



A BILLIONAIRE

Gentleman

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A BILLIONAIRE GENTLEMAN

THE HOLDEN BROTHERS 1

M. S. PARKER

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THE HOLDEN BROTHERS READING ORDER

Thank you for reading *A Billionaire Gentleman*, the first book in my new series, *The Holden Brothers*. Each book is about a different brother and can be read standalone, but I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

1. *A Billionaire Gentleman* (This book)
2. *A Billionaire Rebel* (Coming January 17)
3. *A Billionaire Dom* (Coming January 31)

ONE

JUDE – 1993

I STOOD AT THE WINDOW AND LOOKED OUT OVER HOUSTON WITHOUT REALLY seeing the city. I'd been born and raised here. Married and had a family here too. Now, at fifty-two, I was a grandfather twice over, the youngest one just a couple months old, and I wouldn't be surprised if Walter and Cheryl had at least a couple more.

A hint of a smile appeared as I thought about little Damon. The oldest, Davin, was such a serious child, especially for a toddler. Being a big brother would give him something to focus on, and I hoped, something to smile about.

I sighed as I turned away from the window and went back to my desk. Hopefully, all the hard work I'd put into Holden Enterprises would give my son and my grandsons – maybe a couple granddaughters – an easier life than I'd had. Not that my life had been financially difficult. Though I would've traded every penny to have had my parents just one day more.

My eyes dropped to the pictures on my desk. One was of my first wife, Dorcas, and our son, Walter. It'd been taken about a year before she died. The other one was of me with my current wife. Rachel and I had been married for eight years, and things had actually been really good...until a few days ago when she'd started acting crazy.

I winced at the word. I'd actually said it to her last night, and then I'd slept in the guestroom. I'd known it was the wrong thing to say the moment it'd left my mouth, but the things she'd been saying *had* been crazy.

She'd been going on and on about this woman that she thought was flirting with me at church. Some tall, skinny blonde whose name I didn't even know, and I really didn't remember talking to. I only knew she was a

tall, skinny blonde because Rachel had said so. If Rachel had told me her name, I didn't remember it.

I glanced at the clock, surprised to see that my morning was pretty much gone. I hadn't realized I'd been there that long. It wasn't the first time I'd recently gotten lost in my head. Getting older was harder on me than I'd always thought it would be. Not that I was old. I intended to be around long enough to see great-grandchildren.

Pushing away the maudlin thoughts that came with age, I turned my attention to the stack of mail sitting on the corner of my desk and reached for the envelope on top. Junk mail. I tossed it into the trash and reached for the next one.

My phone rang, and I reached for it with one hand as I used the other to toss a catalog into the wastebasket.

"Holden Enterprises, how can I help you?"

"Did I interrupt something?" Rachel's voice was harsher than it usually was, and I closed my eyes as it grated on my nerves.

"Just going through my mail. How are you doing?"

"Going through your mail? Isn't that what you have a secretary for?"

I let out a slow breath and counted to five before I spoke again. "Is something wrong, Rachel?"

"Nothing that you want to talk about." She waited a beat before adding, "What time do you plan to be home tonight? I want to get to the salon, and they couldn't get me in until six. And don't even suggest I wait. I found three new gray hairs, and I'm not having that."

I didn't like being at odds with her. We actually didn't fight much, and never like this. I'd never thought of her as the jealous type, but she'd been a little more...sensitive recently. It wasn't until right now that I made the connection, though. She was jealous because she felt like she was getting old. One of our friends had recently left his wife for a much younger woman. Since Rachel was a few years older than me, the news must've hit her harder than I'd realized.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, realizing that there was absolutely no way to tactfully address what I'd just figured out. Before I could think up the best response, my secretary, Lulu, came rushing in, her eyes wide.

"Mr. Holden, you need to come! Hurry! He's going crazy!"

"Who's that?" Rachel asked in an overly sharp voice. "Is it her?"

“It’s Lulu,” I snapped. “I have to go.”

I hung up before she could start in on me again, even though I knew I’d hear it from her tonight. But I knew Lulu, and she didn’t exaggerate. If she was that worried, I needed to go.

The noise gave me a clue to what was going on before my eyes finished processing what I was seeing. A man was beating my car with a baseball bat.

Fortunately, he saw me before I had to yell at him.

“You!” He pointed the bat at me.

Shit. “Mark, you need to go. The cops are on their way.”

I really hoped that was the truth because, if it wasn’t, things could go from bad to worse. I was in good shape for my age, but he was an angry thirty-something with a baseball bat. The odds weren’t exactly in my favor.

“I’m not going anywhere!”

His face was bright red, but he stopped a foot away and just pointed with the bat, so I decided that was a positive turn of events.

“You’re fucking my wife!” He turned around in a circle, clearly enjoying the audience. “Do you all hear that?! Jude Holden is a fucking cheater! He’s fucking my wife! My! Wife!”

“I’m not sleeping with Heidi, Mark,” I said mildly. I put my hands in my pockets so I wouldn’t be tempted to do anything stupid. The last thing I needed was a picture of me in a tabloid, hitting someone who was in the process of accusing me of having an affair with his wife.

“Right. I believe that.” He glared at me as he stalked forward. “Heidi’s always whispering on the phone, and then I see the two of you talking, and it stops when I come in the room. Don’t tell me there’s nothing going on between the two of you.”

He was literally spitting as he talked, but I didn’t step back. I needed to maintain a calm, steady presence. Too many people were watching, and I had worked too hard to build my business to let this idiot tear it down or make me look weak. Besides, often the best defense against a bully was to make them look foolish by comparison.

“Put down the bat.” The voice came from behind me.

One of the security guys. Delbert, I thought his name was. I carefully schooled my face not to show my relief. At least things wouldn’t get too far out of hand.

Mark sneered at us both, then tossed the bat to the ground. “I don’t need a bat to fuck up an old man.”

That was all the warning I got before his fist connected with my jaw.

TWO

DEKLIN – PRESENT DAY

EVEN WITH THE SUN GETTING READY TO SET, THE TEMPERATURE WAS sweltering, but that didn't mean any of the Holden family would acknowledge it by taking a dip in the Olympic-size swimming pool several yards to the right of the party pavilion where we'd gathered.

This was no picnic. This was a celebration for me graduating with my MBA, and as such, there was more drinking wine and scotch while discussing business than there was levity. We had a reputation to maintain, after all.

Of course, part of that reputation was the reason we'd been waiting around for the past hour. Dad and Davin were late. As Holden Enterprises's CEO and CFO, respectively, they rarely worked regular hours. My oldest brother, Davin, was the worse of the two. Dad, at least, took Sundays off since he still attended church every week.

My brothers and I had cut back attending services to just Christmas and Easter. Well, Davin and Damon did only those two, anyway. I still lived in the house where I'd grown up, so I had to put up with more of Dad's day-to-day complaining than my brothers did. That meant, when I was home from college, I went to church at least every few weeks, and that was enough to appease them. Now that I'd graduated, I'd be looking for a place of my own.

Finally.

I turned toward the house as I heard Damon call out to our brother. The three of us were twenty-three, twenty-six, and twenty-nine, our birthdays even in the same month – March – but Davin had always seemed much older and Damon much younger.

Me, I was the baby. Dad and Grandad both had been only children, and

my mom's sister was a nun. Literally. All that meant that my brothers and I had grown up without cousins. Which meant I always was and always would be the baby.

"Congratulations," Davin said as he held out his hand. With his golden blond hair, athletic build, and perpetual tan, he would've looked right at home on a beach, getting ready to catch some waves.

Those of us who knew him, however, knew that was about as far from my brother as it could get. The fact that he was still wearing a suit and tie even though he could've taken both off on the way over just reinforced the serious businessman image.

"Thanks." The slight nod of approval I got told me that my handshake had met the Holden family expectations, and I hoped that meant that he was finally ready for me to come work at the family business. I'd never been passionate about business – or real estate – but I was passionate about my family. And the business *was* family.

"You don't like the wine selection?" Dad gave a pointed look to the dark bottle in my hand.

I gave him a tight smile. "We didn't want to open the wine until everyone was here."

"And that meant you needed a beer while you were waiting?"

My grip on the cold glass tightened. I wondered if his problem was that I was drinking or that I was drinking beer, but I wasn't going to ask. This was a party, and I refused to ruin the occasion by getting into a debate over alcohol consumption. I was over twenty-one, and I wasn't drunk.

Besides, this was my party. I could have a beer if I wanted.

"Walter, Davin, glad you're here." Grandad saved me from having to figure out a tactful way to change the topic. "I'll let Cynthia know to have the caterers bring out the food."

I didn't have to look at Dad to know he'd stiffened as soon as his stepmother's name was mentioned. I liked Cynthia, actually. She was nice and really loved Grandad, but it was hard for Dad. He'd been fifteen when his mom died, then nineteen when Grandad married Grandma Rachel. I remembered her, and she'd been okay, but I'd liked Cynthia from moment one. The fact that she was only ten and a half years older than me kept me from seeing her as a grandmother, but she'd never tried to make us view her that way.

Dad, however, would never forgive her for being younger than him, or

Grandad for marrying her.

Family gatherings could be awkward.

“Deklin.” Grandad put his hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t you come with me. This is your party. You should be mingling.”

I was half-tempted to ask if, because it was my party, I could decide whether or not I wanted to mingle, but I knew it would be pointless to ask. All it would do was point out another way I wasn’t cut out to be part of Holden Enterprises.

I knew all too well that no one in the family thought I was cut out for any business, let alone something that had the excellent reputation this particular business had. Grandad had built it himself, using the money he’d gotten from his inheritance and his parents’ life insurance to create a billion-dollar company.

I pulled my attention back to the present as Cynthia excused herself to let the caterers know it was time to eat. While we waited, Grandad steered me to the next group over and introduced me to the people standing there. I knew them by sight and name, but I hadn’t really talked to any of them before. I’d never been the heir apparent, so there’d been no point until I’d followed through with schooling.

“So, Deklin, it looks like you’re following in the family’s footsteps like Davin, not going your own way like Damon.”

Lindberg Shreve was a big man with an even bigger presence. He’d known Grandad for years and was one of the best-known conservative judges in the area, even if Grandad didn’t always agree with his politics. They played golf together and had the occasional dinner. Every time they were at the same event, they shook hands and asked how the other was doing, even if they’d seen each other the week before at a different event.

Networking.

Grandad had technically retired eight years ago, but he was still involved, at least as much as he could without driving everyone completely crazy. Networking was one of the areas neither Dad or Davin liked, so they were more than happy to pass along that particular responsibility and focus on the more concrete aspects of the business.

“Yes, sir,” I said to Lindberg. “It’s what I’ve been working toward.”

“Were you at Texas Southern?” he asked. “My alma mater, you know.”

I shook my head, my smile tightening. “University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.”

His bushy eyebrows shot up. “You didn’t want to move there? Didn’t meet anyone who tempted you to become an East Coaster?”

To my even greater embarrassment, I flushed, my ears growing hot. I’d had a girlfriend a couple years back, but we’d broken up after eight months together. There hadn’t been anyone since. “No, sir. Never met anyone who would’ve made it worth leaving Houston.”

“Good to hear. Play the field as long as you can. Wish I still was.” He let out a loud belly laugh and then clapped me on my shoulder hard enough to make my knees threaten to buckle. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I see the good Scotch is being brought out.”

“That’s the key to Lindberg Shreve,” Grandad said. “Good Scotch and bragging about women.”

I could handle the first. The second would be an issue. I didn’t really have anything to brag about.

“This is how you handle public relations,” Grandad said, his tone even and matter-of-fact. “You find out what they like, where they go to school, all those sorts of details. It gives you something to talk about, so they don’t think that you’re only talking to them for business reasons. A lot of companies can brag about education, financial backing, that sort of thing, but what I built our business on is personal relationships.”

I’d heard this speech before. Dozens of times, in fact. Sometimes, it had been for Dad, sometimes for us kids. Davin had probably heard it more than anyone except Dad, who I was pretty sure had heard it along with his bedtime stories. Not that it’d done much good. Both Dad and Davin sucked at personal relationships. Davin could at least fake it with business contacts. Sort of.

Cynthia clapped her hands, and everyone quieted. “Jude and I would like to thank everyone for coming to help us celebrate Deklin’s college graduation. I know we’re all hungry, so we’ll save any speeches or toasts until after we eat.” She gestured toward the now-full food table before stepping out of the way.

I felt bad for her at things like this. She knew that people looked at her and Grandad and thought she was just after his money. Grandad was important enough that no one would dare say anything to her face, but there was plenty of talk behind her back. People could be real assholes.

Maybe the main reason I liked her was because, in our own ways, we were both outsiders through no faults of our own. No one took either of us

seriously. Some younger wives and youngest sons might've loved the idea that they didn't need to be responsible for anything important, but that wasn't us. All we wanted was for people to see us the way we really were, and not what people assumed we were.

"Is something wrong?" Grandad asked, frowning at me.

"No." I gave him a partial smile. "Just thinking about how different it's going to be, working with Dad and Davin, rather than going to school. It's been a long time since I haven't been on a school schedule."

"It'll be good to have you here," Grandad said. "I'm sure Walter and Davin are looking forward to working with you."

"I'm not so sure about that," I muttered. When he gave me a look, I explained, "I think they're more worried about finding something for me to do that I can't mess up."

"We all have our strengths and weaknesses, Deklin," he said. "Once you find your niche, you'll excel, just like your brothers."

I didn't mention that I had no idea what my niche would be. No need to shake Grandad's faith in me so soon.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get something to eat. I've got more people for you to meet."

Maybe *this* was actually my beginning at Holden Enterprises. I really hoped I didn't fuck it all up.

THREE

SOFI

TEARS BURNED MY EYES AS MY HANDS SLAMMED INTO THE DOOR, PUSHING IT open with enough force that, if someone had been on the other side, they would've gotten hurt. Normally, that would've made me apologize profusely, even if no one was there, but I couldn't find it in me to care right now. Even the blast of Vegas heat that hit me barely registered.

I wasn't naïve or sheltered – far from it – but this many sleazebags in a row had me doubting the entire human race. Halfway to the bus stop, I began to slow. I was already sweating, but that didn't mean I had to show up to my interview smelling as slimy as I felt. Why was it, whenever I talked to a man, I felt like I needed a thirty-minute scalding shower afterward just to get the filth off me? I'd had men staring at me since I hit puberty, and I did mean *men*, not only boys. I should've been used to it by now.

Someone on the other side of the street cat called as I ducked into the bus shelter, the shade offering me little in the way of relief from the setting sun. I plucked at the front of my blouse, cursing my decision to wear it. I'd thought it made me look older, more responsible, the way a responsible mother should look, but all it had done was ensure that not a single one of the three lawyers I'd talked to today had looked any further than my chest, as if wondering if the buttons were going to pop off and give them a show.

I brushed at my cheeks to get rid of the couple tears that had escaped, grateful that I hadn't bothered with much in the way of makeup today. I was twenty-four but had one of those faces where heavy makeup just made me look like I was a kid playing dress-up. Well, unless my asshole ex-husband had something to say about it. According to him, I looked like a whore with makeup and frumpy without it.

No, I told myself firmly. I was not going to think about him. This wasn't about revenge or getting the better of him. This was about our son. *My* son. I had to get Dallas back, but I was starting to feel like all I was really doing was repeatedly running headfirst into a brick wall.

I'd been barely nineteen when I met Mead, a college student, and then I'd gotten pregnant a few weeks before I turned twenty. Without much in the way of options, I'd dropped out and gotten married. Mead had wanted me to stay home with the baby, and I'd been happy to do it. He made the money, kept the money, and decided what to do with the money. I hadn't really let it bother me until I finally left him and realized that I literally had nothing but the clothes on my back.

My face burned with embarrassment as the series of events that had followed that decision played themselves out in my memory. I looked down, sure if anyone looked at me, they'd be able to read it all on my face. I still couldn't quite process just how badly I'd messed up my life when I'd thought all of my decisions had been smart ones.

When the bus pulled up, my stomach twisted, and it had less to do with the fact that I'd barely eaten today and more to do with the attorney ad on the side of the bus. I'd just come from his office, and the meeting had gone the same way as the other two had, but he'd been less subtle about it.

I couldn't afford anyone better, though. I'd managed to get a part-time job at a fast-food chain, and that had helped me save enough to put down a deposit on an apartment, so I could get out of the halfway house where I'd been living for the last few weeks. A place of my own had been my first priority since all of my visits with Dallas were supervised, and I wouldn't have my son visiting me there.

Now that I had a place, sparse as it was, the next thing I needed was a lawyer to fight for joint custody at the very least. But to do that, I needed a half-decent attorney and that cost money.

I sat behind the driver without looking at any of the other passengers. Chances were, most of them were decent people using city transportation like me, but even people who looked decent on the outside could be far from that inside.

Like the guy advertising on the side of this bus.

I'd wanted to slap him when he'd walked around his desk to put his hand on my shoulder and leaned down to whisper in my ear that he'd happily find an arrangement that would allow him to take on my case, pro bono. The first

lawyer I'd gone to had referred to it as "extra company." The second had used the phrase "whatever you're able to pay...or trade." This one, after calling it "an arrangement" had proceeded to give a few lewd examples before I'd shoved the chair back and practically ran from the office.

He'd been laughing as the door slammed shut behind me.

Tears threatened again, and I rolled my eyes to look up at the ceiling of the bus, blinking rapidly to keep the damn things from falling. I didn't remember where I'd learned that trick, but it'd come in handy more than once, and not just with Mead.

I took slow, deep breaths. My interview was a little over thirteen miles from the bus stop, and I needed to pull myself together before I got there. I was grateful that I had a job at all, but I needed a better one. Better as in higher pay.

I'd already accepted that I wasn't going to get much of an improvement in atmosphere. If I hadn't been terrified of losing my son forever, I might've cared about the career path I'd never get back to, but I just didn't have the energy for more than one focus at the moment.

By the time I reached my stop, I was composed enough to keep my head up as I exited the bus and headed down the sidewalk to the Diamond Star Lounge. Part club, part restaurant, it boasted 'showgirls' rather than strippers, but still wasn't the classiest of places. I didn't possess the skills to get hired as a legitimate showgirl, and I definitely didn't have the time to learn, even if I thought I probably could. They promised no nudity, though, and that was enough for me.

Since they were only hiring dancers at the moment, I didn't have the opportunity to interview for hostess, server, or bartender, but if I got this job, I could always keep an eye out for other positions as they became available. Honestly, this place might be the best for me, anyway. Not high-class enough to worry about my past or my ex, and not low class enough for my ex to use against me if he found out about it.

I kept telling myself all of this as I opened the door and walked inside. It wasn't as dark as I'd expected, but it was still early in the evening. I supposed it had its own version of dinner lighting at some point. If I was lucky, I'd find out.

"Here about the job?"

A tall guy who looked to be in his mid-forties came toward me. Dark eyes, hair that had a reddish tone to it, and a pleasant, if forgettable, face. I

would've thought he'd be the sort of person who'd be good to work with if I hadn't learned at a young age that what a person looked like didn't necessarily reflect what was on the inside.

"Is it still available?" I asked, my hold on my purse strap tightening. It was the only tell I still had, the only indicator of how my gut was churning, this need to have something to hold onto when anxiety clawed at my insides.

"It is." He held out a hand. "Sanders Flannery."

I shook his hand, appreciating that he didn't linger or take this as an opening to get more...familiar. It was completely, and surprisingly, professional. "Sofi Stafford."

"Let's sit while we talk," he said, motioning toward the bar.

A couple men were at the far end, but they didn't even look at us as we sat down, thoroughly engrossed in whatever was on the television. About two dozen people were scattered around the room, some talking to each other, some watching the dancer who'd just come on stage. The slot machines, however, were full.

"Dinner and a show starts a little later on Fridays and Saturdays," he said. "We're open every day, noon to four – that's am not p.m. Dancers' schedules rotate based on seniority. That means you pretty much don't have a say in your schedule unless it's an emergency." He gave me a pointed look. "And I'm the one who decides if it's an emergency."

I nodded, folding my hands in my lap. I didn't care when I worked as long as I worked. I'd worry about schedules and things like that when I had my little boy back.

"Some women only want a job during specific hours," he said wryly. "You're not one of those, are you?"

I shook my head this time, then reached into my purse and pulled out a sheet of paper. When I held it out, he gave me a strange look.

"My resumé."

His eyebrows shot up. "You brought a resumé to apply to be a showgirl?"

I flushed and looked down at my hands. "Yes, sir."

"Sanders, please." He skimmed the paper as he spoke. "So, no dancing experience?"

"No, but I've always been athletic and a fast learner."

"Never heard anyone refer to dancing as athletic, even though it is," Sanders said. "Is there anything not on the resumé that you would put on an application?"

Shit.

I supposed honesty was the best policy. "I'm on probation."

He looked more amused than surprised. "For what?"

"Drugs. A misdemeanor." I really hoped he wouldn't ask for more details than that. I didn't want to relive it any more often than I already did.

"We're a drug and alcohol-free workplace." The words came out automatically, as if they were part of a script.

"I'm clean," I said, hating the words even as I said them. I could tell people I didn't do drugs, that I'd never done drugs, but it wouldn't do any good. Once that little five-letter word had inserted itself into my life, no one believed that I'd never used them. The best they believed was that I wasn't using anymore.

"We don't do drug tests," he said. "But if we catch you using or it affects your work, you'll be fired."

"I understand." I really hoped the way he was talking meant I was going to get the job.

"You wear the costume we provide, and you start in the background. When I say you're ready, I'll move you to where I think you'll be best." He flipped over the paper and wrote a few things on the back. "Are you able to stay tonight to watch the routines?"

"Yes." I almost frowned at how eager I sounded. "Yes, I can."

"Good." He handed me the paper back. "If, at the end of the night, you think you know them well enough, you can start tomorrow evening."

Well, that was easier than anything had been in a long time.

I really hoped it didn't blow up in my face.

FOUR

DEKLIN

I *REALLY* NEEDED MY OWN PLACE.

It'd made sense for me not to get anything permanent either here or there while I was still in school, but I hadn't realized how claustrophobic it would feel, being home again and knowing that I didn't have a set time where I would get to leave, no safe space to escape to.

I loved my father, but living with him could be...well, it could be a bitch.

For example, on Sunday afternoons, he always wanted us to have lunch together after church, and he'd always tried to use that to get me to go to a service with him. I had a bad feeling that the longer I was here, the more he'd expect me to go along with how he did things. I didn't have a problem with him going to church. I never did.

But I didn't want to go. That wasn't how I wanted to live my life. Which meant I needed to establish myself as a responsible adult instead of a college student.

But before I could start looking for an apartment or house or whatever, I needed to be absolutely certain where I would be working.

"Is there something wrong with the tuna salad?" Dad asked, his tone telling me he'd asked once all ready.

"No, no, Dad, it's fine." I scooped up another forkful. "I was just thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

I started to shake my head but changed my mind. Maybe, if I was honest with him, I could get some answers. Every time I tried to talk to Dad or Davin about when I'd start at the company or what I'd be doing, they'd brushed it off, telling me I didn't need to worry about it yet. Telling me to

enjoy a bit of a break.

I didn't need to take a break. My brothers never had. Neither had my dad or grandad. Sure, Damon didn't have a 'regular' job, but he still worked hard. Why did everyone keep thinking I needed to be coddled? I'd never expected it or asked for it. I wanted to prove my worth. Now.

"I'm thinking about when I'll start work. What I'll do once I begin."

"Actually, I was just going to talk to you about that."

I would've thought he was lying, but Dad didn't lie. Ever. He hadn't even done the little white lie thing when we were kids. After Mom died, he'd gotten more involved in the church, stricter about following all the rules. Never abusive or anything like that, but it did make things awkward more often than not.

"Great." I smiled at him. "I'm all ears."

"Over the next few months, you're going to be working with your grandfather," he began.

Grandad? "I didn't think he came into the office anymore."

"He doesn't, really, but this isn't exactly office work. You and he will be doing some preliminary scouting of holdings in different states. He will show you what we're looking for, the types of properties we buy and sell."

I stifled my annoyance. Did he think I hadn't done my homework? That I didn't watch and listen? I might not have been in board meetings or know all the inside information, but I wasn't completely clueless either.

"We haven't decided on a specific destination or date yet," Dad continued, either oblivious to or ignoring my annoyance, "so I have something I'd like you to do while you're waiting. A special assignment."

Okay, that sounded better.

"An old family friend is moving back to Houston, and I want you to handle showing him the properties I've selected for him to look at here."

I gritted my teeth and gave myself a moment to think before I spoke. I didn't want to sound ungrateful. "So, I take this family friend to the addresses you give me, and that's it?"

"It sounds simple, but Ronall Kane isn't just a random family friend. He's important to our business too. Having him as one of our clients will only help our reputation."

I could tell he was being earnest, but it didn't matter how much he believed what he was saying. He was giving me busy work.

And I would do it. I'd show everyone that I could follow directions, and

I'd absorb everything I could possibly learn. Then, when they finally gave me something real to do, I'd show them that they should have trusted me all along.

"Sounds good, Dad. Why don't you run me through the properties so I can process it all and not sound like I'm reading someone else's descriptions."

"There's my boy."

As he started, I wondered just how much time it would take and what I would have to do to get him to start treating me like an adult, because I didn't know how well I could work with him if he kept talking to me like I was still a kid.

FIVE

SOFI

I'D STAYED UNTIL CLOSE LAST NIGHT, SIPPING WATER AND TURNING DOWN drinks as I watched one dance after the other. Every so often, Sanders had stopped by to ask if I had any questions or concerns.

At first, I'd thought he was hitting on me, but he'd never once been anything but a gentleman, and I appreciated that more than he could ever know. He'd been surprised that I'd been taking notes, which I hoped meant he'd cut me a little slack if I screwed up tonight.

My stomach clenched again, and the little I'd managed to eat threatened to make an appearance. It'd been a toss-up as to whether it'd be better for me to not eat anything and risk passing out if my blood sugar dropped too low, or if I should stick with something light and bland.

I suddenly regretted using the word "toss-up."

Instead of going in through the front door like I had yesterday, I walked around to the back where Sanders had told me to go. The alley was dingy enough that I had to squint, and the faint scent of cat urine made me wrinkle my nose, but the door itself was illuminated by a bright ring of light. That, plus the mountain of a man leaning against the wall next to it, made me feel better about coming in this way.

Sanders had explained yesterday that most of the dancers preferred to use this entrance to avoid customers trying to talk to them or hit on them when all they wanted to do was go to work and then go home. Some used it only on the off days when they didn't feel like talking to anyone when they came in to check the schedule or pick up their paychecks.

Even though Sanders claimed the girls who chatted with patrons got bigger tips, I had no intention of mingling. It might hurt my individual tips,

but it was safer than giving anyone even a hint that I'd be romantically interested. I was done with men.

"New girl?" The massive man straightened and flicked his cigarette to the ground before grinding it out with his heel. His voice was softer than I would've imagined.

"Yes," I said, holding out my ID. "Sofi Stafford."

He studied it for a moment before handing it back to me. I hoped that meant he was always careful about who he let inside. "I'm Bruce. The other guy on this door is Paulo. You'll want to have your ID for both of us for a couple days. We're usually pretty good with names and faces, but we like to be sure. If you have any drastic changes to your person, we'll want to see your ID again."

It took me a minute to realize that "drastic changes" probably referred more to plastic surgery than it did to a new haircut or dye job. The dancers here didn't strip all the way down, but from what I'd seen last night, a boob job wouldn't exactly be useless here.

At least that was one thing I didn't need to worry about. I wouldn't have any problems filling out the costumes. I'd always been what my mom had called "top-heavy," but after getting pregnant, I'd filled out even more. Mead used to say that if I'd gotten a tummy tuck after Dallas had been born, my figure would've been perfect. Fortunately, I'd seen women of all sizes and shapes on stage yesterday, so I doubted anyone would mind the few stretch marks low on my belly.

"The door takes you into a short hallway," Bruce said. "First door on the left is Sanders's office. Second and third doors are the bathrooms. First door on the right is the dressing room and backstage. Second is the main floor."

"Thank you." I smiled and hoped he couldn't see how nervous I was. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but my confidence in my ability to judge characters had been pretty decimated by how wrong I'd been about Mead. It'd be better if I didn't show any weakness.

He held the door for me, and I stepped into the club. I was fifteen minutes earlier than what Sanders had told me, not wanting to risk being late on my first day. He'd given me a schedule of what to expect tonight, and I ran through the mental list one more time. I'd only be on stage for a handful of sets tonight, and always in the background, part of a chorus, so if I made any mistakes, they'd be more easily covered.

The simplest of the routines, I didn't even need practice. That would

come tomorrow. The biggest thing I needed to learn tonight, Sanders had said, was dealing with costumes and costume changes.

Women's voices came from behind the door Bruce had said led to the dressing room and backstage. I willed myself to calm before opening the door and stepping inside. Talk dropped off as all eyes turned toward me. If I suddenly found myself naked, I could chalk this up as one of my worst nightmares and go home.

"Hi." I gave a feeble wave.

A few of the women nodded in acknowledgment before turning back to whatever they'd been doing when I'd first walked in. Others looked me over the same way a head cheerleader looked at a new girl. Well, not all head cheerleaders, but all the ones at my high school had been that way.

A few smiled, including one tall, athletically thin woman who looked like she was probably close to ten years older than me. Strawberry blonde waves, bright green eyes, and the sort of grace that came only from a true dancer, I had no doubt she was the star.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Pasha Gumenick."

"Sofi Strafford."

"Let's get you to your costumes."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I followed her. I was anxious about wearing so little, but I'd push through it. The one thing I couldn't just grit my teeth and get through was figuring out how to put on some of the outfits I'd seen last night.

"Each one of us has a section," Pasha explained. "Anytime you get a new costume, it'll be in your section. You're starting in the background of a couple of the group numbers with the less elaborate costumes."

She said "less elaborate," but I thought "less material" was probably more accurate. Three of them were literally the skimpiest of the costumes I'd seen last night. The fourth wasn't much better. Technically, they all covered the essentials, but not by much. Then there were the heels.

At five feet nine inches in flats, I wasn't a short woman, but these would put me over six feet by a couple inches. Fortunately, I had confidence in my ability to move in heels. At least enough to do the simple steps I'd be doing tonight. After that, I'd have to see.

The only positive thing I could say about these costumes was that none of them had the tall, feathered headpieces that the others did. Two had two gold circlets with shiny jewels, but those wouldn't affect my balance or how I held

my head. They'd probably be the easiest things I had to put on.

"The group numbers you're in have a couple other routines between them, so you won't have to rush to change," Pasha continued. "Piece of advice, though. Don't linger. As soon as a number is done, come here and change in a specific order. After a while, it'll be as much muscle memory as the routines themselves. If you take your time, it'll be harder to move faster."

I managed a tentative smile. "Makes sense. Thank you."

"I have a while before I'm on. Why don't you try these on, and we'll see how well they fit." She reached for one of the costumes. "Sanders is usually pretty good at sizing up dancers and hiring ones who'll fit what we have available."

How about that, I thought wryly. I'd gotten this job because the dancer whose place I'd taken was around the same build as me. Hardly a surprise once I thought about it. I mean, this wasn't exactly the sort of job that'd be impressed by my two years at the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

Not that my less-than-extensive college career would've impressed anyone.

"We leave our costumes here every night, and there's someone who'll dry-clean them. If there's any alterations that need done, just write a note and pin it to the costume. If a costume gets stained or ripped, the replacement or repair comes out of our paycheck, unless a customer is responsible for the damage. That doesn't happen often, though. Between Sanders and security, we rarely have problems.

I nodded, remembering Sanders telling me the same things. It was nice to hear it from one of the dancers, though. It meant that my gut instinct about the manager was probably right. I could trust him. Well, I could trust him when it came to the job, anyway.

"Are you going to change?" Pasha asked.

I looked around for a changing room or a screen before suddenly realizing that other women were getting in and out of costumes right where they stood, chatting as if they did this every day. Which they did. Heat flooded my face, and I hated that Pasha could see that I definitely wasn't as cool about all of this as I was trying to seem.

"Get on with it. You don't have anything different than we do." A brunette catty-cornered from where I stood sneered at me. She was pretty, about my height though thinner, but her blue-green eyes were hard, glinting with something I could only describe as malice.

“Fuck off, Alexys.” Pasha raised her middle finger without looking at the other woman. “Not everyone is used to taking off their clothes in front of other people.”

I wasn't going to let Alexys scare me off, but I still couldn't bring myself to completely strip right there, talking to Pasha while I did it. As a sort of compromise, I turned toward the wall where my costumes were hanging and gritted my teeth. I could do this.

As if sensing that I needed to feel like everyone wasn't watching me, Pasha started talking again. “Any tips from group numbers are divided between the performers, but any solo acts you do, you get all the tips. Don't let any of the girls tell you any different.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shooting Alexys a dirty look. At least I already knew who the playground bully was here. I'd avoid her as much as possible, but just like school bullies, adult ones didn't always let the prey practice avoidance. I'd dealt with them before, though, and I could do it again.

“Sanders calls us showgirls, but the term burlesque dancers is a better description. Not exactly family friendly, but too many clothes to really be strippers.” Her voice had a hint of humor.

I nodded to say I understood. My hands shook, and I didn't trust my voice to stay steady. This was all getting far too real.

“I know Sanders gave you the company lines about how there's no nudity and no sex, but you don't strike me as a naïve person, so you know there's usually a workaround at places like this. Here, it's the private dances. If someone requests us specifically, we have to do it, but if it's a general request, you can pass a guest off to someone else. Most of us don't because we get a percentage of every dance we do.”

Pasha took my shoulders and turned me toward her, fingers tucking and pulling at different parts of my body with the sort of detached movements that told me she did this a lot.

“Private dances don't include nudity,” she went on, “but guests can request it for an additional cost, but it's ultimately up to you. Technically, they're supposed to keep their hands to themselves, but unless someone is trying to force you into sex, it's a good idea to just let it go. As for 'extra' services...take them as cash for whatever the customer is willing to pay. We give the club a 'bonus' of twenty-five percent for that since it's on their time, but we don't have to claim it on taxes, that sort of thing. The club covers its

ass and keeps down turnover at the same time.”

I thanked her for the information but didn't add that I wouldn't need it. The dances I could handle, but I wasn't about to do the other stuff. That was a line I wouldn't cross. But I wasn't going to look down on anyone else who chose to do it. I knew, better than most, how life could throw one hell of a curveball and change everything.

“EXCUSE ME,” I mumbled as I rushed through the dressing room, praying I didn't turn an ankle in these shoes.

I'd done it. Routine number one in a costume that was more revealing than any bathing suit I'd ever owned. I'd kept my head up and smiled until past the point where my cheeks ached. It'd been a relief to realize that the stage lights kept me from actually seeing the audience, and the music had drowned out all but the loudest customers. I'd almost been able to pretend we were just rehearsing.

The steps had been as simple as they'd seemed, but I hadn't realized how hard it would be to stay in sync with a group of other women. I'd managed it, though, and since no one had yelled at me, I was going to take it as a win.

None of that, however, kept me from running into the performer bathroom to throw up.

I didn't have much to lose, but it still felt horrible. Once I was sure I was done, I came out to find everyone's eyes on me. They didn't even try to pretend they weren't looking. In their eyes, I saw everything from sympathy to downright disdain.

“Your nerves will ease up after a while,” Pasha said. “Best cure for stage fright is to push through.”

I didn't tell her that it wasn't exactly stage fright that had made me puke. Sure, the idea of public speaking or performing in the theater made me nauseous, but I'd managed to get through both of those in high school. This was about sex, and I'd never been comfortable with that.

“She's wrong,” Alexys said as she tossed her sequined top onto a nearby chair. She turned toward me, not seeming to care that she was now wearing only a tiny thong. “The best cure is to quit. If you can't handle that, you're going to freak out when you actually have to do something difficult.”

Surprisingly, it was Alexys's words that had me squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin. "You have no idea what I can handle. *This* isn't even a blip on my radar."

I stalked back to my area, gritting my teeth at the whispers behind me. I didn't try to hear what they were saying because none of it mattered. I'd suffer any amount of embarrassment or nerves, or whatever came my way if it meant I got my son back. He was worth whatever the cost was to me.

SIX

DEKLIN

I'D GOTTEN THE ASSIGNMENT ON SATURDAY, AND NOW IT WAS THURSDAY AND finally time to get started.

The Kanes had gotten in yesterday, but they hadn't wanted me to meet them at the airport. Dad had been a little annoyed at that, but I figured they probably just wanted a day to acclimate to being back in Houston again. They'd asked for a slow start today too, so I'd spent the morning going over the property list with Dad.

Again.

Like I didn't have the ability to read the files he'd given me on Monday.

How would I ever convince them that I could be trusted with a normal workload if no one would give me the chance to show what I could do? It was bad enough that my own family didn't see me as capable, but to not even let me have the same responsibilities as a non-family employee was humiliating.

As the driver slowed at the second red light we'd hit, I went back over what I knew. Ronall and Aurelia Kane were old family friends of my dad's, which meant they were probably both in their fifties, unless Ronall had done the same thing as Grandad and married someone younger than him.

Dad hadn't mentioned any kids and none of the files had any notes about school districts or anything else kid related. That meant their kids were either adults like my brothers and me, or they didn't have any at all.

I was glad for that. I had no idea how I'd be with kids. I hadn't had any opportunities to be around any since I was one, and figuring out that I was bad with them while trying to find a home for their family wouldn't have made a positive impression. I wasn't quite as charming as Damon, but I could

handle a couple our dad's age.

We pulled up in front of the Hilton, and I told the driver to wait while I went inside to get our clients. I felt like an idiot as soon as the words left my mouth, like I was trying to prove that I really was a Holden. Like I was used to taking wealthy clients to exclusive properties specifically selected just for them.

Thankfully, the driver just nodded. He'd been quiet the whole way here, and it seemed like it was his personality as much as professionalism.

I ignored the heat as I moved from the air conditioning of the car to the cooler hotel lobby, barely feeling the heat during my brief time outside between the two. I made it only a couple steps when a stuffy-looking man with a sneer stepped in front of me. His gaze flicked down to my empty hands and then behind me.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you visiting a guest?"

He must've been looking for luggage. "I'm here to pick up a guest, actually."

His smile was tight and didn't reach his eyes. "And who might you be here to see?"

"He's here for us." A man's voice came from my right, a Texas twang in every word. "That is, if he's Deklin Holden."

I turned toward him. "Mr. Kane."

He was a few inches taller than me, with dark hair and a pleasant face. Crinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth made me think he was probably halfway between Dad's and Grandad's ages, but he was definitely a well-kept sixty-something.

"Ronall, please." He held out a hand, and I stepped around the stuffy guy to shake it.

"My dad called you to tell you I was coming?" I asked, trying not to let my annoyance bleed into my voice.

"He did," Ronall said, the twinkle in his hazel eyes telling me that I hadn't done that good of a job. "But I would've known you anywhere. You look like your mother."

A pang of grief went through me. It'd been seven years since Mom died, but there were times it still hurt like it was yesterday.

"You knew her?"

Something on his face softened. "I did. And I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Dad." The woman who stepped up next to Ronall was about a foot

shorter than me, slender and almost too delicate for the thick chestnut brown hair spilling down her shoulders.

“Deklin, this is my daughter, Aurelia.”

So, *not* a husband and wife pair.

I smiled at her as I reached out a hand. She was young. Probably barely twenty. She had a sweet face, an innocence that was beyond rare.

“Nice to meet you.” My hand engulfed hers, and I felt like I needed to be careful, or I’d break her.

“You too.” She blushed, her eyes flicking down and then back up again.

Ronall cleared his throat, and it was my turn to feel a rush of embarrassment.

“I have a car waiting. I’ll brief you on each property while we’re on our way.” I gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

The town car had two seats, facing each other, and I took the one with my back to the driver. Aurelia slid in first and settled with her hands in her lap. By the time her father shut the door, she was twisting her fingers together as if something was making her nervous. I wondered what it was, but that wasn’t why I was here.

I tapped on the divider window with a single knuckle and then held up my index finger. I’d given the driver a list of where we were going, numbered in the order I wanted us to go. As he pulled back into the street, I picked up the folder next to me.

“My father selected the properties on this list, but if none of them suit you, we’ll find something that does.” I opened the folder and pulled out the top few sheets, handing one to Ronall and one to Aurelia. She looked surprised, but took it, giving me a shy smile. “Since you hadn’t yet decided what type of commercial properties you might want, we’ll look at homes first.”

“Musket Lane,” Ronall said, noting the address of the first house. “I always liked the houses there.”

“Good.”

I glanced at Aurelia and found her eyes on me. She wasn’t flirting with me, and I wasn’t flirting with her, but something about her drew me in, making me want to...protect her. It was an odd feeling, and not one I’d really experienced before.

As the youngest, I was always the one being looked after, protected, *coddled*. It was nice to have someone who didn’t look at me that way. Not

yet, at least.

Who knew what it'd be like when she got to know me better? After all, if my own family barely thought I could do this, why would the Kanes be any different?

I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the job at hand. I'd never prove my family wrong if I kept whining about it. I needed to just do the damn job.

WE MADE it to three of the five properties Dad had given me, taking thorough walkthroughs of each of them. Considering how many tens of thousands of square feet and at least a dozen acres in land we had to cover, we accomplished a lot. We were heading back to the car after the third property when Dad texted me, asking me to invite the Kanes to dinner.

"I think we've covered enough for today," I said. "Unless you'd like to continue."

Ronall shook his head. "No, you're right. It's been a long day."

"If it hasn't been too long, my dad would love for both of you to come to dinner at his house. He's been looking forward to reconnecting with you." I added the last part, but considering Dad had gone to such lengths to make sure Ronall and Aurelia found the right house, I didn't think it was too far-fetched.

Something crossed Ronall's face, gone before I could identify it, but I wondered if it had something to do with why I'd never heard of the Kane family before. I hadn't asked Dad about it, but I'd been curious about it since he'd told me about them moving back.

"What do you think, sweetie?" Ronall asked Aurelia.

She nodded, brushing back some hair that had fallen across her face. It'd been like this all day. Ronall would include Aurelia in the conversation, but she barely spoke. He wasn't mean and didn't act like she was stupid, but I definitely got the impression that her dad treated her like she was a kid.

"That would be great," Ronall said to me. "It'll be nice to catch up with Walter. Will you be staying too?"

"I actually still live with my dad." Aurelia gave me a curious look, and I added, "I just finished up my MBA and moved back here for good. I haven't

decided what sort of place I'm looking to get."

"Is it difficult because you don't know if you'll be moving in alone or with a girlfriend?" Ronall asked. "Or boyfriend, I suppose. I shouldn't assume. No one knows these days."

"No girlfriend or boyfriend," I said with a slight smile. He didn't sound like he was being judgmental, just commenting on something he didn't quite understand. "My last girlfriend and I broke up a while ago."

"Better to break up when you're dating than waking up one day and realizing that you married the wrong person," Ronall said.

Neither he nor Aurelia had mentioned a wife or mom, and Dad hadn't said anything either, so I didn't know if Ronall was a widower or if his statement came from experience and there'd been a divorce. It wasn't really important, but it did make me wonder about that comment.

"True." I did agree with his statement, but I'd replied more because I was uncomfortable with the silence following it than any need to express a real opinion.

"Has your dad ever thought about getting married again?" Ronall asked.

"Not that I know of," I answered honestly. "But he doesn't really talk to my brothers and me about stuff like that."

"He never was one to show what he was feeling."

Ronall sounded more like he was talking to himself than adding to the conversation, and I wondered again at the relationship that existed between my family and his. Had my parents and the Kanes simply fallen out of touch when the Kanes had moved?

It wasn't like they'd parted ways back when the only options for communication were phone calls and the US Postal Service. Dad might not have been the most technologically savvy person I knew, but he was hardly a troglodyte. It would've been easy for them to reach out to each other at any time.

"Does your grandfather still live in the same house?" Ronall asked, shifting the conversation.

At least I knew the answer to this one. My brothers and I had heard more than once how Granddad had bought the house for Grandmom a few years before she passed. I think one of the reasons Granddad loved Cynthia so much was because she never complained about his insistence at keeping the house. Grandma Rachel had tolerated it, but even I knew it had been one of the things that had always bothered her.

“He does,” I said with a smile. “It’s just him and Cynthia there now with the staff, but I don’t think he’ll ever want to downsize.”

“My father is the one who told him about the house before it went on the market. They were friends, Father and Jude. Your grandfather saw him almost like an older brother, and I called him Uncle Jude when I was a kid. I don’t think I would’ve gotten through those first few years after Father died if it hadn’t been for Jude.” Ronall unbuttoned the top button of his dress shirt. “Your family was like the extended family I’d never had.”

How did I not know any of this? When Dad had said “old family friend,” I hadn’t realized he’d meant something like this.

“My boys called your parents Auntie Cher and Uncle Wally.” Ronall’s mouth quirked into a smile. “Davin used to follow my boys around everywhere. He couldn’t say Maverick’s full name, so he called him Marick.”

“I didn’t know that’s where the nickname came from,” Aurelia said.

I wondered if she knew more about our family’s history than I did, or if this was all new to her too.

“Does Davin still live here?”

My eyes still on Aurelia, I answered the question. “Yes, he’s actually the CFO at the company now that Dad’s CEO and Grandad retired.”

“I’m surprised Jude retired. I used to think he’d be running that place until he was a hundred.”

“You’re not far off,” I said dryly. “And he’s still involved. The two of us will be doing some traveling soon.”

“I don’t need to ask about Damon. Aurelia’s a huge fan.”

Color flooded her face. “Dad,” she protested softly.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about, sweetie. He’s a talented young man.”

My brother’s music career was a safe topic as there really wasn’t much there that could surprise me. I kept our conversation there until we arrived at the house, and then I was able to relinquish the conversation to Dad.

I barely hid my relief as I stepped back to walk with Aurelia. Ronall looked a little stiff at first, but as soon as Dad had smiled, whatever it was on Ronall’s mind seemed to disappear, and the two immediately started filling each other in on the last two-and-a-half decades.

Dinner went pretty much the same way, with those two dominating most of the conversation. Occasionally, they’d ask Aurelia or me a question, but for the most part, they left us to eat in peace. It wasn’t until we were heading

for the sitting room that Dad pulled me aside. I assumed it was to ask about how things had gone today, but he surprised me.

“You should take Aurelia out.”

Thinking I had to have misheard him, I asked him to repeat himself, but he said the same five words again, so I tried a different question. “Like on a date?”

“Why not?” Dad asked. “She’s a nice girl, and I’m sure she’d like a chance to see the city without her father taking her around. Help her get acclimated. Get to know her. Maybe the two of you will hit it off.”

I wasn’t sure if my dad was trying to play matchmaker...or if it’d be more accurate to refer to it as pimping me out. Not that I’d ever say something like that to him. We didn’t talk about sex in our family, and we certainly didn’t joke about anything sex related.

Ever.

Grandad had given Davin ‘the talk.’ Davin had talked to Damon. I’d gotten most of my knowledge from listening to the two of them growing up.

“You’re back home for good now,” Dad continued. “It won’t hurt you to start looking to settle down.”

Okay, so it was serious matchmaking. Dad was trying his hand at an arranged marriage. I stifled a sigh. I wasn’t some playboy, dating a different woman every night. I didn’t see why I was the one he was coming to with this.

Aurelia glanced up from her plate, her eyes meeting mine for a few seconds before turning back to the food she was pushing around on her plate.

Yes, I had to admit, I knew why I was the one he’d come to. Aurelia was definitely *not* the sort of woman who’d fit with either of my brothers. She’d be safe with me.

It seemed like Dad had finally found something he trusted me to do more than anyone else. I wasn’t going to screw this up.

SEVEN

SOFI

IT WAS GETTING EASIER, LIKE PASHA HAD SAID IT WOULD. NEARLY A FULL week of rehearsals for two hours a day after the club closed, then home for a few hours of sleep before getting up to do whatever needed to be done, and then back to the club for a full shift.

We got bonuses for practice hours, but it wasn't even close to minimum wage. And it would last until I was confident that I knew every step, which meant the longer it took me, the more the others would resent me for making them come in during their time off.

I hadn't talked to anyone about their lives outside of the club, but some of the others had pictures of children in their sections, so I assumed at least a few were also mothers, and I felt awful that I was taking away their time with their children. I'd worked extra hard, and Sanders had declared today would be our last practice.

So, yes, easier.

Except it was really only the dancing itself that was easier. The rest of it was still hard. Being up on that stage, knowing that men were watching us, not because they were impressed with the athletic ability it took to do what we did, but because they wanted our bodies. They wanted to see as much as we would give them, file it away to get off to later.

Or, sometimes, get off to now.

"Sofi, there's a customer asking for you." Sanders leaned against the wall next to me, everything about him completely at ease with being in a room full of half-dressed women. It wasn't the first time I'd seen him in here, and it wasn't the first time I'd noticed that he didn't leer at any of us. If anything...

My observations screeched to a halt as I processed what he'd said.

“What?”

“Someone wants a private dance.” He straightened and stuck his hands in his pockets. “He wants that costume.” He gestured to the skimpiest one.

Big surprise there.

“I’ll help her get ready,” Pasha said. Sanders nodded and headed back out to the club floor while she picked out a sheer wrap from the rack of general use accessories. “The key to a good dance, if you don’t want any of the extras, is to put on a couple of these layers, so you have to take them off to get to what they want to see.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice to stay steady. My pulse was racing, and my chest was tight. I’d never had a panic attack, but I had a bad feeling that, if I didn’t get ahold of myself right now, I was about to have my first one and end up getting fired on top of it.

“Breathe, Sofi.” Pasha kept her voice low, but all of the other women knew what she was doing.

Calming the newbie before sending her in for some sweaty old leche to ogle and grope.

“It can be harder one-on-one,” she said. “Without the lights, you can see them. And they’re closer.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it,” I muttered, annoyed.

She laughed. “Better now? Not freaking out?”

I grinned at her when I realized what she’d done. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “Now get changed and get out there before he decides on someone else. As much as you may think you want him to, just remember that you’ll get a nice bump in your check. I’m sure you need it.”

I hadn’t told her why I was here, but it wasn’t too much of a stretch to guess that I needed money. Most of us here did.

She was right, though. I *had* to do this.

I finished changing my clothes, and Pasha helped me arrange the extra wraps, then showed me where to go. The man was already inside, sitting in the shadows. I took a slow breath and then reminded myself that this was for Dallas.

And that meant I could do this because I could – and would – do anything for my child.

I walked through the beaded strands that hung in the doorway and hoped I looked sexy rather than silly.

“Hey there.” I sounded like an idiot but pressed on. “Do you have a song

preference?”

He shook his head, thick tongue sticking out to wet his lips. “Something sexy.”

Duh.

I didn’t say it, though. I just walked over to where the song selection was and pushed the button for the first song that I knew. I hadn’t practiced for anything solo, but if I closed my eyes, I could pretend I was just goofing off like I’d done sometimes in high school. Dancing with my friends. Laughing. Joking.

I managed to make it through the first minute without actually acknowledging what I was doing, but then I heard the squeak of the man shifting in his seat, and the illusion was broken.

My eyes opened when his hand brushed my thigh. He tugged the scarf I’d just released onto his lap, drawing attention to the erection tenting his pants. I looked away immediately, but his grin told me that he’d seen me notice it.

“Like what you see?” He dropped his hand, and I didn’t need to look to know he was grabbing himself.

I just smiled and turned, making my movement away from him seem like part of the dance. Unfortunately, he took the response as encouragement and took the opportunity to grab my ass.

Making a scolding noise, I wagged my finger at him, hoping he’d take it as flirty. If he grabbed my boobs, however, I’d be seriously tempted to break his hand, and that would probably not go over well with my probation officer.

I needed to play smarter and nicer if this was going to work. And it had to work.

“Come on, baby, let me see those big tits of yours.” He grabbed my hips.

I put my hands over his and danced backward until I was out of his reach.

I could do this.

I could.

I was.

EIGHT

DEKLIN

I WAS GOING ON A DATE. I'D BEEN HOME FOR A WEEK, AND I WAS GOING ON A date.

Aurelia had been surprised when I'd asked her to go out with me tonight, even looking to her dad, but as soon as he'd smiled, she'd accepted. I didn't know if she wanted to go out with me because she liked me, because she was bored, or because her dad apparently thought it was a good idea, but I figured the worst thing that could happen was that the two of us would find out we annoyed each other and make an early night of it.

I doubted that'd be the case, though. Something about her drew me in, and I thought it was the same for her. The two of us had a connection despite the fact that I wasn't attracted to her. At least, I didn't think I was.

What did it say about me that I actually had to think about it?

I shook my head and smoothed out a non-existent wrinkle in my short-sleeved dress shirt. I really needed to stop overthinking things. Aurelia seemed like a nice young woman, and if nothing else, the two of us could use a friend. Most of the friends I'd had growing up here had faded into the lives they were living now. I expected my college friends would go the same way. I didn't mind, though. I wasn't really that close to any of them.

I'd always been too busy feeling like I had to prove myself to take the time to make real friends.

Maybe the worst-case scenario here was that I'd end up with a friend.

"You're wearing that?" Dad's question was mild, but the look in his eyes was anything but. He'd perfected the art of making more of a single question.

I sighed. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing, Dad?"

"That depends on where you're taking her." He leaned back from the

table. “That’s hardly the appropriate attire for a five-star restaurant, and I certainly hope that you’re not taking her somewhere less than she deserves.”

“I thought I’d show her around the city, and it’s a bit warm to be in a full suit.”

Dad shrugged, but I knew what he was thinking. He wanted me to impress Aurelia, to show her the elite life that she and her father could expect here. Basically, he wanted me to do things exactly the same way he would have done them. Because that was the best way.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone,” I said. “Have a good night, Dad.”

I could’ve had a driver take us around, but I didn’t want the day to be like that. I wanted us to spend the evening just getting to know each other. It’d be nice to see who Aurelia was when she was away from her father and able to relax. Not that I thought he was hurting her or anything like that. No, I’d been able to see how much he loved his daughter. I just had the impression that she wanted to be perfect for him.

I knew all too well what that was like.

Aurelia was waiting in the lobby of the hotel, looking nervous and timid as she paced by the valet stand. She wore a dress that had been clearly tailored for her, but the style was far too old, too serious. She looked more like she was going to work at some stuffy business rather than going on a date. Even if this wasn’t some sort of exciting romantic thing, I hoped she thought we’d at least have some fun.

“Aurelia, it’s good to see you again.” I smiled at her and held out my hand. I didn’t shake hers this time, just lightly grasped her fingers and squeezed. When she took her hand back, I let it go and gestured for her to come with me.

We were in the car before she spoke.

“This is a nice car.” Her voice was soft but not weak.

“Thanks.” It wasn’t flashy, but it wasn’t exactly a common model either. A couple beats of silence passed before I asked, “Do you like cars?”

Silence.

Yeah, this wasn’t awkward at all...

“I do,” she answered after a long while. The furtive, sideways look she gave me made me wonder if she’d hesitated because liking cars didn’t fit with the image her father had fashioned for her.

“Then, we’ll take a little detour from what I had planned.” I moved over into the next lane. “Houston has an Art Car Museum.”

“What’s that?” Now that she knew I wasn’t going to scoff at her interests, the tension in her appeared to lessen.

“Cars and art.” I laughed. “It’s...unique.”

“I like unique.”

The knot in my chest eased. Her smile was small but genuine, and it made me wonder if she’d grown up as lonely as I had. At least I had my brothers. Based on what Ronall had said yesterday, her brothers had to be several years older than her.

“That’s good,” I said, “because I wanted to do something different than a dinner and movie sort of thing. My dad thought I should take you to a five-star restaurant, and we can do that if you’d prefer, but I thought you might like to see a bit more of the city than that.”

“I would.” She looked down at her clothes and frowned. “Unless you think I’m not dressed right for it.”

The urge to reassure her surprised me. “You look fine. We’re going to check out the Art Car Museum and then go for a picnic at the zoo.”

“A picnic at the zoo?” She glanced outside. “Isn’t it closed this late?”

I grinned. “One of the perks of being a Holden. We’re one of their biggest donors, so I pulled some strings.” My smile fell away as I realized how that sounded. “I don’t do it a lot. Use my family’s name and money to get special treatment. Hardly ever. I mean, not really ever before this. And not for anything...dammit.”

To my surprise, she laughed, her hazel eyes sparkling. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh at you.”

“It’s all right,” I said with a sigh. “I’m not very good at this.” I gestured between us.

“You’re doing fine.” She reached over and patted my arm. “Besides, it’s not like I’m the least socially awkward person in the world. I get it.”

That was the most I’d heard her say at one time, and I found myself wanting to hear more. “Why don’t you tell me about your family? All my dad said was that you guys were old family friends, but I’d never heard about any of you. At least not in any way that would’ve made me realize how close they’d been.”

“I have a feeling you and I grew up in very similar lives,” she said. “I have three brothers, but I think the age gap is bigger between them and me than it is between your brothers and you. There’s Maverick, who’s forty, Pierce, who’s thirty-seven, and Heathcliff, who’s thirty-five. I’m twenty-one,

so they were mostly all out of the house before I was even a teenager.”

I’d been pretty close in my estimate of her age. “My brothers are only three and six years older than me, but they treat me like it’s more most of the time.”

She nodded in understanding. “When I was really little, I used to feel like I had three extra dads.”

“Are you still close to them?”

She gave a half-shrug. “Marick and Heathcliff both live in Oklahoma with their families. We sometimes see each other at holidays.” Her expression tightened. “Pierce lives in Nashville, and I haven’t seen him in several years.”

There was something more to that, but I didn’t pry. It wasn’t my place.

“Nieces and nephews?”

Her smile returned. “Marick has two girls and a boy. Heathcliff has one of each.”

“Maybe when they visit, you and I can take them to the zoo,” I suggested. I made the last turn and pulled into the closest public parking. “If you like it. And I won’t be offended if you don’t.”

“Thank you for doing this,” she said. “I mean it. This move...caught me off-guard.”

I waited until we’d paid the entrance fee and moved inside to bring up my question. “Do you mind if I ask what prompted the move?”

She smoothed down her hair in what I recognized was a nervous gesture.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said quickly. “I’m just curious. Feel free to tell me it’s none of my business.”

Another of those shy smiles. I was starting to get the impression that she wasn’t just delicate in appearance. She didn’t seem weak, exactly, but definitely the sort of person who’d been sheltered from a lot, who wasn’t comfortable enough in her own skin to stand up and say what she wanted.

“My mom decided God was calling her to be a teacher in China. She was the one with the real roots in Vernon, so when she told Dad, he said he wanted to move back to Houston with me.”

The troubled expression on her face told me that she believed what her parents had told her, but suspected that it wasn’t the entire truth.

It was time to change the subject. I wanted to learn more about her, but I didn’t want to bring up anything that would hurt her, and I had a feeling if we went any further down this path, it would cast a damper on the entire night.

She needed this more than I did, and I wanted to give it to her. I still didn't know if I felt anything romantic toward her, but I definitely liked her, and we could both use a good friend.

I had no problem going slow and building on a solid friendship. I'd let her set the pace.

NINE

SOFI

I LOOKED AT THE CLOCK AGAIN AND PRESSED MY HANDS AGAINST MY stomach, wishing I could calm my nerves before Dallas got here. My visits with him were still supervised, but since his dad had to work today, the caseworker was bringing him to my apartment for the first time.

Ms. Stanton had already come by twice on her own to make sure everything was up to par. One visit was scheduled while the other had been a surprise inspection, just like my PO did. Even though Ms. Stanton was tough, she'd been fair to me so far, and I liked her for it.

She gave me hope that this nightmare could be over one day, and I'd have my son back, even if I was only ever able to get joint custody. The thought drew my attention back to the notebook sitting on my small kitchen table. All of my notes about my plans for the future were in there.

Since my first priority had been getting an apartment and making sure it was fit for Dallas to visit – and hopefully live – it'd taken me until last week to finally have enough money to get a sit down with a family lawyer who didn't make my skin crawl. The estimate he'd given me had been fair, but it still made me sick to my stomach to think of how long it would take just to get enough to have paperwork filed.

A knock at the door got me to my feet, and I pushed aside the money worries. I wasn't going to waste a single minute of my time with Dallas.

I opened the door and greeted Ms. Stanton, but I only had eyes for my son. He had Mead's dark brown hair, and his eyes were a combination of my blue and Mead's gray, but that was where his resemblance to his father ended. I didn't remember my father or brothers, but I'd seen pictures, and Dallas looked a lot like my oldest brother, Eddie.

“Please, come in.” I stepped aside to let them pass, then crouched down until I was at eye level with Dallas. “I think you’ve grown again.”

He gave me a shy smile, and my heart broke. Every time I saw him, it took him a few minutes to warm up to me, and even though he’d never come out and said anything, I knew Mead had been telling Dallas things to distance him from me.

I didn’t tell Ms. Stanton my suspicions, though. I didn’t want to risk her thinking I was the awful person I knew my ex claimed I was.

“It’s okay,” Ms. Stanton said quietly. “You can give your mom a hug.”

I glanced up at her in time to see the lines at the corners of her mouth tighten. Maybe I didn’t need to tell her.

Dallas stepped right into my open arms, and I buried my nose in his hair, breathing in the scent of sweat and grass and all the summer things that little boys did this time of the year.

I brushed the heels of my palms across my cheeks to catch any tears that had escaped, appreciating how Ms. Stanton looked away to give me at least some semblance of privacy for those few moments.

“Would you like to see the apartment?” I asked Dallas, my voice overly bright in compensation for my tears. “There’s a room just for you.”

His entire face lit up as he nodded. I looked at Ms. Stanton, and she nodded for me to go ahead. I knew she’d follow, but I was grateful she didn’t hover. She hadn’t when we’d met in other places, but I hadn’t been sure if she’d be the same way when we weren’t in public.

I’d only gone to the house once before asking if it’d be possible for us to find somewhere neutral, at least for a few weeks. She’d agreed without even asking why and I’d been relieved to not have to explain it. It would’ve sounded like I was jealous, and possibly imagining things if I’d tried to point out the subtle signs of another woman’s presence.

Mead had always been good at making me seem foolish and stupid. The last thing I needed was Ms. Stanton thinking of me as either of those two things.

Both bedrooms together were the size of Dallas’s bedroom at the house – I was still adjusting to not calling it home – but they were clean and uncluttered. Dallas had a single bed in one corner and a small dresser in the other. He didn’t have a closet, but I’d put up rows of hooks where we could hang up any clothes that didn’t go in the dresser. Of course, he didn’t have much in the way of clothes here since I had to buy anything I wanted him to

have, but it'd be a little while longer before he could stay overnight, so I could wait to get anything more than the little I'd already purchased.

"Where's Mr. Mouse?" he asked after inspecting everything with four-year-old seriousness.

"Mr. Mouse lives with you and Daddy," I said, my smile feeling wobbly. "You can have a special friend who stays here with me if you want."

He considered my offer with all the somberness that came with such a heavy decision. "Okay. Can I have an elephant? Daddy says I can't have one at home 'cuz mice are scared of 'em."

"An elephant it is, then."

Satisfied with the promise, he crossed to the crate of second-hand children's books and began going through them. He couldn't read the titles, but he knew the covers, and he laughed every time he found one he recognized. I'd scoured every thrift store on this side of the city to get him as many of the same books he had at home as I could.

"You've done well here," Ms. Stanton said, keeping her voice low enough that it wouldn't disturb Dallas. "I've seen too many parents try to win their kid over with new, flashy toys instead of buying the things they know will make the child feel more secure. You've got your priorities in the right order."

"Thank you." I could barely get the whisper out past the lump in my throat.

After spending so many years being told that I wasn't good enough, that I was dumb and a bad mother, her kind words meant more to me than I could express. Especially since I'd gotten the impression that she didn't give unearned compliments.

"Mommy, can you read the 'lelepint book?" He held up a book I immediately recognized.

I'd had *Babar the Elephant* books from when I was a kid, some of the few things that had survived through the numerous moves of my childhood. I hadn't bothered to try to get my copies back from Mead because, if he realized how important they were to me, I knew he'd probably throw them away or burn them, but I'd known how much Dallas loved them, so I'd picked up my own copies.

"El-e-phant," I said the word slowly, enunciating each sound. "And yes, I'll read it to you. Why don't we take it out into the living room so Ms. Stanton can sit down too?"

He nodded. "She can listen 'bout Barbar too."

"Ba-bar," I corrected as I held out my hand. He took it, and I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest.

Over the past few months, I'd woken up at least once a week after a nightmare that Dallas had forgotten who I was, and everyone had told me that it'd be better for him if I just walked away like my dad had done with me. Reading to him today would be the memory I'd call up to counteract those fears. And it would be the feel of him leaning against my side, my arm around him as we read, that would get me through every shift I needed to work to get him back.

Mead was not going to win this one because I would never stop fighting for my son.

TEN

DEKLIN

OF ALL THE PLACES I'D BEEN WITH GRANDAD IN THE PAST TWO MONTHS, Kansas City, Missouri was my least favorite. Not that there was something wrong with the city itself, but the hotel where we were staying had an entire staff of idiots. Okay, maybe not housekeeping because they'd been doing their job, but every other member of the staff I'd spoken with had been awful.

It was the first Monday morning in August, and I'd been here far too long. Grandad and I had flown in the previous Wednesday, intending to stay for a week so we could see all the properties on Dad's list. We'd arranged for a car service to pick us up each morning, take us wherever we needed to go, and then return us to the hotel when we were done. The first two days had gone by without incident, but every day since had brought a new problem.

Friday evening, we'd returned to our suite to find that the air conditioning had gone out, and when I'd called the front desk to report it, I'd been told that someone would be up to fix it right away. By midnight, no one had come, so I'd gone down to the desk to insist that someone come up with me right then only to be told that the maintenance staff had left at eleven. I'd made a few calls, brought someone in from outside, and then presented the bill to the front desk when it was done.

Things had just gotten worse from there.

Saturday morning, we'd been running a little late, and by the time we'd gotten downstairs, "someone" had reported our driver as a "suspicious person," and he'd been in the process of being handcuffed.

Yesterday afternoon, our sink had backed up, and when I'd called down to have someone come fix it, the front desk sent a valet with one of those snake things that plumbers used to clear drains. Not to use it. No, he'd simply

held it out for me to take and then walked away.

Needless to say, Grandad had spent the last hour on the phone with the owner and was now on his way to a meeting with the on-duty manager. I had a feeling there were going to be several staffing positions opening up very soon.

I closed my eyes and rubbed the back of my neck as I listened to the phone ring. I figured I'd use the time Grandad was gone to call Aurelia. Hopefully, talking to her would help me get my head cleared after the crazy week.

I wanted to get our work done and go home. I didn't mind traveling, but every passing day made me suspect that all of these trips Grandad and I had been taking had just been a way for Dad to keep me busy without giving me any actual responsibility.

"Deklin! Hi!"

I smiled, loving how happy Aurelia always sounded to hear from me. "Good morning."

"I wasn't expecting to hear from you until this evening," she said. "Aren't you going to see that former high school today?"

"Not until a little later," I said. "Grandad's meeting with the manager."

"About the sink thing?"

I pulled open the blinds and squinted at the bright sun. "About all of it. I know Grandad wanted to stay here to see what some of the competition would be if we decided to invest in hotels here, but I'm starting to think he might just buy the place outright, if only so he could fire everyone we've dealt with."

"He'd really do that?"

"I'm pretty sure that's how the family business got started in the first place," I said dryly. "Anyway, I didn't call for you to listen to me complain." I winced. "And I just realized that's what I've been doing all week. Sorry about that."

"It's okay," she said. "I like that you don't try to protect me from any of it."

I wasn't so sure either of our fathers would agree with my decision to be honest with her about stuff like this, but I didn't see how she and I could grow whatever this was between us if I was trying to make her think everything was great all the time. Especially since our dating over the last two months consisted solely of phone calls and brief visits centered around

family activities or public outings.

Honestly, I didn't even know if I could call it dating. Neither of us had made any sort of declaration of feelings aside from saying that we enjoyed spending time with each other. And physical contact...there'd barely been any. We'd touch, but it was more like the sort of thing friends did. Bumping shoulders, leaning close to talk in noisy surroundings. Sometimes we'd brush hands or even lock fingers together, but it was always brief. We hadn't kissed yet, not even chastely. The closest we'd come were the times I'd kissed her cheek when I'd taken her home at the end of a date, and even that had seemed like a lot for her.

I didn't know why she shied away from anything that wasn't platonic, but we hadn't had much of an opportunity to even talk about it. That wasn't the kind of conversation I wanted us to have in a public setting or on the phone, and it seemed like, when I was home, the only thing we did was spend time around other people.

And it wasn't like there'd even been much of that time to begin with. Aurelia and I hadn't even planned our second date when Grandad had announced that we'd be leaving for Seattle.

Honestly, I should have been grateful that she wasn't angry that I hadn't been around. I didn't want her to think that I was trying to stay away from her, but I didn't know how to let her know it other than to just say it flat-out, since any other things couples usually did when they missed each other weren't even close to being on the table.

No innuendo intended.

I wasn't going to push her. I'd meant it when I decided to let her set the pace, but I was starting to feel like the two of us were dancing around something neither of us wanted to be the first to say. Problem was, I didn't know what it was I didn't want to say, or if she was thinking the same.

"Do you think you'll come back early if your grandad buys the hotel?"

"No." I stared down at the fountain across the street from the hotel, realizing with a start that the water was orange. Or was it red? Maybe somewhere in between? It didn't matter. "The main place Grandad wanted to see is what we have scheduled for tomorrow. We should be home Wednesday night, though, and he hasn't told me about any trips coming up in the next week or so, which means we should get to spend some time together finally."

"Oh. Well..."

Sensing her hesitation, I turned away from the window and went back to

the chair I'd been sitting in earlier. "Is something wrong?"

"Not exactly. It's just, with this being my first year living in off-campus housing, I wanted to get back to Vernon before my classes started up again."

She was going to graduate school, which was great, but she was going back to where she'd gotten her BA, which meant she wouldn't be staying in Houston. I was happy for her, but it was one more obstacle keeping us from moving forward.

Maybe I should take it as a sign or something.

"That makes sense," I said. "When are you going?"

"Friday morning." She sounded more frustrated than I felt.

"Hey, we'll still have Thursday to get together."

"Our dads have already planned a going-away dinner for me. It was your Grandad's idea. It's sweet of them to do that for me, especially since they haven't known me that long."

"That is sweet," I agreed, making my tone more enthusiastic than I felt. "And then I won't feel like I'm asking you to not spend time with your dad before you leave. We can all be together."

I was nearly one hundred percent sure that my Grandad was cock-blocking me.

A sentence I'd never thought I'd use.

ELEVEN

SOFI

“BITCH, YOU DON’T NEED TO LOOK LIKE YOUR SHIT DON’T STINK.”

I didn’t have to look up from fixing my boot to know that particular comment had come from Alexys. She’d been gracing me with those little pearls of wisdom from the moment she’d seen that I wasn’t running away.

I didn’t know what her problem was with me, but I honestly didn’t care. I’d been nothing but polite to her, and it wasn’t like Sanders wouldn’t hire someone else if I left, but something about me bugged her, and she wouldn’t let up.

What she didn’t know was that I’d had plenty of people in my life growing up who’d told me how worthless and talentless I was. People who were supposed to love me. Hearing it from a co-worker I barely knew was nothing. I wasn’t here to make friends or win any popularity contests. I was here to work.

“Pleasant as always, Alexys,” Pasha said as she tossed her top into the bin of clothes to be cleaned. She looked down at me, hands on her hips. “You know no one would blame you if you bitch-slapped her once, right? Probably not even if you did it a couple times. We’ve all wanted to.”

“I’m more of an ‘ignore until they get tired of it’ sort of person,” I said, angling myself away from Pasha as I swapped out my costume.

I’d gotten to where I didn’t go red every time someone flashed me while they changed clothes, but I still wasn’t at a point where I could stroll around with my boobs hanging out. In all honesty, I hoped I wasn’t here long enough to get that carefree about nudity, but there were times I feared I’d someday be where Pasha was, coaching the new girl about how to make the best of whatever circumstances had brought her here.

“Pasha!” Sanders called from the doorway. “Your fucking sister is here again!”

I looked over at Pasha, eyes wide. I’d heard Sanders curse before, but even that was usually done in his mellow way. He didn’t sound mellow now. He sounded pissed.

“Fuck.” Pasha yanked on the first shirt she grabbed. “If she’s stoned again, I’m calling the cops on her ass. I’ve had enough of this shit.”

I quickly finished fastening the annoying row of buttons that held together the front of my top. I doubted Pasha needed back-up, but she’d been such a big help to me that I’d feel awful if I wasn’t at least close enough to hear her if she needed someone.

My good intentions, however, didn’t take me far. Sanders had planted himself nearby, arms crossed and a scowl on his face. Judging from the direction in which he was glaring, his anger was directed at the tall blonde next to Pasha.

He paused from his glowering to give me a glance. “Sofi, you have a customer who wants a private dance. I put him in room two. He didn’t make any special costume requests.”

Dammit. I definitely would’ve preferred being out there for Pasha than doing a dance for some creep, but at least I’d figured out the trick for handling these sorts of customers.

I’d spent a lot of my marriage pretending to be someone I wasn’t, whether it was a simpering, placating version of myself, or the calm, cool me who pretended like everything was just fine. I’d simply needed to create a persona who was confident and sexy, able to seduce men with a smile and a wink.

I shrugged that person into place and then stepped into the room, ready to field whatever came my way...

“If you’d been a little more like this in the bedroom, maybe I wouldn’t have had to go somewhere else for some decent cunt.”

Shock paralyzed me even as my pulse and blood pressure rocketed.

This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t be here. This was a nightmare. I couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t real. I needed to wake up.

Wake up!

“Surprised to see me, honey?” Mead lounged in the seat across from the door, his arms stretched out along the back of the bench and his legs set wide, everything about the picture familiar even as my brain struggled to process

the fact that he was here.

No.

No!

We weren't hidden away in our house where he ruled with an iron fist. This might not have been the job I'd always wanted, or even a job I really liked, but it was *my* job, and I was through letting him take things from me.

"Do you have a specific song you'd like me to dance to?" I asked between gritted teeth.

He stood, and it took everything in me to stop from taking a step backward. Adrenaline rushed through me as flight warred with fight. I couldn't do either, but I could stand my ground.

"What's the dirtiest, filthiest song you've got?" He moved toward me until we were only a couple inches apart, my heels allowing me to look down on him for the first time in my life.

He didn't like that.

Quicker than a man his size should have been able to move, his hand wrapped around the back of my neck, and he sent me flying into the bench. I landed on my knees, the pain jarring up through my body. My stomach hit the edge of the bench, and I gasped, the air knocked out of me.

Before I could even think of how to get away, he was on me. His fingers dug into the back of my neck as he shoved my face against the seat of the bench. I braced myself for the blows I was sure would be coming, but it wasn't until he kicked apart my ankles that I realized he didn't want to hit me. Not yet, anyway.

"How many men have you fucked here, *wife*? Made yourself a nice little whore, haven't you?" He snarled at me, blunt fingers grabbing at the back of my costume.

For the first time, I was grateful for all of the little hooks and buttons that kept this particular outfit together. It was the hardest one to remove, and I usually cursed it, but I never would again.

"I'm going to scream, Mead." I tried for threatening, but the words had no strength.

"Oh, I have no doubt about that," he snarled, his breath hot against my ear. "I'm going to fuck your ass until you bleed and then make you gag on my cock."

"I mean it!" I tried to throw him off, but I didn't have the leverage. "I'll scream, and someone will come!"

“No, my little whore wife. You’re not going to scream. You’re going to let me do whatever I want to do to you. For free. And you’re going to keep letting me do it, or I’m going to make sure that stuck-up bitch of a caseworker knows exactly what you do to pay for that apartment of yours. Her, my lawyer, the judge. Everyone.”

I stifled a sob. He’d do it, if for no other reason than to prove he could. He might even do it if I let him do whatever he wanted to do to me, but giving in was the only glimmer of hope I had.

How fucked up was my life that being *raped* was my best hope?

“Cry all you want.” His breath was hot against my cheek. “I like it when you cry.”

I closed my eyes and told myself that I could survive this too.

I felt a seam give.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

A woman’s voice came from the doorway. A familiar voice. But I couldn’t think of who it was. If I did, she might not be real, and that would be worse.

“Back off, bitch!”

“Sanders!” she shouted. “You want to come help me, or should I just shove one of my five-inch heels into this fucker’s ass?!”

With a frustrated growl, Mead shoved my head down hard enough to bruise, but then he let go.

I stayed where I was, muscles trembling, teeth biting into my lips. He could be pretending. Waiting until I thought I was safe just to show me that I wasn’t. It could all be a trick...

I let out a surprised yelp when someone touched me, but the arm that went around my shoulders was thinner and smoother than Mead’s. I opened my eyes and saw a pair of angry green eyes glaring back. They quickly changed to compassion.

“That your ex?”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“He’s gone,” Pasha said, easing me back until I was sitting on the floor. She wrapped her arms around me, not caring how gross the floor was.

“He’s never gone,” I whispered, tears burning paths down my cheeks. “He can do anything he wants.”

“You want me to have Sanders call the cops? I’ll tell them what I saw that bastard trying to do to you.”

I shook my head, familiar despair settling heavily onto my shoulders. “There’s no point. They won’t do anything.”

“If you press charges they will,” she said. “We might not be the classiest place in Sin City, but we’re clean enough that complaints really get filed.”

“Not with him.” I looked up at her. “They won’t do anything to him. He’s one of them. He’s a cop.”

TWELVE

DEKLIN

I STILL WASN'T ENTIRELY SURE THAT GRANDDAD HADN'T BOUGHT THE HOTEL, but whatever he'd said had gotten through because the last couple days we had in Kansas City were uneventful. We did what we'd come to do and didn't have any more surprises, bad or otherwise. Still, I'd never been so glad to fall into my own bed as I had been last night.

I'd intended to help Aurelia pack today, but Granddad had insisted that he and I give Dad and Davin our report first thing. I loved my grandfather, but this was getting ridiculous. He knew Aurelia was leaving tomorrow morning and still didn't offer to postpone the meeting a single day. At least he wasn't the one in charge of this evening's dinner so he couldn't do anything to screw up me at least seeing her before she left.

Maybe I'd be able to steal a few minutes alone with her, and we could finally talk face-to-face about where we thought this was going. I felt like the two of us were in limbo, hovering in place as we waited for something. The problem was, I didn't know what that something was. I liked spending time with her and talking with her, but everything else was just...awkward.

"Good to see you," I said as soon as she followed her dad inside. I gave her a hug and felt her stiffen when it lasted more than a couple seconds. I immediately released her, not wanting her to feel trapped, but I stayed close enough to ask, "Are you okay?"

She nodded, cheeks pink. "It's good to see you too."

"How was your trip to Kansas City?" Ronall asked, clapping me on the shoulder.

"Good," I said. "Too long for my taste."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aurelia hide a smile and knew she was

thinking about everything I'd told her had happened. I wondered how often people talked over her and around her, but never actually to her.

I completely understood, and I liked that I was able to make her smile with something as simple as conversation. I honestly didn't think it was because she was a social person, but more because I saw *her* and not her dad, her family, just *her*.

"Are you going to be around for a while now?" Ronall asked.

I shrugged. "That's up to Grandad. He's the one saying when and where and how long."

"I hope I have half of his energy at his age."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that I wished Grandad had half his energy now, but I kept it to myself. I didn't actually mind going on the trips with him, even if I did think he and Dad were just trying to keep me busy, so I wasn't in the way.

"Would anyone like some scotch?" Grandad asked as we gathered in the sitting room. "Cynthia and Mrs. Potts say it'll be another fifteen or twenty minutes before dinner is done."

"Mrs. Potts?" Aurelia whispered.

"The cook," I answered.

"Like the one from *Beauty and the Beast*?"

I grinned. "Damon used to follow her around singing songs from the cartoon the first time he saw it."

"Walter, I appreciate your opinion, but we've had this discussion before. It's my house, and I'll offer my guests a drink if that's what I want to do."

Aurelia's gaze moved to where Dad and Grandad were having a not-so-quiet discussion. They weren't yelling, but I could see that my dad was mad.

"They do this a lot," I assured her. "They have different viewpoints on what a church's stance against alcohol means. It's not as bad when it's wine, but anything else and it turns into an argument half the time. Just ignore them."

"You should see them when they're at a business event together, and alcohol is served." Davin appeared next to me, already sipping at the scotch Grandad had given him. "You can almost see the smoke coming out of Dad's ears when Grandad gets something."

"My mom's like that," Aurelia said softly. "Like your dad, I mean. My dad just doesn't like the taste."

Sure enough, a glance at Ronall showed that he hadn't accepted a drink,

but I wondered if that was more to prevent him from having to take sides in a debate that I figured was probably as old as the friendship.

“What about you?” Davin asked. “We have wine if you’d prefer that to scotch.”

Aurelia shook her head, and I looked over at my brother, trying to figure out why he’d suddenly started talking to my...well, whatever she was to me. I wasn’t jealous, exactly, more like curious, and the fact that I didn’t want to tell him to back off should have been the sign I’d been asking for.

Maybe jealousy was just immaturity, and I shouldn’t want to feel it toward my brother, but it just felt weird. If he did something to make her uncomfortable or upset, we’d have words, but that was protecting her.

I was going to have a headache before dinner was over.

“No, thank you,” Aurelia said, her fingers doing that twisting thing again that told me she didn’t like being the center of attention, even for one other person. “It gives me a headache.”

The first question that popped into my head also popped out of my mouth. “Davin, I have to ask, did Grandad buy the hotel we were staying at in Kansas City?”

Davin smiled. “He did, and it’s driving Dad nuts, having Grandad more involved again.”

I almost asked him if Grandad was supposed to be babysitting me, but I wasn’t in the mood to handle the answer to that question, no matter what it might be. Besides, my usually stoic brother seemed to be in an unusually good mood tonight. It didn’t happen often, and I wasn’t going to spoil it, especially since this was supposed to be a celebration for Aurelia going to grad school.

“Dinner’s ready,” Cynthia said from the doorway. “If you’ll follow me to the dining room.”

As Aurelia and I started after Davin, Dad gestured for me to stay behind. In a rare moment of brotherly teasing, Davin assured me that he’d get Aurelia to the table safely, and I walked over to where Dad stood.

He waited until we were alone to finally say what was on his mind. “The two of you seem to be getting along well.”

“We are. She’s sweet.”

“She is,” Dad continued, “and I’m sure you can understand that Ronall wants her to be taken care of, protected.”

I thought I knew where he was going with this, and I held up my hand to

stop him before he embarrassed us both. “Dad, we’re taking it really slow. We haven’t even kissed yet. You don’t have to worry about me rushing her into anything. I don’t want to see her hurt any more than her dad does.”

“I knew I could trust you with her,” he said. “That’s why, when Ronall told me that he wanted one of my boys to take care of her, I knew you were the only one I could go to.”

I’d wanted my dad to trust me more, but I’d been thinking in terms of the family business, not him playing matchmaker with his friend’s daughter, but I supposed one could lead to the other. In fact, maybe I could kill two birds with one stone.

“You know, if I wasn’t traveling around so much with Grandad, it’d be easier to spend time with her, build our relationship into something that’ll last.”

Dad smiled. “That’s what Ronall and I want too.”

I wasn’t sure how Ronall had anything to do with me working at the office, but I’d take it if it meant I was actually going to do real work.

“In fact, we’d like to make things more permanent sooner rather than later. Make sure Aurelia’s taken care of, even when she’s away at school.”

More permanent?

I was starting to feel like I’d missed something important.

“Here.” He held out his hand, and even when I saw the ring, I still didn’t get it. “We want you to propose. Tonight. Before she leaves for school.”

I stared at him, my mouth going dry as a bone. “We barely know each other, and you want me to propose to her?”

“I understand it’s fast, son.” Dad squeezed my shoulder. “But, when it’s right, is it ever too fast?”

I was sure there was an argument I could make, but I was still too stunned to think of anything beyond what I’d already said.

“It’s not just for her either,” Dad kept going. “Holden Enterprises is a family business, but none of you boys have expressed an interest in starting a family. The Kane family money comes from oil, but they’ve gotten out of the business aspect of things. Ronall’s boys have taken their trusts and made their own ways, but he feels like his legacy is ending too. Bringing our two families together is a solution that’s best for everyone.”

Best for everyone? Including Aurelia and me? Or were we just a means to an end? I didn’t like thinking that our fathers saw us both like that, but this was all just too much.

“Deklin, it has to be you. You’re the only one who can do this for our family.”

I’d always wanted to hear him say those words, but I’d never thought they’d be in reference to marriage. Not that marriage had really been on my mind. I hadn’t even wanted to think about it until I’d established my place in the business. But, if this *was* the responsibility my family needed of me, could I really refuse and then complain that they weren’t trusting me with anything?

“Does she...has Ronall talked to Aurelia about this?”

“More or less.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but a woman being surprised by a proposal wasn’t exactly odd. A lot of women liked that kind of surprise.

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait a little while? I mean, we’ve only been dating for a couple months, and she’s leaving tomorrow. Wouldn’t Christmas be a better time for it?”

“Ronall’s concerned that people at her school might try to take advantage of her since it’ll be her first time on her own. Knowing that she’s engaged to a family with our sort of clout will make people think twice about it.”

That rationale made sense, in a way, even if it did seem to be too extreme, but I could understand Ronall’s concern. Aurelia had always been taken care of, and to go from that to being miles away from family, living on her own, would take quite an adjustment. And even if I wasn’t entirely sure about the physical attraction between us, I did want to protect her.

Besides, it wasn’t like I had anyone else in mind.

The friendship was already there, providing a fertile field in which love would grow. In time, we could build something solid.

I held out my hand, glad to see that it was rock steady. I could do this. For my family. “All right. I’ll do it right after dinner.”

Dad set the ring onto my palm and gave me one of his half-hugs before heading for the dining room. I hung back for a minute, looking at Mom’s ring and wondering what she would think about all of this.

She’d have liked Aurelia, I decided. And she would’ve wanted me to be happy. I tucked the ring into my pocket and joined the others at the table. Aurelia was next to me, but the conversation stayed so thick during the meal that I barely got a word in to her. It didn’t quiet down until the dessert had been served, and Dad gave me a pointed look that I took to mean that it was time.

I took a deep breath. I could do this. Would do this.

“Aurelia.” I took her hand, and she looked at me, startled at the unexpected touch. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I think that we’ve found we’re a good fit together.”

Everyone but Dad and Ronall looked confused, but I plunged ahead even as my heart hammered in my chest. Sliding from my chair, I went down on one knee before I could rethink my actions. The entire room went still.

“Will you marry me?”

Davin muttered something under his breath that I was sure was a curse, but I ignored him. This was between Aurelia and me. Sure, Dad and Ronall had their hands in it, but it was ultimately our decision to make.

She looked from me to her father and then back to me before nodding, her face a bright red. I slid the ring onto her finger as Dad and Ronall congratulated us. I heard Cynthia in there too and something perfectly polite from Davin, but I just kept my eyes on my fiancée as I stood up.

I supposed this was an appropriate time for that first kiss, but I’d make it brief and chaste, not wanting to embarrass her further. I bent toward her but was stopped when Grandad’s arm went around my shoulders and yanked me up straight.

“A toast to the happy couple.” He raised his glass, his expression as unreadable as if it’d been set in stone. “And after that, Deklin, you and I need to talk about our trip to Vegas this weekend.”

As if today couldn’t have gotten any stranger.

THIRTEEN

SOFI

I'D ALWAYS HATED DRIVING IN VEGAS TRAFFIC, BUT I WOULD'VE GIVEN almost anything to be in a comfortable, air-conditioned car instead of on a stuffy bus with a heavy bagful of groceries. Ms. Stanton was bringing Dallas here tomorrow for our visit, and I'd planned to make us lunch. I didn't know if Mead was working again or if Ms. Stanton had decided to observe without him around, but whatever the reason, I was grateful.

My hand went to my cheek. The bruise I'd gotten earlier this week had faded enough that I could cover it up with makeup, but I still felt it like a pulse beneath my skin. It didn't physically hurt anymore, but the humiliation and shame would take longer to go away.

Or, rather, it'd get pushed down into boxes and packed away in my head, because I hadn't yet been able to get any of it to leave entirely. Maybe now that I was away from Mead on a day-to-day basis, I'd be able to actually heal and not simply survive.

I had one more stop to make before I went home, and as I went out into the late summer heat, I wondered how many years it would be before I could afford a car. Then I realized that if it was going to take years, it'd be better if I didn't think about that at all. It was too depressing.

I walked into the hardware store and smiled politely at the cashier who greeted me. I'd discovered this place by accident about two weeks after moving into my apartment. I'd forgotten to get a towel rack for my bathroom when I'd gone to one of the bigger department stores, and while I'd been trying to decide if it'd be worth getting back on the bus, I'd seen this place. An out of the way, family-run hardware store where the employees didn't talk down to me if I didn't know specifically what I was looking for, it was

exactly what I needed.

This morning, I'd pulled my dresser handle off the drawer and then discovered that I didn't have the right screwdriver to fix it. I'd thought about borrowing one from the super, but I didn't want to have to keep calling a man every time I had to fix something so simple.

It was one thing to have the super fix a leak or an appliance where some level of understanding was needed. It was something else to not be able to screw in a drawer handle. Mead had often ridiculed me for the things I couldn't do. Finding what I was capable of was helping me build back up my self-worth.

I dug a screw from my pocket and started looking for the right size screwdriver to fit it. I'd just matched it when someone behind me cleared his throat. For one heart-stopping moment, I thought Mead had followed me here, and then I forced myself to turn around and face my fear. Relief made my knees weak when I saw that the man in front of me wasn't Mead.

Unkempt gray and sandy brown hair, coal-black eyes, and a scar through his left eyebrow, he looked like the type of man that should have scared me, but after what Mead had done to me at work, seeing a stranger while out shopping in a public place was hardly enough to get my blood pressure rising.

"I'm sorry. Am I in your way?" I asked, taking a half-step sideways.

"No, Miss. My name is Royd Kichner, and I'm a private investigator, contacting you on behalf of a client."

The muscles in my jaw clenched as I fought back the sliver of panic trying to get a foothold. This guy had to be pushing sixty and was only a couple inches taller than me, but he had an athletic build that told me not to underestimate what he could do. It was that thought that kept a civil tongue in my head.

"Could you repeat that, please?"

If Mead had hired someone to come at me in public like this, I needed to find the money for an attorney sooner rather than later. Then again, this guy might not have been here to physically threaten me, but rather to dig up dirt, and this was the caution to back off before the shit hit the fan, so to speak.

"I have an employment opportunity that will pay you enough to hire the representation you need to get your son back."

Heat rushed to my face, and I shook my head. Any trace of worry was burned away by anger. "I'm not Julia Roberts, and this isn't *Pretty Woman*."

I fought to keep my voice down, not wanting anyone else to hear me being propositioned like some prostitute. “I don’t sleep with men for money.”

One corner of his mouth twitched up like he was trying to hide a smile, and that just pissed me off more. “You don’t have to sleep with him, just make him fall for you.”

My jaw dropped. Who the *hell* did this man think he was? What sort of balls did it take to walk up to a complete stranger and try to hire her as a girlfriend for a client?

Except he’d mentioned Dallas. Not by name, but he’d said that he could pay me enough to get my son back. He knew that I was fighting my ex for custody, which meant this wasn’t some random approach.

“Who are you?” I asked, taking a step back. If I had to, I’d scream.

“My client wants to hire you to date his grandson. Make the kid fall for you.” He held up a hand to stop a protest. “Not a *kid* kid. He’s in his twenties.”

Like that made it all okay. I shook my head. “No. I don’t want to hear anything else. I’m not interested, and you need to get away from me before I call for security.”

Completely unruffled by the threat, he held out a business card. “If you change your mind, just give me a call. Don’t wait too long. I’ve got other women to talk to besides you.”

I didn’t want to take the card, but he kept standing there with his hand out, so I snatched it, hoping that would make him go away.

“Have a good day, Miss Brennan.”

It wasn’t until I heard the bell over the front door ring that I realized he’d called me by my maiden name, as if he wanted to assure me that he wasn’t coming to me as Mead’s wife, but as a single woman. If the circumstances had been different, I might’ve appreciated it, but as it was, I just wanted to get my screwdriver and get home so I could concentrate on getting ready for Dallas’s visit. I didn’t want to spend another minute thinking about my bizarre encounter.

Except I kept hearing it in my head the entire way home. Between the way men looked at me at work and the proposition I’d just received, I was feeling less like a strong woman leaving an abusive situation...and more like a whore with a nicer label.

I slammed my door behind me and took my bags into my kitchen. I had everything I needed to make a good, nutritious lunch that Dallas and I could

share tomorrow. I had a screwdriver that I could use to fix my dresser all by myself. These were good things, but all of the joy I'd felt just an hour ago was gone.

I needed to push that odd meeting out of my mind, and putting things away gave me the sort of monotonous work I needed to calm me. I'd almost succeeded when someone knocked on my door.

My heart pounded as I went to it, hoping it wasn't Mead. A quick glance through the peephole showed someone else I didn't really want to see, though she was always more welcome than my ex-husband.

"Mrs. Islip," I said as I opened the door. "Please, come in."

"Mrs. Stafford." Marge Islip had only ever referred to me by my married status and name, but since it was still my legal name, I wasn't going to make a big deal out of it.

"What are your plans for today?" she asked, opening the folder she always had with her.

I was used to her abrupt manner and knew not to take offense. While she didn't seem to be a member of Mead's fan club, she also didn't treat me as if I'd been wrongly accused. She didn't care that I'd always claimed to be innocent, but she didn't insult me either, so it definitely could have been worse.

"Ms. Stanton is bringing Dallas by for a short visit tomorrow, so I'm going to do my cleaning this afternoon, and after that, I have a shift at work."

She knew where I worked since keeping track of my place of employment was her job. Since my official job description was showgirl and the club had a relatively clean reputation, she'd approved it from a legal standpoint. I'd gotten the impression that she didn't personally approve of it, though. Whether for good or bad, she didn't let her private opinions about anything come into play.

"Your last drug test came back clean."

I held back the comment that all of my drug tests had been clean. She knew that because she had the results of every single one of them right there in that file of hers. She hadn't looked surprised at any of them, but I'd gotten the impression that she would've had the same non-reaction if it'd come back positive.

"I'll be speaking to Ms. Stanton on Monday morning to discuss her observations during your visits." She made another note. "Please stay here while I do my walk-through."

I nodded, crossing my arms as I leaned against the table. The first time she'd told me that, I'd been annoyed but hadn't argued. Now, I knew that it was the way she did things. I didn't like being treated like a criminal, but I understood why she'd want to have the exact same routine with each person. It saved her from accusations of favoritism.

Besides, I didn't have anything to hide, and not really anything that would even embarrass me. Despite the sexual nature of my job, I had absolutely nothing sexual in my apartment. My underwear was all simple cotton, my bras as plain as possible. I owned no lingerie, and the very idea of sex toys embarrassed the shit out of me.

Mead was the only man I'd ever had sex with, and he'd spent the entire time we were together shaming me, humiliating me. He'd said it was my fault that I hadn't ever climaxed with him. That I was barely good enough for him to fuck.

Before meeting him, I'd masturbated every so often, using my fingers to get off, but he'd told me I wasn't allowed to do that anymore. That if I couldn't manage to reach an orgasm when we were having sex, I didn't deserve to have one.

I'd never been able to decide if he was ignorant or cruel, but I'd always suspected both.

"Everything seems to be in order," Mrs. Islip said as she finished her inspection. "This is my last required surprise visit. Unless you've violated your probation or I receive a negative report from Ms. Stanton, I'll be scheduling any future visits until your probation is complete. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Just one." I straightened and put my hands in my pockets. "Will this help with my custody case?"

She didn't seem surprised by my question, but considering how my entire world revolved around Dallas, it made sense. "I have no involvement in custody issues. My reports will be filed as they're supposed to be, and it will be up to your lawyer to utilize anything needed for your case."

My lawyer. Right. That massive number I'd put together had never seemed as far away as it did right now. I could make lunch for Dallas, keep doing all of the things I needed to do to make it through my probation, and still never have more than short visits simply because I couldn't afford to fight.

The business card in my pocket suddenly felt heavy.

And it felt like it might be the answer to everything...if it didn't cost me my soul.

FOURTEEN

DEKLIN

WE LANDED IN VEGAS EARLIER THAT AFTERNOON, AND NOT LONG AFTER WE'D settled into the hotel, Grandad had told me he had an appointment that I didn't need to go to, and then he'd disappeared. It was Sunday, and we hadn't scheduled anything for today, but Grandad had insisted we get here right away.

My suspicion that he was trying to keep Aurelia and me apart just kept getting stronger, but I didn't know how to confront him about it. Or if I even should. It seemed sort of pointless since Aurelia and I were engaged. That was pretty much the opposite of apart.

But that was a problem for another day. Right now, I had a 'date' of a different kind waiting for me in the hotel restaurant.

From the doorway, I could see him at the bar, and I chuckled as the bartender leaned closer to him. His hair was the dark kind of blond that was just this side of light brown, and I didn't need to see his face to know that he had light blue eyes women swooned over.

Damon was the black sheep in the family, choosing to become a musician instead of being part of the family business, but he wouldn't have been suited to real estate anyway, so Dad didn't actually mind.

The moment he saw me, his face lit up, and he gave me a hug. That was Damon, all exuberance and good humor.

"You look good, little brother." Damon sat back down, and I took the seat next to him.

"You too." Between me finishing up at school and Damon's concert schedule, we hadn't seen each other since Christmas. "How did last night's concert go?"

“Good,” he said, sipping his drink. “No surprises. Everyone doing their jobs.”

I frowned at his bored tone. “I thought you loved what you do.”

“I do,” he said. He was smiling, but there was something in his eyes that told me he wasn’t being completely honest. “Now, how about you tell me why I had to hear from Davin that you’re engaged?”

I waved over the bartender instead of answering the question. After giving her my order, I turned toward Damon again. “It was a...spontaneous thing.”

One eyebrow shot up. “You’re not exactly an impulsive person, Dek. I’ve never even heard of this girl, and you’re ready to marry her?”

“She’s a sweet woman, Damon.” I pointed at him. “And you’re not exactly in a position to be giving me advice about dating.”

He grinned. “I’d never dream of it.”

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. “Please tell me you’re not going to make this harder for me. Grandad is already working overtime to keep Aurelia and me from spending much time together.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. Dad practically threw me at Aurelia, and Grandad keeps pulling us apart. I don’t know if it’s Grandad not liking the Kane family, or if he thinks Dad shouldn’t have set me up with her or what.”

“You haven’t asked him?”

I gave Damon a look, and he laughed.

“You’re right. That was a stupid question.”

“Ronall said that you and Davin loved the Kane boys. You would’ve only been a few years old when they moved.”

“I don’t remember them.” He drained his glass and motioned for a refill. “Doesn’t it strike you as weird that we’d never heard about these ‘old family friends’ until they suddenly show up?”

“Do you think they’re up to something?” I asked, surprised.

“Don’t you?”

I took a small drink and shook my head. “I think it’s more likely that it’s just one of those things that Dad never told us.”

“Possible,” Damon agreed. “Now, tell me what it is about Aurelia that made you fall so madly in love with her that you decided you just had to marry her.”

“Dad actually suggested it to me,” I admitted. “We were taking things

slow, but Dad told me that Ronall wanted to make sure Aurelia was taken care of before she left for grad school.”

“Wait a minute.” Damon turned toward me, his drink forgotten. “You proposed to this woman because Dad *told* you to?”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted. “I like her. She’s easy to talk to and sweet. Shy, but not stand-offish.”

“You like her.” The way Damon said it made me narrow my eyes. “Dek, you said you *like* your fiancée. Like, not love.” He picked up his glass and drained it before setting it back down. “Do you love her?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But it doesn’t matter. People marry for all sorts of reasons.”

He snorted and grabbed my arm. “Come on, Deklin. You know this is too fast.”

“It’s not.” I pulled my arm away from him. “Nothing about Aurelia and me is too fast. We can have a long engagement. I mean, it’s not like we’ve even slept together yet.”

“Shit! Dek, are you telling me you haven’t had sex with her?”

I was thoroughly annoyed with this conversation, but I wanted to be honest with my brother. “We haven’t even kissed,” I admitted, lowering my voice. “Didn’t you hear me saying Grandad is cockblocking me with my fiancée?”

My brother stared at me, shaking his head. Finally, he blew out a breath and ran both hands through his hair. “Look, I get that you want to do this for Dad, but you have to do this for you. You deserve to have someone you love. Not just a friend.”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it. Being friends now doesn’t mean what we have won’t become love.”

He sighed. “All right, little brother. If you won’t do it for you, do it for her. Doesn’t Aurelia deserve someone who wants to marry her because they love her?”

Shit.

FIFTEEN

SOFI

MY VISIT WITH DALLAS HAD GONE WELL, AND MS. STANTON COMPLIMENTED my cooking, both of which should have made for one of my best days in a long time, but my stomach had been too twisted into knots for me to have enjoyed it as much as I should have. What I was doing was monumentally stupid, but it was the only option I could live with.

And that was what I kept telling myself as I walked into the restaurant where I was supposed to meet Royd and his client. It wasn't the fanciest place in Vegas, but it would've been far out of my price range even when I was married.

I was wearing my nicest outfit, one I'd gotten for job interviews back when I'd thought I still had a chance to work somewhere decent, but my simple pencil skirt and plain blouse made me look more like a waitress than a patron.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Clearly, the man with the handlebar mustache and bad comb-over was thinking along the same lines.

"I'm meeting someone," I said. "Two people, actually. One of them is Royd Kichner."

"Oh, of course. Right this way."

The man's sudden change of attitude made me feel better about the likelihood of Royd's client being able to pay what I'd need to make this worth doing. With that concern at least being put to bed – for now anyway – I followed the host to a secluded table at the back of the restaurant where two men sat waiting. One of them was Royd, so I turned my attention to the other.

If I looked like I wasn't quite fancy enough for this place, Royd's client

looked like he was slumming it.

Kichner had said that his client had wanted to hire me for his grandson. Both of my grandfathers had died before I was born, so I didn't have anyone to compare this guy to, but I had a feeling not many people would've pictured him when thinking the word *grandpa*.

He was tall and lean, distinguished-looking but not a snob. He clearly could've had me come to one of those places that needed a year-ahead reservation, but he'd chosen one that was nice enough to let me know he had the means to pay me, and at the same time, not so fancy that I felt like he was bragging. With a grandson in his twenties, he had to be over sixty, but he looked good for his age, and it was definitely from good genes rather than plastic surgery.

Both men stood when I reached the table, and I blushed, taking the seat Royd pulled out for me. After giving the nearby waiter my drink order, Royd introduced me to his client.

"Miss Brennan, I'd like you to meet Jude Holden."

"Sofi, please," I said as I held out my hand. "Though I do appreciate you using my maiden name. I'm only keeping Stafford so it's the same as my son's."

"Royd tells me that you're recently divorced and are in the middle of a custody battle with your ex," Mr. Holden said. "He also said that your ex doesn't play fair."

I gave Royd a startled look. "What do you know about Mead?"

"Nothing I can prove, unfortunately," he said, a muscle popping in his jaw. "Not with the basic research I did. But I did more than that on you personally, and you're by far the more credible of you two, which leads me to believe that your ex is using his connections to discredit you."

"That's..." Hope sprang into my heart. "That's exactly what he's doing."

"I'm willing to pay you enough to hire the best family attorney in the city and have some left over," Mr. Holden said.

This sounded too good to be true, and if my life had taught me anything, it was that if something seemed too good, it usually was.

"What, exactly, is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to seduce my youngest grandson, Deklin. I want you to make him fall in love with you, or at least fall enough in lust that he breaks off his engagement."

Jude Holden said it with such a matter-of-fact tone that I almost didn't

process what he was really asking me to do. How cruel was this man that he'd hire someone to break up a relationship? He must've seen my opinion on my face because the next thing he said was an explanation of sorts.

"They met at the end of June and have barely spent any time together since. The engagement is my son's idea, not Deklin's. The boy is just trying to make his father proud."

I picked up my napkin, then realized it was cloth and put it back down again, my fingers itching to do something. "Why didn't you just talk to your son, then? Or grandson, for that matter?"

Jude reached into his jacket and retrieved a piece of paper. "Because neither of them can know the real reason the engagement needs to be called off." He held the paper out to me. "This is extremely sensitive information, Miss Brennan, but I think once you see what's on this paper, you'll understand why I have to do this."

Curious, I took the paper and opened it. My eyes widened as I read what was written there. Mr. Holden's methods were unorthodox, to say the least, but I no longer thought him cruel. If anything, he was trying to cause the least amount of damage to the people he loved.

Tears burned my eyes as I looked back up at him. "Why me?"

He cleared his throat and looked at the private investigator, who leaned forward. "Let's just say that someone who knows of your situation brought you to my attention, and I thought you'd be perfect for the job."

Someone who knew of my situation?

My parole officer? Child services? Sanders Flannery? Pasha?

Those were the handful of people who even knew a little about my situation. Would any of them try to help me? And if they did, could I turn this opportunity away?

"I'll do it," I said as I handed him back the paper. "But I'm not a prostitute. I'm not going to sleep with him for money."

"I won't ask you to," Mr. Holden said as he tucked the paper away again, looking satisfied and relieved. "But I will need you to come to Houston with us for a while. I don't think the short amount of time we're here will be long enough."

My heart fell. "I can't go to Houston. I have a job and an apartment. I have visits with my son that I can't miss." My face burned as I added the one thing I didn't want to say. "I'm on probation. I can't just up and leave."

"I'll pay your rent until you're done," Mr. Holden said immediately.

“And you’ll have enough money to keep you going while you find a better job when you come back.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think you understand. I have a drug conviction. I might not have been given any jail time, but it changes things for employers.”

“I know all about that, Miss Brennan.” Mr. Holden waved his hand like it didn’t matter. “When you’re finished with this, I will give you a glowing letter of recommendation and a list of all of the places my family owns. From there, it will only be a matter of finding the best fit.”

“And I’ll speak with your parole officer,” Royd said. “I don’t foresee any issues.”

“As for your visits with your son, you’ll have access to the Holden family jet to fly you back and forth as often as necessary.”

I leaned back in my chair, my head spinning. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll do it,” Mr. Holden said.

Our food’s arrival gave me a few minutes to think. “Mr. Kichner, how much do your services cost?”

“Depends on what you want,” he replied. “And Royd is fine.”

“Would I be able to hire you to dig into my ex and see if you can find any proof that he set me up for the drug bust?” My fingers tightened around my fork, the cool metal pressing into my flesh as I tried to caution myself against too much hope.

“I’ll pay for Royd’s services,” Mr. Holden offered. “Unless I need him for something specific, he’ll work exclusively on digging up everything on your ex-husband.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked, my forkful of pasta dropping back to my plate.

A shadow passed over his face. “Let’s just say that I have a soft spot for women whose husbands are abusive bastards.”

In that case...

“Thank you.” I wasn’t going to let my pride get in the way of someone helping me clear my name. Help me leave that job. Get my son back.

“Good.” Mr. Holden retrieved an envelope from the same inside pocket as the paper he’d given me earlier. “Here’s half of what I’ll pay you. You’ll receive the rest when the engagement is broken. If my grandson appears to be incapable of being dissuaded from his engagement, you may keep this, but

you will forfeit the remainder.”

I took the envelope, unsure if I was supposed to look inside or if that'd be tacky.

“Go ahead,” Royd said quietly, as if he knew what I was thinking.

I nodded and peeked at the check. My heart nearly stopped. I couldn't be reading that correctly. There were way too many zeroes. This couldn't be only half. It was more than I'd imagined for the whole thing.

“We can renegotiate if that's not enough,” Mr. Holden said. “I'd rather not have to use Royd's back-up.”

“No!” I said quickly. I put the envelope in my purse and resisted the urge to keep the cheap leather bag on the table. “No. Thank you very much. It's more than generous.”

Mr. Holden smiled. “Good. Now, finish your dinner, and we'll discuss scheduling over dessert.”

“I do have one question before we get to that,” I said. “What happens if Deklin realizes that it's all fake?”

“Don't worry about that. I'll have a plan in place for every possible contingency.”

I doubted he could think of everything that could possibly go wrong, but I didn't really have much choice but to trust him. He was my best hope of getting Dallas back.

SIXTEEN

DEKLIN

I SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN THAT LAST SHOT, BUT WHEN YOUR BIG BROTHER double-dog-dared you to take another shot of tequila, then you took another shot of tequila and damned the consequences.

Damning the consequences, however, did not actually make said consequences go away.

Which was why I was downing my second bottle of water and hoping the aspirin kicked in before I got to the restaurant for breakfast. Just the thought of eating made me queasy, but if I didn't eat, Grandad would want to know what was wrong, and I didn't want him thinking that I couldn't be trusted on a business trip. Granted, I'd been out with Damon, not a client, but if everyone was looking for a reason to bench me, I doubted it'd matter who I was with.

Maybe that was why Grandad kept pulling me away from Aurelia. Maybe he was trying to get me so frustrated that I'd do something stupid.

As soon as I thought it, I felt bad. Grandad wasn't that kind of person. He wasn't sneaky or passive-aggressive. That was honestly why I thought it was weird of him to keep taking me on trips rather than just coming out and saying it if he had a problem with Aurelia and me.

Then again, maybe he just didn't want me to think he was trying to control my life like Dad sometimes did. Considering the engagement was one of those controlled "decisions," I couldn't exactly brush aside how much influence Dad had over my choices.

I leaned against the elevator wall and closed my eyes, the cool surface soothing my pounding head. If I was going to be honest about last night, I had to admit that it'd been more than Damon's dare that had made me take

that last shot.

I'd hoped that it would have done what all of the other ones hadn't: made me forget about Damon's comments about my engagement. He'd dropped the subject after asking me if Aurelia deserved better, but I hadn't been able to get that question out of my mind.

She did deserve better. She deserved someone who loved her and who she loved, but just because she loved someone didn't mean he wouldn't break her heart. Wouldn't it be better for her to marry someone who would protect her and take care of her? Wasn't that also love? Maybe not the romantic kind, but maybe that shouldn't matter.

I was still thinking about it when I walked into the restaurant that I almost sat down without realizing that Grandad wasn't alone at the table. A pretty woman with short, raven-black hair and baby blue eyes sat on the opposite side of the table. She looked to be around my age and well-dressed, even if her clothes weren't expensive. Her smile was polite but a bit stiff, and I wondered if she was as surprised by me as I was by her.

"Hi."

"Deklin, good morning." Grandad was clearly at ease. "I'd like you to meet Sofi Brennan."

"Stafford," she corrected quietly. "I haven't had it changed back to my maiden name yet."

Her voice was low, but not in a rough way. More like...sultry.

"I apologize." Grandad gestured for me to sit. "Sofi, this is my grandson, Deklin. Deklin, this is Sofi Strafford, my assistant."

I didn't bother to conceal my surprise. They both obviously knew that I had no clue who she was or why she was here.

The waiter had impeccable timing because, as he started with Sofi, I was able to lean over to Grandad and speak without her hearing.

"What do you mean, she's your assistant? You came to Vegas to find someone for a job I didn't even know was open?"

Grandad gave me that enigmatic smile of his. "I didn't want the family name prompting applicants who aren't actually interested in the job."

That made sense, I supposed. When Grandad had married Cynthia, most people thought she was after his money. I could see women wanting to be his assistant thinking that they'd seduce him and be wife number four. What I didn't understand was why he needed an assistant at all. Wasn't that the entire point of me being here?

I kept my tone even and light as I asked, “I thought I was supposed to be doing all the extra things you didn’t want to do.”

“She’s not for me. She’s for you.” As I tried to process what he could possibly mean by that, he explained, “If she trains as my assistant, but with you here, she’ll learn the best ways to do things, as well as any quirks you might have. By the time I’m ready to completely step down, she’ll be able to be your assistant as you take over from me.”

He wanted me to take over scouting for the company.

Now, I felt like shit for thinking he was trying to keep me away from Aurelia and taking me all over the damn country to keep me busy. This entire time, he’d trusted me enough to train me to do what he did. I vowed I wouldn’t make him regret his decision.

After the waiter left with our orders, I turned back to Sofi and held out my hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Sorry if I came off a little grumpy. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Not at all.” She smiled, and her entire face lit up.

It hit me like a punch to the gut. I’d never had such a visceral reaction to anyone before. I’d noticed she was attractive, but this was beyond an acknowledgment of general physical appearance. I’d been around beautiful women before. Beautiful women who threw themselves at me because of who my family was. But there’d never been anything like this. I had no idea what to do with it.

Damn.

“Your grandfather tells me you recently received your MBA from the University of North Carolina.” Sofi interrupted my thoughts. “I’ve never left Nevada, not even for college.”

“Where did you go?”

“University of Nevada Las Vegas. Really adventurous, right?” She laughed and stirred what looked like a cup of tea. “I majored in landscape architecture but ended up leaving before I got my degree.”

“Why was that?” I asked, stirring creamer into my coffee.

Something flickered in her eyes, there and gone again before I could figure out what it was. She gave a casual shrug. “Life happened.”

“We know all about that, don’t we?” Grandad joined the conversation. “Now, here are the properties I want us to view today.”

With that, we shifted to work, but I found my attention straying to Sofi more often than I was comfortable.

I was such a bastard.

THE AFTERNOON HAD TURNED from hot into scorching, and each time we moved out of the air conditioning seemed hotter than the last. I'd abandoned my suit jacket after the first property, and now my sleeves were rolled up, and the top button of my shirt was undone. Grandad didn't look like he'd even broken a sweat, but he must've understood that my wardrobe changes were better than me passing out from heatstroke because he didn't say anything about it.

"We're making good time," I said as I slid into the back seat of the car, my thigh brushing against Sofi's and making my gut tighten. "Only two more to go."

"A slight detour, if you don't mind," Grandad said. "I'm feeling a bit drained. Would you mind viewing the last two without me, Deklin?"

Immediately, concern replaced everything else I was feeling. "Are you okay? Dehydrated? When was the last time you had something to drink?"

His eyes narrowed. "I said I'm tired, not dying. You just wait and see how much energy you have when you're my age."

I flushed but didn't back down. "You shouldn't ignore it if you think something's wrong."

"Deklin, let it go."

I heard the warning in his voice and debated whether or not to heed it.

"I'm tired, and at my age, it's not good to push myself. Now, between you and Sofi, I am confident I'll have everything I need. So, we're going to take me back to the hotel, and then the two of you are going to continue on and finish the list for today, so we don't get behind."

I didn't like it, but I knew better than to argue with him when he was like this. It would be better all the way around if I just did what he said. Besides, if he wanted me to take over doing this myself, this would be a good test run.

SEVENTEEN

SOFI

JUDE'S LEAVING DEKLIN AND ME ALONE TO SEE THE LAST TWO PROPERTIES was unexpected, but I supposed it shouldn't have been. He was concerned enough about the engagement to hire a stranger to seduce his grandson. Lying about being tired was hardly a stretch.

I'd thought Deklin would see through it for sure, but he didn't say anything as we drove away from the hotel, heading for the next estate on his list. The determination on his face made me wonder if the reason Deklin wasn't questioning his grandfather's motives was because he wanted the opportunity to prove himself without Jude around.

I could understand that all too well. Sometimes, I felt like I'd spent my entire life trying to live up to some impossible standard set by people who didn't know me and hadn't asked what I wanted. Relating to Deklin should have made this job easier, but it just made me feel worse about deceiving someone who seemed to be such a nice guy.

Reminding myself that I was doing this for Dallas only alleviated a small portion of my guilt, but then I reminded myself that Jude was truly looking out for Deklin's best interests. It sucked that doing things this way was probably less damaging than the truth would have been, but none of that was my responsibility. I wasn't taking advantage of anyone, and if someone was going to get paid to do this, I deserved it as much as the next person.

"What made you want to go into landscape architecture?" Deklin asked suddenly. "I mean, that's not exactly the type of job someone spends their life wanting to do."

At least I could answer this question with complete honesty. "You know how when you're little and play with blocks, most kids want the action ones?"

Helicopters and spaceships, that sort of thing? Not me. I wanted the ones where I could make cities and parks and all that. I like neatness and order, but with creativity inside it. A clear path to show beauty.”

He stared at me as if I'd said something profound, and I was struck by the depth in his green eyes. He was more attractive than I'd thought he would be. Clean-shaven, he didn't have one of those baby faces that needed scruff to keep him from looking like a teenager. His golden-brown hair probably needed a trim to be considered entirely professional, but I liked how it wasn't exactly tidy. From the little I'd gotten to know him, it suited him.

A couple inches over six feet, he was taller than me, and he carried every inch of it well. He had a lean body that made me think he did a lot of physical things to keep in shape instead of just relying on nature.

The phrase *physical things* had been the wrong one to use. Now, all I could think about were the sorts of things he could do to me, and I didn't want those images in my head. I was supposed to seduce him, and that meant I needed to keep my head clear, not drool over him like some horny teenager.

My problem was, I didn't really know how to seduce someone. Working at Diamond Stars Lounge helped a bit, but that wasn't what I wanted to do here. I had the feeling that if I threw myself at him, I'd either end up having to backpedal if he assumed I wanted to sleep with him, or come on too strong and embarrass myself when he rejected me.

I clearly hadn't thought this through as much as I should have, but it was too late now. Jude had taken care of the arrangements for my apartment. Mrs. Islip knew I'd be going to Houston for a new job. And I'd quit dancing.

The one good thing Mead had done by coming into the lounge and assaulting me was make it easy for me to quit without any sort of backlash. Sanders had been a little annoyed, but he actually hadn't been mad at me.

Right after the incident, he'd assured me that security had Mead's photo, and they weren't to let him inside again, but he hadn't really been surprised when I'd called him last night. I hadn't known what to tell him, but I'd barely gotten two words out of my mouth before he'd said he understood.

How sad was my life if my boss, a virtual stranger who hired women to be ogled, was kinder to me than my own husband had been?

Thinking about Mead didn't help me figure out how best to seduce Deklin, but I doubted there was anything short of an instruction manual that could do me any good. I supposed the only thing to do was jump in with both feet. The logical place to start was flirting.

My track record with men suggested I was bad at it – practically screamed it, actually – but I had to try. I had no doubt whatsoever that Jude would fire me and demand his money back if I didn't at least attempt to do what he'd hired me for. He was nice, but he wasn't a saint.

“Are you passionate about anything?” I mentally kicked myself the moment the question popped out. Why did my attempts at flirting always end up sounding like the script to some cheesy porn?

Deklin tapped his pen against his chin, obviously taking my question seriously, though I couldn't for the life of me think why. He seemed eager to prove himself, and I assumed that would be the logical answer, even if my question was inane.

“I don't know.” The look of surprise on his face would've been comical if it hadn't made me sad for him. Everyone should have something they're passionate about, even if it had changed through the years.

“You've always wanted to go into real estate then?”

He shrugged. “It's the family business. My oldest brother is the CFO, and he'll take over as the CEO after our dad retires. My other brother isn't involved in the company, but Damon's always been all about music, and he's good at it. With his talent, no one expected him to do anything other than that.”

Damon Holden? Why did that name sound familiar?

Deklin chuckled. “You're trying to figure out who he is, aren't you? He did ‘Heartbreak Collision’ and ‘Up All Night.’”

“Seriously? I love him!” I blushed as Deklin laughed, but there was no malice in the sound. “I mean, I love his music. Obviously. Because I've never met him. I'm not one of those crazy fans who thinks she knows a celebrity... dammit!”

“You're cute when you're flustered.”

Silence fell as we both processed what Deklin had blurted out. It wasn't a declaration of love or some lust-filled statement designed to get me in bed, but it did tell me that maybe I had a shot at getting this to work after all.

“I didn't...” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Dammit.”

It was my turn to laugh, and he relaxed when he saw he hadn't offended me.

“Sorry for fangirling,” I said. “It wasn't very professional of me.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “That wasn't even close to fangirling. When I was in college, one of my professors gave me a pair of her underwear

and asked me to give them to Damon.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.”

He grinned at me, and I saw the boy he’d been before he’d decided that the family business was all he wanted for his life. I understood now why Jude had needed to take drastic measures to end Deklin’s engagement. Nothing short of love or the truth would do it. I just hoped I could get him to care enough about me to work. No matter how awful I felt for helping Jude deceive Deklin, it’d be worth it, and not only for the money.

The bright anger I felt toward his father for doing this surprised me. I guess it reminded me too much of my mother, putting her own desires ahead of what was best for me. I supposed I should have known that selfishness transcended socio-economic differences.

“I guess Grandad hiring an assistant in Vegas makes sense,” Deklin said. “If people wouldn’t have applied to try to get money, then they might have done it to get close to Damon. Here, the chances of someone automatically knowing that Damon was connected to Holden Enterprises was slimmer than back home.”

I felt a flash of guilt and then reminded myself that I hadn’t gone to Jude. He’d come to me. Whatever Royd had told him had caused him to pick me over however many other women Royd had looked into, and none of that was my fault.

“Here we are,” Deklin said as we pulled into a long driveway.

It was time to get to work. Maybe if I did well enough taking notes for Jude, I’d be able to get a job doing something similar after this was done.

BY THE TIME we got back into the car after the last property, I was comparing my current level of exhaustion to what I felt like after a full night of sets at Diamond Stars. Who would’ve thought being in real estate could be so physically demanding?

“Did you drive to the hotel this morning?” Deklin asked as he settled into the seat next to me.

“No, I don’t have a car at the moment.”

“Let me drop you off at home then,” he said. Correctly guessing that I

was about to protest, he continued, "I'd feel much better if I knew you were home safe and sound."

If this had been just a regular job, I would've refused, thinking he had ulterior motives in mind, but since *I* was the one with ulterior motives, I figured it'd work to my advantage. Besides, I suspected that Deklin wouldn't have even considered doing anything inappropriate. In fact, the only thing that was making me hesitate was the thought of how he'd view my apartment. Someone used to having money would probably look down on someone like me.

Except my gut told me that Deklin wasn't like that at all. He was a decent guy who appreciated what he had, and he wasn't afraid of hard work. It was surprising the things someone could learn about a person in a few short hours.

"All right," I said. I gave him my address and hoped I wasn't making a mistake.

"I meant to ask earlier," he said, "are you coming back to Houston with us?"

I nodded. "For the time being. I have a lease, and I don't want to break it until I'm absolutely certain this is a good fit. Finding a good place for decent rent in Las Vegas isn't easy."

I didn't add that if I changed to an out-of-state address, my chances of winning any sort of custody back would fall. I was complying with all of the terms of my probation and custody agreement, and I wasn't going to do anything that would risk either one.

When we reached my building, Deklin insisted on walking me to my door, and the closer we got, the more awkward I felt. I had to do something to hint to Deklin that the chemistry we'd had all afternoon wasn't lost on me.

He hadn't once mentioned his fiancée, and I was grateful for that. If I made a move on him, I might seem forward, but at least I wouldn't be the kind of woman who hit on a man who was already taken.

Not for real, anyway.

He stood next to me as I dug my keys from my purse, and I hoped he didn't notice that my hands were shaking. After I unlocked the door, I turned back to him. It was now or never.

"Thank you," I said.

Then I leaned in and brushed my lips across his.

It was barely a kiss at all, but desire twisted in my belly, and I had to

hurry inside before I confused myself into thinking it was more than it could ever be.

EIGHTEEN

DEKLIN

I WAS AWARE THAT THE DOOR HAD SHUT, LEAVING ME STANDING IN THE hallway alone, but it seemed unimportant at the moment. My lips burned where she'd kissed me, and I still couldn't quite believe she'd done it. I supposed it could have been a mistake. An action as impulsive as her comment about Damon had been. Something she'd regretted the moment she'd done it and was even now berating herself for it.

I frowned in displeasure at the thought. I didn't like the idea that she was probably trying to figure out how to apologize tomorrow. She didn't need to be sorry. It wasn't like she'd known I was engaged. We'd been talking and joking. Maybe she'd taken it as me flirting with her.

I gave myself a shake.

Whatever it was, I couldn't do anything about it right now. Not unless I wanted to knock on her door and have a discussion right here. The only thing worse than that would've been if she'd invited me inside. Either way, I had no idea what to say to her.

Mostly because I had no idea how I felt about what she'd done.

My mind wandered all over the place as I made my way back to the hotel, questions circling at a pace rapid enough to make me dizzy.

Should I tell Grandad about the kiss? What if I did and it cost Sofi her job? Was that really my problem? Was Grandad wrong about her not being after our money? Had she just been trying to con me this whole time?

But I hadn't gotten that impression from her. Did that mean she was genuine or that I was simply that bad of a judge of character?

Grandad was waiting for me when I entered the suite, room service already spread on the table. He looked well, and I wondered if he'd just

needed a nap, or if he'd just been trying to give me a chance at doing things by myself.

"I trust everything went smoothly," he said as I looked over the selection of food he'd gotten.

"It did."

Except for the kiss at the end, but I wasn't about to share *that* with him, especially since I didn't know what it meant. Or what I wanted to do about it.

"How did Sofi do?"

I resigned myself to having to discuss work over dinner and made myself a plate. Maybe it was for the best. If I could focus on the work and not on the kiss, maybe it'd put everything in perspective, make it easier for me to see the way I should handle things.

SILK SLIPPED FROM HER SHOULDERS, and the robe puddled at her feet. I caught my breath at the vision she made standing next to my bed. Alabaster skin practically glowed in the pale moonlight. Full breasts with pale peach nipples. Long legs with dark hair between them.

I held out my hand to her, and she climbed onto the bed. We didn't speak, but I didn't mind. My other senses were too consumed by all that was her. My hands slid from her knees to her thighs as she moved to straddle my waist. My cock ached as it strained toward her center, desperate to be inside her, to be a part of her.

The muscles in her thighs tensed as she lowered herself onto me an inch at a time. It was torture of the most exquisite kind, tight heat enveloping me, squeezing me. Air puffed out of her in short little bursts, her skin flushing as her muscles quivered.

Her hands splayed out on my chest, my skin humming where we touched. As she slumped forward, she closed her eyes, and I took the opportunity to savor the sight of her. Lips parted. An expression of ecstasy on her face.

I surged upward, putting one hand on the small of her back to keep her in place, and the other gripped her ass, pulling her tight against me. She moaned, and I took her mouth, tongue plundering and exploring. Our bodies danced, her hands gripping my shoulders, nails biting into my skin. Pressure built inside me, pleasure coursing through my veins. Her nipples were hard

against my chest, and she tore her mouth from mine, biting at my jaw and neck until I shuddered, coming with her name on my lips.

“Sofi!” I bolted upright, still saying her name as I woke. My heart was racing, body covered in sweat...and the flannel pants I’d put on for bed were sticky and damp. “Fuck.”

I stood too fast, my head spinning. I walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower, my movements automatic. I didn’t know what time of day it was, but I wouldn’t be getting back to sleep anytime soon. I might as well take a shower and get some work done before Grandad was up. Maybe I could even have a private conversation with Aurelia—

Shit.

I’d forgotten to call Aurelia after dinner. I’d talked to her at least for a bit every day I was gone...until yesterday.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on the cold tile of the shower wall. I was the worst fucking fiancé ever.

NINETEEN

SOFI

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

Jude, Deklin, and I had spent the entire day together, moving from one property to another. I'd taken notes, listened to everything the two men discussed. It was exactly what I would've expected of a workday, but since I hadn't exactly been hired as an actual assistant, it was frustrating. I'd thought for sure I'd made progress yesterday, but from the moment I'd arrived at the hotel, Deklin had been handling me with a distant politeness.

We were at our last stop for the day when Jude pulled me aside, out of Deklin's earshot.

"What's going on?" he asked, his voice low. "You two were a lot friendlier yesterday."

I sighed, sure I was going to have to take a cab to Diamonds and beg to get my job back. "I kissed him."

Jude's eyebrows shot up.

"It was barely a kiss," I kept going, talking even faster with each word. "I don't know what happened after that."

He looked over at Deklin, a thoughtful expression on his face. "He was up early this morning, before me for the first time ever. He was jittery. Strange." Jude looked down at me. "I think he's feeling guilty."

"Shit." I immediately clapped a hand over my mouth. So much for professional. This just kept getting better. "I'm sorry."

"On the contrary, Ms. Stafford, this is a good thing."

It was?

He gave me a half-smile. "If he hadn't felt anything, he wouldn't have any reason to feel guilty, would he?"

Oh. I hadn't even thought about it that way.

"I'll get the two of you some time alone," he promised before heading over to where Deklin was standing, inspecting the fuse box.

I didn't know that Jude's idea was a good one, but he was the boss. Hopefully, he knew Deklin as well as he thought he did, and this wouldn't backfire. Then again, this was the man who'd built a real estate business essentially by himself. That wasn't the sort of thing someone did if they didn't have good instincts.

When we got into the car several minutes later, Deklin still wasn't looking at me, but Jude didn't seem concerned about it.

"A client back home gave me two tickets to a show tonight," Jude announced, "but as it doesn't start until late, I think I'll be too tired to enjoy it. I'd hate for the tickets to go to waste. The two of you should go."

Deklin glanced at me, but only for a second or two before turning to Jude. "That's not necessary. If Sofi wants to go, I'm sure she has someone she'd rather go with."

"Nonsense." Jude managed to make the word firm but not condescending. "It was given to the family, so at least one member of the family should go. You and Sofi will have a great time."

I wanted to tell Jude that it was okay. If Deklin didn't want to go with me, he should just leave it, but it wasn't my place. Jude and I had a business arrangement. How he handled the personal aspect of things was between him and his grandson.

Deklin sighed, and I was almost insulted by the wary expression on his face. "What's the show?"

Jude smiled. "Absinthe."

Fuck me.

The blank look on Deklin's face told me he didn't know what that was, but the gleam in Jude's eyes made me wonder if he did. I'd never seen it, but I knew it was a fairly risqué show, maybe even more than what I'd done at Diamond Stars Lounge. It wasn't just dancing either. I'd once heard someone refer to it as the X-rated Cirque du Soleil.

This was going to be interesting.

The rest of the ride back to the hotel was quiet, each of us consumed by our own thoughts. I wondered if Deklin was thinking about his fiancée or if he was trying to figure out how to get out of going tonight. Or both.

Jude was probably alternating between scheming and congratulating

himself for getting Deklin and me out on a date. Trying to figure out what they were thinking was easier than figuring out my own thoughts on the matter. I couldn't consider things too deeply, though, or I'd never be able to live with myself for deceiving someone as sweet as Deklin.

They dropped me off at my car, and I went home to eat and get ready, all the while half-expecting a call or text from Deklin saying that he'd decided not to go. I didn't like how much that possibility disappointed me, but there was no denying it. No lying to myself that it was all about the job, either. I genuinely liked Deklin, and the physical attraction between us was strong too. Even I wasn't that naïve.

As I put on one of my new dresses – courtesy of the clothing bonus Jude had given me the day I'd taken the job – I couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. When Deklin and I were alone, there'd be nothing keeping him from saying it was a mistake or that I needed to behave more professionally. My stomach clenched painfully. That brief kiss had electrified me in a way that nothing else ever had.

And I wanted more.

TWENTY

DEKLIN

I WAS STARTING TO SUSPECT THAT GRANDAD WAS TRYING TO SET ME UP WITH Sofi. Why else would he have left early yesterday and then sent Sofi and me out on our own tonight for something that wasn't work-related?

He clearly didn't like the idea of Aurelia and me together, but I didn't understand why he wouldn't just come out and say it. He'd never had a problem disagreeing with Dad before.

Still, I wasn't going to be rude to Sofi, even if she had kissed me. In fact, I could use this opportunity to let her know that I was flattered, but taken. She didn't seem to be the kind of woman who'd be offended or angry if I handled it politely.

All of my good intentions, however, flew out the window the moment she opened the door, and I saw her in that dress.

A deep midnight blue, it made her skin and eyes practically glow. Tasteful, it flattered her figure without being tawdry, and it managed to walk the line between casual and dressy perfectly. She'd put on low heels instead of the comfortable shoes she'd worn the last two days, and the attention it drew to her legs was nothing short of sinful.

"You look amazing."

My compliment made her blush, and I had the sudden feeling that people didn't say that to her enough, not without ulterior motives anyway. How foolish were the men in this city if they couldn't see what was right in front of them?

"Thank you. You do too," she said, gaze darting up to mine before sliding away.

"Thanks." I held out my arm. "Shall we?"

The slide of skin on skin when she hooked her arm through mine sent a hum of electricity through me, a low charge that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

What was I getting myself into?

“Have you seen the show before?” she asked, her voice so even that I knew she was forcing it.

“No. You?”

“I haven’t, but I’ve had friends that have. It’s supposed to be really good.” Color flooded her cheeks. “If a bit...salacious.”

Dammit, Grandad.

“Thanks for the warning,” I said with a half-smile. “That could’ve been quite a shock.”

“Do you think that’s why your grandfather gave us the tickets? That it wasn’t the sort of thing he’d want to see?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to share my suspicions with her just yet. “Maybe it’s his way of apologizing for leaving the two of us to look at the last two properties yesterday.”

She tensed, and I wondered if she thought I was going to mention the kiss. I wasn’t, not now, at least. The last thing I needed was to make things between her and me awkward before sitting through a show. Unless she brought it up, I’d put it out of mind until the end of our date.

No. Not a date.

Dammit.

We chatted about nothing as we made our way to the show, taking a few minutes to stop for drinks at concessions. Grateful that I’d had a driver bring us, I ordered something stronger than what I usually drank. I had a feeling I was going to need the alcohol to make it through tonight.

Our chairs were close together, pressing her leg against mine with an intimacy that made my heart pound. When the music began, I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that I could concentrate on the performance and not be distracted by the heat of her skin, the subtle floral scent she wore.

I’d never been more wrong in my life.

I could barely remember what happened from one scene to the next, but I was achingly aware of every shift, every breath. The air between us was charged, and each passing second made it worse. By the time the show ended, I was wound tighter than I’d ever been before.

I was also a little drunk.

Not like staggering and slurring my words drunk, but buzzed enough that my brain had finally stopped going a million miles a minute. And buzzed enough that I finally allowed myself to acknowledge how attracted I was to Sofi.

I wanted to kiss her.

A real kiss.

As we stood up to go outside, I put my hand on the small of her back, and she leaned into my touch. She glanced over her shoulder at me, and her eyes were dark with the promise of everything I wanted. We walked in silence to where our car was waiting, and I wondered what she was thinking. She hadn't drunk as much as I had, but I didn't know her tolerance for alcohol. I needed to know before I did something stupid.

Like kiss her.

I couldn't get that thought out of my head. I'd never wanted to kiss anyone this badly before, not even as a teenager.

Once we were in the car, I gave the driver her address as she leaned into me, her face tucked against my shoulder. I put my arm around her, and she sighed. Not a sad sigh, but a contented one.

Damn, she still smelled good. I never wanted us to move from how we were right now.

When the car pulled up in front of her building, I broke the silence. "Are you going to be okay alone tonight?"

She raised her head, and I drowned in her eyes. "Will you walk me to my door?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to say or do anything else. Who knew what sort of asinine things that would come rushing out of my mouth if I opened it? I probably needed to keep my hands to myself too, but I didn't have that much self-control right now. If she said not to or anything like that, of course, I'd stop, but if she didn't...

When we reached her door, she unlocked it and then reached for my hand. My heart leaped into my throat, and I took a step toward her. Her fingers tightened around mine, and I stopped, afraid I'd misread. Afraid that I'd completely fucked things up when I hadn't talked to her about the kiss. Afraid that I'd do or say something wrong...

"Do you want to come in?" Her thumb brushed back and forth across the back of my hand. "It's okay if you don't—"

"I do," I blurted out. "Yes. I'd like to come in. If you're sure."

“I am,” she said with a smile. “Are you?”

Not at all.

“Yes.” As I followed her inside, I asked, “How much did you have to drink tonight?”

“Enough, but not too much.” She winked at me. “Which I think is the perfect amount. What about you? How inebriated are you?”

“Enough to be able to repeat *inebriated*,” I said with a laugh.

She kicked off her shoes, and I did the same, not taking my eyes off her as we went to the couch. Her legs bumped against it, and then I bumped against her. That was all it took, that little bump of our bodies against each other, and my arms went around her. I didn’t know which of us moved first, but then our mouths crashed together, and it didn’t matter.

Her tongue touched my bottom lip, and I chased it back into her mouth. She groaned and clutched at my shirt, angling her head to deepen the kiss. Her drink at the show had been cherry-flavored, and the taste exploded across my taste buds. I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, my teeth scraping against her lip.

We tumbled into the couch, and I caught myself before my full weight landed on her. I ran my hand up her leg, pushing up the hem of her dress as I went. Her skin was as soft as it looked, and I wanted to touch all of it. With my hands. With my mouth. I wanted to taste every inch of her. I’d never wanted anyone like this before, this all-consuming desire to have all of her.

I kissed her neck and moved lower, pushing down the neckline of her dress until I could reach the tops of her breasts. She moaned, her nails scratching my scalp. The hand under her dress went to her ass, firm muscle under soft cotton.

“Deklin.” She breathed my name, tugging on my shirt until I raised up to help her take it off.

Her fingers went to the tattoo over my chest, traced the initials there – CRH – and then the numbers. I saw the question in her eyes.

“My mom.”

Her hand moved to my cheek. “I’m sorry.”

Shit. Had I just ruined the mood?

“It’s okay.” I turned my face into her palm and kissed it. “It was several years ago.” I went up on my knees. “Do you want to stop?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you?”

I didn’t let myself overthink it. “No.”

“Then don’t.”

Her couch was small, but I maneuvered us around until I had her legs over my shoulders. She bit her bottom lip and raised an eyebrow as I grabbed her hips. One nod, and that was all I needed to do what I’d been wanting to do for what felt like forever.

I pushed her dress up farther and then pulled aside the crotch of her panties. I’d only done this a couple times before, but I was determined to do it right. I ran my tongue along the sensitive skin, and she gasped, then shivered, encouraging me with her positive response. That’s what I needed to do, listen to her, and figure out what she liked.

The tip of my tongue found that little nub of nerves and circled it. She made a slightly pleased sound, but then shuddered when I flicked my tongue back and forth across it. She liked that better.

“Stop...”

I jerked back. “Sorry.”

“Thinking. Stop thinking.”

“What?”

She grabbed my wrist. “Stop thinking so damn much.”

I nodded. “All right.”

I dove back in, using my tongue and lips and teeth to taste and coax and explore. I held her tight as she squirmed and begged for me to let her come. The sound and taste, the feel of her, surrounded me, consumed me. I wanted nothing more than to have her come apart because of me. I didn’t even care that my cock was throbbing. I just wanted her to feel good, and I wanted to be the person that made her feel that way.

Her entire body stiffened suddenly, and she cried out my name. It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard, and I would’ve been content to just have that tonight. But as she came down, she reached for my waist.

“Your turn.”

TWENTY-ONE

SOFI

I DIDN'T KNOW IF DEKLIN WAS MORE PISSED AT ME BECAUSE OF WHAT HAD happened between us after Absinthe or because of what hadn't happened. I'd used my hand to get him off after he'd gone down on me, and then we'd fallen asleep on the couch together. When I'd woken up sometime after midnight, he was gone. No note, but I hadn't really expected one.

I had, however, hoped that he wouldn't be weird about things when I'd seen him again yesterday morning. That hadn't been the case, though, and I'd known it the moment I'd walked into the restaurant. He hadn't looked at me, and he certainly hadn't spoken to me. I'd done my own avoiding, preventing Jude from getting me alone. I definitely hadn't wanted to tell him what had happened between Deklin and me.

In all honesty, I was ashamed. We might not have had intercourse, but it had been sexual. And Jude was paying me for it. I'd crossed a line I'd promised myself I wouldn't, and I didn't know how to handle it.

When the three of us had parted ways last night, I'd half-expected Jude to call me to tell me not to bother coming to the airport for the flight to Vegas, but he hadn't, so I'd followed the original plan.

When I'd arrived a few minutes ago, he'd been pleased to see me. Deklin, on the other hand, still wouldn't look at me. If this happened every time we touched, Jude's plan was doomed.

Unless, of course, Deklin's guilt made him confess the infidelity to his fiancée, and she broke up with him because of it. Maybe that would be best for everyone. It would hurt them both, I knew, but the truth might be worse. And this way, I wouldn't have to keep up with the charade until I got in so deep that I couldn't live with myself anymore.

I was an awful, selfish person.

“Have a seat anywhere you like,” Jude said as I stepped inside the plane. “Monte will stow your bags for the trip.”

I nodded, trying not to look like a gawking child as I moved into the main cabin. It wasn't a massive plane, but it was far from tiny. Plush individual seats and tables, a long bench-like seat against one wall that looked more comfortable than my second-hand couch...

Thoughts of the couch brought back the other night, and my face heated. I needed to stop thinking about it, but I couldn't get it out of my head. I'd never come so hard in my life, and the fact that it'd happened under these circumstances just made the guilt worse.

It wasn't only guilt for manipulating Deklin into cheating on his girlfriend, but for enjoying it. Not the manipulation part. I wasn't that far gone, at least. But I'd enjoyed the physical part of it more than I liked. What sort of person was I if I could get off like that?

I buckled myself into one of the individual seats and looked out the window until we took off. My first time on a plane and I was getting spoiled. Even first-class would be unimpressive after this. Still, I couldn't really enjoy the experience knowing why I was truly here.

“Sofi.”

Deklin's voice was soft, and I hated the way it slipped over my skin, reminding me of how my name had sounded when he'd come. The feel of his hot breath against my throat when he'd said it. The way his body had stiffened as he spilled over my hand. The expression of pure relaxation and bliss that had settled on his face.

I swallowed hard and fixed a polite mask on my face before turning to face him. “Deklin.”

“I'm sorry.” He was angled toward me, but careful not to touch me. “I'm sorry for all of it. I never should have—”

“I'm not,” I cut in, knowing I needed to take this chance and hating myself for it. It was for his own good. “I'm not sorry. Not about what we did, anyway. I'm only sorry that every time I think we're having a good time, you follow up with treating me like a leper.”

He winced but didn't deny it. “I'm engaged. That's why I've been acting the way I have. I've been a real bastard to you, and I hate myself for it as much as I hate myself for being weak.”

“Engaged.” I let the word fall flat. I was a good actress, but I'd never

been able to pull off shock or surprise very convincingly. Devoid of emotion was easier. “You weren’t acting engaged when I had my hand around your cock the other night.”

His face turned red.

“And you certainly weren’t acting engaged when you had your tongue—”

“I know. And I’m sorry.”

Grateful he hadn’t made me finish that last sentence, I tempered my tone, but not my words. He needed to admit to himself why he’d done it before he’d even consider breaking the engagement. And based on what his grandfather had shared with me, the engagement had to be broken off. Soon.

“Is it out of your system now? Whatever it was that made you come into my apartment when you knew exactly where things would go?”

His eyes met mine. “It has to be. I’m engaged.”

“I heard you the first time,” I said and folded my arms over my chest. “Next time you want to scratch an itch, hire a pro.”

He winced. “It wasn’t like that.”

“It wasn’t?” I raised an eyebrow and tried to pretend that he was the one I was angry with. “That wasn’t you just wanting someone new to fuck while you were away from home?”

He shook his head but couldn’t seem to find the words he wanted.

“Do you love her?” The question had to be asked. If he said yes, Jude needed to know. If he said no, then I’d keep playing this role until it was over. Even if I did hate myself a little more each day.

“In a way,” he said. After a beat, he added, “But not the way you mean. Not how a man should love the woman he’s going to marry.”

“And you don’t think that’s something you should consider?” Maybe this was all he needed, someone to talk to him about it, show him how foolish he was being.

He shook his head. “It could grow into love. Arranged marriages happen all the time, and people end up happy.”

If he hadn’t sounded so miserable, I might’ve believed him.

“Look, I’m not mad.” Not at him, at least. I put my hand on his arm and was as honest with him as I could be. “And I’m not saying you should be with me or that you love me or anything like that. But if you’re going to be with someone forever, she should be someone you love. You both deserve that.”

“Sofi, I—”

“Trust me, Deklin. I know far too much about getting married for the wrong reasons.” I stood up. “I have a headache. Probably from the pressure change. I’m going to lay down for a while. Excuse me.”

I didn’t look back at either him or Jude as I headed for the cabin at the back where a bed was set up. My head really was hurting, but it wasn’t from the pressure. I hoped I’d gotten through to him because I needed this to be over.

TWENTY-TWO

DEKLIN

THE PLANE ATE UP THE MILES BETWEEN VEGAS AND HOUSTON, BUT IT DID nothing to bring me closer to a solution for my problem. I'd never been the type of man who thought with his dick. Or, at least, I'd never thought I was until the other night. I couldn't even blame it on the alcohol. Sure, it'd lowered my inhibitions, but I hadn't been too drunk to know what I was doing.

I was a horrible person. Dad had specifically said that Ronall wanted me to marry Aurelia because I would protect her and keep her safe. It hadn't even been a week, and I'd done something to hurt her. My family would never trust me again, and I'd be lucky if I hadn't completely ruined the friendship between the Kanes and us.

How had I fucked up my life so badly in such a short period of time?

Grandad sat down in the chair across from me, an unreadable expression on his face.

Did he know too? I hadn't even thought yet about how my actions affected him personally. He'd hired Sofi, and he clearly liked her. She'd never want to work for me now, and Grandad would have gone to all the trouble of finding her, only to have her quit and leave him to look for someone else.

"What's wrong?" He handed me a bottle of water. "You look like Davin stole your favorite toy and put it down the garbage disposal again."

I managed a smile at the memory. I'd been maybe six or so, and I'd done something to my brother that had royally pissed him off. He'd taken my favorite action figure and put it down the garbage disposal. Dad had planned to tan his hide for that one, but Mom had intervened.

She'd said that Davin had behaved like a child, and he should be restricted to only the privileges I had until he bought me a new toy. We might've had money growing up, but our parents made sure we appreciated it by doing chores for an allowance, so Davin would have to work to replace the action figure he'd broken.

Even better, he would only be able to earn the same amount I did. He'd been furious. For two glorious weeks, he'd had to go to bed when I did, only watch the things I was allowed to watch, go the places I was allowed to go. For a twelve-year-old, it'd been the worst punishment ever.

What I'd done was so much worse than that.

My smile faded. "I cheated on Aurelia."

He merely raised an eyebrow and motioned for me to go on.

"The other night, after Sofi and I went to Absinthe, we went back to her place." I couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see the disappointment when I told him what I'd done. "We didn't have sex...well, we did. Sort of. I mean..." I pressed the heels of my hands over my eyes. "You know what, it doesn't matter. It was more than should have happened. She kissed me the first day we were out together, and I should've shut things down then, but I didn't. I should've told her about Aurelia then."

"But you didn't."

I shook my head. "I didn't. And I didn't say no when she invited me into her apartment. I had more than one chance to stop it, and I didn't. The only reason we didn't go all the way was we fell asleep."

"It was that boring?"

He sounded amused, and I wanted to snap at him that it wasn't funny, but honestly, that was the least I deserved. "It was...no, it wasn't boring. We'd both been drinking."

"So, you both got drunk, and one thing led to another."

I raised my head then, annoyed that he thought I could take advantage of someone like that. "We were both sober enough to know what we were doing."

"Seems to me that I'm not the one you should be talking to about this. It took two of you to do whatever it was you did."

"No," I said firmly. "This is all on me. Sofi didn't know about Aurelia until this morning."

"How did she take it? Sofi, I mean. I'm guessing you haven't talked to Aurelia yet."

“Better than Aurelia will, I suppose,” I said.

“You do plan on telling her then? Aurelia?”

“Of course.”

Grandad sighed. “You’re a good man, Deklin.”

“No, I’m not.” I put my elbows on my knees and leaned forward. “I was supposed to take care of Aurelia, not fool around with your assistant.”

“Did you do it because you don’t care about Aurelia?”

At least that was an easy question to answer. “No. I care about her. I’m marrying her.”

His face tightened for a moment, the muscle popping in his jaw. “Caring about someone isn’t the same as loving them. Especially when you’re talking about a marriage kind of love.”

I was getting tired of people telling me that I shouldn’t marry Aurelia because I didn’t love her the way they believed I should. Even as the thought came into my head, though, another thought followed it.

Maybe the reason it bothered me was because it was true, and I just didn’t want to admit it. The first thing my dad had asked me to do for the family, and I was going to fail.

“Did you go to Sofi because she was available or was there another reason?” he asked. “Is it *her*, or is it just because she’s not Aurelia?”

Shit. That was the real question I needed to answer, wasn’t it?

“If I’ve learned one thing in my life, Deklin, it’s that real connection doesn’t happen every day. I’ve had it once in my entire life. I’ve loved other women, but it was never the same.” He paused, a faraway look in his eyes for half a minute before he gave himself a mental shake. “If you think there’s even a chance that you could have that with someone other than Aurelia, you need to take it.”

“I made a promise,” I protested.

“Yes, you did. But this is a better promise to break than if you say your wedding vows and then realize down the line that you’re missing something vital. I’m not saying this only for you. Would it be fair to Aurelia if you married her when your heart belonged to someone else?”

I’d heard somewhere that if life is trying to tell you something, you’ll hear it over and over until it gets through. Since Grandad wasn’t the first person to bring up that Aurelia deserved better, I figured I’d better pay attention.

“Dad’s going to be pissed,” I muttered.

“Your father could learn a thing or two about meddling,” Grandad said. “Now, go talk to Sofi before she decides she wants to go back to Vegas before we even touch down in Houston.”

“Right.”

The distance between where I’d been sitting and the cabin where Sofi was lying down wasn’t far in terms of feet, but it felt like miles as I walked it. I didn’t know what to say or how to ask if she even wanted me to say anything. For all I knew, finding out I was engaged had closed her off to any possibility of more. She’d said she wasn’t mad, but she could’ve just been being polite. It wasn’t like she could’ve left whenever she wanted to.

Her eyes were closed when I pulled aside the curtain, but when I moved to sit on the edge of the bed, they opened. She pushed herself up until she was sitting, making her close enough to touch, but I kept my hands to myself. The last thing either of us needed was to cloud things with anything physical. I wanted to do this right. Or, rather, as right as I could from this point on.

“How’s your head?”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms, looking surprisingly vulnerable. “Are we getting ready to land?”

“Not yet.” I picked at a piece of fuzz on the bedspread. “I was wrong to get involved with you when I’m engaged.” She opened her mouth, and I held up a hand, asking her to wait. She nodded, and I continued, “You were right. And you weren’t the only one to say it. As soon as we land, I’m going to break things off with Aurelia.”

Something that looked like relief crossed her face, and I almost stopped right there, not wanting to know if she was relieved that I hadn’t just asked her out, but if I was going to hurt Aurelia and upset my dad, I needed to see it through all the way, and that meant admitting everything.

“I really like you, Sofi. More than I thought possible. After I talk to Aurelia, I’d like to see if there’s something real between us. I know with you working for Grandad, it might be awkward, and we’ll have to figure something out for when—”

Her hand on my arm stopped me mid-sentence. “I’d like that very much.”

I hadn’t realized how worried I’d been until that particular weight lifted from my shoulders. I wasn’t done with difficult conversations today, but knowing that this connection with Sofi wasn’t all in my head made me feel like it’d be worth it.

Part of me wanted to finish what Sofi and I had started at her apartment,

but I wasn't going to disrespect Aurelia like that. I stood and leaned over Sofi, kissing her forehead.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"For forgiving me for lying to you. A lie of omission, but still a lie."

Her smile was tight and didn't quite reach her eyes, but I wasn't worried. Once I talked to Aurelia, Sofi and I could do this the right way, without anything between us.

Grandad smiled at me when I came back, and I gave him a thumb's up. I thought it was weird that he was so gung-ho about me and Sofi but had been against Aurelia and me from moment one, but Dad's tendency to think that he knew best for everyone came from Grandad.

Honestly, I was worried that Dad would take the broken engagement worse than Aurelia would. At least I had Grandad on my side.

TWENTY-THREE

SOFI

HOUSES – MANSIONS – LIKE THE ONE JUDE HOLDEN OWNED SHOULDN'T EXIST in real life. They just didn't seem real. When the car Jude and I took from the airport pulled up to a massive wrought iron gate, I'd thought we were going into some sort of gated community.

I should have known better.

I'd sat there, gaping like an idiot, until the driver opened my door and held out a hand. The inside was no less impressive than the outside, and the first twenty minutes I was there consisted of Jude's wife taking me on a tour. Despite their age difference, Cynthia and Jude seemed to be quite in love, and she was such a sweet person that I liked her almost immediately.

After a light supper, I excused myself to the set of guest rooms I'd been given in the west wing. My meager possessions barely took up any room, and I wondered if I should have declined the invitation to stay here instead of going to a hotel. I didn't know how long I'd be in Houston, and being somewhere with a kitchen and a laundry room would make things easier. I just didn't know how long I could feasibly put off 'looking for a place of my own.' At least here, I could pretend I was taking my time.

As I curled up on the loveseat with a book I'd found in the guest library – seriously, they had a *guest library* – I told myself there was no use second-guessing myself now. I was here, and leaving would insult not only Jude but Cynthia as well. I'd gotten the impression that she didn't have many friends.

Why people ever thought it was their business what went on between consenting adults never failed to piss me off. Cynthia wasn't a child, so what did it matter how much older Jude was than her? And Jude was far from gullible or unintelligent.

My phone buzzed, and I smiled when I saw Pasha's text. When I'd told her what I was doing, she'd given me a huge message full of advice about how to take care of myself. I would've been insulted if she hadn't meant it well.

Now, however, she wanted to know more about this gorgeous house. I'd sent her pictures so she wouldn't worry about me having been carted off by traffickers, but I was more than happy to just chat with her for a while.

She and I were in the middle of debating whether or not the tub in the bathroom was technically a whirlpool or just an enormous, fancy bathtub when someone knocked on my door. I tapped out a quick response, letting her know I might be a while getting back to her and then went to the door, fully expecting Cynthia to be checking in to see how I was doing.

It was Deklin.

"May I come in?"

I stepped aside, suddenly more nervous than I had been when I'd first met him. I didn't know where I wanted this conversation to go. If he'd changed his mind and decided to stay with Aurelia, there was a chance I'd be sent home so someone more suitable could be found. If he'd broken up with her and wanted to be with me, I didn't know how long I'd be involved before Jude thought it was enough.

"The engagement's off."

I turned from closing the door to find him close enough to touch. "It is?"

"I don't want to make an assumption here, Sofi." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I know what I want, but I need to know what you want."

Too many possible answers ran through my mind, and I didn't want to settle for any of them. Deflection seemed to be the best course of action.

"Tell me what you want. I need you to say it." I moved closer to him, itching to touch him despite knowing that this wasn't real.

"You." He put his hand on my cheek, eyes searching my face for something I wasn't certain I could fake. "Is that enough?"

"It is," I whispered as I closed the last of the distance to bring our lips together.

I had no alcohol to cloud or dull my senses this time, and the intensity of his kiss hit me with force enough to steal my breath. I'd changed into a t-shirt and leggings, wanting to be comfortable, and the thin cotton did little to keep his hands from searing me with their touch. They roamed as our tongues

danced, all exploring everything within reach.

When a hand slid under my shirt to run up the length of my spine, I shuddered, breaking the kiss to gasp for air. I closed my eyes, resting my forehead against his chest as he pulled me tight against his body, every hard inch of him pressed to every soft inch of me.

“Too fast?” he asked.

I shook my head even as a part of my mind wanted to say *yes*. I’d started us down this road when I’d invited him inside that night, maybe even when I’d given him that first chaste kiss. It hardly seemed like only a few days ago.

I felt like we’d known each other much longer than that. I knew him well enough to know that if I asked him to go, he would. If I said this was all I could give him right now, he’d understand. He wouldn’t end everything simply because I wanted to wait a little longer. I could draw this out, be the tease Mead had sometimes accused me of being.

But I didn’t want to.

Deklin made me feel good, and I made him feel good. Sex hadn’t been part of the bargain. If I made this decision, it would be for me and for him. No one else. No other motivation.

I’d gone too long without feeling good about anything other than Dallas.

I took a step back and watched him accept what he thought I was going to say. When I reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up, his eyes went dark, and the electricity between us sparked to life. He removed my shirt then, cursing under his breath when he saw I wasn’t wearing a bra. Our pants went next, underwear with them so that when we faced each other again, we had nothing hidden.

My heart thudded against my ribcage as I took in all six feet, two inches of lean muscle and tanned skin, saving his cock for last. I’d had him hot and heavy in my hand, but I hadn’t seen it then. He wrapped his fingers around it now, stroking himself until he went from half-hard to it bobbing in front of him.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I don’t know how much patience I’m going to have,” he teased.

“You’re beautiful.” I flushed but didn’t take the words back. They were true. He was a work of art.

He shook his head and held out his free hand. I took it, letting him lead me to the bed. I had a fleeting moment where I wondered what Jude would think about me having sex with his grandson in his house, but then I realized

I didn't care. What was happening here had nothing to do with Jude.

"Lay on the bed," Deklin said. "I want to look at you."

I climbed on the bed, self-conscious as I felt his eyes on me. When I laid down, my head propped up enough that I could watch him, he let his gaze roam up and down my body, all the while working his hand over his cock.

"Deklin." I held out my hand, parting my legs to make my intention clear.

"Not yet. I want to take my time."

I made an impatient sound. "Next time. I feel like we've had two days of foreplay."

He chuckled before reaching down to grab his pants.

"Don't even *think* about putting those back on."

Now he laughed, one of those deep, rich sounds that came from a source greater than happiness. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, rummaged in it for a minute, then let the pants fall back to the floor as he held up a condom.

"Oh."

"Trust me, Sofi. The only thing that's going to keep me from burying myself deep inside you is if you tell me to stop." He ripped the package open and rolled on the condom. "The house could catch fire, and I'd just move us to the shower and threaten to punch any firefighter who looked at you."

I burst out laughing, and it tugged at something inside me. I'd never laughed during sex. I barely talked. Not counting, of course, what Mead had always needed. How big he was. How good. How I was such a slut. Deklin wouldn't want any of that, and it left me feeling lighter than I ever had before.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take my time?" he asked as he knelt between my legs. "I don't want to hurt you. I want this to be good for you."

"I'm sure. You won't. It will." I answered each question respectively, smiling as he leaned down, balancing himself on one arm.

The tip slipped through my folds, gathering moisture, and then stilled against my entrance. I gasped as he eased inside, and he immediately stopped.

"No, it's good. So good. Don't stop." I put my hand on the back of his neck, and he raised his eyes to meet mine. "Don't stop. You won't hurt me. I promise."

He was thicker than Mead. Longer too. But Mead hadn't ever cared if I'd been ready for him or if it hurt. The stretching sensation, the pressure, as

Deklin slowly slid into me, was nothing but pleasurable. So much so that I almost closed my eyes, but I wanted too much to see everything he was feeling as we came together, and that desire kept my eyes open.

It was worth it to see the brilliant fire lighting up his entire face when we were as joined as two people could possibly be. I hooked my leg around his waist, needing him to stay right where he was for a moment, giving my mind a few seconds to process the new sensations, somewhat familiar, but not the same.

“Sofi.” He captured my mouth, tongue demanding entrance even as he let me hold the rest of him still.

I parted my lips and rocked my hips upward, and that was all the encouragement he needed. He pulled back and thrust into me again, making me moan as we found our rhythm. Our bodies worked together, give and take, racing each other to the brink and tipping us both over far too soon. But it was better than good, even if too brief, and we clung to each other in the aftermath, limbs trembling as the bright burst of ecstasy slowly faded, and we allowed the exhaustion of the past week to pull us under.

TWENTY-FOUR

DEKLIN

SOMETHING SMELLED GOOD. LAVENDER? LILAC? FLORAL, BUT NOT THE FAKE kind that made people gag. Subtle. Nice.

These thoughts processed in that place that existed halfway between sleep and waking, the scents pulling me inexorably to the surface where different senses alerted me to unfamiliar surroundings.

A soft, warm body in my arms. Silky hair on my skin. The lack of anything between me and the expensive sheets.

Shit.

Sofi.

It'd seemed like a good idea yesterday, coming here after talking to Aurelia. Now, I wasn't so sure.

The conversation with Aurelia had gone better than I'd expected, especially since I'd done it over the phone. That had been the best way to do it. I could have taken a trip to see her and talked to her face-to-face, or I could have waited until the next time she was here, but I'd told myself that I hadn't wanted to wait because it'd be disrespectful to Aurelia. I knew the truth, though. I hadn't wanted to hold off being with Sofi for one second longer than necessary. Something in me feared that if I waited too long, she'd disappear.

I should've given Sofi more time before coming here. Or maybe I should have just kept my dick in my pants for a little longer.

How had I gone from only having had two sexual partners – if I could even count the first drunken time as having a partner since I barely remembered it – and not having even dated anyone in a couple years to meeting, proposing, cheating, dumping, and fucking all within a single

summer?

Sofi's head was on my chest, making getting out of the bed difficult, but not impossible. I grabbed my clothes on my way to the bathroom and hoped that a shower would help me clear my head.

The shampoo and soap were lilac, answering my previous question. Fortunately, the shower also had unscented shampoo and soap, and I made a mental note to thank Cynthia for that. Grandad wouldn't have thought of it. As much as I loved the scent on Sofi, I didn't want to spend the day smelling like a flower, if for no other reason than I'd probably end up with a damn hard-on because of it.

She was still sleeping when I came out of the bathroom, and I let her be, heading downstairs to get some coffee for both of us. I needed to check in with Grandad anyway. He'd said something yesterday about us not briefing Dad and Davin until Monday, but I didn't want to assume that was still going to be the case.

Grandad and Cynthia were both at the small breakfast nook in their massive kitchen when I walked in, which wasn't surprising since their dining table seated two dozen and would've looked ridiculous with just the two of them sitting at it.

"Morning," Grandad said, his lack of surprise letting me know that he'd already assumed I'd spent the night.

"Good morning, Deklin." Cynthia stood up and brought her dishes to the dishwasher.

"Morning," I mumbled.

"There's coffee already on," she said, gesturing toward the machine on the counter next to the fridge. "If you need anything, I'll be in the office, making some calls about Sunday." She went back over to Grandad and gave him a light kiss before leaving the room.

I could feel Grandad's eyes on me as I filled up a mug with the Holden Enterprises logo, but he didn't say anything until I joined him at the table. I wanted to talk to him before Sofi woke up, and this was the best time to do it.

"I see you took my advice." He seemed inordinately pleased.

"I did." I took a couple swallows of coffee and let the caffeine do its work.

"And you're regretting it?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly. I mean, everyone was right that I wasn't being fair to Aurelia, marrying her without loving her."

“Everyone?”

“You, Damon...Sofi.”

“Ah.” He set down his mug, his expression serious. “You talked to Aurelia yesterday?”

“I did.” I sighed. “She was great about it, actually. She didn’t cry or yell at me. If anything, she almost seemed...relieved.”

“Are you worried about complications from Sofi being my assistant? We can move her to another position where it won’t cause any conflict.”

I hadn’t even thought of that in any detail. Wonderful. One more thing to add to the work issue I was already stressing over. “I’m worried about what Dad’s going to say.”

“My son needs to learn that he doesn’t always know what’s best for you boys.” Grandad carefully folded his newspaper. “And he needs to keep in mind that one does not sacrifice the happiness of the family simply because he thinks it’ll be good for the business. Family comes first. Always.”

Some of the tension eased from me. The phone rang, making me smile. Grandad was extremely tech-savvy, especially for someone pushing eighty, but he refused to give up his landline. My smile only lasted until Grandad spoke to the person on the other end.

“Yes, Walter, he’s here. Just a moment.” He handed me the phone and returned to his seat. “Your father couldn’t reach you on your cell.”

I winced. “Morning, Dad. Sorry about that. My battery must’ve died yesterday.”

“I’m sure your conversation with Aurelia used up the last of it, am I right? Because I can’t think of another reason why you’d make such a huge decision without consulting me first.”

My grip on the phone tightened. At least I didn’t need to figure out when and how best to tell him about the broken engagement. “I planned on telling you, but yes, I ended things with Aurelia yesterday.”

“Why would you do that?” He sounded like he was trying to keep from yelling. “I told you that Ronall wanted someone to protect and care for his daughter, and I told him that you were the man for the job. Do you realize what that looks like?”

“I *am* caring for her and protecting her,” I said. “We’re not right for each other, and we don’t feel the way two people should if they’re going to get married. It wouldn’t have been fair to either of us to go into a marriage like this.”

“Fair? Life isn’t *fair*, Deklin,” he snapped. “You were supposed to do this for the family, and you couldn’t do it. Do you know what it does to our reputation if we can’t keep our word?”

“I don’t think anyone’s going to think a broken engagement is a big deal, Dad. Not when Aurelia and I only knew each other for a couple months—”

“Let your *yes* be *yes*, and your *no* be *no*,” he almost shouted, cutting me off. “Do you even remember anything I taught you growing up? The Bible verses you had to learn?”

“Yeah, Dad. From the book of Matthew. I remember.” I got up and went to the fridge, needing to move. “But—”

“This isn’t acceptable.”

I didn’t hear what Dad said next because Grandad was suddenly next to me, taking the phone from my hand. I handed it over, wondering what was going to happen next.

“Walter.” After a beat, he repeated, “Walter. Stop.” The word was sharp. Hard. “Your son and I have business to discuss. Real business that has nothing to do with your son’s personal life. Real business that he excelled at this past week, if you’d bothered to ask. We’ll be in on Monday to talk about it, but we’ll see you Sunday for Cynthia’s birthday.”

And then he hung up.

On my dad.

I stared at him. “Um...”

“Take the day,” he said. “Spend time with Sofi.”

“I thought you said you and I needed to talk.”

He shrugged. “Not really. I know how well you did in Vegas. I don’t need to talk to you to prove it.”

“Okay.” I blinked as he went back to the table. This was not how I saw this morning going.

“I mean it, Dek.”

Still, I hesitated, trying to think. “I don’t know if I made the right choice. You heard Dad.”

“I heard someone who’s putting work before his child’s best interests.” His tone was mild, but the words were harsh. “Follow your heart and stop worrying about what people think. Especially your father.”

All right then.

TWENTY-FIVE

SOFI

THE SMELL OF COFFEE WOKE ME UP, BUT IT WAS THE MEMORIES THAT flooded in just before I opened my eyes that gave me pause.

I wasn't home. I wasn't even in Nevada. I was in Houston. At the insanely massive Holden mansion. In a guestroom bigger than my apartment.

And I'd had sex with Deklin last night.

Shit.

The first man I'd had sex with since Mead. The *only* man I'd had sex with besides Mead.

And I'd been paid to do it.

Okay, not exactly, but no matter how much I wanted to deny it, I wouldn't have been here in this bed, thinking about how he'd held me while we'd fallen asleep if Jude Holden hadn't asked me to seduce his grandson in the first place.

"Sofi." His voice was soft, and I felt his fingers brush my hair from my face.

I smiled as I opened my eyes. I wasn't going to let him think that I regretted what we'd done. I didn't, really. If I'd met him on my own, gotten to know him without all the extra shit, I would've been happy to wake up like this.

So, I was going to act like that was what had happened. Like this hadn't been influenced by Jude at all.

"Morning." My smile grew wider when he handed me a mug of steaming coffee. I pushed myself up until I was sitting, holding the sheet across my chest with one arm while I reached for the cup with my free hand. "Thank you."

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“I did,” I answered honestly. “Did you?”

Was this a normal morning-after conversation? I’d never done anything like this before. Whenever Mead and I had finished having sex, he’d fallen asleep or left. He’d never been one for cuddling and even less for conversation.

I glanced at the clock next to the bed. “Are you going to be late for work?” I sat up straighter. “Shit. Am *I* going to be late for work?”

“Grandad said to take the day off.” His eyes dropped, and he smirked.

I sighed. “I let go of the sheet, didn’t I?”

“You did.” He chuckled, looking so handsome it made my heart ache. “Can you sigh again?”

I laughed and reached out as if to smack him. He caught my wrist, and the laughter died as quickly as it’d come. His eyes met mine, and he reached for my coffee. I let it go, more interested in the heat I saw on his face than what was in that cup.

He went onto his knees, hand curling around the back of my neck as he lowered his mouth to mine. I parted my lips, tongue flicking out to tease the seam of his mouth. His fingers flexed but didn’t hurt. He wouldn’t hurt me. I knew that as sure as I knew that I wanted him again.

His hand covered my breast, thumb rubbing back and forth across my nipple even as I arched my back, wanting more of his touch. He took my bottom lip between his teeth, tugging on it even as he let his hand trail down my stomach and then moving under the sheet. I spread my legs without him asking and shivered as his fingers slipped over my clit. I grabbed his shirt, annoyed that we had clothing between us.

“Want you naked,” I growled against his mouth. “Inside me.”

He laughed, kissing his way down my throat as he pushed a finger inside me. I moaned, clutching at his shoulders as he twisted it in and out. His lips latched around my nipple, and I cursed.

A second finger joined the first, and he curled them, rubbing until he found what I could only assume was my g-spot because I’d never felt anything like the electricity that shocked my entire system.

“Come for me, Sofi.” He took the cool, sensitive skin of my nipple between his teeth, worrying at it even as his hand worked between my legs.

I dug my fingers into his hair, panting and pulling as the pleasure inside me built higher and higher, burning a path along my synapses until I couldn’t

take any more of it, and I exploded with a cry.

He held me through it, coaxed me down until I slumped back on the pillows, body pleasantly boneless. He sat back, reaching for a tissue as he did so. He grinned at me as he wiped his hand clean, and I couldn't fault him for the smug expression on his face. He'd earned it.

"When I can move again, I'll take care of that." I made a feeble gesture at the erection tenting the front of his pants.

He stood up and pulled off his shirt. "How about we continue this in the shower, and then I take you out for brunch?"

"I'd like that very much."

I'D NEVER TAKEN A LONGER shower in my life. By the time Deklin and I emerged from the bathroom, my fingers were wrinkled, and my body sated. We didn't talk a lot as we dressed, but neither one of us could stop smiling.

He didn't say where we were going to go for brunch, but considering how he'd grown up, I doubted it would be anywhere too casual. I picked out a sundress, cute without being fancy, and he went with a pair of slacks and a dress shirt.

The entire Holden family apparently kept extra clothes in one of the guest rooms in case they needed a change for any reason. I couldn't imagine living in a house so large that an entire guest room could be used for clothes.

The car we took was from Jude's garage, but Deklin assured me that his grandfather always had a few cars for anyone in the family to use. I didn't think anything could've driven home the differences between the lives Deklin and I lived more than that. At least after seeing what Jude had, I knew I wouldn't feel the least bit guilty for accepting so much money from him.

"Do you like French food?" Deklin asked as he turned out of Jude's driveway.

He'd been to my apartment in Vegas, and he thought I had any idea what French food was like?

"Um, sure." I'd never tasted it, but I wasn't really much of a picky eater. "Except snails. Or whatever they're called."

He smiled. "No snails. Check."

A comfortable silence settled between us as he made his way through

Houston traffic, and I looked out the window, taking in the unfamiliar view. Size-wise, I didn't know how Vegas and Houston compared, but structurally, they were very different. Everything here – at least in the part we were driving through – was clean, simple lines. Even the more elaborate architecture had a simple feel to it. I saw none of the spectacle I associated with home. Both cities had their own beauty and purpose, their own atmosphere.

I'd always been fascinated with how cities and towns were put together, particularly how landscaping fit in with buildings and other structures, and I'd seen pictures of places all around the world, of course, but this was my first time experiencing one of them firsthand.

“Are you okay?”

I turned my attention to Deklin as he rolled to a stop behind a flashy convertible. “I'm fine.”

“You just seem quieter than usual,” he said. “You don't regret this, do you?”

I smiled. “Not at all. I was just admiring the city. I've never been much of anywhere before, and there's a big difference between seeing pictures and actually being here.”

“That's right, you went to school for landscape architecture.” He looked back at the road as the light turned green. “What do you think of Houston?”

A not-so-small part of me wondered if he was asking because he was fishing for hints as to whether or not I was considering moving here permanently, but then I remembered that it didn't matter because I wasn't really Jude's assistant and this would never be my home. My home was in Vegas with my son.

But I had a job to do while I was here, and I kept smiling. “There's a lot more greenery than I realized. I mean, Vegas had palm trees, and there's vegetation in some places, but there's so much more here than I would've imagined. It's a lot less crowded too.”

As I warmed to my subject, I found myself thinking and talking about things I hadn't considered in years. My interest had never waned, but between being a mom and Mead's disdain for anything I enjoyed, it'd been a long time since I'd been able to remember why I'd gone to college in the first place. Deklin's interest in the subject appeared genuine, and the conversation between us felt so natural that I forgot how different we were.

Until we pulled into Etoile Cuisine et Bar, and I saw how out-of-place I

truly was in his world. My dress was nice, but it looked almost childish next to the classy and sophisticated clothes worn by the other women heading inside. And that was just for a Friday brunch.

Deklin didn't seem to notice my growing unease as he came around to my door and opened it for me. I took his hand and let him help me out, more because that's what other women were doing than because I actually needed the assistance. One of the reasons I'd like this dress was that it was comfortable and easy to move in, but now I was thinking I'd made a mistake by not going with the stiffest, most uncomfortable thing I could find.

He threaded his fingers between mine as we walked to the door, his touch the only thing keeping me from fleeing. I didn't belong here. Not at this restaurant. Not with these people. Certainly not with Deklin.

I belonged with Dallas.

I forced myself to think of my son. Of what it would be like when he would be with me again. Even if I could only get joint custody, it would be better than what I had now. No matter how much I'd enjoyed sharing Deklin's bed or liked my new clothes and this city, none of this was about me. Dallas was the only person who mattered. As horrible as it sounded, Deklin was a means to an end, no matter how much I liked him.

The man who took us to our table was polite, but I felt the eyes of the other patrons on me. Maybe I was just imagining it, or maybe everyone else could tell how much I didn't belong here. Either way, the joy I'd found in the car had faded away, leaving me with only determination to complete the task I'd been brought here to do.

Deklin pulled out my chair, then pushed me in after I sat down. Two glasses of water with lemon appeared on the table as he moved around to the seat across from me. I picked up my menu just to have something to do with my hands, cringing when I saw that nothing was in English.

Mead had always loved telling me how stupid I was, pointing out all the ways I couldn't measure up. Maybe if I'd taken French in high school instead of Spanish, I would've felt a little better, but that ship had sailed years ago. What was the saying: no use crying over spilled milk?

"Want some absinthe?"

The teasing tone caught me first, and then the rest of what he said sunk in. I flushed, then laughed, letting some of the tension ease out of me. It didn't matter what all of these people thought of me, not even if they knew who Deklin was and thought I didn't deserve him.

It wasn't like I was going to be here long. Once I was done here, I was heading back to Vegas, and I'd never be back here again. I'd never see these people again, and they'd never see me. Even if they did happen to show up in my city, the chances of anyone in Deklin's social circle coming to Diamond Star Lounge were slim.

Then again, if things went well, I wouldn't be at the lounge either. I'd be working a nine to five job, a good one where I wouldn't be ashamed to tell people what I did for a living. I'd never be a teacher or a doctor or the kind of person who was responsible for big things. I'd never make a lot of money or make a difference in the world. But my son would never have to be embarrassed of me, and that was enough.

"See anything you like?" Deklin asked, studying the menu in such a way that told me he was actually reading it.

I smiled at him and set the menu down. "What do you recommend?"

"Want me to order for us both?" he asked as the waiter came over. I nodded, and he rattled something off in French.

This was going to be interesting.

"I like your dress," Deklin said after the waiter had stepped away. "You look nice."

I blushed. "Thank you. You look good too."

Well, this wasn't awkward at all.

Thankfully, our waiter returned with coffee that probably cost as much as what I would have paid for a full meal back home, and we chatted over that. It was nice, feeling like we were on a date, talking about normal things. I could almost pretend it was real.

"After we're done here, I'll take you around the city, show you the sights," he promised. "How does that sound?"

"Are you sure your grandad said we didn't need to go to the office today?" Deklin's gaze slid away from me, and I frowned. "What's wrong?"

"My dad knows," he admitted, his hands gripping the delicate coffee cup. "About me breaking up with Aurelia."

"He knows about me?" I didn't know how I was supposed to respond.

"No, just that I ended things with Aurelia. He wasn't happy about it at all. I think Grandad told us to take today off because he wanted to give Dad time to get used to the idea."

The salad that was placed in front of me looked good, but the reason I dug in right away was to avoid having to talk about the fact that Deklin's

father wasn't going to be pleasant once he realized who I was.

Well, who I was pretending to be, anyway.

"I'll probably stay at Grandad's tonight too, if it's okay with you. It doesn't have to be in your room. I don't want to crowd you. I just don't want to go home yet either." Deklin sighed as he stabbed something in his salad. "I really need to get a place of my own."

"Your family doesn't have a ton of random properties all over the place? Apartments and houses that you all can choose from?"

His eyes narrowed, and he pointed his fork at me. "You're mocking me."

"A little," I admitted, stabbing a tomato as I grinned.

My throat tickled, and I reached for my water. I sipped some, but it didn't help. The tickle turned into something else, and I coughed. Then gasped. A thin whistling sound told me I was in trouble even before my lungs started to ache.

"Sofi, are you okay?" Deklin leaned toward me. "Your face looks red."

Shit.

"What – was – in – the – salad?"

TWENTY-SIX

DEKLIN

A TRIP TO THE ER WAS NOT PART OF THE PLAN FOR TODAY'S DATE.

Sending the woman I liked to the ER didn't seem like the best way to start a relationship, and I really hoped this wasn't foreshadowing the way things would keep going between us. Still, her dying from anaphylaxis would've been worse.

"Feeling better, Mrs. Stafford?" The ER doctor tugged the privacy curtain around us, and I wondered again if I should even be back here with her.

"Yes." Sofi's voice was still a little breathy, but at least she was breathing semi-normally again.

"As I told your husband, you most likely ate something that caused an allergic reaction. He said you don't have any known food allergies."

"I said I didn't know," I corrected him. "And I'm not her husband. We were on a date, and we were eating our salad when it happened."

"Oh." He looked down at the chart. "That explains why we don't have a lot of medical history here."

"She couldn't exactly fill out paperwork while she couldn't breathe," I said dryly. "I wrote down what I know."

"Which included her health insurance information?"

I reminded myself that telling him it was none of his business how I knew her insurance information wouldn't do any good. Then I realized that he probably thought we were having an affair since he'd called her Mrs.

"We work at the same place, but she just started so she doesn't have her insurance card yet."

"But she's already covered?"

At least they waited until *after* giving her a shot of epinephrine to start

asking these sorts of questions. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. I handed the doctor my license.

“I’m Deklin Holden. As in Holden Enterprises. Where she works. She’s covered.” I took my ID back and then handed him a business card. “Put that in her file and make a note that if there are any problems with the insurance company, to have them call me directly. I’ll take care of it.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. Her face was pink, but I didn’t think it was still from the allergic reaction. She was embarrassed.

Before I could figure out how to tell her not to be embarrassed without actually bringing it up, the doctor started talking again.

“So, Mrs. Stafford, do you have any food allergies?”

“It’s Ms. And, no, none that I know of,” she said, carefully not looking in my direction.

“Was there anything you ate today that you hadn’t eaten before? You’ll want to carry an EpiPen with you, but you should identify what caused the reaction today so as to avoid it in the future.”

“I’m not sure.” She picked at the plastic hospital bracelet on her wrist. “I didn’t see anything I didn’t recognize.”

“What about seasoning? Dressing?”

“I didn’t order any dressing.”

I pulled up my phone and went to the restaurant’s website. After finding the detailed menu information, I handed her my phone.

She handed it back. “I can’t read French.”

I was an idiot. I hadn’t even considered that it might be an issue. Rather than commenting on it, I started reading off the ingredients.

A few items in, she held up a hand. “Truffle oil. It’s the only thing on there I’ve never had before. Isn’t a truffle some sort of mushroom?”

“It is,” the doctor said. “You should avoid it until you speak with your regular doctor about having some allergy tests done. Who do you normally see?”

“I don’t live here.” She glanced at me. “I mean, I’m from Las Vegas, and I only got here yesterday.”

“All right.” He scribbled something down and handed the paper to Sofi. “I’ll send you home with an EpiPen, but you’ll need to follow up with a regular physician soon to put together the best plan for you. Give that to him or her.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going to recommend that you take it easy the rest of today and make sure you have someone close by. I don’t foresee any complications, but it never hurts to be careful.” He wrote something on her chart. “Do you have any questions?”

“No.” She folded the paper he’d given her. “Thank you.”

“I’ll send someone in with your discharge paperwork then.”

After a minute of uncomfortable silence, Sofi said, “I’m sorry I ruined your day off.”

“You didn’t.” I reached out and took her hand. When she kept staring at her lap, I tightened my fingers around hers. “Look at me.”

Slowly, she turned her face toward me, and I saw her struggling to hold back tears. Immediately, I stood and wrapped my arms around her. I kissed the top of her head and felt her relax against me.

“I’m the one who should be sorry. I didn’t even think to ask—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if you had.” Her voice was muffled as she pressed her face to my chest. “I didn’t know. It’s not like I’ve ever had truffles before.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” I promised. “What do you think about going to the symphony tomorrow?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

With a sudden glimpse of clarity, her comment about never having truffles before sounded a lot less like ‘I never wanted to try them’ and more like ‘I’d never be in a place where they’d been served.’ And now I saw her reluctance to order for herself in a different light too. I also saw her not asking about the menu from a different light. It had never occurred to me that she might have considered her inability to read the names of the dishes to be something of which she should be ashamed. Was I really that clueless?

“I’ll take you shopping.” I hesitated, and then added, “Unless that’s stepping over a line. I mean, I don’t care what you wear. Honestly, I don’t really care about what we do either. I just want to spend time with you, and I want you to feel comfortable while we’re doing that.”

“Do I have to decide now?”

“Of course not. We don’t have to make plans at all. We can just do whatever it is you feel like doing, whenever you feel like doing it, however you feel like doing it.”

It took me until she pulled back far enough for me to see her face to realize my unintentional innuendo. Fortunately, she appeared to be amused

rather than offended.

“Is that so?”

The curtain moved, and a young man in scrubs held out a clipboard with paperwork on it. In his other hand, he held a white paper bag, and he extended that to me.

A few signatures later, I was opening my passenger side door for Sofi. It was barely past noon, and our day out was done. I didn't mind, though. If I was going to be honest, the idea of spending the day curled up on the couch, watching TV while Sofi dozed next to me was quite appealing. The outside world could wait.

TWENTY-SEVEN

SOFI

I HADN'T SLEPT THAT LONG OR DEEP SINCE BEFORE MEAD AND I HAD MET, but I was grateful for the drug-induced slumber that gave me the chance to finally get some actual rest. Waking up Saturday morning with a clear head was exactly what I needed to get refocused on why I was really here.

Going out with Deklin was part of the plan.

Starting to feel like this was real was definitely *not* part of the plan.

Deklin had mentioned something yesterday about him taking me shopping or something like that, but pretty much everything after the restaurant was a blur due to the whole not-being-able-to-breathe thing. I wasn't even sure if he'd stayed here at Jude's or if he'd gone home, but since I didn't plan to lounge around in my pajamas no matter where he was, I dressed after showering.

I didn't have fancy clothes, but everything was neat and clean. That was plenty good enough for me to go to breakfast, whoever might already be there.

Still, I couldn't stop my heart from its unsteady thump when I walked into the kitchen and found him sitting at the table across from Jude and Cynthia. His smile was warm as he stood up and pulled out the chair next to him.

"Coffee?"

"I can get it," I said.

"Sit," Jude said with a smile. "Let the boy get you coffee if it makes him happy."

As I sat, Cynthia leaned across the table and stage-whispered, "The Holden men like to take care of their women. I've found it best just to let

them do it.”

I laughed as Jude rolled his eyes. The two of them didn't have a traditional relationship, but anyone who actually watched them couldn't deny that they loved each other.

A stab of wistful jealousy tempered my humor. What would it be like to have this sort of family? Not rich or anything like that, but to be this close to each other. Okay, being close had some negatives – such as hiring a showgirl to seduce your grandson to keep him from marrying the wrong person – but these things were done from love. Holding people too tightly could be dangerous, but not wanting to have a grip on them at all was worse.

I knew all too well what it felt like when someone who was supposed to love you let go.

My father had taken my brothers and left before I'd been more than a couple months old. I'd been a last-ditch attempt to save a doomed marriage, and my dad hadn't even wanted visitation rights.

I sometimes wondered if he'd thought I hadn't been his, but Mom had never mentioned an affair or the possibility of someone else being my father. Considering how often she'd bad-mouthed him throughout my life, I doubted she would've kept quiet if there'd been anything to tell.

From what I'd gathered over the years, they'd both been verbally and emotionally abusive to each other, and if my dad had followed Mom's pattern, he hadn't stopped after the divorce. He'd just kept doing it in Rhode Island.

As far as I knew, he still lived there. If my two brothers had moved after becoming adults, they'd never reached out. They could've grown up to be good men, but my gut said our father had trained them well.

Deklin's hand on my shoulder pulled me back to the present. “Sleep well?”

“I did.” I poured some creamer into the coffee he handed me and then added some sugar. “You?”

“Yes. Do you want some breakfast?” He gave me a sheepish smile. “I promise it'll go better than yesterday.”

“I'm allergic to shellfish,” Cynthia said as Deklin went to make me a plate. “Didn't find out until my parents took me out for my sixteenth birthday. I spent the night wheezing in the hospital.”

“Do you two have plans for the day?” Jude asked, squeezing his wife's hand.

“Tentative ones,” Deklin said. “If Sofi still wants to, I figured I’d take her shopping and then to the symphony. Make up for the date that didn’t happen yesterday. Or, at least, didn’t happen the way I would’ve liked.”

“That sounds good to me,” I agreed. I could feel Jude’s eyes on me, and I hoped he knew I was doing whatever I could to make sure Deklin was happy with me. He didn’t seem like he blamed me for the ER trip, but I didn’t want him to have any doubts about my commitment to my job.

Besides, when else was I going to get a chance to go shopping in Houston? I might as well enjoy my time with Deklin...in a non-sex way. Because I wasn’t going to sleep with him again. I couldn’t. Even if it had probably moved things with Deklin along a little faster. It still felt too much like prostitution to me.

His hand brushed across my shoulders as he returned to his seat, and a shiver of pleasure made me want to reconsider my ‘no sex’ resolution.

Maybe it was a good thing he had plans for us that didn’t involve being alone in the house. Shopping and music. That was safe.

Right?

AS DEKLIN BACKED me into a corner, I decided that dressing rooms made shopping very *not* safe.

My arms went around his neck as his hands slid down my sides to cup my ass. His mouth was hard on mine, hungry and demanding, feeding my own desires until the only thought remaining in my head was how badly I wanted to have him inside me.

The dress that I was supposed to be trying on hung from a nearby hook, and the clothes I’d worn here were on the bench beside it, leaving me in only my underwear. Even the soft cotton chafed my overly sensitive nerves as Deklin’s hands slid over my bare skin, setting me on fire.

I moaned as he bit my jaw, and the sound jerked us both back to reality, and he broke our kiss.

He rested his forehead against mine, our breathing harsh in the relatively small space. The tips of his fingers stroked my waist, heat still coiling and twisting inside me.

“I should probably leave,” he said.

“Unless you want us to get kicked out for indecent exposure,” I said with a half-laugh.

“We wouldn’t want that.” He laughed, then took a step back.

When he glanced down, my gaze followed his, and I couldn’t stop a nervous giggle. “You go out there like that, and you might still end up getting in trouble.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How about some sympathy here? I didn’t get like this all by myself. I seem to remember you doing your fair share of groping.”

My pussy throbbed at the memory of having that thick shaft buried inside me. If we weren’t in public, I would’ve gone to my knees right then and there to give him more than sympathy. Honestly, I was tempted, anyway.

He glanced at the dress on the hook. “Wear that one, and I’ll let the girl outside know to ring it up too.”

As he slipped out, I reached for the dress and wondered how I was going to keep from dragging him into bed again. I supposed I’d have the entire concert to get myself under control. At least it was a symphony and not a romantic movie or something like that.

Except, when Deklin and I walked into the concert hall, my arm entwined with his, it felt like just sitting next to him was going to wind me up. The dress was like nothing I’d ever owned before, clingy and sexy and far too expensive for me to ever wear back home. His clothes weren’t new, but they were tailored to him, and *damn*, they looked good. He smelled wonderful too.

I loved music, and I would’ve enjoyed the concert no matter what, but having him next to me made it all...*more*. His knee touched mine, and he laced our fingers together. There were other people around us, but I was barely aware of any of them. It felt almost like the concert was only for the two of us.

The surreal feeling stayed with me through the entire performance and followed us to the car. Neither of us had spoken much, and we were halfway back to Jude’s place when Deklin finally broke the silence, though what he said wasn’t anything I would’ve guessed was coming.

“Grandad is having a birthday party for Cynthia tomorrow.”

Oh. Well, I could find somewhere to be for a few hours, and I opened my mouth to say as much, but he kept going.

“I’d love for you to be there. I know Grandad and Cynthia would like that too.” He glanced at me. “I’d really like you to meet my family.”

Shiiit.

He wanted me to meet his family. This was all moving insanely fast. If it had been for real, I might've panicked, but because it wasn't, I was able to tell myself that this was for the best for all of us. The faster this pretend relationship went, the faster I'd be able to tell Jude to end things so I could go back home and get my son.

TWENTY-EIGHT

DEKLIN

WITH THE WAY DAD HAD BEEN LOOKING AT ME FOR THE LAST QUARTER-HOUR, I was starting to wonder if I'd made the right decision, inviting Sofi to the party. Grandad and Cynthia were happy that she was here, but they were the only ones. Davin and Damon were both here too, but they'd both been overly polite so far. The sort of polite that came with being unsure of a situation.

"Maybe I should leave for a little while," Sofi whispered as her grip on my hand tightened.

"No." I kept my voice low, but not a whisper. "You're with me, and you have every right to be here."

Then Dad came back into the main sitting room with Ronall and Aurelia following him, and I started to doubt my own words. Ronall glared at me, putting a protective arm around his daughter and saying something in her ear that I assumed was more derogatory to me or Sofi than it was supportive of Aurelia. Next to me, Sofi had gone stiff, and I hated myself for putting her in this situation. I hadn't even imagined that the Kanes would be here.

I was saved from having to decide how I should handle things by Grandad calling for our attention. As he gave a small speech about how much Cynthia meant to him, I couldn't help glancing over at Aurelia. I had accepted that our relationship had been more about me pleasing my father and wanting to take care of her than it was actually wanting to marry her, but that didn't mean I'd wanted to hurt her. When we'd talked, she hadn't sounded upset, but seeing me here with Sofi looked insensitive at best, uncaring and cruel at worst.

She didn't deserve that.

As if she'd felt me watching her or even guessed that I was thinking of

her, she turned to look at me. She smiled, that same sweet smile that she'd given me when we'd first met, and guilt struck me hard enough to make me wince. That just made it worse because now she looked concerned. I almost wished she'd come over and make a scene, yell at me for what I'd done. If she did that, maybe Dad would think I'd been punished enough, and we could all move on.

"All right, I've talked enough," Grandad finished up. "Let's eat."

Sofi and I hung back for me to talk to Davin and Damon for a minute, allowing the others to go to the dining room first and avoid any unpleasantness for a little while longer. Delicious food allowed us to eat without anything more than a few snide comments by my father, but I knew a confrontation would happen sooner or later.

Before dessert, Sofi excused herself, and I watched everyone else watch her leave. When eyes turned back to me, I waited to see who'd be the first to start. Before anyone could, Grandad cleared his throat and asked Dad a question, his tone such that no one was going to dare to bring up anything that might upset the balance. With everyone distracted, no one but me noticed Aurelia slip out of the room. After a moment, I followed.

I was at one end of the hall when the bathroom door opened at the other end, and Sofi stepped out. Aurelia was between us, and I saw the guilt flash across Sofi's face when she realized Aurelia was coming toward her. When Sofi's eyes flicked up to meet mine, Aurelia looked over her shoulder and smiled at me.

"May I speak to both of you?" she asked, her voice calm and friendly as ever.

How was I supposed to deny her after all I'd put her through?

"Of course," Sofi said. "Deklin, where's the best place for a private conversation?"

I gestured to the room across from the bathroom. One of the several libraries in Grandad's house, it'd work for whatever Aurelia wanted to say to us. If it got too bad for Sofi, I'd ask her to leave and let Aurelia yell at me alone.

The fact that I actually thought Aurelia was going to yell at us was evidence of how little I actually knew my former fiancée.

Once inside the library, I shut the door but didn't go over to where Sofi was standing. I wanted to be by her side, but I didn't want to draw attention to the relationship.

“I have to thank you,” Aurelia said to me. Then she looked at Sofi. “Both of you.”

“Thank me?” I asked, confused. She didn’t sound like she was being sarcastic.

“I like you, Deklin, and I thought if I had to keep pretending, doing it with you wouldn’t be awful.”

Now, I really had no clue what was going on. Sofi’s expression, however, made me think that she was figuring it out.

“I’m gay.” Aurelia closed her eyes and took in a shuddering breath, looking like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. “That’s the first time I’ve ever said it out loud.”

“Aurelia?” I took a step.

She opened her eyes. “Five years ago, my brother Pierce came out to our family as bisexual, and everything imploded. He’d met a guy and wanted to introduce him to the family. Instead, they ended up moving to Nashville and getting married, and he hasn’t spoken to any of us since.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sofi murmured, putting her hand on Aurelia’s shoulder.

“I was sixteen when it happened. I don’t know a lot of the details because they tried to protect me from it, but I knew enough to understand I couldn’t talk to my parents about what I was starting to suspect.”

“That you were gay.” I saw the past few months in a new light now, pieces clicking into place.

She nodded. “I’m terrified that I’ll lose my family if they know the truth.”

“Which is why you went along with the engagement.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Aurelia said. “Deceiving you like that.”

I shook my head. “No, you have nothing to feel guilty about. You were in an impossible position.”

“I feel awful that our dads are so mad about it.” Her expression became pleading. “But I’m not ready to come out yet. I’ll keep telling them that I’m okay with it, that I see that we’re better friends than lovers.”

“It’s okay.” Sofi gave Aurelia a gentle hug. “We’re not going to tell anyone.”

“She’s right,” I agreed. “I promise you, neither one of us will tell anyone about you. Now that I know you’re okay, I don’t care what anyone else thinks. Not even my dad.”

Aurelia’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “Why would you do that for me?”

I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Because we’re friends, Aurelia. I meant it when I said I liked you, and I don’t want to lose our friendship. As long as you’re okay, nothing else matters.”

“Whatever you need, we’ll be there,” Sofi said quietly. “You don’t have to go through this alone.”

As the two women hugged, I realized that I didn’t deserve either one of them. They were far better people than I could ever hope to be.

TWENTY-NINE

SOFI

I DIDN'T KNOW WHO WAS MORE RELIEVED AT AURELIA'S ADMISSION, DEKLIN or me. I knew he'd been feeling guilty about breaking things off with her, and he didn't even have all of the information about why that best for everyone. Keeping that and the truth about why I was here had been compounded by my guilt over hurting someone innocent. Then I'd met her and realized she was even sweeter than I'd believed. If she hadn't pulled us aside, I might have ended this whole charade and demanded Jude confess to the whole thing.

Now, the only guilt I still had was about lying to Deklin. If it was this bad for me and I wouldn't have to really deal with any fallout when things between us ended, I couldn't imagine what it was like for Jude. Granted, Deklin would never know his grandfather's role, but Jude would have to continue keeping secrets from everyone. I didn't think I could do that.

The three of us left the library together. I had no intention of breaking my promise to her, but it wouldn't hurt anything if everyone saw us come back to the table together, smiling and clearly at ease with each other. I hoped it might even ease the tension between Deklin and his father.

What I didn't really want to consider was that, with this new information, there no longer needed to be any worry that Deklin would resume his relationship with Aurelia once I was out of the picture. All I had to do was tell Jude that he didn't have to worry anymore, and I could go home with a bigger bank account balance than I'd ever dreamed.

I had a visit with Dallas tomorrow evening, so I'd be flying home tomorrow anyway. It'd be easy for that to be it. Talk to Jude, get on a plane in the morning, and never come back. I'd get the job Jude had promised me,

hire a great lawyer, and I'd never be at Mead's mercy again.

A two-minute conversation, and it'd be all over.

Unless Jude wanted to know why I was confident that Deklin and Aurelia's relationship was over. I couldn't tell him that. I'd promised. And if I asked about going home immediately after asking him to trust me, he could think that I was skipping out without finishing the job.

I'd come this far. I had to see it through.

As I returned to my seat, I ignored the curious looks the three of us received. None of the secrets at this table were my business. They weren't my family or my friends. I needed to remember that, or I was going to be the one hurt when things ended.

"Sofi, Grandad says you're from Las Vegas. Have you always lived there?" Damon gave me that thousand-watt smile that women – and men – had been crushing on since the first moment he'd taken the stage.

And I felt nothing.

I wasn't blind. He was gorgeous, but so was the oldest Holden brother, and I didn't want Damon any more than I wanted Davin. I'd never been one to let attraction of lust rule my life, but I'd also never shied away from admiring someone attractive. Now, I wasn't being reserved about it, but I didn't feel anything other than the same casual observation that I would've had toward a pretty woman.

The first fluttering of panic had me tensing, but I managed to will it away before anyone noticed.

"More or less," I answered his question with a smile of my own. "I didn't always live right in the city, but I never went far from it."

"You moved around a lot?"

I nodded, uncomfortably aware of the silence around us even as Damon seemed completely at ease with it. "Coming here is my first time out of the area."

"How do you like Houston so far?" Cynthia interjected her own question.

"It's beautiful," I answered honestly.

"What did you do in Vegas, before Jude found you?" The question came from Ronall, and I wondered if he'd worded it that way because he suspected the type of work I'd been doing. Probably worse.

I gave a half-truth. "I was a housewife. If that's even really a word anymore."

"You're married?" Davin frowned, his gaze shifting to his brother.

“Was,” I corrected. “My ex isn’t the...nicest of people. The divorce was finalized earlier this summer.”

At least that one was completely true, though I’d chosen more polite phrasing than Mead deserved. I kept smiling as I waited for the next question, telling myself this was better than them completely ignoring me.

“Aurelia, my dear, I’ve been meaning to ask you how you’re settling in.” Jude cut in so smoothly that the shift in conversation almost seemed natural. “You’re working on your master’s in childhood education if I remember correctly.”

“You do, and I’m settled in quite well, thank you.”

She blushed as she answered, clearly not liking the attention, but when her gaze touched on mine, I saw a strength she was only just beginning to understand. If I really had been planning to move here, I thought she and I would have become good friends.

“Are you going to be staying in Vernon to teach after you graduate?” Cynthia asked.

“She is not,” Ronall answered sharply. “There are several private schools here in Houston that will be eager to hire her.”

I wondered how much of Ronall’s tone was because he didn’t care for Cynthia or because he was struggling with relinquishing control over his daughter. He loved her, that much was clear, but the little I knew made me think that he was smothering her even as he tried to protect her.

“I’ll be working in Vernon’s public school system next semester,” Aurelia said. Her voice was even, but she kept her eyes on her hands in her lap. “Depending on how that goes, I may not want to work at a private school.”

Ronall’s mouth flattened into a tight line. “Nothing needs to be decided right now.”

She nodded, as if that response was exactly what she’d expected, but I wondered if this would be the start of her getting up the courage to tell her parents who she truly was. I had no doubt that at least a majority of the schools Ronall had in mind were ones that wouldn’t approve of Aurelia’s recent revelation. That very well might be what she needed to speak out. Either way, that parent-child relationship was in for some serious changes soon.

“What grade do you want to teach?”

Everyone in the room went completely still as I directed my question to

Aurelia. Her eyes glinted with humor, and I felt a pang of regret that she and I wouldn't have the opportunity to become friends.

"First or second grade," she said. "I did my student teaching with second graders and loved it."

I could almost hear the sigh of relief when things didn't explode, and I knew at least two of the people at this table were thinking about how much gall I had and how amazingly polite she was not to snap at me.

As conversation began to flow more naturally, I sat back and let it move on around me. Maybe it would be better for everyone if I left tomorrow and stayed away. Deklin would get over me, and the family would heal without me here.

Jude wanted the best for his family, and that had never included me. I was merely a means to an end, and the longer I was here, the more danger I was in of forgetting it.

By the time the presents had been opened and the cake cut, I was determined to talk to Jude alone. I got my chance when he picked up some dishes and carried them into the kitchen. I grabbed the closest ones to me and followed.

"May I have a minute of your time?" I asked.

"Of course." Jude's smile reminded me of Deklin's, and my courage faltered. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a visit with Dallas tomorrow evening. I need to be back in Vegas that afternoon at the latest to get my place ready."

"All right. I'll arrange for the plane to be ready first thing and my driver will take you to the airport whenever you're ready. Will you be coming back Monday night or Tuesday morning?"

Never.

That was what I needed to say. What I intended to say.

But what came out was, "I'm not sure yet. I'll need to check in with my parole officer, and it depends on what she says."

Jude nodded. "I'll let the pilot know to be on stand-by then."

He left, and I was still trying to say that I was done. Maybe he knew that, and that's why he hurried away. Or maybe he just knew that I wasn't ready for this to be over.

Not wanting anyone to see how annoyed I was at myself, I didn't go back to the sitting room where everyone had moved after dinner. Instead, I headed for the bathroom across from the library, figuring I could steal a few minutes

in there to compose myself.

As I reached the library door, however, the sound of men's voices stopped me.

"How did you go from being engaged to someone you hadn't even kissed to sleeping with Grandad's assistant?" Damon sounded amused.

"You're the one who said that Aurelia deserved better," Deklin said. "Are you really giving me shit about breaking up with her?"

"Not at all, Dek. I'm glad you took my advice and decided to live a little before settling down. Sofi seems great. Really different from Aurelia, which is what you need right now. You're young. Have some fun."

I turned around and walked away before Deklin answered. I didn't want to hear him agree with what Damon was saying. I wasn't mad, not at Damon or Deklin. It wasn't as if Damon was belittling me or anything like that. He just saw that Deklin and I were casual because there wasn't anything else to see. He might not have known what his grandfather had done, but he knew I wasn't the person Deklin would settle down with.

That was fine.

That was how things were meant to be, after all. Get Deklin past Aurelia and then get on with my own life.

None of the truth was enough to ease the ache in my chest, and I knew I needed this to be done sooner rather than later. I was starting to fall for Deklin, and if I waited too long, I'd cross that line and break my own heart.

THIRTY

DEKLIN

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY WENT BETTER THAN I'D THOUGHT IT WOULD. DAD AND Ronall were still pissed, but I couldn't really blame them. At least now, I knew Aurelia was okay. She was the only one whose feelings really mattered in this. Well, hers and Sofi's. As long as the two of them weren't mad at me, I could handle anything else.

Sofi.

She'd haunted my dreams last night, but my bed had been empty. I'd gone back home last night, but not because I'd wanted to. I'd known that if I'd stayed at Grandad's again, I wouldn't be able to keep myself out of Sofi's room.

I wasn't strong enough to avoid temptation so close, and I knew we needed some space if things between us were going to last. And despite what my brother may have thought, I wanted this to work.

It didn't make waking up with an erection so hard it hurt any easier, though. Seeing Dad sitting at the table when I came down for breakfast was enough to kill it. I nodded a greeting and went to pour myself some coffee, fully expecting him to start lecturing. Instead, he waited until I sat down to speak, and what he said wasn't what I'd imagined.

"I expect you in my office first thing to report all of your findings from Las Vegas. If you ride with me, you'll have a few minutes to settle in your office before the presentation."

"My what?" I stared at him, my mug of coffee stopped halfway to my mouth.

He didn't need to ask what I needed clarified. "I believe *office* is the word you're looking for."

That's what I'd thought he'd said. "I wasn't aware I had one."

"You do, and it's time you use it."

I thought about asking him if that meant I wasn't going to be traveling around with Grandad anymore, but I didn't want to give him any ideas. It had been bad enough being away from Aurelia. I didn't want that with Sofi. I wanted to have a house where I could invite her over, somewhere we'd have real privacy. Maybe I could convince her to only sign a six-month lease wherever she found a place...

I was getting ahead of myself.

The first thing I had to do was go to work.

I finished my breakfast and then headed back to my room to change. I supposed I'd have to get a few more suits now that I would be working with the rest of the family. Maybe Sofi and I could go shopping again.

With that pleasant thought in mind, I made my way back downstairs and joined Dad in the car. We didn't talk on the ride to the office, but that was par for the course. I didn't expect that a working relationship would miraculously make us close. Honestly, I didn't know if my father was close to anyone.

Not even with the brother who was waiting in Dad's office when we arrived. Davin didn't look surprised to see me, so I assumed he'd already known that I was coming in. Or maybe nothing really surprised him anymore. It was hard to tell.

He'd always been a serious person, and time hadn't done anything to change that. Not even thirty, and sometimes he acted older than Grandad.

"Morning." He pushed himself up from the chair. "Your office is next to mine. Come on."

I knew where his office was, but I followed him as if I didn't, going into the one that he pointed to. The two offices looked a lot alike, both without a single personal touch. As I settled into the seat behind my desk, I wondered what I might be able to bring in to make it look different. It wasn't like I had family pictures or anything like that.

I smiled as I imagined a picture of Sofi on my desk. Maybe I'd ask someone to take a picture of the two of us and have it framed.

But I first had a report to give.

"Dek, Grandad's here." Davin tapped on my door a few minutes later. "There's breakfast in the conference room."

Grandad.

Sofi.

Davin raised an eyebrow as I bolted up out of my chair, and the hint of a smile I saw made me think he knew exactly where my thoughts had gone. Since it wasn't often that I got to see him smile, I was happy to let him have some amusement at my expense.

"You really like her," he said as I fell into step next to him.

"I do," I agreed. "I know she's Grandad's assistant, but I don't care."

It was freeing to say it, and a thrill went through me. I was grinning like a fool when I walked into the conference room, but I quickly saw she wasn't there. My disappointment must've shown on my face because Grandad answered my unspoken question.

"Sofi went back to Vegas to take care of a few things. She'll be back tonight or tomorrow."

I frowned. She hadn't told me.

"Maybe what's from Sin City should stay in Sin City." Dad scowled as he shut the door behind him. "And leave good people alone."

"Sofi is good," I snapped. "If you want to be pissed at someone, fine, be pissed at me, but leave Sofi alone. She's a good person."

Utter silence and all eyes were on me.

"Now that we've determined Deklin's personal life has nothing to do with our business, perhaps we can get to said business." Davin's voice broke through. "I believe we have some properties to discuss."

I had to admit, I was impressed with how well Davin shifted things right back to where they needed to be. Dad wasn't happy, but Davin managed to work around it with enough skill that I wondered how often this happened. As Grandad and I presented everything we'd gathered in Vegas, I watched Grandad direct his attention more to my brother, giving Davin the chance to respond before Dad. And Dad seemed completely oblivious to it all.

When we finished, I headed back to my office with only one thought on my mind. I needed to talk to Sofi. I started dialing even before I sat down, slumping in my chair when the call went straight to voicemail. She should have landed by now, but maybe she'd forgotten to take her phone off airplane mode. That was probably it.

"Hey, Sofi, it's me. Just wanted to make sure your flight went well. Let me know when you're back, and I'll pick you up at the airport. No need to take a car. Um, that's it. Bye."

I felt like an idiot as I ended the call, but I hoped it'd come across as general concern rather than creepy. I wasn't trying to be stalker-ish, and I had

no right to be annoyed that she hadn't told me she was leaving. We were still trying to figure out who we were to each other.

When a phone rang, I fumbled with it, thinking it was Sofi calling me back. It rang a second time before I realized it wasn't my cell, but rather my office phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Deklin Holden?"

"It is."

"My name's Brady Conlon. I spoke with you several days ago in Las Vegas."

I vaguely remembered him now. "Yes. Mr. Conlon. Of course. How can I help you?"

"I'd hoped you were still in the area, but since you've returned to Houston, I guess I'm wondering if you'd be available to come back for a meeting."

Someone wanted me to come back to Vegas on a work-related matter shortly after I discovered that the woman I was seeing had taken a trip to Vegas herself?

I was going to call that fate.

THIRTY-ONE

SOFI

I FELT...WEIRD.

I shouldn't have. I was home. Not just home in my city, but home in my own apartment. I'd gone grocery shopping, cleaned the apartment, and made everything presentable for Dallas's visitation. All of it should have felt like getting back to my real life after a strange and surreal dream-like vacation.

But it just felt *weird*.

Like my skin didn't fit right anymore.

I told myself it was just because Mead would be here for the visitation, and he'd pick apart everything I'd made of my life since I'd left him. The money Jude had given me had gone a long way toward making things look less stark here, but I hadn't used a lot of it.

I planned on doing some research tonight and making calls tomorrow so that I'd have a lawyer before I went back to Houston. The next time I came back to Vegas, I'd have local interviews in place, and whatever job I ended up getting would provide me with a deadline to give Jude.

Having a plan in place helped calm my nerves, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Maybe it was the voicemail from Deklin that I hadn't responded to yet. Maybe it was the lingering effects from the stress of Cynthia's birthday party and the revelations there.

Whatever it was, I didn't like it.

I straightened the papers on my table even though they didn't need it. When I'd left this morning, Jude had given me one of those yellow envelopes. Inside were page after page of everything I could possibly need to prove that I had gainful employment. He'd also included several copies of a reference letter.

None of those things mentioned that he was located in Houston since I knew Mead would use that against me, no matter what I said about my plans to get a local job. Everyone who needed to know where I'd been had known, but I wasn't required to tell Mead since I didn't plan to take Dallas out of the city, much less the state.

The one thing in the envelope that wasn't sitting on the table right now was a hand-written note from Jude, telling me that Royd was still working on his investigation into Mead and might have something for me by the end of the week. That note was safely tucked into my wallet behind my ID.

I jumped when someone rang the buzzer and then practically ran to the door to buzz them up. My heart was still racing when the knock came a minute later. I didn't have to fake my smile as I opened the door and Dallas ran to me. I bent to hug him, ignoring the fact that Mead and Ms. Stanton were still in the hall. When I finally straightened, I motioned for them to come inside while listening to Dallas tell me all about his preschool.

While Dallas and I talked, Ms. Stanton looked around the room, taking in all of the changes and improvements I'd made since the last time she'd been here. Her expression didn't change, but I still hoped that she approved of what I'd done. I could hire the most expensive lawyer in the city and still lose Dallas if Ms. Stanton didn't think I was a parent capable of providing for and protecting my son.

"Great neighborhood," Mead said, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "Exactly where I'd choose to raise a child."

I ignored him and addressed my comments to Ms. Stanton. "Can I get you something to drink? Water? Tea?"

"No, thank you." The small smile she gave me was encouraging.

"Mommy." Dallas tugged on my arm. "Where's horsey?"

"Horsey's at home," Mead answered before I could. "With Mouse, remember? Mommy doesn't have any toys for you."

If I had to keep smiling at Mead, my face was going to crack. "Actually, there are some new toys in your room. Why don't we go see who we have for you to play with?"

Mead and Ms. Stanton followed behind me as Dallas and I went to his room. As per Dallas's request, I'd bought him a stuffed elephant, but right now, there was another stuffed animal getting all the attention.

"Horsey with a horn!" Dallas grabbed the unicorn from the bed and hugged it. "Look, Daddy! Horsey with a horn!"

“You bought him a fu– a unicorn?” Mead hissed, glaring at me. “I’m not going to let you turn my son into a pu...” He cleared his throat. “A wimp.”

If Ms. Stanton hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have chosen his words so carefully, and I hoped she realized that it wasn’t Dallas’s presence that had softened things.

“He saw one and asked me for it,” I said evenly. “I told you when he was born that I wasn’t going to do the ‘boy toys and girl toys’ thing.”

His hand started to rise, and for a moment, I thought he’d actually grab me in front of the caseworker. If I hadn’t been worried about how it’d affect Dallas, I might’ve tried to goad Mead into it. He caught himself, though, and dropped his hand.

“I’m sure you’ve seen a lot of parents who disagree on things like this,” he directed his statement to Ms. Stanton but didn’t take his eyes off me. “What their kids can and can’t play with.”

“I have.” Her gaze slid from him to me and then dropped to Dallas without another word.

I didn’t know if that meant she agreed with me or with Mead, but I was okay with that. If she was as unbiased as I hoped, this could go my way with less of a fight than I’d feared.

“You must’ve worked some serious overtime to afford all this,” Mead said as I sat down on the floor with Dallas. “I mean, the brand-new stuff. The second-hand crap is cheap.”

I had my back to Mead, but I didn’t need to see him to know how patronizing his expression was...or to know what he wasn’t saying. I didn’t respond, though. I hated not standing up to him, but this was one of those times that standing firm was a greater measure of character than if I started verbally sparring with him.

“I mean, there are always ways to supplement your income, right? What are some of the things your job offers?”

I sighed and stood. When I turned, I made sure my voice and expression were pleasant, no matter how much I was seething inside. “Ms. Stanton, I was going to let you know this before you left, but the present might be best so you can ask any questions you might have.”

Mead made a move like he was going to go around me to Dallas, and I took a half-step sideways. Maybe it was petty, but I wasn’t going to let him fill my son’s head with nonsense about me while he was in my own house.

“I’ve gotten a new job. Mrs. Islip already knows about it, and I have

paperwork for both of you.”

Mead snorted a laugh, and I glared at him for a moment before going back to Ms. Stanton.

“I’m working as a personal assistant to Jude Holden of Holden Enterprises while he’s preparing to retire, at which point I’ll be moved to another position with equal or greater pay. I have full benefits, not only for me but for Dallas too. Medical, dental, and vision insurance.”

“‘Assistant?’ Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Mead sneered at me.

I was getting pretty good at ignoring him, especially considering how many years his had been the only voice I’d been allowed to have in my head. “I have copies of my contract, my insurance information, as well as a letter from my employer.”

Mead stepped closer to Ms. Stanton and lowered his voice as if he didn’t want Dallas to hear what he was about to say.

“I’d bet my pension that she’s shacking up with some guy and getting him to pay for stuff.”

“You’d lose that bet,” I said smoothly. “Mr. Holden is happily married.”

“Come on, you can’t think we’re that stupid. An old man looking for something on the side doesn’t care if he’s married.”

I shrugged. “It really doesn’t matter what you believe, Mead. The truth is, Jude Holden is a good man with a beautiful wife he adores. There has never nor will ever be anything sexual between Mr. Holden and myself. I trust that Ms. Stanton will do a thorough job of evaluating things.” I smiled at the caseworker. “Mrs. Islip asked me to let you know that she’s happy to share her findings with you if you want to reach out.”

A muscle in Mead’s jaw twitched, and I felt a flutter of fear before I pushed it down. I didn’t need to be scared of him anymore. With Jude’s money, I leveled the playing field, and I knew I could beat Mead on my own merits. Anything he did to me, I’d take straight to the cops and to Ms. Stanton. I knew how well he played people, but I also knew that I could get under his skin like no one else could. I just needed to bide my time until he made a mistake.

I could do this.

“Mommy, let’s play!”

Smiling, I turned back to my son and sat down next to him once more. Mead wasn’t going to take Dallas from me, and now I had the means to make

that be the truth.

THIRTY-TWO

DEKLIN

I STEPPED ONTO SOFI'S FLOOR AND WONDERED IF I SHOULD HAVE CALLED first. Surprising her had sounded like a good idea when I'd found a straight flight from Houston to here, even if I had been stuck next to the toilets the entire time. In fact, it had kept looking better and better until right now.

Grandad had just said that she'd needed to take care of a few things. I'd assumed that meant she was coming back here to make arrangements to move to Houston, but now I wondered if the reason she hadn't told me she was leaving was because she was having second thoughts about the job. About me. If I just showed up without warning, I didn't know if it would make things worse or better, but I couldn't seem to stop my feet from moving forward.

I'd gone half a dozen steps when one of the apartment doors opened, and three people came out. A tall woman in a pin-striped skirt and white blouse clutched a clipboard as she moved at a brisk pace, quickly leaving the other two behind. A dark-haired man who looked to be a little older than Davin and a boy with the same unruly hair held hands, but the boy kept looking behind him at the door they'd come out of.

Neither one of them gave me a second look as we passed by each other, but when I realized which apartment they'd been in, I turned in enough time to see them both disappear.

Questions now on my mind, I knocked on the door, and it swung open before my hand had the chance to drop.

"Deklin?" Her eyes darted down the hall the way her visitors had left. "What are you doing here?" She seemed to catch herself and smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Please, come in."

I stepped into her apartment, wondering if she was going to come up with a lie or if she'd tell me the truth. I could practically feel her anxiety, but I didn't bring any of it up. There were so many things that we didn't know about each other, and I wasn't going to make matters worse by accusing her of hiding things from me.

"I should have called," I said. "I can go if you want me to."

"No." She shook her head, her fingers clutching together in front of her. "I don't want you to go."

The fist around my heart eased its grip. "One of the property owners we met last week wanted a meeting with either Grandad or me. When I found out you'd come back, I thought I'd surprise you."

Her smile softened into something real, and she put her hand on my arm. "Thank you. That was sweet of you."

"It really is okay if you want me to go," I said, searching her face. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

She leaned in to kiss my cheek, bringing with her that lilac scent again. "You just caught me off-guard is all." Suddenly, she frowned. "How did you get here? There wasn't enough time for the plane to get back to Houston, then turn around and come here again."

"I bought a ticket like a regular person." I winked at her.

"I am so sorry," she said with a laugh, pushing her hair away from her face. She shook her head. "Please tell me you at least managed to get first class."

"Nope. Third class. Next to a baby."

A mortified expression settled on her face. "You have to let me make it up to you."

"You can let me take you to dinner," I said.

Her cheeks turned pink. "Um, I've already eaten."

For the first time since I'd gotten here, I noticed my surroundings. Dirty dishes at the sink, more than one person would need. Dirt on the rug just inside the door, and I knew it hadn't come from my shoes. A stuffed unicorn on the couch. Pictures on the wall. Pictures of a dark-haired boy who, despite my fleeting glance at him, was the same child I'd passed in the hall.

"My son," she said softly. "Dallas. He's four."

I looked over at her, but she had her eyes on a picture of the two of them, a recent one if I had to guess. I didn't see any pictures of the two adults I'd seen.

“He was here, right before me.” I made it a statement rather than a question.

She nodded, crossing her arms in a gesture I’d seen from Aurelia, one that seemed to be more about security than defiance, a way to protect herself. “His dad and the caseworker brought him. My visits with him are supervised.”

The bitterness in that last sentence chilled me. I crossed the short distance between us and wrapped my arms around her. She didn’t resist as I pulled her to my chest, my own heart aching at the story I didn’t yet know.

“I was nineteen when I met Mead. He was manipulative, mentally, and emotionally abusive pretty much from moment one, but I’d had a shit childhood, and all I let myself see was someone who cared about me. We’d been together less than a year when I found out I was pregnant.” Her voice was muffled as she buried her face in my shirt. “We got married a few weeks later. I dropped out of college to stay at home with the baby, and I didn’t mind. I loved the idea of being a mother, of having a family, and I thought Mead did too.”

She pulled back and looked up at me, her eyes red-rimmed but dry. I pushed back her hair from her face and rested my palm on her cheek. I held her like that for a minute and then kissed her forehead before folding her back into my embrace.

When she was ready, she continued her story. “After Dallas was born, Mead started hurting me. Pinching. Hitting. Never where anyone could see, of course.”

I’d suspected it was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. If I’d known any of this when he’d walked by me, it would’ve only been the presence of a child that would’ve kept me from tearing into him.

“I tried to find a way out, but I don’t have any family. I had no job, no money. All of my friends were his friends.”

I wanted to tell her that she had family now, but it wasn’t the right time. She needed me to listen, not to declare the feelings I still couldn’t quite figure out.

“About a year ago, I did something at a family gathering. I don’t even know what it was, just that his mom complained to him about it. I argued with him. I don’t know why. I knew he’d hit me like he had before. This time, though, he didn’t hold back. It was bad enough that I ended up driving myself to the ER.”

I was going to kill that son of a bitch.

“He showed up later, saying he heard about my ‘accident,’ and I knew that if I didn’t leave him, he was going to keep hurting me, and he might start hurting Dallas too. I told him if he didn’t contest a divorce, I wouldn’t press charges.”

She shook her head, and even though I wanted to soothe her with my words and my touch, I knew she wasn’t finished. She needed to get it out, and I needed to listen.

“I can’t believe I was stupid enough to believe him when he agreed. When I was released, he picked me up, told me that he’d hired a divorce lawyer, and had an appointment for me the next day. I never made it. I got pulled over, my car searched, and the cop found drugs. I was arrested and skipping over all the legal stuff to the point, I have a couple months left of probation and a caseworker who has to be at every visit I have with my son until our custody arrangement is finalized.”

“Baby, I am so sorry.” I kissed the top of her head. “If there’s anything I can do to help, anything at all, just say the word.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Just knowing I’m not alone in this is more than you can know.”

“I can probably find people who could make him disappear.”

She laughed, and I felt some of the tension leave her. “I think I’ll stick with the legal system for now, but if he charms his way through this, I might take you up on that.”

I raised her face, keeping my hand on her chin as I brushed my lips across hers. “Whatever you need.”

Her expression sobered. “Knowing all this doesn’t change things?”

“Only in that I’m tempted, for the first time in my life, to become a gun-toting Texan.” I kissed her again, more thoroughly this time, leaving us both breathless by the time it ended. “You know what, I think we need a vacation.”

“I think I’d get fired if I tried to take another day off.”

I grinned at her. “I’m pretty sure no one will miss me, and Grandad won’t mind if you’re with me. In fact, I think he likes the idea of us together.”

Her smile faltered. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Won’t people think I’m getting shown favoritism?”

“Are you going to break up with me?” I made the question light, but the answer worried me.

“No.”

I could breathe again. “Then it doesn’t matter because they’re going to talk once we start getting noticed together. Why not at least get a trip to Tahiti in before we have to start defending ourselves?”

“Tahiti?” Her eyes widened.

“Tahiti,” I repeated. “We’ll go to the meeting together tomorrow, and when we’re done, we’ll have the jet take us to Tahiti. If anyone needs us that badly, we can always video chat.”

The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

Me, Sofi, the beach, Sofi in a bikini...Sofi *out* of a bikini.

We were going to Tahiti.

THIRTY-THREE

SOFI

I WAS IN TAHITI.

It was Thursday evening, and we'd gotten here Tuesday evening...and I still couldn't quite believe it.

Deklin had booked us a deluxe beach bungalow at one of the best hotels on the island, and I felt decadent just saying it. I would've been thrilled to stay anywhere at all in this paradise, especially at this hotel, but he'd gone all out. We were set apart from the other suites and bungalows, having our own private space while still enjoying the amenities of staying in a quality hotel.

While there were all sorts of activities available, we'd chosen to simply relax. We'd tuned out the rest of the world, ignored clocks, ate when we'd felt like it, and gone to bed when we wanted. We'd lazed about as much as we wanted, sometimes talking and sometimes not.

This morning, we'd spent an hour in the outdoor bathtub simply enjoying being together. The weather was absolutely gorgeous. High seventies to mid-sixties and blue skies. We couldn't have asked for a more beautiful vacation.

And the longer we stayed, the worse I felt.

This wasn't Jude giving us something expensive, so I could do what he'd hired me to do, which would've been bad enough. Deklin had planned this trip because he thought what we had was real, and it was killing me. I cared about him far more than I should, and every passing moment pulled me deeper and deeper. I knew that telling him would destroy what we had but continuing to keep it a secret wasn't fair to him.

As I came out of the bathroom, washed clean of all the sand I'd accumulated during our time on the beach, I couldn't help but smile when I found Deklin waiting for me, his fingers tapping on the counter – a tell of his

I'd learned. He was trying not to be impatient about something.

"Will you join me on the terrace?" He held out a hand in a gesture that would have looked at home when he was in a tux as it did now when he wore a pair of shorts and a simple button-up cotton shirt.

"I'd love to." I took his hand, loving the way our fingers fit together. "You look nice."

"You look beautiful."

I blushed, using my free hand to smooth away non-existent wrinkles in the fabric. The eggshell white sundress was my favorite of all the new outfits I'd purchased. It had the rare ability to be both comfortable and pretty at the same time.

"While you were in the bath, I took the liberty of putting together an evening snack."

We went out the sliding glass doors onto the terrace that overlooked the lagoon, and I gasped when I saw what he'd done. A blanket was spread out across the space, the edge of it nearly dipping into the pool. A bottle of champagne sat in a bucket of ice next to a plate of various kinds of fruit. Large, fluffy pillows covered the space between the blanket and one of the lounge chairs that had been turned sideways, making it possible to lean back.

"You didn't need to go to all this trouble." I had to practically whisper, unable to trust my voice not to tremble. "Not for me."

"I wanted to," he said as he raised my hand to kiss my knuckles.

I didn't deserve this. Any of this. Not the trip or the hotel or the romance of champagne under the stars. I didn't deserve this kind, sweet, generous man.

In that moment, I hated Jude for what he'd asked me to do, and I hated Royd for having found me in the first place.

But I still let Deklin lead me to the blanket, and I still sat down next to him. I smiled as he poured me some champagne, and I sipped the bubbly liquid while he moved the tray of fruit to make it more accessible to me. He put his arm around my shoulders, and the two of us sank back against the pillows and stared up at the sky, the only sound between us the gentle lapping of the water.

At some point, the absent brush of his fingers on my arm shifted from a pleasant reminder of his presence to a growing warmth that spread from cell to cell until my need for him had me turning toward him, reaching to bring his face closer. I sighed as our lips touched, heat rushing through me,

consuming everything that wasn't desire. The scent and taste and sound of him filled my senses, and I knew I was doomed.

"Thank you," he murmured against my mouth.

"For what?" I asked as I ran my fingers through his hair, trying to memorize the feel of the strands.

"You saved me." A hand moved up my spine to my neck, long fingers curving around. "I would've spent my entire life trying to earn my father's approval at the expense of my own happiness."

I closed my eyes, hands fisting the front of his shirt. Dammit!

I was living with the consequences of my bad decisions, the consequences of my own actions. I didn't deserve how Mead had treated me, but I'd had chances to get out before I'd gotten pregnant, and chances after.

I was trying to fix it, and Jude had offered me an easier way to do that. And while I knew that breaking Deklin and Aurelia up had been the right thing to do, the weight of all the deceit and lies it'd taken to get there made me sick to my stomach.

"How did I get so lucky?" His thumb ran along my jaw. "I can't think of a single thing I've ever done that would make me deserve you."

It was too much. I couldn't do it anymore. I had to tell him the truth. I loved him too much not to.

Love.

The word was a knife to my heart, but I didn't try to soften the blow, didn't try to convince myself that I'd been right not to try to talk Jude into telling Deklin the truth. I deserved to hurt.

But I was still selfish enough to want to be with him one last time. And I had no doubt that it'd be the last. Whatever meager hope inside me wanted to believe that Deklin would understand and forgive, I quashed, knowing that I'd have to accept whatever came my way for my part in the deception.

I moved, swinging one leg over his lap and settling on his thighs. A quick tug on his shirt popped buttons, and he made a sound in the back of his throat that had all sorts of things inside me clenching. I leaned forward, kissing his tattoo and then making my way up to his collarbone. Adding teeth and tongue, I sucked and licked across his chest, then bit down on his nipple.

"Fuck!" His entire body jerked, and he grabbed my hips, fingers digging in with enough force to bruise. "Sofi..."

"Shh," I said as I turned my attention to his other nipple. "I'm not done yet."

One of his hands moved to the back of my head as I continued to torment him with my mouth, his fingers tightening in my hair until I gasped at the zings of pain. That was good. I wanted it to hurt like this. I wanted to feel *everything* so that when it was all over, I'd have the memory to hold onto because I'd never meet anyone like him again.

I rocked against him, smiling as he cursed again. His cock pushed against the front of his shorts, the small spot of moisture on the front telling me that he wasn't wearing anything underneath. I squeezed him through the thin fabric, appreciating the heft and heat of him against my palm.

Then, he was in motion, flipping us so that I was pinned underneath him. The intensity of his stare was as responsible for my breathless state as the sudden movement, and a shiver went up my spine. Despite the fact that I was still completely clothed, I felt naked under that gaze.

Without taking my eyes from his, I reached under the waistband of his shorts. My fingers wrapped around him, and his eyes nearly closed. The effort he made to keep them open captivated me, and I teased him with unhurried strokes until he caught my wrist.

"I don't have any pockets in these shorts." His strained voice distracted me, and it took a moment for his strange sentence to register, though I still didn't understand why that was important. "The condoms are inside."

Oh.

"I know," he said, "poor planning on my part."

"I—" I hesitated, then decided I might as well go all-in if this was the last time. "It's okay. I mean, if you're okay..."

I'd never given any thought to how awkward a conversation about birth control would be. The one good thing I could say about Mead was that he'd been obsessive about using condoms. Dallas had been a fluke – one that I was so glad had happened – and after he was born, Mead had insisted I go on the pill too, just to be sure it didn't happen again.

"Are you sure?" Deklin asked. "I don't have...I mean, I'm okay too."

I smiled and rose up far enough to give him a gentle kiss. "Yes, I'm sure."

From there, it was simple. I didn't know whose hands shoved down the front of his shorts or how my dress moved up enough for him to reach between my legs and pull aside my panties, but it took only a few seconds from the time I said yes until he pushed inside me, filling me in one smooth motion that left me gasping.

His mouth covered mine, swallowing the sounds I made as he kissed me. I wrapped my legs around him, my heels at the backs of his knees. My hands slid under his shirt, tracing the muscles in his back as they bunched and moved. His strokes were shallow, as if he didn't want us apart even that much, and my body pulsed and throbbed in time with his.

Ripples of pleasure turned into waves, each one cresting higher than the last until I peaked. My back arched, and his rhythm faltered for a moment before resuming, faster and deeper, prolonging my climax until it rolled into a second one, catching me by surprise. My nails raked down his back, and he cried out, his body going stiff as he came at last.

It was over far too soon.

THIRTY-FOUR

DEKLIN

I ACTUALLY SAW SPOTS WHEN I CAME, AND I WAS FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT SOFI had climaxed twice. I allowed myself a certain measure of pride that I'd been able to give her that, especially since my ex-girlfriend had always acted like sex with me was a chore. Maybe I'd improved – though it wasn't as if I'd had any practice since then – or maybe the connection Sofi and I had changed things.

She made a soft noise as I pulled out, and I immediately leaned over her, concerned that I'd hurt her somehow, but she gave me a small smile.

“Messier than I thought it'd be.”

Messier...oh. I flushed, straightening. I reached for a couple napkins and cleaned myself off while Sofi did the same. Maybe once we caught our breath, I'd ask if she wanted to go for a swim. I'd be up for another round soon enough and since condoms weren't an issue, maybe the pool–

“I need to tell you something.” Sofi sat up, straightening her dress in a way that looked more like fidgeting than actually needing to do it.

“All right.” I settled next to her, concern growing when she wouldn't look at me. “Sofi?”

She took a shaky breath, looking like she was bracing herself for whatever my reaction would be, and I realized that she hadn't been this way when she'd told me about having a son. Whatever this was, it was going to be bad.

“Because of my c-criminal record, the only job I was able to find back home was working as a showgirl at a place called the Diamond Star Lounge. It wasn't a strip club, exactly, but calling us 'showgirls' was a bit of a stretch. Pasha, my friend there, said burlesque dancer was more accurate.”

I reached for her hand. "Sofi, it's okay. We all have pasts."

She pulled her hand back. "I'm not done. You need to hear all of it."

"Okay." I frowned but resolved not to interrupt again.

"I never had sex with anyone or anything like that, but..." Her cheeks were bright red, and she kept staring at her hands while she talked. "I hated it. And I knew Mead could use it against me if he found out. Which he did...and it...I knew I needed to get out of there."

Her voice shook, and I gritted my teeth. He'd done something to her. I'd bet my life on it. This wasn't the time to ask, but I would before her next visit with Dallas. I'd be damned if I let that bastard terrorize her. Whatever it took, I'd keep her and her son safe from him.

"A man named Royd Kichner came to see me. He said he was looking to hire someone for a client of his. That's how I met your grandad."

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. Not surprising. My family employed thousands of people. Remembering all of their names was impossible.

"I met with Jude the first day you were in Las Vegas." She raised her eyes, and I winced at the haunted look in them. "He told me that he wanted to hire me to seduce his grandson and break up an engagement."

It took a full minute to register the words, and once I did, I popped to my feet. "That's not funny."

"It's the truth." She stood up too but kept her distance. "He didn't hire me to be his assistant. That was a ruse to get me close to you."

I couldn't breathe. Fury and betrayal warred for a voice. Why would she say any of this? Was it true? Had my grandfather done this? Why? And why had she gone along with it?

Every kiss, every touch, was a lie.

She opened her mouth to say something else, but I was done listening to her. It was my turn to talk.

"Shut. The fuck. Up."

THIRTY-FIVE

SOFI

EACH COLD WORD WAS LIKE A FIST TO THE GUT.

And I deserved every single one of them, and more.

“You’re lying.” He pointed at me, his face twisting into something unfamiliar.

It killed me to know I was responsible for it. “I’m not.”

“Shut up!” he snapped. “You’ve been lying to me from moment one! How can I believe a word you say?”

He wasn’t wrong.

Suddenly, his face went white. “Was this what you were after?” He gestured to the blanket I was standing on. “Getting me to fuck you without a condom so you could get pregnant? Nice meal ticket, right? Live off the child support I’d provide?”

My jaw dropped. I’d expected anger and deserved it, but I’d never imagined he’d think me capable of something that despicable. “No! I swear to you, I didn’t. I wouldn’t.” I confessed the last secret that was mine to give. “I’ve fallen in love with you. That’s why I had to tell you. I couldn’t lie to you anymore.”

“Bullshit.” He picked up a piece of fruit we hadn’t eaten and threw it toward the lagoon. “Everything you say is fucking bullshit!”

“Deklin, please...” I hated myself for pleading, but I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t at least try to get him to understand.

“No! You don’t get to ask anything of me.” The pain on his face as he turned back to me tore at my heart. “All of this was a lie. You made me hurt someone who didn’t deserve it. You destroyed my relationship with my father and with Ronall Kane. All because you married an abusive asshole and

got yourself into trouble you couldn't get out of."

My stomach churned, and I wondered if he'd finish before or after I threw up. Either way, I needed to find somewhere to sleep tonight and figure out a way to endure the flight back to Houston. I didn't even want to think about what Jude was going to say when he learned that I'd told Deklin the truth.

Most of it, anyway. I was still holding onto the other secret. I'd done enough damage. If Jude wanted to share that particular bombshell, it was on him.

"I can't believe I thought I—" He shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

I wanted to tell him that it did matter, that it hadn't been a job since the first time we'd kissed. Maybe before that. I didn't say anything, though, because I knew it wouldn't do any good. He needed to process everything before he could even think about believing me. Except, even if he did end up believing me, it wasn't a guarantee that he'd ever trust me again.

"You know, no matter how much of what you just said is true, you're still lying about one very important thing. You did fuck someone for money. It just wasn't while you were in Vegas."

I grabbed onto the back of the chair, the wind knocked out of me.

"The room's paid through Sunday." His voice was quiet, and his shoulders slumped. "Stay. Don't stay. I don't care. Find your own way home." He looked at me, his expression hard. "Vegas. Not Houston. That's not your home."

I managed to stay on my feet until I heard the front door close, and then I crumpled to the ground. A wounded cry ripped from me, too strong for me to keep inside.

It was all true. Everything he'd said. It didn't matter that I loved him. I'd lied to him. Broken his trust. I'd tarnished everything we'd shared.

I'd considered myself better than the women I worked with at Diamond Star, looked down on anyone who'd even consider selling a piece of themselves to provide for the people they loved, but I was the whore, not them.

I didn't know how long I stayed there, only that by the time I finally stood up, a chill was in the air and my knees ached. I limped inside, hoping against hope that he'd come back and just hadn't been able to talk to me yet. It didn't take long for me to confirm that I was alone. His stuff was still here, but that didn't mean anything. He'd taken his phone and wallet, I was sure, and anything else he'd left behind could be replaced.

The thought struck a nerve when I realized I was one of those things he'd left behind. Not because he'd ever treated me as an object, but because that's what I'd made myself when I'd accepted this job.

He wasn't coming back, and I didn't need to check the airport to know he'd left on the jet. He'd said I had to find my own way back to Vegas. The couple hundred dollars in my wallet and almost-maxed-out credit card wasn't going to get me far, though. The money Jude had given me was in a savings account I couldn't touch from this far away. That left me with pretty much only one viable option.

I picked up my phone and called the only person who could help me now...if he even would after I told him what I'd done.

“Deklin knows.”

THIRTY-SIX

DEKLIN

I'D THOUGHT ABOUT CALLING GRANDAD ON MY WAY TO THE AIRPORT, AND then again while I'd been waiting for the pilot to do whatever he had to do to get us off the ground. During the nearly eleven-hour flight, I'd been tempted more than once to call just to ask if Sofi had been lying.

I hadn't done any of it, though. I wanted to be face-to-face when I asked him if he'd done what she'd said. If he said no, I knew he'd be the only one sympathetic that she'd lied to both of us. If he said yes, then I wanted him to look me in the eye when he told me why.

I hated that I was even considering believing Sofi's claim of Grandad's involvement, but too many things about it made sense. It'd been Grandad who'd kept Aurelia and me apart so much. Trips he'd planned. He'd never mentioned anything about wanting an assistant, and then he'd suddenly hired one, but not in Houston and not from a pool of assistants who were already employed by the family. He hadn't mentioned interviewing anyone, and he hadn't told me where he'd gone that first day in Vegas.

All of that evidence was too damning to ignore.

But he did have one very important thing going in his favor.

Motive.

There wasn't one. He'd been friendly with both Ronall and Aurelia the entire time. Not simply polite, but friendly. He liked them both. I'd never heard him speak a word against either of them.

Even if he'd thought Aurelia and I were moving too fast, hiring someone to break up the relationship seemed a bit extreme. If it was merely a timing thing, I would think he'd do something like offer to buy us a house if we waited until Aurelia was done with grad school.

Which was why none of this made any sense at all.

It was evening by the time I got into a cab, but I gave the driver Grandad's address without a second thought. While he and Cynthia were probably settling in for the night, it wasn't so late that they'd be sleeping. Besides, this couldn't wait. If Grandad hadn't been involved, he needed to know what Sofi was saying about him. If he was involved...

I shook my head, not wanting to even think about it.

By the time I arrived at Grandad's house, the pressure of all of the emotions that had been roiling inside me since Sofi's confession had my hands almost shaking. My stomach was in knots as I pounded on the door.

"Deklin? What's wrong?" The concern on Cynthia's face helped me keep my temper in check.

"Is Grandad here?" I stepped past her as she moved back to let me in.

"In the den."

She followed me as I headed down the hall, but I didn't wait for her. I liked her, but this wasn't a social call. Grandad was in his favorite recliner and raised his head when I walked in. He set aside the book he'd been reading, his expression serious, and I wondered if he already knew why I'd come.

"Did you hire Sofi to fuck me?" The words were harsher than I intended, but they'd been building in me for almost a full day.

"No."

The answer was simple and should have satisfied me, but it didn't. Sofi had said sex hadn't been part of the job, so Grandad could've been telling the truth in that one-word answer, but still have been responsible for her and I getting together.

"Okay, maybe not sex, but she said you hired her to seduce me. To break Aurelia and me up." I wasn't shouting, but my voice was definitely raised louder than I'd ever spoken to my grandfather before. "She said you found her at some strip club in Vegas and offered her a ton of money to pretend to like me just so I'd dump Aurelia."

I glared at him, but his mild gaze never wavered.

"My PI found her at a club in Vegas, but she was never a stripper." His tone was even and calm, grating on my raw nerves. "Yes, I hired her to turn your interest from Aurelia, but sex wasn't part of it. And it hasn't been a job to her since she stepped foot on the plane to come here. That's real."

"Bullshit!" I snapped. "I can't believe you did this to me! To Aurelia!"

What the fuck?! Whatever your problem with me is, why did you bring her into it like this? Why didn't you just talk to me?!"

He stood, something that looked an awful lot like guilt on his face. "Life is rarely as simple as it seems."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He sighed. "It means that I was caught between a promise I made and watching my grandson – who I love, despite what he's thinking right now – make a horrible mistake."

I shook my head, confusion adding to the mix of my chaotic emotions. "If you thought Aurelia and I were moving too fast, you could've just said so."

Grandad walked over to the cabinet where he kept a couple bottles of expensive alcohol. "Would you like a drink?"

"I don't want a drink. I want answers."

He nodded, as if that was the answer he'd expected. "Cautioning you to slow things down wouldn't have fixed anything."

"Why not?" I was getting tired of playing twenty questions.

He poured himself two fingers of some scotch that probably cost more than my car and drank half of it in one go before turning back to face me. The distress on his face shocked me, but I couldn't let this go. I had a right to know why he'd done what he'd done.

"She's your sister."

I sank down on the couch, knees suddenly weak. "What?"

He sighed and came over to sit next to me. "Aurelia is your half-sister."

"Dad–"

Grandad shook his head and drank the rest of his scotch. "Your parents went through a rocky patch, and at the time, Ronall and his wife were having some problems too. Your mom told me it started innocently, with them confiding about their marital problems, and they became close. Too close. The affair lasted a couple months, but they both ended up deciding that they wanted to save their marriages. They ended things, and the Kanes moved away."

My head spun. This wasn't possible...but I couldn't find a reason why he'd make any of this up. He and my mom had always gotten along. He wouldn't be telling me about this if it wasn't true.

"When Cheryl found out she was pregnant with you, she came to me for advice. She told me about the affair and that Ronall was the father of the baby. Of you."

My dad wasn't my dad.

I was going to throw up.

"She didn't want to lose Walter, and I knew if he found out, he'd leave her and take your brothers. It would destroy her."

Half-brothers.

Each new revelation changed my world even more.

"Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but I told her not to tell either man. To raise the baby as hers and Walter's. I promised I'd keep her secret, but I never imagined that Ronall Kane would come back here, let alone have a daughter."

He stood up and went back to pour himself another drink. This time, he brought one back for me. I took it in one gulp, coughing as it burned its way down. Probably a waste of good scotch, not savoring it, but I didn't need it for the taste right now.

"Who else knows?" My voice was hoarse.

"Cynthia knows that I encouraged a relationship between you and Sofi, but not why." He hesitated, and then added, "Sofi knows."

"She knows," I repeated dully.

"When I first told her what I wanted her to do, she thought I was a horrible person, wanting her to break up an engagement." He held out an envelope I hadn't seen him pick up. "So, I showed her this, and she realized why it needed to be done."

"What's this?" I asked as I took it.

"A letter from your mother. She wrote it a couple years after you were born and gave it to me for safekeeping. If I ever had to tell you the truth about your parentage, she wanted me to give it to you."

I'd passed the point where I could feel anything at all, my fingers so numb that I didn't know if I could even open the envelope without tearing it. "None of this gives you the right to do what you did. How you did it. It doesn't make Sofi's lies okay."

"I was wrong," he said. "And, yes, Sofi had a part in the deceit, but her feelings for you are real. That's why she didn't tell you about Aurelia being your half-sister, even after she told you everything else."

"I can't trust anything she says."

"Maybe not." He stood up again. "But you need to understand that she risked everything to tell you the truth. She could lose her son because of this. If that isn't proof of how she feels about you, I don't know what is." He came

over and put his hand on my shoulder. "I'll leave you to your letter. I'll be in the kitchen if you want to talk more."

He left, and I was alone.

I stared at the envelope in my hands. My name was on the front, written in handwriting I hadn't seen in a long time. I didn't know if I could do this, if I could read a letter written by my mother to tell me...

No. I had to do it. I had to know.

I unfolded the paper and began to read.

My sweet Deklin,

As you sit on my lap, you're too young to read this, and I hope you never will, but I know that life doesn't always go the way we want it to. If you're reading these words, then I must not be there to explain things, and I'm so sorry for that. And I'm so sorry for what I'm about to say.

I made a mistake, and I'll never forgive myself for how it's going to hurt you...

THIRTY-SEVEN

SOFI

ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL DAY IN TAHITI. CLEAR BLUE SKIES. A COOL BREEZE coming in off the water. Paradise.

I'd cleaned the entire bungalow by dawn, unable to fall asleep with so much chaos in my head and heart. The physical work had been enough to stop me from thinking for a while, but it hadn't done anything to ease the pain. With every passing minute, it had gotten worse until I'd given up trying to stop it.

The terrace chair was comfortable and the view beautiful, but I couldn't enjoy it, not when all I could see was the expression on Deklin's face when I'd confessed what I'd done. I didn't know if I'd ever stop seeing it. Perhaps the best I could hope for was time with Dallas to replace it.

Except I probably wouldn't even have that now.

I was giving it all back. Every penny I hadn't spent, I was sending back to Jude Holden, whether he wanted it or not. I'd find a job waiting tables or working in a casino that didn't care about my drug plea. I had to trust that Mrs. Islip and Ms. Stanton would be able to see the truth of Mead and tell the court that Dallas would be better with me.

I'd thought I'd do anything to have my son back, but I'd found the one thing that I wouldn't do. I wouldn't hurt an innocent person. Not again. Maybe that made me a bad mom, but I wanted to believe that it meant I wanted to be a mom whose son could be proud of her.

As the sun disappeared, I wondered if I should call Jude again. When I'd talked to him earlier, he'd told me that he'd be in touch and that I should stay in Tahiti while he decided how to handle things. Since we hadn't planned on being back in Houston until tomorrow, I was covered on the probation end of

things, but being here was just depressing now.

The front door opened, and I sat upright, heart pounding. Someone was here.

“Sofi?”

My pulse went from racing to a dead stop, or at least, it felt like it did.
“Deklin?”

I hurried back into the house and found him standing just inside the front room. I opened my mouth to say something, then snapped it shut again. What could I say that could even come close to fixing what I’d been a part of?

“I talked to Grandad.”

That explained the shell-shocked look in his eyes.

“Aurelia’s my half-sister.”

I nodded. He knew the whole truth now...and he’d come back. I desperately wanted to know why, but I wasn’t going to make things worse by jumping to any conclusions.

“I’m sorry for leaving you.”

I could breathe again but didn’t want to hope it meant anything more than him being the decent guy I knew him to be. “It’s okay. I understand why you did it.”

He shook his head and came a step closer to me. “It wasn’t okay. No matter how pissed I was, stranding you without a way home was a dick move.”

“I’m sorry for everything.” I swallowed hard, determined not to cry. I didn’t want him to think that I was trying to manipulate him with tears. No matter what Mead said, I’d never done it to him, and I certainly didn’t intend to do it to Deklin.

“Grandad told me that you didn’t agree to take the job until he showed you the letter from my mom and told you about Aurelia.”

I nodded.

“I know you did it for your son, and for me.”

“I never meant for things to get this far,” I said around the lump clogging my throat. “I didn’t know I was going to fall for you. I wouldn’t have slept with you if I didn’t—”

I stopped, unsure if I should say it or not.

He smiled, and it was so achingly beautiful that my heart felt close to bursting. “I love you too,” he said, “and I want to give us a second chance. A new start.”

I caught my breath as he pulled me to him. When his arms wrapped around me, I pressed my face against his chest, hands clutching at his shirt. The smell of his laundry detergent mingled with his natural now-familiar scent and loosened the knot in my stomach.

“Does this mean you want the same thing?” He kissed the top of my head as he stroked my back, hand moving up and down my spine.

“Yes.” I tipped my head back so I could see his face. “I want that very much.”

He brushed his lips across my mouth and then rested his forehead on mine. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you thought it wasn’t worth it.” After a beat, he added, “That would’ve made for an awkward trip home.”

Home, right. We both had a lot waiting for us when we stepped off that plane. With a sigh, I took a step back. “We should probably pack.”

“You’re right,” he said. “We have an appointment with Grandad’s PI tomorrow afternoon.”

I frowned. “What?”

He gave me a sheepish grin. “I may have spent the flight here talking to Royd Kichner about what he’d found on your ex.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You did what?”

“Grandad told me about how Royd was looking into Mead for you, so I figured I might as well do something productive since I hadn’t done anything but brood the whole flight to Houston.”

I walked over to the closest chair and sat down. I felt like I had whiplash. “And?”

Deklin came over and crouched down in front of me. “And Royd has enough to bury your ex. Not just stuff that’ll make any judge think twice about giving him custody of a kid, but enough to get him arrested.”

Arrested?

Deklin grinned. “Royd’s got something that proves Mead’s responsible for having those drugs planted on you.”

I was glad I was sitting down already because, otherwise, I would’ve been on the ground. In less than thirty minutes, I’d gone from thinking I’d lost any chance at a happy future to seeing a real chance at get everything I’d never dared to wish for.

Deklin took my hands and kissed both of them. “You’re not in this alone anymore.”

That simple statement did what nothing else had done so far, and tears

spilled down my cheeks. My whole life, I'd never had that sort of support, not even when I was married.

"It's all right." He brushed his hands over my cheeks, wiping away my tears. "We've got this. We can do this."

I nodded, letting him pull me to my feet. He was right. Whatever was coming, we could handle it together.

Step one was packing up. Step two would come after that.

I'D BEEN STRETCHED out next to Deklin for nearly an hour before I gave up all hope of falling asleep. We'd laid down on the bed in the back of the plane shortly after take-off, but my mind refused to let my exhausted body rest. I couldn't turn my brain off. All I kept thinking about were all the ways things could still go insanely wrong.

Deklin's arm around me shifted, his hand sliding up my arm and then down the curve of my body to my hip. He pressed a soft kiss just behind my ear, and I wondered how long he'd been awake.

"Can't stop thinking, can you?"

I sighed. "No, but you don't have to stay awake with me. We've both been up too long."

"I could try to sleep," he said as his fingers crept under the hem of my shirt. "Or I could help you relax."

I smiled as he cupped my breast through my bra, squeezing it lightly before returning to my stomach. He didn't stop there, though. My breathing stuttered when his fingertips teased the skin between my bellybutton and the waistband of my pants. He hesitated, and I nodded, pushing back against him to feel his cock half-hard already.

"Sofi," he breathed my name on the back of my neck, his hand moving under my pants and underwear at the same time.

I moaned softly as his fingers traced along my lips before slipping between them. First, a single digit brushing across the top of my clit and then a second joining in before both began to make circles over the swelling bundle of nerves. I squirmed at the tingles of pleasure dancing across my skin, biting my lips to stay quiet. I doubted the pair in the cockpit would be able to hear me, but I was all too aware of how ambiguous our privacy

actually was.

“Stop thinking so much.” Deklin bit down on my earlobe hard enough to make me gasp. “I don’t want you thinking about anything but how good I’m making you feel.”

I nodded, even though it wasn’t a question. I closed my eyes and tried to will myself to focus only on the sensations his touch brought, but distractions still hovered at the edges of my thoughts. Unexpected pain cut through it all as he sunk his teeth into the place where my shoulder met my neck. Sharp, it twisted everything into ecstasy, and my mind went blissfully blank.

Snapshots of sensation followed, each clear and abstract at the same time.

One leg free of my pants lifted, bent backward over his knee.

Hot and hard flesh rubbed against my ass and then found my slick and waiting pussy.

Joined together in an abrupt thrust that sent me rocketing back up, not quite climaxing, but close.

Fingers changing to quick, brisk strokes in time with short thrusts.

Mouth at my ear, whispering all the ways I made him feel good.

Coming a second time just after he did.

Then, floating, drifting, with my mind gray and empty. Exhaustion finally claimed me, and I let it, knowing I was safe in his arms.

THIRTY-EIGHT

DEKLIN

FALLING ASLEEP AFTER SEX AND NOT HAVING ANYTHING MORE THAN A TINY airplane bathroom for clean-up wasn't exactly conducive to a pleasant arrival, but the solid seven hours of sleep it had given both Sofi and me would've been worth it alone.

Not that sex with Sofi was ever not worth the effort. Fortunately, this was Vegas, and people looking freshly fucked as they got off a plane wasn't exactly out of the ordinary. Our cabbie hadn't even blinked.

As nice as it was to be at Sofi's place rather than a hotel, we didn't linger any longer than it took to take showers and change our clothes. If everything went well, we'd be back here with Dallas in time to put him to bed. Whatever logistics we needed to work out for the future could be discussed then. Our first priority was to clear Sofi's name and destroy Mead.

"Royd is going to meet you at the police station," I explained as I sent a text to Grandad, keeping him up to date with what was going on here. "He's already reached out to contacts he has to make sure everything's in place to get this taken care of today."

"You're not coming with me."

The flat statement made me immediately cross the room and take her in my arms. "I'm going to go keep an eye on your ex and make sure he doesn't get a head's up and skip town."

Her eyes widened slightly. "I hadn't thought of that. I'm so used to him never getting into trouble that I didn't even consider that he might run if he knows he won't be able to lie and charm his way out of it."

"I tend to think he's arrogant enough that he won't figure out he's screwed until he gets sentenced, but I'd rather be there just in case."

She nodded. "That makes sense."

The worry in her eyes tugged at my heart. "Hey, we've got this. Royd knows what he's doing, and I've got no problem using my name to make sure your voice is heard." I kissed the tip of her nose. "And if that's not enough, Grandad will start making phone calls, and that always gets stuff done."

I kissed her mouth this time, keeping it brief, so we didn't get distracted. As confident as I was that this would work, it wouldn't look good if she was late because she'd been fooling around with her new boyfriend. I had no doubt her ex-husband would hit the roof when he found out about me.

Besides, I'd planned something more than just tailing the asshole, and I didn't know how tight my timetable was.

"Ready?" I asked.

She nodded. Her expression was still pinched, and her fingers were cold, but she didn't hesitate to walk out of the apartment with her head held high.

The cabbie dropped her off first, and since Royd was waiting outside, I didn't have to get out of the car to hand her off to him. I didn't know him, but Grandad said Royd was loyal and trustworthy, and I knew how much he valued those two characteristics. He wouldn't have asked Royd to look into Mead in the first place if he hadn't thought something would come of it.

I shook his hand as I took the manila envelope from him and made a mental note to send him a bonus for the extra work he'd done for me. Even Grandad didn't know about this part of what I planned to do. He might've approved, but he also could have told Royd not to help me, and I hadn't been willing to risk that.

After Royd and Sofi disappeared into the station, I gave the driver another address. The last anyone had seen of Mead, he'd dropped Dallas off at his parents' house and then went back home. He was on the schedule to work tonight and was most likely getting ready for that when my cab pulled up in front of his house. If he wasn't here, I'd have to improvise a bit, but I wasn't opposed to that, as long as I was able to do what I'd come here to do.

No one had ever looked out for Sofi, and I was going to make sure she knew that she'd never have to feel alone again.

I knocked on the door and reminded myself that no matter what Mead did, I couldn't punch him. Well, unless he threw a second punch. I'd even take one without reacting if only so I could press charges for assault. The only thing that would completely ruin my plan was if he told me to leave. Trespassing would probably get me in trouble rather than him. I was hoping

the dirt Royd had dug up would be enough to get Mead to think twice about involving anyone else.

“Whatever you’re selling, I’m not interested,” Mead yelled through the door.

“I’m not selling anything.” I raised my voice enough to be heard but kept it polite. “Trust me, Mr. Stafford, you’re going to want to talk to me. It’s about your ex-wife.”

The door opened, revealing Mead in the processes of buttoning up his uniform shirt. “This better be good, or you’re going to find yourself on the wrong side of the law.”

I’d been a little worried that he’d recognize me from the hallway of Sofi’s building since it’d only been a week ago, but that clearly wasn’t the case. I held up the manila envelope. “I need to show you something.”

His eyes narrowed as if he was trying to figure me out, and I kept my expression bland as I pushed down my impatience. Finally, he unlocked his door and motioned me inside.

“I’m getting ready for work, so this needs to be fast.” He walked into the kitchen, and I followed. “You have pictures in there? My wife fucking some other guy? Maybe at that club? She says she’s not working there anymore, but who else would hire someone so stupid, am I right?”

Punching him in his face would only make things worse for Sofi, and that was the only thing that kept me from showing him what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a beating.

I opened the envelope and spread out just a few of the contents on the table.

“What the fuck is this?”

Time for show and tell.

I pointed to the first picture. “This is you in a compromising position with the patrol officer who ‘found’ drugs in Sofi’s car.” Moving on. “And this is a picture of you buying drugs from the same dealer who claimed to have sold those drugs to Sofi.”

Mead’s face was turning red, and I knew he was going to explode soon.

“Here’s a confession from that dealer saying that you’re actually a regular of his, and he’d never seen your ex-wife before you told him to speak against her.”

“You have no idea how badly you’re fucking up your life right now,” Mead growled.

I ignored him. “I also have screenshots from your girlfriend’s dash camera that show there was absolutely no cause to pull Sofi over or search her car. It also shows that same officer carrying a bag from the squad car to Sofi’s car, putting it inside, and then ‘finding’ it a few seconds later.”

“That stupid bitch!” Mead slammed his hand against the refrigerator.

“There’s a letter from Sofi’s public defender saying that he’d been told there was no dashcam footage from the incident.”

“So what?” Mead jutted out his chin. “Some dumb cunt decides she wants to set up my wife. Doesn’t prove shit.”

The more this guy talked, the more I hated him. “This is just a little of what my PI found on you. I have proof that you’ve been using steroids and various illegal drugs. Proof that you’ve stolen from police lock-up on more than one occasion. And to top it all off, evidence that you abused Sofi for years.”

“You’ve got shit.” He picked up the pictures and tore them in half.

I didn’t even blink. “I’ve got it all. And those are copies. Do you really think I’d be stupid enough to bring the originals here? Everything here has two more copies, both of which are in safe locations, and the originals are with the PI.”

“No one’s going to believe any of this.” He was turning an alarming shade of purple. “I don’t care what you say you have.”

He sounded like a belligerent child, and I marveled that he could’ve convinced Sofi to marry him.

“Let’s cut through the bullshit,” I said, keeping my voice carefully neutral. “We can go round and round about whether you think I really have all this evidence and how you’re going to threaten me, but it will end in the same place, with me telling you what you’re going to do to keep me from taking this to the cops. And before you think your friends will be able to get you out of this, let me tell you that no matter how much clout you may think you have, you’re out of your league dealing with me.”

The look he gave me said he didn’t believe me. I pulled out my phone, searched my own name, and then showed him the screen. More color flooded his face, and I had to wonder if he was going to have a heart attack.

“You got all that money, and you’re blackmailing me?”

“I don’t want money.”

“If you want the whore, you can have her.”

I took a step toward him. “Keep running your mouth, and I promise that I

will bury you so deep, no one will find your body.”

He crossed his arms, chin lifting. “What do you want? Drugs? Guns?”

“Dallas.” I held out the legal documents Royd had gotten for me this morning. “You’re going to sign away all of your parental rights. Sofi gets full custody, and she sets up whatever visitation she thinks is best for her son. You agree to never contest the arrangement.”

Mead glared at me, but he hadn’t interrupted to tell me to fuck myself, so I figured I could give him the last part of the agreement.

“And you agree that if Sofi ever gets married again, her husband can adopt Dallas.”

“No fucking way.” His hands dropped to his sides, fists curled and ready to go. “I’m not a moron. You’re fucking my wife and want my kid.”

“She’s your *ex*-wife, and I don’t believe for a minute you actually love Dallas. If you did, you wouldn’t have put him through any of this.” I stepped right up to Mead and met his angry gaze with one of my own. “No loving father would *ever* hit a woman, and definitely not the mother of his child.”

“You’re a bastard,” Mead snarled.

I laughed. “You have no idea how right you are.” I held up the papers. “Now, sign...or do I make a phone call?”

He stared at me for a long moment, and I could practically see him sorting through his options. Finally, he huffed out a breath. “I’ll sign.” Mead grabbed a pen from a nearby counter and snatched the papers from me. He scribbled his name into the appropriate blanks, almost tearing the paper with the force of his writing. “How do I know you’re not going to screw me over?”

I took the papers and left everything else. “I promise you, Mead, I won’t speak a word of this to anyone. As long as you hold up your end of things, everything I have stays with me.”

“Get out of my house.”

“Gladly.” I heard the first sirens as I opened the door, and two cars screeched to a halt in front of the house as I hurried down the steps.

“What the fuck is this?!” The screen door slammed behind Mead as he came after me.

I turned toward him, hearing the car doors close as the cops got out. “I haven’t said a word. Sofi’s the one who took you down.”

He screamed obscenities as he ran at me, but an officer intercepted him before he could get to within a few feet. Mead might’ve had anger on his

side, but the guy who took him to the ground was massive. The female officer raised her voice to be heard over the cursing.

“Mead Stafford, you’re under arrest...”

THIRTY-NINE

SOFI

I'D EXPECTED TO SPEND HOURS AT THE STATION, GIVING STATEMENTS, enduring cops being rude because I dared to accuse one of their own, but it wasn't like that at all. The first sign I'd had that things were going to be different was that we weren't at Mead's precinct.

Royd had found enough dirt to convince someone that this needed to be handled outside of Mead's sphere of influence. The second sign was that, as soon as I finished giving my statement, four officers left with an already-signed warrant.

I barely had time to process before Royd was taking me into what I assumed was an interrogation room so I could have some peace and quiet while I dealt with the custody issue. Because I hadn't expected Mead to be arrested tonight, I hadn't even thought about what I was going to do about Dallas. I hated the thought of him being put in a foster home while all the legal stuff was sorted out.

"Ms. Stafford."

I looked up at the familiar voice. "Mrs. Islip?" Another woman came in behind my PO, and my heart leaped. "Ms. Stanton?" I automatically looked for Dallas, even though I knew he wouldn't be here.

"You have some very good friends in high places," Mrs. Islip said as she sat down across from me. "And while that would normally be problematic for me, I've been apprised of the situation regarding your arrest. While your conviction still needs to go through the proper channels to be overturned, I'm here to provide my report to Ms. Stanton."

I didn't want to hope that this meant what I thought it did. It would hurt too much when I was let down.

Mrs. Islip continued, "Giving her my report like this is unusual, but these circumstances have been anything but usual." She handed an envelope to Ms. Stanton but kept her eyes on me. "I've written all of this down, but I wanted you to hear this from me. I'd already thought well of how you complied with the terms of your probation, not just following the rules, but not complaining about them. You have been exemplary, and now that I know you were innocent of the charges, my admiration of you has only increased. As much as I am able in my position to do so, I am recommending that full custody be returned to you immediately."

Tears burned my eyes. "Thank you. I've appreciated how fairly you've treated me. You had no way of knowing I was innocent, but you never made me feel as if I didn't deserve the chance to be better."

She gave me a tight smile and then stood. "I'll leave the two of you to it then. If there's anything else I can help with, please give me a call."

"As Marge said, you have friends in high places," Ms. Stanton said.

It took me a moment to realize she was talking about Mrs. Islip. "I don't understand."

"Normally, there'd be a mountain of paperwork and hearings before we'd be able to return Dallas to you. Even the best-case scenario would be twenty-four hours since it's a Sunday afternoon and I'd need a judge's signature, but the people you have looking out for you have enough clout to get one of the crankiest judges in the city to sign an emergency custody order to release Dallas to you today."

I leaned back in my chair, completely taken off-guard. If I'd been asked what I wanted more than anything else, it would've been to get to take Dallas home tonight, but I'd never imagined it could actually happen.

"Now, we have a lot of paperwork to do, but once it's finished, I'll be able to get Dallas and bring him to you."

"Where is he?" I asked. "If Mead's going to be arrested right now, where's my son?"

"Safe," she assured me. "Dallas was already with his grandmother when the warrant was served."

A knot of anxiety formed immediately in my stomach. "She's never going to hand him over if she knows he'll be given back to me."

"She will," Ms. Stanton said grimly. "Or I'll have her arrested for interfering with a court order."

I allowed myself the momentary entertainment of imagining Mead's

mother being arrested. She'd never liked me, and she'd made my marriage even more miserable than it already had been. She'd reinforced Mead's emotional and mental abuse by telling me that everything was my fault and what a horrible wife and mother I was.

"Let's get going on filling out this paperwork," she said. "Once it's done, I can go get Dallas and bring him here."

"Why here?" I asked.

"Because if Mead's mother decides to follow me and try to take Dallas from you, I want people in place to handle it."

Shit. I hadn't even thought about that. "What if she decides to come to my apartment?"

Ms. Stanton scribbled something down on a business card and handed it to me. "Don't let her in. Call 9-1-1, and then call me."

I nodded. "All right." I took a deep breath. "Where do I start?"

She pointed, and I began writing.

MS. STANTON and I had just finished up the paperwork when Deklin appeared in the doorway. The ear-to-ear smile he was sporting made my heart leap.

"You're going to want to see this." He took my hand when I came over to stand next to him.

Ms. Stanton touched my shoulder. "I'm going to go get this started. I'll bring Dallas back here, so don't leave."

"What if something goes wrong?"

Deklin squeezed my hand but didn't give me clichés or platitudes. I wasn't being paranoid. Mead had proven just how ruthless he was when it came to getting what he wanted.

"Then I'll call you here," Ms. Stanton said. "Wait here until you hear from me, one way or the other."

I nodded, and she left. Deklin pulled me against his side and put his arm around my shoulders. He was still smiling, and I hoped that meant good news, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. I felt like everything was balanced on a knife's edge, and the slightest breath could tip things.

Then the doors opened, and I heard Mead cursing and yelling, his voice

echoing off the ceiling and walls. As Deklin and I moved closer, I saw everyone in the station looking the same direction, none bothering to conceal their disgust as Mead railed against everyone and everything under the sun.

Their attention only fueled his anger, and I pressed closer to Deklin's side. Logically, I knew Mead couldn't hurt me here, but I hadn't ever felt safe enough for his conditioning to break. With Deklin, I thought it might finally happen.

"I'm going to have your fucking badges!" Mead tried to jerk away from the men holding him. "Where is she?!"

Deklin's entire body tensed.

"It's okay," I whispered as I wrapped my arms around him, giving him the same comfort he was giving me.

"Where's that fucking whore?! Are you sons of bitches lining up to fuck her?! Is that what you're getting out of this?!" Mead's voice faded as he was half-dragged down another hallway.

"It's not okay," Deklin said, his voice rough. "No one should talk about you like that."

"I meant that his words don't bother me anymore." I tipped my head back to look at Deklin directly. "I still have to work on the way him shouting makes me react, but I don't believe those things he says. Not anymore."

He kissed my forehead. "All right, but I can't say that I'm not hoping for him to get the shit beat out of him. A lot."

I smiled, not quite relaxed enough to laugh. When I had Dallas safely at home, maybe I'd be able to laugh. I doubted I'd completely relax for at least a couple more months, depending on how things went with Mead's case and if any of his family tried to come after me and Dallas, but after everything I'd been through, even this drop in tension was a relief.

"What do you say we go find a bad cup of coffee while we wait?" Deklin asked. "I don't know about you, but jet-lag is kicking my ass."

DEKLIN PUT his hand on my knee to stop it from bouncing and then laughed when I glared at him.

"You're the one who wanted to find coffee," I pointed out. "It's not my fault they have super-extra-caffeinated here."

“It could be the fact that you drank three cups in less than ninety minutes.”

I was in the middle of composing a mildly clever retort when I heard a shout.

“Mommy!”

Out of my chair before Dallas had gone more than a few steps, I only had eyes for him. I dropped to my knees, the pain of hitting the tile floor barely even registering as I caught him in my arms. I fought for control, not wanting to scare him with my tears. Only when I knew I wasn’t going to cry did I pull back and kiss his cheek.

“Ms. Stanton says I’m going to live with you now.”

“You are.” I looked up at her and found her smiling. “Thank you.”

She held out a red backpack, and Deklin took it from her. “There will be some details to iron out, depending on if there’s a trial or plea bargains, but he’s going to be in the hot seat now.”

I liked the sound of that. I stood up, taking Dallas with me. He was happily chatting away about how happy he was that he was going to get to stay at the apartment with me and all of his new things, and I couldn’t stop smiling. Deklin’s hand came to rest on the small of my back.

“Take him home,” Ms. Stanton said. “I’ll call you tomorrow after I get an update about how things are going.”

“Thank you,” I said again, those two words inadequate to fully explain my gratitude for what she’d done.

“Come on,” Deklin said. “We’re going to go out the side door just in case any press got wind of the arrest.”

“Do you really think anyone’s going to care?” I let him guide me to the exit.

“I think as soon as it hits that there’s a cop who’s been arrested for domestic violence, drug use, and planting evidence, there’ll be a feeding frenzy.”

“Great,” I muttered. He was right. Mead’s picture was going to be everywhere, and Dallas was going to want to know why. “Looks like I’ll have to figure out something to explain seeing *his* face everywhere.”

“Not tonight,” Deklin said firmly. “Tonight, you’re going to take a break from all of that and enjoy the victory.”

I liked that idea. In fact, it gave me another idea.

Deklin’s driver was waiting for us, but as Deklin opened the door for me,

a thought hit me. “Crap. I don’t have a car seat.”

He grinned at me and pointed. There, strapped in correctly, was one of those high-end, crazy-expensive car seats. “I had Joseph pick one up on his way over. It’s the kind that you can adapt as he grows.”

I kissed Deklin on the cheek before getting Dallas settled and strapped in. Would there ever be a day when I wouldn’t feel like the luckiest woman in the world to have such an amazing man in my life? I hoped not. I hoped that I’d have the chance to thank him every day for what he’d done for me.

I sat between Deklin and Dallas on the way home, each one having one of my hands. Dallas was fighting sleep, but he’d nod off soon enough. I had a feeling he hadn’t gotten a nap this afternoon. Mead’s mom had once informed me that giving Dallas a set schedule would stifle his creativity. If he didn’t crawl into bed on his own, she waited until he fell asleep wherever he was and then put him to bed.

When we reached my building, Deklin took Dallas and I took the backpack, grateful that I wouldn’t need to carry my growing boy all the way up the stairs. After setting a half-awake Dallas at the table, Deklin stood next to him, clearly unsure what to do.

“We’re going to have grilled cheese sandwiches. Would you like to join us?”

The smile that spread across his face made me smile in return. Then he turned to Dallas. “Is it okay with you if I stay for dinner with you and your mom?”

My heart melted. If I hadn’t already been in love with him, that question would’ve done it.

Dallas nodded, and then yawned. “She makes the bestest grilled cheese.”

“I’m sure she does.”

Grilled cheese was one of my go-to meals for when dinner was late. Deklin kept Dallas chatting while I made the food, and then we ate in relative silence. Halfway through the second half of his sandwich, Dallas’s head started nodding.

Eyes still on my son, I spoke softly so as not to wake him. “I can never thank you enough for what you and your family did for Dallas and me. And I want you to know that I understand if this isn’t what you want. A relationship that has a four-year-old already in it won’t be the same as if I didn’t have him.”

Deklin stood and picked up his plate. For a moment, I thought that was it,

that he'd walk right then and there. Instead, he took the other plates and leaned down to kiss the top of my head.

"Put him to bed, and then we can talk. I'm not going anywhere."

I hoped that meant more than just him not leaving before we talked, but I didn't let my mind wander any bunny trails as I picked up Dallas and carried him into the bedroom. The last thing I wanted while I was tucking in my son was to be thinking about Deklin just wanting to let me down easy.

Except when I came back out into the living room, Deklin was sitting on the couch, at ease, and looking like he belonged. Something in me twisted, and I knew that if he walked away, my heart was going to be shattered. I wouldn't be angry, though, not after he'd done so much to take down Mead and get Dallas back to me.

I smiled as I sat down next to him, but I could feel how tight my expression was and knew it didn't look completely genuine. Judging by the look on his face, he had an idea of why I didn't look happier.

"I don't know Dallas," he began, "but I know how important he is to you, and what a great mother you are. That means he's important to me. I want to get to know him."

I opened my mouth, and he put his fingers over my lips. His eyes were sparkling.

"I'm not going to push things. You're his mother, and I will respect whatever timetable and boundaries you want. But you need to know that I'm serious about you. About him. I'm in all the way."

I removed his hand from my mouth, kissing his fingers before releasing his hand. My heart was pounding. I wanted this so badly to be real.

"I have something for you." He picked up a folded sheaf of papers and handed them to me.

I opened them and read the first few lines. I frowned, letting my gaze drop to the bottom of the letter where I saw Mead's signature. I flipped to the second page, the legal jargon not processing anything better than I had in the letter. I mean, I knew what they said, but it wasn't getting through.

"I don't understand."

"When I went to keep an eye on Mead, I talked to him." He gave me a sheepish smile. "Actually, that's really why I went there. To get him to sign that."

I held up the papers. "I think I'm going to need a little more explanation than that."

“I may have shown him copies of the evidence you gave to the police and told him that if he signed over full custody to you and rescinded all parental rights, I wouldn’t take the evidence to the cops.”

He had to be joking, right? He couldn’t have blackmailed my ex into relinquishing all claim on Dallas just minutes before Mead was arrested.

“It’ll hold up,” Deklin said. “Even if he does say I blackmailed him into it. It’ll just look like he’s jealous of our relationship.”

“So...I...” I shook my head, trying to make everything process more quickly. “Mead granted me custody.”

“And made it possible for...someone to adopt Dallas.” Color rushed into his cheeks. “I made it general, in case you don’t want...I mean...” He let out a rush of air. “Sofi, I want to marry you and adopt Dallas.”

And I was speechless.

“I don’t need an answer right now. And I don’t have a ring.” The words were rushed, as if he thought he needed to say all of this before I rejected him. “Like I said, I’ll go at whatever pace you want, but whenever you’re ready, that is what I want. You as my wife. Dallas as my son.”

I wanted to ask about the fact that we lived in two different states, but as soon as I thought it, I realized that it didn’t matter. After I tied up all of the loose ends, there’d be nothing keeping me here in Vegas. I could go anywhere I wanted to go.

But there was only one place I wanted to be.

Wherever Deklin was.

“Yes.”

His eyes widened.

“Yes,” I repeated. “I don’t care about a ring. I love you, and I want to be your wife. I want you to be Dallas’s father.”

He caught my face between his hands, and I had a second to see his eyes blaze before he crushed my mouth with his. I grabbed the front of his shirt, wanting him closer. All of the adrenaline and fear and relief suddenly converted into an all-consuming desire, and the need to have him with me, inside me, was overwhelming.

He stood up, taking me with him, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. My tongue tangled with his, fingernails scratching the back of his head as I ran my fingers through his hair. I heard the bedroom door close, the dim light vanishing completely. Despite the dark, he managed to put me on the bed and then found my bedside lamp.

I pulled him down onto me, yanking on his clothes as he worked on mine until we were both wonderfully naked, and it was all sweet silken skin at our fingertips. My body hummed, and I felt more alive than I ever had before. I traced the lines of his body. His jaw and down his neck to his collarbone. Over the muscles in his stomach and then his back. Over his firm muscles of his ass and thighs.

When I wrapped my fingers around his cock, he groaned, biting his lip to muffle the sound. I used the advantage to roll us over, putting him beneath me. His hands ran over my body as I kissed my way down his torso. Those sexy lines at his hips got extra attention before I moved to that thick, bobbing shaft. I flicked my tongue against the tip, tasting the salt of his skin.

“Fuck,” he moaned, burying his hands in my hair.

I smiled, then wrapped my lips around the head and went to work. I used my tongue, licking and circling and teasing, taking encouragement from the low sounds he made and the way his fists tightened in my hair. I moved lower and then back up, increasing suction as I went until the begging and pleading became nonsense.

He was close, and as much as I wanted the satisfaction of him coming in my mouth, I needed him inside me more.

I raised my head and moved up his body until I straddled his waist. His eyes were wild as I balanced myself with a hand on his stomach, reaching underneath me to hold him as I deliberately lowered myself one little slip at a time until we'd come together as completely as possible.

His hands slid up along my ribcage and over my breasts. Strong fingers teased my nipples, making me shiver as I rocked back and forth, enjoying the way he stretched and rubbed all the right spots inside me. When his hips started to move, I matched his rhythm. Our gazes met and held. Whoever had said that eyes were the windows to the soul must have come to that revelation while making love, because as I let myself go, let myself drown in the rich green of his eyes, I knew his soul was just as pure and beautiful.

A hand dropped down to where we were joined, and his thumb found my clit, already swollen and sensitive. With firm strokes, he coaxed me toward orgasm, my stomach clenching, pleasure zinging through me with an almost painful intensity.

My breathing came faster, harsher, and our rhythm changed into something near-frantic as we raced to completion. Then, suddenly, we were there. I tightened around him, and he groaned my name, the two of us coming

together in that white-hot ecstasy that went above and beyond mere physical pleasure.

I was home.

FORTY

JUDE – 1993

I ABSENTLY RUBBED MY JAW AND THEN WINCED. I DIDN'T REGRET LETTING Mark Titan hit me, but I wasn't enjoying the bruise. It'd been two days, but it still hurt if I put too much pressure on it. That was why I had some unprofessional stubble instead of my usual clean-shaven look. Still, Mark had been sitting in jail thanks to a judge who owed me a favor, and a bruise was a small price to pay for it.

I sighed and closed my eyes, resting my head on the back of my chair. I could've avoided all of this if I hadn't hired the bastard in the first place, but hindsight was twenty-twenty. All I could do now was deal with the fallout.

My phone rang, but I ignored it. It was late enough that the chances of it being anyone other than Rachel was slim.

Okay, maybe the bruise wasn't the only price I'd paid.

Mark's accusations had made the news, and more than one tabloid had jumped on the idea that I'd been sleeping with a former employee's wife. My lawyer was working on suing them for libel, and I was content to let him do his work, but my lack of vehement defensive posturing had just made Rachel even more convinced that I was cheating on her, even if Heidi wasn't the woman she'd been jealous of originally.

The sound of a door closing caught my attention. No one else was here, and I wondered if maybe the call hadn't been from Rachel, but now my wife was coming in to yell at me in person. Or maybe Mark had made his exorbitant bail and was coming in now to finish our fight.

This time, I wasn't going to stand back and let him hit me without any retaliation. No cameras here. If he threatened me, I'd show him that I could kick his ass, even if he was twenty years younger than me.

Except the person who stepped into my office wasn't Mark, but rather his wife, Heidi. Slender and delicate-looking, she was one of those kinds of women who was beautiful no matter what, even when she'd been crying, like she was now. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her face drawn.

"Jude." She crossed her arms over her stomach as she came into my office. "I didn't know where else to go. I'm pregnant."

Shit.

THE END

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