

This hilarious, fast-paced novel is about three beautiful, but desperate women who convert a mansion into a Bordello-Spa where hunky men service the women, and try to make all of their fantasies come true.

The CB (Chocolate Brown) Social Club

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# THE CB SOCIAL CLUB

(The Chocolate Brown Social Club)



# THE CB SOCIAL CLUB

by A.R. Alan

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## CHAPTER ONE

“HE’S DEAD!” LEONIE cried, when Sally picked up her phone. “I killed him!”

“What? Leonie, calm down!”

“I killed him, Sally! I killed him!” Leonie wailed. “He’s lying in a bowl of ice cream!”

“Leonie, what the hell are you talking about? Who’s dead?”

“Stewart! Didn’t you hear me? He drowned in his ice cream!”

“Leonie, listen to me. Call 911 right now! Calm down, baby. Just get off the phone and call them. I’ll pick Ann up. We’ll be right over. Just make the damn call!”

“I...I...” Leonie started to sob.

“Call them now!” Sally shouted, and quickly hung up.

“Hurry,” Leonie mumbled into the dead line, trying to control her sobs. “Please hurry.”

When Sally’s car drew close to the McGill mansion, the circular driveway was lined with at least a dozen police cars, their spinning lights flashing red against the night’s blackness, police band radios blaring out codes and instructions to the officers milling about. Sally stopped the car part way down the block, behind a waiting ambulance, its rear door open, the inside lit, but vacant.

Ann stared out of the car window. “This block looks like it’s having a carnival,” she muttered angrily. The two of them stepped out from the car and started walking. After a long, harsh winter, spring had finally come, but this night still had a wintry, biting chill to it. Sally and Ann pulled their jackets closer around themselves, making their way toward the large stone mansion. As they passed the curious neighbors who were gathered in groups on Leonie’s lawn, they glanced at the array of designer nightwear those people were wearing. Silk robes with marabou trim were hardly fitting to ward off the evening’s chill as they stood about whispering to one another. Obviously the McGill neighbors, their children, and even their hired help were willing to brave the brisk, chilly wind to learn what all the commotion was about.

“Must be a bad night on TV,” Ann said angrily, clenching her fists at her sides as she walked on past a rotund man and his equally rounded wife. They were both huddled in luxurious, full-length mink coats, their slippers poking out from beneath.

“I knew that piece of trash would cause trouble in our neighborhood some day,” they heard a wild looking, gray-haired old woman tell an old, stooped-over man. “She was just a waitress, for goodness sakes! Her kind doesn’t belong here with us!”

Ann, panting, her eyes filled with fire, immediately changed direction and headed over toward the nasty busybody. She was so angry, Sally was certain she would rip the woman apart before the old buzzard knew what had hit her. Sally caught up with Ann, grabbed her arm, and quickly pulled her away.

“Some day, I’m going to get that woman,” Ann threatened, still staring back at the old hag, while letting Ann tug her up the drive to the stately mansion. “I swear, I will, Annie. That woman’s made Leonie’s life miserable for years telling lies to the neighbors behind her back. The old bitch is always spying on the house, hoping to catch Leonie doing something wrong so she can report it to the town council. She not only hates Leonie, but she hates Stewart’s position as District Attorney and would love to have him fired.”

Ann ignored Sally’s ranting and pulled her along. As they climbed the brick steps, Ann nearly tripped, because she was still

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looking back and not paying attention. “You ladies have to wait out here,” a cop said, his arms stretched sideways, blocking Sally and Ann from entering the massive double doors with their huge, lion-head knockers.

“I have to get in there,” Sally said, trying to get around the tall, rugged-looking cop. Just then, two uniformed medics emerged from the house, both shaking their heads. Sally stopped what she was about to say to the cop and listened as one of the medics started to speak with him.

“That crazy lady won’t let us take the body,” he said, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head in frustration. “The man didn’t respond to the EKG we gave him, and he was still clutching his heart when we turned him over. I’d say it’s pretty evident he died of a heart attack, but his fruitcake wife says she wants to clean him up, so there’s nothing more we can do here, Bob. We’re leaving. Talk to you later,” he said, as they both took off quickly down the steps.

“Please, I have to get in there,” Sally pleaded, trying to edge her way around the austere-looking cop who stood guard with his arms now folded across his chest. “My sister needs my help.” The cop looked at both women, hesitated a moment, then stepped aside to let them enter.

When Sally and Ann walked into the foyer, they saw a cop leave the study, closing the door behind him. He turned to them, but didn’t move or speak.

“My sister...where is she?” Sally asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “The DA was a good man.”

“Where’s my sister?”

He pointed back to the room he’d just left, then shook his head and walked out of the house.

The women waited a few moments to make sure there were no more cops about, and then Sally closed and locked the door behind them. As the two made their way across the enormous and opulent entry hall, their high heels clicked against the black-and-white veined marble floor, the tapping sounds echoing in the stillness. Without speaking, they made their way past the antique, gilded French table with the ornately etched, eight-foot Venetian mirror hanging above it.

They paid no attention to that or any of the other showy furnishings that Stewart had collected. When they reached the massive cherry wood doors of Stewart B. McGill's private study, each woman took hold of one of the classy, custom-made brass doorknobs—this time a pair of horned beasts—and pulled open the paneled doors.

"Leonie, where are you?" Ann called out. She scanned the ballroom-sized study and called out again, "*Leonie? Honey? Answer me!*"

"Over here," came a small voice from the dimly lit room.

Both women looked in the direction of the voice, and their mouths dropped open as they silently took in the scene before them. Sitting on the sofa at the far end of the room was Stewart B. McGill, Esquire, Saddle River's prominent District Attorney. Stewart, a tall, heavysset man who was always impeccably dressed, now sat stiffly back on the sofa with his legs apart, pants unzipped, shirt open and thrown to either side of his bloated stomach. His eyes stared vacantly out of a face covered with dripping brown muck. Leonie was sitting across from him in an overstuffed, leather chair that was dotted with cigar burns, sobbing into a hankie.

"My God!" Sally cried in a hushed voice, as they made their way over to their friend. Sally and Ann knelt down before Leonie and took her into their arms. "We're here, honey," Sally whispered. "Everything's going to be all right."

"I killed him," Leonie wailed. "I gave him his second bowl of ice cream, and was leaving to meet both of you. But when I got to the door, I heard a terrible crash and ran back in here," she said, tears streaming down her ashen cheeks. "Stewart fell off the sofa and crashed down onto the cocktail table. But his face... his face fell into the bowl of ice cream. And it was his favorite, chocolate Häagen-Dazs ice cream," she wailed even louder. "And I didn't take his face out of the bowl. It's all my fault, I tell you." Leonie sobbed, looking at both her friends and grabbing hold of their hands as her tears continued to slip down her cheeks until they landed in her lap, leaving large wet splotches on her pink linen skirt. "I let him drown. It's all my fault!" she moaned, rocking back and forth, clinging to their hands.

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Both women hugged Leonie tighter and let her cry until the wailing subsided. Leonie sniffed a few times, then dabbed her eyes with her sopping wet handkerchief. "I have to clean him up," she said, sniffing again and wringing her hands. "I can't let anyone see him like this. They'll know I killed him."

"What are you talking about?" Ann asked. "The paramedic just said Stewart died of a massive heart attack. You didn't kill him! Get it out of your head!"

"It wasn't a heart attack," Leonie insisted. "I left his head in the bowl of ice cream and he drowned! Everybody's going to know. I'm going to go to jail for the rest of my life, or get the electric chair!"

Sally and Ann glanced at each other.

"Leonie, you're hysterical. Calm down, and let's talk about this," Ann said, tugging Leonie up from the chair and pulling her over to the leather-topped game table. She plopped down in one of the four matching high-backed chairs. Sally and Ann removed their jackets, put them on one of the chairs, and then sat down on both sides of Leonie, who was shaking her head and staring down at her lap.

"Leonie, we'll help you," Sally offered, cringing at the thought of actually having to touch the dead man. Especially a man she detested. How could she not hate the man who mentally tortured her sweet, innocent friend the entire ten years of their marriage? She was also positive that Leonie's husband physically abused her as well, but when she tried to get something out of her friend, Leonie always made a lame excuse about why she was often black and blue. Either she accidentally bumped into something, or she said she tripped over her own feet. Sally knew she was lying because, in the twelve years they had been friends, tall, slender Leonie was as graceful and sure-footed as a prima ballerina.

"Ann, why don't you get us some brandy," Sally said, nodding her head toward the bar.

"Good idea." Ann got up and headed over to the other side of the room, where a magnificent bar spanned the entire wall. After searching through the well-stocked supply of bottles, she found the brandy and poured some into three brandy snifters. Baccarat Crystal, of course. *Only the best for Stewart*, thought Ann. "Ready," she called

out, carrying two of the large, balloon-shaped glasses across the room. She placed one glass before Sally and the other on the table in front of Leonie. "Be right back." Ann crossed the room again, not looking at the dead man, whose fishlike eyes stared out of his chocolate-brown face. When she got back to the game table the second time, she was carrying her glass and the almost full bottle of brandy.

"Drink a little," Sally said, raising Leonie's glass to her lips.

Leonie shook her head. "I don't drink," she answered, lifting her tear-filled eyes to both women. "Stewart doesn't like me to drink." Sally and Ann glanced at each other, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

"Stewart can't tell you what to do anymore," Ann whispered, stealing a peek back at the slovenly dead man for confirmation that he was still dead. She put the glass into Leonie's hand and steered it to her lips. "Just take a taste of this, honey, it will make you feel better."

Leonie finally took a few sips. "A little more," Ann coaxed. Leonie looked first at Ann, then at Sally, then downed the rest of the liquid in one long gulp. She gasped, sucked in a large breath of air to cool her burning mouth and throat, and her face turned from white to a bright red.

Sally quickly refilled Leonie's glass. "Oh my!" she said. "We almost forgot to make a toast to Stewart. What do you say we do it now?" She raised her glass and looked across the room to the man who was silently staring back at them. Ann and Leonie also turned toward him. As they silently lifted their glasses and extended their arms out toward Stewart, the dead man's head suddenly dropped forward, his chin landing on his hairy chest. The three women gasped, then quickly lifted their glasses to their lips and downed the entire contents.

"To Stewart!" Sally said, after catching her breath. "Thank God the bastard is dead!"

"To Stewart!" Ann giggled. "May he rot in Hell!"

"Sally! Ann! How could you?" Leonie cried. "He was my husband!"

"Come on, Leonie." Ann tried not to laugh as she refilled their glasses, "You finally got rid of the monster. It's time to celebrate."

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“I can’t,” Leonie said, new tears trickling down her face. “How can I celebrate when I killed him?”

“For Christ’s sake!” Sally muttered. “Listen to me, Leonie! You didn’t kill him! The fat slob died of a heart attack!”

“If I were a better wife, this wouldn’t have happened to poor Stewart.”

“Poor Stewart, my ass! The man had a heart attack!” Exasperated, Ann finally exploded. “You told us Stewart’s doctors warned him after his second heart attack to stop eating all that junk food and to take off the extra weight. You didn’t shove all that garbage into his mouth. You didn’t put those rolls of fat on him,” she said, getting out of her chair and kneeling before Leonie. “How about all those rainy and snowy nights Stewart sent you out to the store, because he had eaten everything in the house that wasn’t nailed down?” she asked, staring into Leonie’s tear-filled eyes. “Huh? What about that? Remember telling us that he had finished an entire tub of ice cream one night, but still wanted more? So you drove around half the night, going from one convenience store to another until you found what he wanted! Remember? You could have been mugged or raped, for heaven’s sake, but ‘Good Old Stewart’ didn’t give a damn! He wanted his favorite chocolate ice cream, and didn’t give a shit about you!”

Leonie lifted the glass to her lips and drained it, looking first at one friend, and then the other, before she finally managed to mouth the words, “What do I do now?”

“We have to plan his funeral,” Ann answered, refilling their brandy snifters. The women considered this, looked at each other, then lifted their glasses and drank some more.

Leonie looked hopelessly from Sally to Ann, and then started over again. “I don’t know what to do. Stewart always took care of everything. I was just supposed to look pretty. Pretty like everything else in his house.”

“Leave it to us, honey. We’ll make sure Stewart gets what’s due him,” Sally said, a little smile lifting the corners of her mouth as she glanced at Stewart, who sat silently staring down at his bare feet.

“Why don’t we call a taxidermist and have the fat slob stuffed,” Ann giggled. Leonie stared at her in disbelief. “Then we can put him in one of the leather chairs he’s ruined, cover him with a white sheet, and have a grand unveiling at his wake... like an opening at one of those fancy art galleries.”

“That’s terrible!” Leonie gasped. She had swigged down the last of her third brandy.

“Oh, all right,” Ann, sighed, “We’ll use a brown sheet instead of a white one.”

“No, I won’t have my husband stuffed!” Leonie hiccupped.

“Wait a second. I have to get us another bottle,” Sally chuckled, getting up from her chair. She kicked off her high heels and, swaying slightly, made her way toward the bar. She returned a moment later with a new, full bottle, sat down, and filled their glasses almost to the top. “Now, where were we?” she asked, sipping away at the brandy. “Oh yes. Stewart. Leonie, if you don’t want to have Stewart stuffed, how about having him fried... I mean, cremated?”

“Good idea,” Ann readily agreed, pressing her lips together to keep from laughing aloud.

Leonie glanced from one friend to the other while trying to stop hiccupping.

“I know,” Ann went on quickly, “we can throw ‘Good Old Stewart’ a chocolate-brown farewell party, and invite all the women living in Saddle River. I’m sure plenty of unhappy housewives will show up, too. In fact, we’ll put an ad in the paper.”

“My friend Lisa can do that,” Leonie said, swaying back and forth and trying to keep her eyes from closing. “She writes for the *Daily Gazette*.”

As if on cue, the three women looked back at the dead man. “Don’t you think Stewart would like that?” Sally asked Leonie.

Leonie smiled softly, her dark green eyes sparkling against her creamy-pink skin. “Only if we serve chocolate cake and his favorite chocolate Häagen-Dazs ice cream,” she answered sweetly, trying not to hiccup again.

Ann refilled their glasses, almost emptying another bottle of brandy. “We’re almost outta’ dis stuff,” she said, holding the bottle

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up and swishing it around to check its contents. “Yup! Almost done with dis one.”

“We have Chocolate Godiva Riqueur,” Leonie giggled, getting up from her chair and staggering towards the bar. “Here it is.” She returned to the table with the oddly shaped bottle. “Finish up what’s in your glasses, because this is dir-rishis.” She plopped back down into her chair, and nearly fell off.

“Leonie? How tall is... No that’s wrong,” Ann giggled, as she corrected herself. “How tall *was* Stewart, and how much did he weigh?”

Leonie licked her lips and tilted her head slightly, pondering the question. “Oh... he was about six foot three,” she said, pouring chocolate liqueur into her still half-full glass of brandy, missing the center of the glass and pouring some of the liqueur on the table. “I guess he was close to four hundred pounds.”

“Then that’s it! We’ll have a multi-layered chocolate cake made that stands six-feet, three-inches high, and weighs exactly four-hundred pounds, in tribute to Stewart,” Ann giggled, delighted with her own idea.

“That’s great!” Leonie slurred. “Then I can even put a statue of a bride and groom on top of the cake, just like we had at our wedding.”

“Hell no!” Sally shot back. “If we’re having Stewart cremated, then an urn with his ashes has to sit on top of the cake.”

“Wait a minute,” Leonie laughed, placing both hands on the table and pushing herself up and out of her chair. “I’ve got just the right thing.”

Sally and Ann watched her stagger over to the bookcase, open one of the bottom cabinet doors, and then pull out a brass urn decorated from top to bottom with colorful etchings.

“Stewart’s mother gave this to me at my bridal shower,” she said, setting the gaudy piece down in the middle of the game table with a loud plunk. “Every time the old bat came to visit us, Stewart insisted I take it out so she would think we were using it.”

“It’s perfect,” Ann laughed, eyeing the monstrously tacky piece.

“Too bad she’s dead now,” Leonie giggled. “I could have invited her to the party, so that she could see I’m still using it.”

“Now you’re getting into the spirit,” Sally laughed. “Right after we order the cake, we’ll hire a caterer for the food, and rent tables and chairs and whatever else we’ll need.”

“We’ll need lots of dishes and brown tablecloths and napkins,” Ann joined in, swaying in her chair and trying to focus her eyes on Leonie.

“No! No! That will never do!” Leonie said, licking the liqueur off her lips. “The linen has got to be cream colored, so it won’t clash with the chocolate on the cake.”

“What are you? Another fuckin’ Martha Stewart?” Sally chuckled. “Everything *has* to be a dark chocolate-brown color, or it won’t be Stewart’s special day.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right,” Leonie laughed. “Stewart does have to have his last chocolate-brown day.”

“I’ll order the food,” Ann offered. She drained her sixth glass. “We’ll have different kinds of meat in brown sauce, brown rice, noodles in brown sauce, chocolate covered pretzels, raisins, lots of fancy chocolate candy. And you know what? I’ll even get some of those disgusting chocolate-covered frog legs his snooty, stuck-up friends liked to eat and brag about. Yuch!” she said, making a face at the thought of it. “And not to be forgotten, Leonie, honey, hic, the double-trouble, rich and fattening, chocolate cake. And then, hic, last but not least, to top off the rest of that junk, I’ll order tubs and tubs of that dark, creamy-chocolate Häagen-Dazs ice cream, that fat, miserable, Stewart loved so mushhh. So there! That should do it nicely!”

“It’s only a shame Stewart won’t be able to enjoy any of it,” Leonie sighed. She turned back to her dead husband. “Poor Stewart. He’s going to miss all the fun and all the people in his lovely house. And he won’t be able to show them all the new things he just bought, or brag about how much the painting cost, or—”

“Oh, but he will,” Sally quickly interrupted, turning toward the dead man and raising her glass. “Stewart’s spirit will hover around the room, watching all the mourners enjoy his chocolaty food while they admire all his beautiful possessions.”

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Ann and Leonie turned to look at Stewart, whose face was still covered with brown stuff, while his eyes stared down at his toes. They raised their glasses along with Sally.

“To my husband, Stewart!” Leonie sang, rising from her chair and knocking it backwards onto the floor. Ann and Sally stood up and raised their glasses toward the dead man. “To my darling husband, Stewart. May your spirit always remember the party and how we celebrated your send-off to wherever you’ll spend eternity.”

“To Stewart,” the three of them chanted, then downed what was left in their glasses.

## CHAPTER TWO

*SADDLE RIVER DAILY GAZETTE*  
*Saddle River's Champion District Attorney Dies*  
*Story written by: Wm. Taylor*

*Stewart B. McGill, Saddle River's distinguished District Attorney, was given a farewell send-off yesterday at an elaborate party held in his mansion located in the Royal Vista Estates. Amazingly, 3,225 women residing in the township of Saddle River signed the guest book. Although the weather was rainy and chilly, women lined up for blocks, waiting to get into the McGill residence to pay their final respects. The theme of this somber occasion was "Chocolate Brown." This was a tribute to Mr. McGill, who had a passion for anything chocolate. World-renowned chef Arthur Rosenkrantz was flown in from Paris on a private jet to create a special multilayered cake, which stood six-feet-three-inches high and weighed four hundred pounds. As no men were permitted to attend the District Attorney's send-off, I was not allowed to enter the estate. According to the mayor's wife, Mrs. Bork, the chocolate cake was stationed in the center of the grand entry foyer. Each woman who passed by it, was asked to place her own husband's picture on one of the many tiers of the cake, if they had a picture with them. Mrs. Fazio, the wife of the chief of police, said there was a special lottery that afternoon. Three winning women were each given a hammer, and*

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*then, to conclude the festivities, these winners were allowed to smash a wedding statue of a bride and groom until it was nothing more than powdered dust.*

**THE MONDAY FOLLOWING** Stewart's elaborate send-off turned out to be a beautiful spring day. The air was heavy with the scent of the newly opened hyacinth bulbs poking up in clusters in the McGills' back yard. Leonie stood before her dressing room mirror, pivoting from side to side, checking out her short, black, mourning dress. Sunlight poured through the master bedroom windows, and sent slivers of light across the room, where they cast a golden glow around her long, natural, platinum blonde hair.

"I wonder why Archie wants to see me," Leonie muttered to herself, smoothing down the silk dress that clung to her slender body like a second skin. She turned from the mirror and walked over to the chair where her black heels lay on the thick, powder blue carpet beside it. She slipped her feet into her shoes, grabbed her small handbag off the chair, in case she decided to go out afterward, and then made her way to the door.

"Is there anythin' I can do for you while you're talkin' to your accountant?" her maid, Mattie, asked, as Leonie passed her in the hallway.

"No, thanks. You have more than enough to do just cleaning up the mess from yesterday," she said to the short, black woman whose arms were filled with an assortment of cleaning fluids and paper towels. "Mattie, I don't know why you didn't let me get in some extra help. It's really too much work for just you."

"I don't need no help, Mrs. McGill. Besides, I know how you don't like strange people pokin' around your house."

"Thanks, Mattie. Is Mr. Otis in the study?"

"Sure is. He's spreading a mountain of papers all around your husband's desk."

"Well, I'd better get down there and see why he insisted on seeing me today," Leonie sighed. She looked at Mattie for a moment more, and then back to the bedroom door, as if she wanted to escape inside and hide herself away under her quilt. Finally, she pulled

herself together and smiled weakly at Mattie, then slowly, step by step, made her way down the circular stairway and into Stewart's study.

"Archie?" she said softly, entering the dimly lit room. Right after Stewart's send-off, Leonie had all the heavy drapery pulled together so that the only light in the room now came from a small, antique, desk lamp.

"Leonie!" Archie Otis, a short, obese, balding man called out to her, immediately getting up from the desk and heading toward her with outstretched arms. "I'm so sorry, my dear," he said, quickly enfolding her in his arms and resting his head against her chest. "I wish you had let me help you with... with... And then they wouldn't let me in for the... the... It was terrible and disrespectful, and I—"

"It's all right, Archie." She stepped away from him and looked down into his sad, brown eyes. "My good friends, Sally and Ann, took care of everything. And I am sorry they wouldn't let you in, but the two of them decided it would be a women-only affair."

"Here. Let's go sit by the desk," he said, taking hold of her elbow and leading her to a chair in front of the massive mahogany desk.

Leonie sat down and waited while he walked around the desk, then sat down in her husband's antique, high-backed chair across from her. Leonie tried not to smile at the sight of little Archie Otis sitting in Stewart's king-sized chair. She was certain the accountant's feet couldn't possibly be touching the floor.

"Leonie," he said coughing a few times before getting down to business. "You know that I've handled all of Stewart's business and financial matters since he got out of law school."

"I know," Leonie answered softly, tightly clutching the small purse on her lap. "Archie, I just don't understand what's so urgent that you couldn't wait a couple of days for me to get myself together and calm down a bit."

"I'm sorry, Leonie. Truly sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I'm afraid this couldn't wait. Believe me when I say I wish circumstances were different and I didn't have to break the bad news to you at this time."

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“What bad news?” Leonie asked, leaning forward and staring into the older man’s eyes.

“Leonie, I warned the man for years, but he never listened to me.”

“Archie, what are you trying to tell me? Just say it.”

Archie let out a big sigh, then looked down at the desk and nervously shuffled some papers.

“What is it? Spit it out, already!”

“You’re broke, Leonie. I’m sorry. So very sorry.”

Leonie looked at him in disbelief. “Broke?” She couldn’t breathe, her heart started to thump, and suddenly her head began to throb violently. She reached up and rubbed her temple, trying to make the pain subside.

“Dead broke. And worse than that, heavily in debt.”

“What?” Leonie gasped. “Archie, how can that be? Stewart told me he had lots of investments. Cash in the bank. And even a large insurance policy, should anything happen to him. You must be mistaken,” she insisted, shaking her head and blinking her eyes. “It can’t be. He promised I’d never have anything to worry about. Never, ever! I... I... don’t believe this.”

“Leonie, Stewart’s investments went down the drain. I told him not to buy those penny stocks and junk bonds, but he wouldn’t listen to me. Not only that, he piled up a lot of heavy gambling debts, cards, the horses, sports betting....”

“He gambled? I never knew. What about his insurance policy?” Leonie stammered, twisting the strap of her purse around and around as she clutched it in her lap.

“The insurance policy will cover the gambling debts, but the house is heavily mortgaged, and there is only about four thousand dollars left in the savings and checking accounts. That may just cover one month’s expenses. I’m afraid you’re going to have to sell the house and most of the contents, as well as Stewart’s antique car collection, if you’re to have any money left to live on. If you invest it wisely, maybe—”

“Are you sure?” she interrupted, shaking her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe any of this is happening. First Stewart’s death, and now

I learn that I'm broke. Any time I tried to question Stewart, he told me not to worry. Archie, I still can't believe this," she said, staring across the room in an effort not to cry. "How could he gamble? How could I not know?"

"I'm sorry. I wish I had better news for you. Of course, I'll be happy to lend you some money until you sell the house and get on your feet."

Leonie got up from her chair, walked behind it and held on to its back. "Thank you, Archie. You've been a good friend, and I know you tried your best with my husband, but Stewart always was a stubborn man." She sighed and looked away. "I'll figure out a way, but thanks anyway for your offer."

Archie got up from his chair, gathered the papers together, and then stuffed them into his attaché. "I'll have all the documents copied and sent back to you as soon as possible," he said, his voice filled with genuine sadness. "And Leonie, please call me if you change your mind and want the loan."

Leonie walked him to the front door. "Thank you for all your help. I know you did the very best you could, Archie. You were a good friend," she sighed. "I'll call you in a couple of days and let you know what I've decided to do."

"Call me anytime," he said, turning back to her at the door. Leonie saw that his eyes were now filled with tears. "I'll help in any way I can," he promised.

"Thank you," she answered with a catch in her voice, "I will. Thanks again." She leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his cheek, then waited as he got into his car and drove away.

Leonie stood silently by the front door for a few moments, staring straight ahead, not seeing anything. Slowly, tears began to trickle down her pale face. She lifted her hand and brushed them away, then spotted her old neighbor, Mrs. Manfred, looking back at her from their property line. As Mrs. Manfred took a step onto Leonie's lawn, Leonie quickly turned, walked back into the house, and quietly closed the door behind her. She knew the nasty, troublesome, old woman was probably waiting for an opportunity to confront her about being the only female not allowed to attend

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Stewart's send-off, but she wasn't up to dealing with her for the moment, so she escaped inside the house as she had done many times before.

Once again, Leonie walked into Stewart's study. It would always be Stewart's study, she thought, as she walked over to one of the bookshelves and took down a silver-framed photograph. She looked at it for a moment, then clutched the picture to her chest, walked over to one of the overstuffed chairs, and sat down. Slowly, she lowered the picture onto her lap and stared at the wedding photograph taken right after they had been pronounced man and wife. Stewart was all decked out in a tailor-made tuxedo. He was thin and handsome, and his smile was radiant as he stared down at his beautiful bride. She was gorgeous. Stewart had gotten a top designer to make her wedding dress, and although it cost him an absolute fortune, Leonie insisted she wanted it to be plain and simple, without a lot of lace and beading. She remembered how the satin gown made her feel like a princess, instead of the platinum-haired country girl in hand-me-down clothes, who had met him while she was just a waitress at the local truck stop.

"Stewart. What happened?" she whispered to his image as warm tears streamed down her face and fell onto the picture. "You made it seem like a rags-to-riches fairy tale for me. It was all so wonderful in the beginning. You were loving. You were the best any girl could ever want. You were my hero, my Prince Charming, my lover, and my best friend. I don't understand. What did I do wrong to turn you against me?" Leonie ran her finger gently up and down Stewart's face, wiping away the tears that splashed down onto the glass covering it. "And now... now this," she whispered. "You promised you'd always take care of me. You told me I would never, ever, have anything to worry about. I don't understand." She clutched the photograph to her chest again, and heaved a heavy sigh. Then, unable to help herself, she started to cry. The front doorbell rang, but Leonie didn't hear it over her sobs.

## CHAPTER THREE

“LEONIE! WHERE ARE you?” Sally called out after Mattie let her into the house. Leonie still didn’t answer, but Sally noticed the study door was open, and walked in. “Leonie?”

“I’m over here,” Leonie finally answered, sniffing and quickly wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Hi, hon... Leonie, you’re crying again,” Sally said, sitting on the sofa across from her and reaching to take one of Leonie’s hands in hers. “You’ve got to pull yourself together, hon, or you’re going to make yourself sick. And I don’t want you getting sick on me now.”

Leonie heaved a heavy sigh. “I’m all right,” she answered, looking at Sally. Sally was an exceptionally beautiful woman in her early thirties, and she always dressed in simple, pastel-colored outfits. Today, she was wearing a short pink suit-dress with a white-lace collar that made her look younger than her years, and vulnerable. “I’m all right, Sal,” she repeated with another heartfelt sigh. “It’s just that I got bad news a little while ago, and I can’t... I just don’t...”

“Bad news? What bad news? Are you sick? What more can happen to you?”

Leonie looked at Sally and turned the photograph over in her lap. “Archie, our accountant, dropped by to tell me I’m broke.”

“*You’re broke!*” Sally exclaimed. “How can that be? Stewart had more money than God. How else could he afford this house and the

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expensive paintings? And what about his antique car collection, sitting in that monster garage? No, I don't believe it."

"You can't believe I'm broke? What should I say? I can't believe it, either," Leonie said, shaking her head, and then drawing in a deep breath before going on. "Archie told me that Stewart didn't listen to his advice, and had invested in a lot of junk stocks that hit rock bottom when the stock market crashed. Then, to make matters worse, he told me that Stewart gambled away everything we had left. Now, I'm not only broke, but I owe a fortune," Leonie practically whispered. She looked at Sally, hesitated, and then continued, "Archie told me that I have to act quickly. He said things are so bad, I have to sell the house and everything in it, as well as Stewart's car collection, as quickly as I can. Hopefully, I'll have a little money left over so I can get a small place and start over again, but I'm not counting on it."

"*Leonie!*" Ann called out as she entered the mansion.

"*We're in here, Ann,*" Sally called back. "*In the study!*"

"Hi, guys. What's up? Why are the two of you looking so glum?" she asked, kicking off her shoes and plopping down into one of the massive chairs. Ann's mini skirt was so short her red panties showed, but the two friends ignored it because that was nothing new with spike-haired Annie and her outrageous getups. She always dressed to show off her body.

"Leonie's broke! That bastard husband of hers gambled everything away!" Sally blurted out.

"*What?* You've got to be kidding!"

"Nope. She's not kidding," Leonie said softly. She got up and walked to the window, her back to them. "Now I'm going to have to sell the house and everything in it," she said, staring out at the rear garden, where the trees and plants were just starting to burst into bloom. Something she would normally have taken delight in, but not now.

"For Christ's sake, Leonie, didn't you know what the hell your husband was doing? How could you be so stupid? How could you not know he was gambling," Ann burst out, her face growing red. "I've known you for years. I thought you were a lot smarter than that!"

Leonie turned around, taken back by Ann's outburst. Her fear of the future suddenly turned to anger; anger at Annie for making her feel stupid, and anger at Stewart for his deceit. "I told you guys, Stewart always told me that he was taking care of everything," she said, her hands planted on her hips, her nostrils flaring. "How was I supposed to know what was happening? I didn't know I had to be smart, or whatever it is that you're implying, Annie. I had a husband who I trusted. He gave me a charge card, and far as I knew, everything seemed to be okay. Stewart never questioned how much money I spent or what I spent it on. The bills seemed to be paid, so how the heck was I supposed to know the money was going down the drain?"

"Leonie, I honestly wish I could help you," Sally said, staring down at her lap and rubbing her finger against a nub of the linen fabric. "But I just got fired, and I don't have a pot to piss in, myself."

"What do you mean, you just got fired?" Leonie asked. "You've been working as a receptionist in that doctor's office for five years, and you told me just the other day that he'd given you a big raise."

"I know, and I was all excited about the extra money I'd be making."

"Men!" Ann exclaimed. "They sure do know how to fuck you in *and* out of the bed. Bastards! All of them!"

"Now wait a minute. It wasn't Dr. Blockner's fault," Sally said defensively. "He said he was sorry, but that his goddamned wife pushed him into hiring her little niece, and he couldn't afford to keep us both on the payroll."

"Don't worry, Sal. You'll find another job," Leonie said, sitting down on the sofa beside her and taking hold of her hand. "Have you spoken to the police recently? Do they have any new leads on Rachel and your ex-husband?"

Tears slipped down Sally's cheeks. She tried to brush them away, but more fell. "I don't know what I'm going to do. Every time I call the police, they say they're working on it, but it's been six months since he kidnapped her, and they still don't have any idea where the two of them might be," she told Leonie, her breath short, her tears still overflowing. "I gave up on the police a couple of weeks

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ago, called a private detective, and gave him a deposit to start searching for Rachel and that miserable bastard.” She started to cry softly, wringing her hands together in her lap and rocking back and forth. “Now what am I supposed to do? I don’t have a job! I can’t pay the detective any more money. And, by the time I can afford to, Rachel could be hundreds of miles away in another state. She’s only five,” Sally said, breaking into heart-wrenching sobs. “She’s going to forget me by the time I find her,” she sobbed, laying her head down in Leonie’s lap.

Leonie forgot her own problems and started to stroke Sally’s hair. “We’ll find her, babe. Somehow, we’ll find a way to get her back to you.”

Sally sat up again. “I miss her. I miss her so bad that I hurt all over,” she said, looking from Leonie to Ann. “I haven’t had a full night’s sleep since she’s been gone. All night long, I walk back and forth, from my room into her pretty room, hoping this is all a bad dream and that I’ll find Rachel tucked into bed and sleeping like a little angel.” Sally wrapped her arms around her middle, trying to stop the pain, then shook her head and softly said, “The bastard left in such a hurry that he didn’t even let Rachel take her doll, Miss Trudie, with her. She’s going to be devastated without that doll. My poor baby,” she cried. “God only knows what he’s telling her, or where she is, or if he’s bothering to feed her properly.”

Leonie took Sally into her arms and rocked her back and forth like an injured child. “Shush... we’ll find the money somehow, hon, and we’ll find Rachel. Shush... please try not to worry, or you’re going to make yourself sick. Annie and I will get her back for you, no matter what we have to do,” she promised her tormented friend.

“I don’t understand,” Ann exploded. “Why the hell haven’t the police found her already? The school called them as soon as they discovered Rachel missing from the school playground. For Christ’s sake! How inept could they be? They should have used dogs to trace her. They should have had her picture on the television, and the National Guards searching the area before he got too far away. In fact, if you were some rich senator’s daughter, the FBI would have been called in immediately,” Ann said, jumping up and starting to

pace back and forth, her anger growing with each footfall. “I don’t understand,” she said, stopping and staring down at Sally. “Why should you have to hire a private detective? Why isn’t the school doing it? It’s their fault that Rachel was snatched to begin with.”

“Annie, please! You’re not making this any easier on Sally,” Leonie pleaded. “Let up, already.”

“Leonie, I’m angry,” Ann replied. “I’m angry with your fuckin’ husband for leaving you with zilch! I’m angry because poor, innocent, Rachel has been kidnapped by her lunatic father. And I’m pissed off that the fuckin’ over-paid police are doing nothing to find Sally’s baby!”

“I’m sure the police are doing everything they can,” Leonie said, trying to comfort Sally as well as calm Ann down. “You’re not helping either of us, Annie, so please, just sit down.”

“I went to the police, but they... they haven’t helped one damn bit,” Sally said, looking up at Ann. “And now... if that isn’t bad enough, I’m behind in my rent, so I won’t have anywhere to live at the end of the month. What am I going to do? I’m at my wit’s end.”

“That’s easy,” Ann exclaimed, “I’ll tell you what you’re going to do,” she said, finally sitting down in the chair facing them. “You’re going to move in here with Leonie.”

“Here?” Leonie squealed. “I have to sell this place before the bank forecloses and takes it away. How can she possibly move in here?”

“Hold on. Don’t panic, you two. Let me explain. I’ve got to move out of my place, because my lousy landlord just doubled my rent, and there’s no way in hell I’ll be able to afford it. So the three of us can live here for a while and pool our money until I can come up with a better idea.”

“Ann—”

“Relax, Leonie. I told you not to panic!” Ann said, cutting her off. “Leave all the details to me. I’ll figure out a way for the three of us. Just give me a few days. In the meantime, Sally, you and I will put our things in storage together and move in here. Is that all right with you, Leonie?”

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“I guess so,” she sighed. “The worst thing that can happen is that we all move into an apartment together after I get rid of this place.”

“Naw... hang in there. I’m going to make us rich,” Ann laughed. “Just you wait and see. I’ll come up with something. I promise.”

This hilarious, fast-paced novel is about three beautiful, but desperate women who convert a mansion into a Bordello-Spa where hunky men service the women, and try to make all of their fantasies come true.

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