



## Heartbreak Hotel

Paris groaned and forced one eye open by an act of sheer redheaded willpower. Only one eye opened because the other one was stuck shut with a false eyelash. It was hard enough opening the one, because she'd really, really had too much to drink last night, and it hurt to move her eyelids. She didn't want to try moving the other parts of her body.

What a crappy, stupid way to start the second day of being thirty. Her brain felt like it had cotton balls glue-gunned to the inside of her skull. Come to think of it, the inside of her mouth felt the same way.

A horrid light pierced through a six-inch gap in the hotel curtains. She saw the distorted outline of the Eiffel Tower in the distance. She knew damn well she wasn't in France; she was in Las Vegas. A fuzzy sort of Vegas at the moment. What *had* she done last night?

A deep and extreme need arose in her. She needed coffee. Java. Mud. Hot and thick. Right now. For a minute she wondered if room service might just this

once read her mind so she wouldn't have to move any more of her body until a nice big cup of hot coffee was within reach.

The horrid light from the window kept glinting into her open eye. Actually it was glinting off something else in the room, causing a sort of disco-ball effect, which only made things worse. Paris wondered if she'd been so stupid as to wear that red sequined dress last night. Sequins made anyone look fat – and that dress had practically been sprayed on, like Ponytail Barbie's Moonlight Serenade dress. She should throw it out, but sometimes a girl needs to put on red sequins – like maybe on her thirtieth birthday.

She blinked at the glittering disco light, and her sight focused on a white jacket hanging on the hotel desk chair close by. What the hell had she bought now? She raised her head an inch off the pillow and moved her hand up to the stuck-together eye, pulling at the false eyelash. All of that was extremely painful, and her need for coffee increased tenfold. She groaned. She sat up partway and flopped her head forward, a curtain of her own red hair blocking the view. Paris lifted her head slowly and parted the hair curtain, but something got stuck in her long curls. She yanked and freed her hand and looked down to see a very large, square-cut diamond ring on her left hand. When did she buy that?

Her two eyes refocused across the room to that white thing on the chair. It was an Elvis-style jacket with a big-ass collar and broad shoulders, and it was dancing in the sunlight. Her eyes moved to the floor below. There sat one pair of men's white cowboy boots, complete with silver cording and silver studs to match.

What the hell *had* she done this time?

‘Good morning, Mrs Pruitt.’

Paris moved her head painfully, quickly, to her right. She sucked in a quick, searing breath and let out an involuntary, long, loud scream, clutching the sheets against her naked breasts and scrabbling herself to the far edge of the bed.

Beside her in the king-size bed was The King himself. Elvis incarnate. His sexy Elvis mouth was smiling at her. He was buck-naked, his head propped on his elbow, a hunk of his wavy black hair curled down on his forehead.

And speaking of hunks, at least he was a hunk a hunka burning love Elvis – the early years, instead of a hunka big ol’ later Elvis.

‘Who the hell are *you*?’ Paris croaked. Her voice was still asleep. She wished she were too. She knew full well she’d gotten herself into this mess, but she needed some facts, *fast*.

‘Now, darlin’, those aren’t the words a man wants to hear from his wife the morning after their wedding.’

‘Wedding? *What* wedding?’ Paris screeched. She looked down at that big-ass ring on her left ring finger again and screamed out loud – again.

‘Let me order up some breakfast for you, dear. A big ol’ pot of coffee will help you remember.’

‘Don’t call me dear. I’ll take that coffee, though.’

*Hunka Love* got out of bed and rose to his full six-foot-four-inch naked glory. Paris actually got hot staring at him. She felt a flush of heat run up her neck and into her face.

‘Well, at least you remember the package, if not the name. I guess that’s a good start. My, oh, my, you are a

mess, woman. There's an eyelash on your right breast, you know.'

She looked down at her exposed right breast vaguely, still lost in a lustful thought. He leaned back over the bed and reached for her. She flinched with surprise.

'Hold still now, this won't hurt a bit.' His eyes were deep chocolate brown – almost black – and he stared into her eyes as he peeled the offending eyelash off the top of her breast and handed it to her. 'There now, you just sit tight. I'll ring up some grub.'

*Grub?* There was no way she'd actually married this cowboy Elvis dude, drunk or not. But she had to admit that she could see clearly why she'd seduced his gorgeous behind into her bed. As he walked away and gave her a terrific view of that behind, she had some scattered memories of unzipping that white Elvis jacket off his incredible body.

It dawned on her that since her birthday had been 31 March, this was April Fool's Day. Someone must have put this guy up to this. What a grand joke, really. It sort of reeked of Anton's style.

It was actually a shame she didn't remember more. Maybe she'd just have to ask him to recreate the fictional wedding night for her. Paris giggled to herself and pulled the sheet all the way off the bed, wrapping it around her like a toga. She just had to brush her teeth this instant. But handsome boy went in the bathroom ahead of her, so she'd just have to wait.

It didn't take long, and when he came out of the restroom, he stood naked by the desk, talking on the phone. He seemed so comfortable in his nakedness.

‘Yes please, ma’am, that’s Mr and Mrs Pruitt in the honeymoon suite.’

*Honeymoon, my ass.* She was going to have to set him straight, right after she had her coffee, and maybe some Elvis a.k.a. Mr Pruitt for dessert . . . Yum.

She ran her hand down his tan, muscular back as she rustled by him wrapped in her sheet. He twisted round her way to smile at her before he set the phone down. He was obviously happy to see her; a glance downward confirmed that. Oh, yeah, she’d already been a bad girl, so she might as well be bad again. Then she’d explain to Mr Pruitt that the wedding had surely been a fake and that she had a plane to catch back to New York, and Thank You, Thank You Very Much.

Turner set down the phone and watched his new wife saunter into the bathroom, humming. He had always wanted to see Paris James happy at least once in her life, and he was damn glad it had been him who’d put that smile on her pouty lips, but he felt like he’d been hit by a freight train, waking up next to her this morning. What had happened? He steadied himself on the wall and let the shock wave run through him.

How the heck she’d ended up in his chapel in Las Vegas was something he’d wonder about for the rest of his life. There he’d been, belting out ‘How Great Thou Art’ for the midnight service, when suddenly he’d looked down to see Paris James in a red sequin dress, staring up at him.

She’d been like a vision: same crazy red hair, same beautiful, flashing green eyes. Granted, she’d had a champagne bottle in one hand and had been swigging

straight out of it every few minutes. Also, it had been slightly indelicate of her to catcall at him to ‘Take it off, preacher boy! Take it all off!’ But he’d thrown her his silk scarf just the same.

Turner pulled on his tighy-whities and his white double-knit Elvis pants. He wished he’d had the foresight to stop at his place and grab a change of clothes. His shirt was still in good shape – he’d hung it on the chair under his coat. He slid the shirt on and buttoned it up. He felt for his keys and wallet. Nothing. He’d probably done what he always did. He opened the hotel dresser top drawer and saw his wallet and keys, plus some papers. On closer examination, he realized it was the marriage certificate, a bad photograph, and a coupon for ten bucks’ worth of chips at The Dunes.

When Turner had seen Paris last night, he’d known it was fate. But marrying? How had that happened? He must have lost his mind, because what else could explain it? She’d seen him again, remembered him, and convinced him to make her his wife in one night. He turned to the dresser mirror to adjust his collar and saw a shocked, hardly-slept-at-all face looking back at him.

What the hell was he going to do now? He, levelheaded Turner, had done the most impulsive, crazy thing he’d ever done in his life last night. He just wasn’t a drinker, and the last time he’d had that much champagne had been . . . never.

What a night. Truly, all his fantasies of her from the past paled in comparison to holding her in his arms and making love to her all night long. She was his completely. They’d taken their vows and consummated their marriage, and well, dang it, he was going to have to deal

with it. There were some details to work out for sure. He didn't want to hurt her.

Turner fussed with his collar. He wasn't real clear on everything, except how he'd declared he couldn't just have sex with her unless they were married. Obviously, that problem was solved. It was all pretty fuzzy after a certain point, but he started to remember what Paris had said to convince him to climb into her bed. She'd declared her modeling days were over. That at thirty she'd decided to quit and settle down, get married, and raise a family and that he was the guy for her. He'd been swept away in her birthday bash and had ended up with a wedding night. Kind of a combination special.

Room service knocked at the door and Turner went to answer it. A uniformed man smiled and rolled a cart in the door as Turner held it for him. He proceeded to set up a nice breakfast on the hotel room table, complete with a red rose. Turner reached in his jacket pocket and paid the man a generous tip.

'Thank you, Reverend.' The server gave a nod and rolled his cart back toward the door. But Paris was blocking the way, having just emerged from the bathroom, still wrapped in a sheet. Her eyes were as wide as a green river and she was staring right at him, clutching the doorjamb for support. Very melodramatic of Mrs Pruitt, Turner thought to himself, although he recalled he'd had to brace himself on the wall just now, too.

'Reverend? *Reverend?*' Her voice went up a notch.

'S'cuse me, ma'am,' the uniformed man said. He looked at her like she was nuts, shook his head, and pushed on out the door.

Turner cocked his head at his wife and smiled. 'I see

we've both forgotten more than a few details about last night. Come and have some coffee. We'll talk.'

'I – I wasn't expecting you to be a reverend. Listen . . . um . . . I have this habit of being a very naughty girl sometimes. I guess I really stretched myself last night, seducing a minister and all. I feel sort of . . . bad.' Paris had been inching toward the table, staring at the coffee. At least he'd figured out how to make her slow down. 'So you aren't someone's April Fool's joke on me, are you? Did someone put you up to this?'

'No, I'm not an April Fool's joke. I swear. Sit down and join me, won't you?' Turner was polite, but insistent. He could see Paris needed a refresher course straight off the bat. She seemed to have forgotten more than he had.

Paris sat. He reached in the hotel dresser drawer and pulled out the papers. He couldn't believe she didn't remember him from high school. Could he have changed that much?

He recalled that he hadn't actually told her his first name since she'd woken up. He smiled to himself and wondered how long it would take her to remember him. She was still just staring at him and his clerical collar. Perhaps the light was starting to go on. He set the photo down in front of her but kept the certificate in his hand. Then he poured them both a cup of coffee and sat down across from her.

She picked up the coffee with two hands and took a big slurpy sip, her green eyes never leaving his face. Turner felt his mouth turn up into a smile. She was still the girl he'd known thirteen years ago. Still the same Paris.

Paris finally picked up the photograph of the two of them at the altar in front of . . . she guessed it right . . . *another* Elvis – but the heavier, fat, sideburn-years Elvis. They were kissing – she and Reverend Pruitt, that is. She had a fake rose bouquet and, amazingly enough, was wearing a wedding dress. A white satin Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* kind of gown, with a little veil perched on her head.

‘Now this just proves it’s not real, buddy,’ she said as she pointed at the photograph. ‘I would never wear white satin to my real wedding. I look like a cow. Look at this picture. Look at my hips, for Christ’s sake. I look like two-ton Tessie. Oh, sorry about that Christ’s sake thing.’

‘I forgive you,’ he said. He smiled at her, stirred some milk into his coffee, then set the spoon down on his saucer.

‘Ha-ha.’

‘You rented the dress. That’s my own wedding chapel. It’s called the Graceland Chapel. That’s a friend of mine doing the ceremony. Let’s eat. This breakfast looks great.’ Turner lifted the silver covers off each of their plates and set them aside.

‘I rented a wedding dress and got married by an Elvis? That’s just too surreal.’ Paris felt sick. She was too hungover to eat eggs. Turner, on the other hand, put enough pepper on his eggs to hide their color, added Tabasco sauce, then dove into his breakfast with gusto. Yuk.

She picked up a piece of toast and nibbled. As she nibbled and sipped coffee, dipped toast in her coffee and sipped more, it started to occur to her that preacher man here was less likely than most to lie about the

authenticity of their marriage. Paris slowed her nibbling and sipping down to stop-action and stared at the man across the table from her with his clerical collar and Elvis pants. He seemed so familiar.

Oh my God. *Could* she have married him?

‘Paris, we’ve got a great deal to talk about,’ Turner said. He pointed at her with his fork. ‘Even though we’ve known each other a while, we did rush into this marriage, and now we’ll have to catch up with ourselves. We need to decide what to do about it. I have to tell you that despite the fact that we acted rashly, I consider marriage a sacred vow. After all, I own a wedding chapel in Vegas. If someone like me doesn’t consider it sacred, who will?’ Turner laughed. He went back to eating his breakfast.

Paris’s stomach screwed up into a square knot. This guy was talking crazy. ‘Why did you marry me?’ she asked.

‘Well, now, Mrs Pruitt, you finally said yes. Besides, I couldn’t very well take you to bed without a proper wedding ceremony. I don’t believe in premarital sex.’

‘Oh my God, don’t tell me you were a virgin.’

‘Okay, I won’t tell you that.’

‘No way. I do have *some* memories of last night, vague as they are.’ She did. They were very vague, but they involved massage oil and something about that large tub in the honeymoon suite bathroom.

‘I wasn’t always a reverend.’

‘Well, it shows. Now, look. I’m really sorry about accidentally marrying you. I must have seriously tied one on last night. I swear I’ll never touch the stuff again. But we can’t be making any plans for a future, for heaven’s

sake.’ Paris looked at him hard, then chugged down the rest of her coffee and set the cup down with a clunk on the saucer. ‘I have a plane to catch back to New York. I have a life. You were undoubtedly a wonderful lover, and I’d even like to have another go at it, but I have a horrible headache, and you’ll just have to tear up that fake marriage paper and get on with your life, Mr Pruitt. In this case, what happened in Vegas is definitely going to stay in Vegas,’ she snapped.

Turner Pruitt looked at her with his deep brown eyes in a sort of patient, holier-than-thou manner that really irritated the hell out of her. He went back to eating the last bite of his breakfast, which irritated her even more.

‘Tearing up the paper doesn’t change the fact that we are man and wife, Paris,’ Turner said between bites.

‘Listen up, Elvis, I don’t even know you. I don’t care what that paper says; I am not your wife. I’m going back to New York, and I suggest you get a grip on that fact. As a matter of fact, I’d like you to put on your blue suede shoes and hit the road, buddy.’ Paris crossed her arms and let her one nasty eyebrow flare up. Her sheet slipped, so she readjusted the toga fold and recrossed her arms.

She really didn’t remember him, or the wedding. Amazing. Turner sat up and looked at her pretty, pissed-off face across the breakfast table.

‘Cowboy boots.’

‘Whatever!’

‘Paris James, I’m surprised at you. Or should I call you *Patricia Jamison*?’ He picked up his bacon and chewed on it, waiting to see how she’d react.

She reacted all right. She went pale, and her hand went up to her mouth in shock. Her green eyes got wider.

‘What did you say?’

‘You heard me. As a matter of fact, it was me who renamed you Paris. We’ll always have *Paris*, remember? My Humphrey Bogart imitation and your Ingrid Bergman farewell? Here, maybe this will help.’ He handed her the marriage certificate he’d kept on his side of the table.

She looked down at the marriage certificate. Yep, that was her scrawled signature, obviously written under extreme champagne exposure. And his – *Turner Pruitt* – a clear, bold signature. Yep, there were witnesses, too. Turner Pruitt – she used to know a guy named that . . . long ago. But this couldn’t be him, could it? She glanced up at him, then back at the paper. She felt herself freaking out.

So what. So what if she’d signed this. This was Las Vegas. They’d been married by another Elvis impersonating preacher. There were probably a dozen of them on this end of town alone. That didn’t make it *legal*. Plus it was still April first, after all. This had to be a joke. He couldn’t be the same Turner Pruitt. But how would he know her real name?

‘*Turner?*’

‘Lightbulb going on? Sister Agnes’s poetry class? My senior year at St Mary’s? Paris, how could you forget?’ Turner finished his bacon and drank down the last of his coffee. She couldn’t believe he could stay so calm. She felt electrified. ‘Oh my gawd. I can’t believe it. *My* Turner Pruitt?’

‘In the flesh.’

‘You look *so* different. It can’t be you. I would have known. You . . . you were just a scrawny boy. Now you’re a . . .’

‘Man?’

‘It’s really you?’

‘It is.’

Paris leaned back in her chair and studied Turner. She began to see the essence of the boy in the face of the man.

‘Oh God, Turner, it is you. How could I not remember this? You say I did know you last night?’

‘You did.’

At that moment Paris James decided that she would never take a drink again in her life. She’d obviously been out of control if she couldn’t remember anything but the sex.

She paused a long time, reeling back to high school, a place she didn’t visit in her mind often. She and Turner Pruitt at seventeen and eighteen years old. It all came back quickly. Turner’s parents had put him in the only boarding school in the Nevada area, where his elderly aunt lived. His aunt had passed away right before he’d graduated. How could she dredge up old stuff like that and not remember her own wedding?

‘What are you doing in Las Vegas? I thought you were going back to the Cook Islands to rejoin your parents’ mission?’

‘I did. I went back, remember? Then I decided to go to college. I’d gotten a taste of life on the mainland that year I spent here. Besides, I figured out there are lots more sinners in Las Vegas than on the Cook Islands, by far.’

‘That’s for sure.’ Paris laughed. ‘Where did you go to college?’

‘Stanford University, then Denver Seminary.’

‘Woo-hoo, Mr Intellectual. You always were a brain.’

‘So were you.’

‘Get real, I wouldn’t have passed that class if you hadn’t helped me.’

‘And you? I’ve seen your face on a dozen magazines over the years.’

‘Oh, I traveled all over and just did the modeling thing. It’s not as easy as it looks, but the money has been great.’

‘Last night you said you were going to retire.’

‘I did? Did I tell you what I would do for a living after that?’

‘No, you were too busy kissing me. But you did remember me a little more clearly last night.’

‘I did?’

‘Enough to say I do.’ Turner pushed the breakfast things aside and reached for her hand. ‘Paris, I know you. The real you. I was in love with you once. I think our marriage, our coming together after all these years was not an accident. I am willing to make this work. I know you live in New York, but we can live anywhere in the country. I could dust off my credentials and go into private practice. I have a clinical psychology degree.’

‘What about your ministry?’ Paris’s hand felt jumpy under his.

‘That’s my calling, but I can counsel as a minister without being affiliated with a particular church. As I said, I do own a little wedding chapel here in town, but I have options. I can sell it, or just manage it from

anywhere. I've always been sort of a roving minister. I can rove wherever I like. Sometimes life changes.'

'How did you end up doing this Elvis gig? A nice missionary kid like you?' Paris asked.

'It was a fluke. I did some professional church singing in the area, then a friend of mine had cancer, and I took his place in the Graceland chapel to help him out. I could see that I was really helping the people that came in to see me. Unfortunately, my friend died. He left the chapel in my hands, and I took over as the new owner, but like I said, life changes. I can relocate and rearrange things.'

This was just plain insane. At least Paris felt better that she knew Turner. That it was really *her* Turner, from long ago. That relieved her of thinking she'd just up and married some stray Elvis in the middle of the night. They'd been best pals their senior year, both boarding at St Mary's, each for their own reasons. It seemed like a million years ago. And here Turner's family was still in the Cook Islands. Her family – that wasn't even worth thinking about right now.

'It was swell of your folks to let you come to the States for your senior year. I'm glad I got to provide you with that true teenage experience that you'd missed out on, having that sheltered childhood in paradise, like you did.' She smiled, remembering what hell they'd raised. 'Like howling at the moon out in the desert, drunk on beer.'

'You left Charles Barnes out there broken-hearted. I went back for him later, you know.'

'He deserved it! He didn't really love me anyhow. He loved Sheila Broach. I can't believe you rescued him. You should have let the coyotes have him.'

'A trail of broken hearts, and me picking up the pieces.'

'Turner. We have to get this marriage thing annulled. I don't have enough time to take care of that with you. I'm going to trust you to do the right thing.' Paris withdrew her hand from Turner's warm touch.

'I know you're going to find this difficult to understand, Paris, but I don't want to annul the marriage. As a matter of fact, I think it's fate we ended up together.'

Paris got up from the table. 'Fate? That's ridiculous. It was a bottle of champagne. What happened to the people I started out the night with?'

'Trail of broken hearts.'

'Very funny. Turner, I can't stay here with you. I can't be Mrs Pruitt. I have to catch my plane back to New York and get back to work. I . . . I don't want to be married.' Paris talked as she walked across the room. She looked for her suitcase and seemed very relieved to find it. She threw it on the unmade bed and unzipped it.

Turner turned in the chair to watch her. 'Yes, you do. You said you were tired of it all and wanted to settle down like your friend Marla.'

'Quite the memory on you.'

'Practically photographic.'

'I was drunk.'

'I think you said what was really in your heart.'

Paris looked around for her clothing. She gingerly picked the offending wedding dress off the floor, untangling it from the bedding. Paris carefully hung it on the chair across from Turner. He could return it for her, since she had no idea where she'd rented it.

She grabbed up clothing in her arms. 'S'cuse me, I

have to do some things in the bathroom,' she said. She just needed to be out of this room, more like it.

Turner watched Paris scurry around. She was the original runaway girl. Whenever love would get a little too close, Paris would bolt.

He drank down a full glass of water and refilled it from the metal pitcher the hotel had brought with breakfast. Darn, he was thirsty. He wasn't used to alcohol.

He might as well just sit back and watch the show, because nothing he said right now was going to make Paris stop.

It's not like he could just pick up and leave anyhow. He'd have to find someone to take his place at the chapel, and Millie would need a new roommate. It looked like he hadn't thought things through too clearly himself last night. That wasn't like him. He wondered how he could have been so impulsive. Look at the mess it had caused.

He heard the shower running. A flash of the evening before tumbled out of his short-term memory. Paris in the bathtub. It was suddenly quite clear to him why he'd jumped at the chance to marry Paris. It was a chance he would quite literally never get again in his lifetime. Something must have snapped in him – and a more primitive instinct had won out.

Her wallet was on the dresser, splayed open. Such a trusting girl. He thought of getting her address so he could keep track of her no matter what happened next, but he just couldn't bring himself to dig through her wallet.

However, her driver's license was in plain view.

Dang, she might be a model, but the DMV can make

even a beautiful woman look like a dawg. Turner laughed to himself as he looked at her DMV picture. He copied her address onto a piece of hotel stationery.

As he jotted down the numbers, he saw several pictures slipped in opposite the license. One was of a stunning blonde holding up a frilly baby girl – that must be her friend Marla she'd talked about so much last night. And one more photo. He lifted up the edge of the plastic folder a tiny bit – a very, very old picture of Paris as a child . . . with her mother. It was very seventies and Paris had braids in her hair, all dressed up for Easter Sunday in some kind of a psychedelic hot-pink and lime-green dress. Her mother had on a matching outfit. She looked so much like Paris did now. Full of life.

He heard the shower stop and stuffed the note he'd scribbled in his coat pocket. He felt suddenly guilty for prying even that much. Paris's life was so private. Even the relentless press hadn't unearthed the truth – which he knew so well.

Paris reappeared with a small suitcase, a fully done-up face, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and dressed in a white knit sleeveless wrap dress that clung to her every, lovely curve. She looked just like a wife would on a honeymoon. There was no way in hell they were done with all this. He'd married her, and he had to come to some kind of squaring of that fact. Marriage was a sacred thing. He knew that was a very old-fashioned concept in this disposable society, but he was firm in his belief. He'd let her go for now, but she was going to have to deal with this very soon.

He decided to leave her with a good memory for the next few weeks.

‘Well, Paris, I see you are ready to go.’ Turner stepped up close to her and took her in his arms. She seemed a little stunned and dropped her round suitcase with a clunk onto the floor. ‘I wanted to say a proper goodbye to my one-night wife.’ He tipped up her chin with his finger and gave her a toe-curling, remember-me-forever kiss. The future hung clouded and uncertain before them, so this kiss was going to have to last until the fog lifted. He made sure it was a good one.