Who do those panties belong to?"

He held up his hands, shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about you bringing your whore's underwear into my home."

"What?" Now, his voice was as loud as mine.

"I'm talking about you cheating on me. How could you do this?" I cried.

"I don't know what...."

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I didn't let him finish. "Don't deny it, Sheldon!" I screamed. "I found those in your bag; I'm not stupid, I know what those panties mean."

Now, he said nothing. And, it was the way he stood silent that made me snap. That made me rush to him with my fingers clutched into fists, ready to attack. But he grabbed my wrists before I could begin my assault.

"I can't believe you did this to me!" I said. "After all these years. After all the love that I've given to you. After everything that I've given to you." Fury gave me the strength to wrestle free from his grasp and I pounded my fists against his chest.

His eyes widened at my punches and he tried to push me away. Stammering, he began, "I...I...I..."

The beginning of his confession came out in a gurgle. "I...", he said again before his legs shook, his knees bowed, he fell to the floor, the towel now completely free.

I stood there for a moment, confused. Was this really the way Sheldon was going to handle this? He was going to pretend that he fainted?

But then, it was the way he laid there, his eyes rolled back, his fingers clutching the skin on his chest.

Now, it was my eyes that widened and I dropped to the floor.

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"Sheldon!" I sounded different now. Yes, I shouted, but my voice was filled with panic.

His mouth opened and his eyelids closed.

"Sheldon!" I pressed my fingertips against his neck, felt his pulse, then jumped from his side. Rushing to the nightstand, I grabbed the telephone.

"Help me, please," I exclaimed to the 9-1-1 operator. "My husband. He collapsed. I think he's had a heart attack!"