

Thanksgiving

Chapter One

Megan Murphy scuffed through a thick layer of autumn leaves in her round-toed, black leather, gold-buckled shoes. Regulation colonial clodhoppers, she thought happily, bending over to pick leaves out of her buckles. Especially stylish with her blue-flowered thermal underwear and thick gray woolen socks. Yup, she was a real eighteenth-century sex goddess. But hey, it was cold out. Besides, what did the average slovenly trollop wear back then? Silk teddies and designer panty hose?

She did a little tap dance in her big black shoes and kicked at the leaves. When she was a child the leaves in her yard had been immediately whisked away. They were packed in leaf bags, sucked into leaf suckers, or pulverized by the mulch maker, but they were never scuffed through or jumped into or simply enjoyed. That was one of the things that had drawn Megan to Colonial Williamsburg. In its effort to recreate the eighteenth century, Williamsburg had slowed to a walking pace. There was time to enjoy leaves. Even Megan Murphy, who had a strong tendency to hurtle through life at warp speed, found tranquility in the back alleys of Williamsburg.

She scuffed past Raleigh Tavern and along Duke of Gloucester Street to the public garden behind the Prentis House. She settled down on her favorite bench and opened the waxed paper bag containing a cup of hot cider and two sugar cookies from the Raleigh Tavern Bake Shop. It was November, past the season of peak color for the foliage, and only a few hardy leaves remained on the trees. The new wintery image of lacy bare branches pressing against a brilliant azure sky caught Megan's attention as she tilted her head back, hoping for a few rays of warming sun on her face. A beautiful day, she decided, adjusting her mob cap. In fact, it was better than beautiful. It was perfect. A perfectly beautiful day.

A horse-drawn carriage rumbled down Botetourt Street, and the clop, clop, clop of horses' hooves stirred her imagination. Who had sat on this bench two hundred years ago? She wondered. Maybe it was someone just like herself, basking in the sun, gobbling goodies. Some brazen strumpet, she thought. If she were transported in time she would definitely be a brazen strumpet.

She finished her second cookie and drained the last drop of cider from her cup. She brushed the crumbs off her white linen apron and gaped in horror at her ankle-length, royal-blue woolen skirt. A huge, floppy-eared brown rabbit was eating a hole in it.

"Holy Toledo!" she shouted, jumping to her feet and wrenching the skirt away from the rabbit. She held the skirt up for closer examination and made a disgusted sound at the ragged hem. The rabbit looked at her with wide chocolate-brown eyes and twitched its nose.

"You miserable beast," she said. "Just look at this. How am I ever going to explain this? A rabbit ate my dress? Good grief."

She glared at the rabbit and decided it was the fattest one she'd ever seen. Extraordinarily cute, too. Big and fluffy, with soft brown fur and droopy ears. And it was smiling. Yes, she was sure of it. The blasted thing was smiling at her.

She knelt down and stroked its glossy back and soft ears. Two large shoes appeared beside the rabbit, white tennis shoes that had seen better days. The laces were broken and tied in knots, and the left shoe was stitched together with what appeared to be surgical sutures.

"Trying to steal my rabbit, huh?" a voice said from far above her.

Megan looked up. She could have picked him out of a crowd as the rabbit's owner, she thought. He reminded her of the rabbit. He didn't have big, floppy ears, of course. He had nice little ears that lay flat against his head and were begging to be nibbled. And he wasn't fat. He was just right, in faded jeans and a leather jacket with a red wool scarf wrapped around the neck. But he did have the same incredible chocolate eyes, and his hair was brown, just like the rabbit's, and just as strokable. He wasn't handsome. He was... cute. Slightly upturned nose and wide, smiling mouth. A few laugh lines fanning from his eyes. Definitely very cute. And very huggable-just like the rabbit.

"Is this really your rabbit?" she asked. He scooped the animal up and held it in the crook of his arm.

"You bet. We're roomies." Megan pressed her lips together and swept her skirt out for his inspection.

"Well, your roomie ate my skirt."

"Are you kidding me? I hope he doesn't get sick." He narrowed his eyes at Megan. "Bad enough you tried to steal him, but feeding him your skirt! You should be ashamed of yourself."

Megan's mouth dropped open. He was joking, right?

He held out his hand. "Patrick Hunter. Nice to meet you, but don't do this again."

Without thinking Megan shook his hand and mumbled, "Megan Murphy. Okay." She watched in astonishment while he gave her a funny sort of look, a quick appraisal that lingered for an extra moment at her mouth and ended with a boyish, almost embarrassed grin. He turned on his heel and sauntered away, disappearing behind the scuppernong-grape arbor.

Megan shook her head abruptly. Don't do this again? she repeated silently. Had he actually said that to her? Of all the nerve. She didn't care how cute he was-if she ever saw him and his rude rodent again, she'd tell him what for. She smashed the paper bag into the empty cider cup and stomped off to the gunsmith's shop.

"Don't do this again," she muttered. Had he been kidding? She wasn't sure.

Patrick Hunter smiled as he opened the gate to his small, fenced-in back yard. Megan Murphy, he mused. He'd never met anyone so perfectly named. She'd looked like an apparition, standing in the autumn leaves in her colonial dress, with all that glorious silky red hair escaping from her white ruffled cap. She was obviously one of the costumed visitors' aides who sat in front of the craft shops and took tickets. She was average height and seemed to be of average build, but there was nothing average about the riot of freckles that marched across her straight little nose and dusted her rosy cheeks. And there was nothing average about her mouth. It was soft and pink and full. He'd almost kissed her! He threw his head back and laughed at that. Wouldn't she have been surprised? Wouldn't he! It wasn't in his nature to go around kissing strangers.

He locked the rabbit in its large wire-and-wood hutch and shook his finger at it. "It wasn't nice of you to eat her skirt. Now I'll have to pay for it, and I'm going to take the money out of your carrot allowance."

Twenty-four hours later, Megan was practically flying down Duke of Gloucester Street. Her black shoes skipped over the brick sidewalk, her long skirt showed flashes of white petticoat as she jiggled through a pile of leaves, and her thick, wavy red hair tumbled free, swirling around her shoulders. It was five o'clock, and she had just finished work for the weekend. She tilted her face up into the crisp air and wrapped her long black cape tight around herself. This was her favorite time of the year. Crisp apples, nippy mornings, pumpkins and leaves and... rabbits.

She stopped in her tracks and watched the big brown rabbit hop down Duke of Gloucester Street and disappear between two buildings. That was no ordinary rabbit, she thought. That was what's-his-name's rabbit, and it was on the loose, looking for clothes to eat. She followed it into the little garden beside the bakery, becoming more furious with each step. Obviously, Patrick Hunter was an irresponsible pet parent, not caring if his rabbit got lost or run over by an oxcart or starved to death. "Poor orphan bunny," she said. She hefted the huge rabbit into her arms and grunted. Okay, so chances of its starving to death were slim. There was still the oxcart to worry about. Martha Greenwald and Betsy Markham, fellow visitors' aides, peeked into the garden and waved at Megan.

"I see you've got Dr. Hunter's rabbit," Martha said.

"Doctor Hunter?" Megan repeated.

"He's just moved into town. A pediatrician, fresh out of residency and cute as a button."

Megan pressed her lips together. The guy with the ratty sneakers and leather jacket was a pediatrician? He must have gotten his diploma from the Acme School of Medical Make-Believe. The man was clearly loony.

"He should take better care of his rabbit."

"Dr. Hunter's a little disorganized," Martha said. "He's not all settled in yet."

Betsy petted the rabbit. "Don't you think it looks like Dr. Hunter? They both have such big brown eyes."

Megan nodded. "Everyone seems to know Dr. Hunter."

"He's taken over old Dr. Boyer's practice. Dr. Boyer retired last month and moved to Florida," Martha said, smoothing out the wrinkles in her apron. "My daughter took her little Larissa to Dr. Hunter last week, and she said he was wonderful."

"Anyone know where this wonderful person lives?" Megan asked, shifting the weight of the rabbit to her hip.

"Nicholson Street," Betsy said. "I returned his rabbit two days ago. He's living in the little white cottage across from the cabinetmaker."

Megan set her chin at a determined angle and marched off to do battle with Patrick Hunter. She didn't care if he was Pediatrician of the Month; he had no business fathering a rabbit if he didn't intend to take care of it. Rabbits weren't exactly brilliant. This one probably had a brain the size of a walnut. What were its chances against hordes of tourists and overzealous gardeners? Remember the tragedy of Peter Rabbit's father?

"Don't worry," she told the bunny, "That's not going to happen to you. I'm going to give that Patrick Hunter a piece of my mind."

By the time she reached the Hunter cottage Megan was sweating profusely and had resorted to bundling the enormous rabbit in her cape and slinging it over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Lord, she thought, what did he feed this thing, rocks? She stopped at Hunter's front stoop to catch her breath and to reassemble herself and the rabbit into a more dignified appearance.

Before she had the opportunity to unwrap the animal, Patrick Hunter flung his front door open and grinned down at her.

"I saw you stomp up my stairs. Is this a social call?"

She swung her cape off her shoulder and into Pat's outstretched arms. "I'm returning your rabbit."

He shook his head at the lumpy black bundle.

"I see you've been feeding him again." Her eyes widened at the sight of a twitching nose and big bunny teeth protruding through a ragged hole in her cape.

"Oh, no! Oh, darn!" She glared at Patrick Hunter. "This is all your fault. You should be ashamed of yourself for not taking better care of this rabbit. You don't deserve to have a rabbit. If I had my way I'd have you put in the stockade. What if this sweet thing got lost, or rabbitknapped, or run over?"

Pat took a step backward. Boy, she was really steamed, he thought. He wanted to invite her in for tea, or lust, or something, but he was afraid she might start breaking things...like his nose.

She sniffed the air. "I smell something burning."

"My applesauce!" He practically flung the rabbit at her, and ran back into his house. Megan followed at a distance, closing the door behind her. The cottage, a white clapboard Cape Cod with a gray shake roof and black shutters, was very small. The downstairs consisted of one room, dominated by a walk-in red brick fireplace. Part of the room had been converted into a country kitchen. She rolled her eyes at the language Pat was aiming at the pot on the stove.

"Something go wrong?" she asked.

Pat slouched against the stove with a large, dripping spoon in his hand. "I suppose these things happen."

"Hmmm," she said, "I wouldn't know. I haven't gotten around to learning how to cook. I can toast bread and boil water and defrost most anything, but I can't actually cook." She guessed Patrick Hunter couldn't cook either. A large stainless-steel pot of glop bubbled ominously on the stove, sporadically spewing its contents over the side and onto the floor.

A square wood table sat in the middle of the kitchen area. It was cluttered with sacks of flour and corn meal, a jar of molasses, colonial-style cones of sugar, and a wicker basket filled with sweet potatoes, baking potatoes, and turnips. Several pumpkins sat on the floor beside the table. The counters held jugs of cider, bunches of dried herbs, and loaves of bakery bread. Megan set the rabbit on the floor and motioned to the food.

"Mrs. Hunter likes to cook?"

"No Mrs. Hunter. Just me... and Tibbles." He peered into the pot. "Do you think it's done?"

"What is it?"

"Applesauce," he said, sounding insulted.

"What are those big brown lumps?" "I think that's the part that got a little burned."

Megan wasn't much of a cook, but she'd never made anything that looked as bad as Patrick Hunter's applesauce. She wondered if he misplaced babies at the hospital and melted his rubber gloves in the autoclave. They both turned when the front door swung open and a young girl timidly entered the room. She wore blue jeans and a denim jacket, and she held a well-swaddled baby in one arm and a brown paper shopping bag in the other.

"I knocked, but nobody heard me," she said. "I couldn't wait any longer. I have to go."

Tears clung to her lower lashes and straggled down her cheeks. "I have to go, and I can't take the baby, and I didn't know what to do... and then I thought of you. I knew you'd take good care of him for me. You and Mrs. Hunter."

She deposited the baby in Megan's arms. "I'm real sorry I'm in such a rush, but if I don't go now I'll miss my ride. I'll be back as soon as I can. Promise. It won't be any more than two weeks."

She kissed the baby, scrubbed at the tears on her cheeks, and ran out the door.

The baby looked up at Megan and started howling.

Megan jiggled the baby. "This kid's loud. How do I get it to stop?"

Pat stood motionless, the spoon still in his hand. "Did she say she was leaving the baby with us? Oh, hell!"

He ran out to the sidewalk, looked up and down, jogged half a block down the street, but he couldn't find the girl. He returned to the house and stared in astonishment at Megan, crying with the baby.

"Good Lord, what's the matter?"

"I can't get it to stop crying. Just look at the poor little thing. It's all red."

He took the child from her and unwrapped it, slung the baby under his arm, and went back to stirring his applesauce. "That was Tilly Coogan," he said. "And this is Tim. One of my very first patients." "Are you related?"

"Nope."

"Are you... um, friends?"

"Nope."

"Why did she give you her baby?" Pat put a lid on the pot of applesauce and whistled "Taps."

"I guess she thought I'd take good care of him."

"You? The man who burns his applesauce and neglects his rabbit?"

"Yup. I'm a little disorganized, but I'm lovable."

It was true, Megan had to admit, he was lovable. She could hardly keep from squeezing him. She guessed he must stand about six feet, but he didn't look that tall.

He had the wide shoulders, slim hips, and hard-muscled arms of an athlete, yet he didn't look like a jock. He looked average. The casually sexy, slightly sloppy version of the boy next door, wearing battered sneakers and threadbare jeans and a gray sweat shirt with the sleeves cut short. And he looked great. He could probably wear his cannibalized sweat shirt to a black-tie dinner and pull it off. Still, pediatrician or not, she wouldn't trust him with a baby.

"What about Tim's father?" she asked.

"No father. Tilly Coogan hasn't had an easy time of it. She's an eighteen-year-old unemployed waitress living in an efficiency apartment over a garage, and I suspect she's been evicted."

He rummaged through the paper bag the girl had left and extracted a small pile of freshly laundered, carefully folded baby clothes, two clean baby bottles, and several disposable diapers.

"Looks like we have all the essentials here. I'm going to the office to get Timmy's file, and see if I can track down Tilly. You two guys stay here in case she has a change of heart and comes back."

"You're leaving me here? With the baby?" Megan knew less about babies than she did about cooking. Babies were scary. They cried and drooled and did embarrassing things in their diapers. How had this happened to her?

Pat gently set the baby on the kitchen floor, shrugged into his leather jacket, and grinned at her.

"It isn't as if I'm locking you in the house with Godzilla. You and Tim will get along fine. If he cries just change his diaper or give him a slug of milk. He can't walk yet, but he can crawl. Maybe you should put Tibbles in the outdoor hutch before the Bruiser, here, grabs a hunk of bunny fur."

Megan gave him a dazed look and nodded.

"You won't be gone long, will you?"

"What a wench. We hardly know each other, and already you can't get enough of me. Love at first sight, huh?"

He tweaked her freckled nose and smiled as he closed the front door. She had a terrible temper, he thought, couldn't cook, and she didn't know squat about babies, but damned if she didn't look good in his kitchen. All that outrageous hair and eyes the color of a stormy ocean, sort of gray-green, with curly red lashes, and there was an electricity to her. Yessir, he wouldn't mind playing doctor with Megan Murphy.

Megan touched the tip of her finger to the tip of her nose. He'd tweaked her. On the nose. It was the sort of thing someone would do to his child... or his rabbit!

Patrick Hunter was a strange person. A total enigma... She couldn't tell when he was teasing and when he was serious. He seemed altogether too casual about his responsibilities. And she didn't like being tweaked on the nose in such an offhand manner.

Two hours later Megan was smiling at the little boy sleeping in her arms and wondering why it had taken her so long to discover babies. They were terrific. Timmy was especially terrific-even if he had howled for ages. He had soft blond curls, big blue eyes, and blond eyelashes. His chubby cheeks were flushed in sleep, his pink bow mouth slightly pouted, and his dimpled hand was resting against her breast. She'd pulled the Boston rocker directly in front of the huge brick fireplace, built a blazing inferno, and rocked the child to sleep. The fire had burned itself down to glowing embers, and her arms were stiff from holding the little boy, but she couldn't bring herself to disturb him.

The moment Pat opened the door and saw Megan, he knew he was a goner. Everything about her seemed softened. The flame-red hair was now burnished copper, the ivory skin more golden. She wore a black vest that laced down the front and the scoop-necked, shirred white blouse of a colonial working girl. The costume enhanced the elegant slope of her neck and shoulders and the luscious swell of her breasts.

He'd liked the way she looked in his kitchen, but he was overwhelmed by the sight of her in his rocking chair. She was the most provocative creature he'd ever encountered. Patrick, he warned himself, she's not the sort to mess with. This was a woman with strong convictions, intense emotions, and morals. Dammit. She had "hands off" written all over her. He walked over to her and pushed a long, silky strand of hair behind her ear. He wanted to continue touching her until his hands had memorized every square inch of satiny skin. She looked at him drowsily.

"I think my arm is dead."

"Your arm?" he said thickly.

"From holding the baby. I can't feel my fingers any more."

Pat dragged himself back to reality. Here he was, ready to do the caveman thing and drag her off to bed, and she was pinned to the chair by a twenty-two-pound baby. He was losing it. His elevator wasn't going all the way to the top these days. Residency had been too long. He was suffering from social deprivation. He carefully took the baby from her and laid him down on the plump two-cushion couch that served as a room divider.

Megan stood and stretched, rubbing life back into her arm.

"Did you find Tilly?"

"No. Her apartment was locked, and she didn't list any relatives on her medical history. I've talked to her neighbors, been to the train station, the bus station, called the airport. She's vanished."

Pat set a paper bag on the floor by the fireplace. "I brought us some burgers." He stoked the embers and added an armful of logs while Megan arranged the fries and shakes and cheeseburgers on the huge brick hearth.

"I can't believe she did this," he said. "She seemed like such a nice kid, and I know she loves this baby."

Megan sat Indian fashion on a red braid rug and took a bite of her cheeseburger. "She must have been desperate."

"No one should ever be that desperate," he said angrily. "This kid is going to become a ward of the state. What the hell was she thinking?"

Megan swallowed, but the cheeseburger felt stuck in her throat. "What do you mean, he'll become a ward of the state? Tilly said she'd only be gone a couple of weeks."

"I can't keep this child. I have to turn him over to the authorities."

"Why? Why?"

Oh, boy, Pat thought. He'd seen that look before. It happened shortly after childbirth. As a pediatrician he had a healthy respect for the protective instincts accompanying motherhood, and after two hours of exposure to Timmy Coogan, Megan had obviously caught adoptive hormonal maternalitis. He suspected his chances of prying the kid away from her were zip. He chewed his French fries while he weighed his options.

"He's just a baby, for goodness' sake," she argued. "It isn't as if we found him sleeping in a dumpster. Tilly asked us to take care of him for a little while."

"Us?"

"You. You have to take care of him." He lounged back on one elbow. "She thought we were married."

Megan felt the blush rise up her neck. The tone of his voice made her uncomfortable. It was a bedroom voice, velvet-edged and suggestive. She slurped her chocolate milk shake and wondered what she was getting into. Patrick Hunter looked like the wolf about to eat the gingerbread man.

"Forget it," she said. "This is one gingerbread man who's going to make it to old age."

"You want to run that by me again?" She stuffed her empty wrappers into the bag.

"No. It would be embarrassing. I'm going home."

He followed her to the kitchen. "Hold on. You can't leave me alone with the baby."

"Sure, I can."

"I'll turn him over to the state."

"You wouldn't!"

"I have no choice. I work all day. What would I do with him?"

"You could get a baby-sitter." Gotcha, Pat thought. He'd gotten her back in his kitchen. Back in his rocking chair. And who knew where they'd go from the rocking chair?

"Okay. I'll let you baby-sit, but only if you agree to have supper with us every night. I think it's important for a family to be together at the dinner table."

Megan smiled triumphantly and wrapped her cape around her shoulders.

"Deal!" She whisked out the front door and headed for her car, parked by Merchants Square. She'd walked less than a block when she stopped short and gasped. Patrick Hunter had manipulated her! That no-good, irresistible skunk had wheedled her into taking care of the baby!

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