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Billion-Dollar Bride: Book 1—Godric's Academy for Young Ladies

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BILLION-DOLLAR BRIDE: BOOK 1—GODRIC’S ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

A Master’s Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master’s of Arts, English

By

Kaylin Nicole Stickley

December 2020

BILLION-DOLLAR BRIDE: BOOK 1—GODRIC’S ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

English

Missouri State University, December 2020

Master of Arts

Kaylin Nicole Stickley

ABSTRACT

This thesis contains the first five chapters of a young adult romance novel featuring a young woman named Theadosia Lee. The plot is heavily influenced by *Cinderella*, and the biblical braiding technique is heavily influenced by that of Kiera Cass and C. S. Lewis. The piece was inspired by my desire to create more young adult romance novels that contain the biblical values that are sorely lacking in most modern young adult literature. I seek to write a love story that is based on mutual respect, a strong foundation of friendship, and an intentional decision to avoid sexual activities until after wedlock. It is my intention to keep romantic sexual content to a minimum and to avoid scenes of sexual intercourse altogether. After Theadosia receives a confirmation letter that she has been accepted into a university game show called *Billion-Dollar Bride*, her impoverished and abusive life is turned upside down as she enters into a world of fame, fortune, and undiscovered love.

KEYWORDS: young adult literature, romance, fiction, adult content, sexual content, Billion-Dollar Bride, Godric’s Academy, Thea

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my dear friend Ben, who read every single draft of this story including its very earliest incarnations. You have validated me, critiqued me, and kept my impulses in check.

I feel like Thea's story is just as much your brainchild as it is mine.

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INTRODUCTION

Billion-Dollar Bride was meant to be a haven for young readers seeking a fun romance, but without any of the overly sexual content that is so prevalent in young adult literature (YAL) today. As I have grown up reading, I encountered more novels containing sexual acts than I ever cared to. This project was born from the discomfort I felt throughout my youth and the pressures I felt from reading young adult (YA) romance novels to make my relationships mirror that of the characters. As Michael DiCicco and Paula Taylor-Greathouse find in their study on Carol Jones Collin's commentary, "YA literature can serve as a moral conduit for adolescents" (75). With my own experiences supporting that claim, I found myself drawn to novels that fell more in line with my value systems, such as Kiera Cass's *The Selection* series, and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While these stories are amazing, and have provided a heavy influence on my writing, I have found that there are far too few of them on the market—especially gracing the pages of the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Billion-Dollar Bride* seeks to contribute to the romance genre, while tempering the sexual content to a more age-appropriate level.

In a study done by Mark Callister, et, al., they sought to determine how much sexual content appeared in the top forty children's *New York Times* bestseller list. Their definition of sexual content is any thought or action that is of a romantic or sexual nature (480-481). This included anything from a suggestive physical description of a character and mild kissing, to vivid descriptions of intercourse and sexual acts. The most disturbing result of the study, however, was the number of books that held descriptions of intercourse and how many times it was mentioned throughout the course of the book. In the forty books in the sample, there were 453 occasions of sexual acts. More than half of the books contained sexual content, and in each that did, "there

were fifty-six instances of sexual intercourse. When characters engaged in sexual intercourse, depictions were more explicit in nature than implicit” (481-483). While the results are staggering, they are not at all surprising. The world we live in today seeks to glorify sexual acts and place them on a pedestal, as if there is no greater thing people will ever do than take part in sexual pleasures. The conviction I feel towards providing young readers with age-appropriate romance stories is strong, but it begs the question of whether or not we as writers have the obligation to bestow morality upon our young people, or if that should be left to the individual readers themselves.

Lois Lowery, author of *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, and *Messenger*, asserts that “...a young adult writer’s obligation is to be honest, intelligent, and sensitive” (DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse 77). Honesty to our audience will help build trust between the author and the reader. It shows that we are unafraid to write about difficult matters in a way that does not undermine the gravity of the situations. However, we must also be intelligent about how we portray this information, and be sensitive to the developmental stages that our young readers are in. We can explore topics like love and romance without introducing prematurely the intricacies of sexual acts. In Callister et al.’s study, they found that the amount of sexual activity in books geared towards young adults between the ages of 9-12 was lower, but once the target audience became 13 and up, the content spiked and plateaued (484). In other words, a 13-year-old could be reading the same level of sexual content that an 18-year-old early adult may be reading. When an early teen, who’s mental development and decision-making skills are far less than that of an early adult, is left to make their own call on what content they are taking into their brains, they are perhaps unknowingly choosing a path for themselves riddled with pain and depression.

Partaking in premature sexual acts at a young age has been seen to cause higher levels of depression and more frequent cases of low self-esteem and body image. “Early on, dating can be volatile and stressful because adolescents are relatively immature and inexperienced” (Olson and Crosnoe 104). Adolescence is also a time period for exploration and developing a healthy interest in forming relationships. If provided with depictions of healthy relationships in their literature, it is logical to assume that the “moral conduit” that YA can provide will lead them in a direction of *healthy* relationships of their own. But exactly what is the moral standard we as writers should uphold? Alan Sitomer, author of *Homeboyz* and *The Hoopster* admits that, “I think if you ask five different writers, you will get five different answers. Additionally, that which constitutes ‘moral standard’ in one person’s mind might not constitute such the same in another” (DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse 76). What I am suggesting with my writing is not that every children’s and young adult writer should conform to my own moral standard. What I would like to see, however, is a larger variety of YA romance that falls within a more conservative boundary for the young readers who, like myself, enjoy the sweetness of a romantic story without the graphic descriptions of sexual acts.

So, what constitutes as conservative YA romance has become a bit of a struggle for me as I worked through my thesis. I found myself wondering where I should draw the lines, what was pushing the boundary, and what could young adult readers across a broad spectrum of developmental stages find both entertaining and relatable. I wanted my protagonist to feel realistic. I strove to depict life issues that others may have experienced (or not) and tried to formulate a character who had overcome those experiences in ways that developed within her both positive and negative traits. Thea is not a perfect person, and nor should she be. Her quirks and idiosyncrasies make her human and provide room for a powerful redemption arc with strong

character development throughout the complete story. And while Thea's motivations and concerns may not fit every individual who reads this story, my hope is that people might see parts of themselves in her enough that they will care about what happens. For this aspect, I have had to evaluate the things that adolescent girls value.

The term "adolescence," according to Borsheim-Black, was first used by a man named G. Stanley Hall in 1904. He used the word to "characterize[ed] adolescence as a time of emotional and behavioral confusion contrasted to the stability of adulthood" (29). As seen in many YA novels, much of the action that takes places on the page comes from social interactions, misbehavior, and the uncertainty of miscommunication. These life features are the hallmark for many young people as they navigate the uncharted territory of high school and, of course, the forming of romantic relationships. Borsheim-Black goes on to explain how the social construct of being 16 years old has been shaped and developed over time depending on what the culture and generational values uphold (29). I thought about what this meant for the modern teen—not just a 16-year-old but for each stage of a teenager's life.

Using my own experience, I remembered how much I craved acceptance, how I found my worth in the ability to catch the eye of a crush, and how the most important thing to me at the time was spending time with my friends and family. School came secondary to all of that. As I was building Thea, I kept these things in mind. I put her at the age of 18 so that she would be of legal marrying age and able to largely make her own decisions. I kept her a bit uncommonly innocent in many areas, though, namely to romance and the physical side that comes with it. I felt in this way, it wouldn't be unheard of for a girl her age to be inexperienced, and it could provide an area for many teens to connect who also may be inexperienced in the realm of love and dating. An interesting aspect to consider, however, is the fact that I am no longer a teen, so

therefor my own cultural and generational values will have already shifted from the current-day teen.

It is important to remember that in all cases, “YAL is written *for* adolescents *by* adults, [so] it always represents, first and foremost, what adults think adolescents want, need, and care about and who adults think adolescents are” (Heartling Thein and Sulzer 47). I think my story has a bit of an advantage, though, because it was not so long ago for me that I lived through my teen years. My generation, though different from the current, is not so different that I cannot connect with them. We still share in many of the same nostalgia, and the struggles of navigating high school and new relationships is nearly a universal life experience. I think, perhaps, the biggest struggle for me has not been identifying what it means to be a youth of today, but with how much of my own personal values belong in this story. What should I hope to accomplish with my story, and how do I want my readers to feel once they’ve finished it?

Marion Dane Bauer, author of *Runt* and *On My Honor* states that “The role of adults in assisting and guiding youth through adolescence may have a huge impact on not only the development of the adolescent but also the media through which they can explore worlds outside their own” (DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse 79). How could I introduce my readers to a concept of romance that is largely ignored in media in today’s age? As both a YA writer and a Christian, I wanted to write Christian values into my story without being explicitly obvious that they were there. It is in this way that I wanted to model my story off Kiera Cass’s novels. To most who are unfamiliar with Cass as a writer, her series are merely cute YA romance novels. However, Cass is not shy about her religious beliefs on social media. It is easy to see the biblical connections she has woven into her stories once familiar with Cass and her intentions as an author. For example,

The Selection Series is a dystopian version of the story of Esther in the bible; and her newest romance duology, *The Betrothed* and *The Betrayed* are a medieval retelling of the story of Ruth.

Similarly, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series spreads biblical concepts and stories throughout multiple books. Lewis's method is elegant, creative, and impactful. He is far more overt with his interweaving of biblical stories than he is covert, though. A non-Christian *could* read the *Chronicles of Narnia* without paying much attention to the biblical undertones, but the symbolism and representation of Aslan as Jesus is much harder to miss than Kira Cass's America Singer as Esther or Hollis Brite as Ruth. While *Billion Dollar Bride* will not be a retelling of any specific biblical story, I still desire to weave biblical truths and values into the plot to provide a means of sharing the gospel without readers even realizing it. I would like to structure my stories closer to that of Cass's style rather than Lewis's, but I still pull heavy influence from both.

What biblical values look like in my story are an elimination of sexual scenes, a reduction in the amount of sexual content as a whole (such as kissing, physical touch, and sensual descriptions of characters' physical appearance), and what a Godly relationship should look like from a Christian standpoint. Thea's age at 18 is a fitting example of when someone should start entering into Godly relationships. At 18, she is legally an adult and is better prepared emotionally to enter a relationship than say, an individual who is age 13. "As they get older, therefore, girls may gain the capability to handle relationship pressures while boys likely grow in their ability to give as partners" (Olson and Crosnoe 103). This emotional maturity helps to form more positive and healthy relationships, where a younger person may struggle to find this balance.

Additionally, a Godly relationship seeks to honor each individual of the relationship by respecting boundaries and avoiding awakening the sensualities of physical romance before its

time. Love should come slowly and should focus on building the emotional side of the bond before the physical side is even considered. To young readers, this aspect is vital. Many young people enter relationships with the mindset that their partner is meant to “be their other half” and solve all of their needs and problems as they arise. Not only does this go against what the Bible practices, but it is detrimental to forming long-term meaningful relationships that do not end in divorce.

Perhaps the most important part of maintaining Godly boundaries and seeking to honor each individual in the relationship is the consequences of ignoring this feature. This part of relationships has been ignored more often than not in literature as a whole, but specifically in YA novels. The consequences of premarital sex in much of YA literature are mostly emotional, without any reference to unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and diseases and with virtually no reference to practicing safe sex at all (Callister et al. 483). The message that is being made here seems to be that adolescents are emotionally mature enough to enter into romantic sexual relationships with each other, but not emotionally mature enough to even *read* about what happens when such acts actually take place. With literature and the media being one of adolescents’ primary means of receiving information about the world (Callister et al. 478), YA authors are doing an incredible disservice by not providing means to show our young readers a proper and healthy way to enter and maintain a relationship.

In her study, Borsheim-Black focuses on what literary elements offer guiding questions to the portrayal of adolescent characters; elements such as characterization, setting, plot, theme, and metaphor (31). These are the very same elements that I am working to interweave the biblical truths that I want to focus on in this story. So, how would Thea’s character contrast with that of the adults in the world I have built? Thea begins as a lost soul very much focused on the

wrong things. She's had a tough life, so the vices she's created and the fixations she has established to help her cope are not what her mind should be focusing on. The responsible adults in her life recognize this and strive to lead her in a healthier direction. Additionally, I've contrasted Thea's life on the farm with her new life of luxury beginning in California and ending in New York City. Her perceptions about each are very much clouded by the experiences she had growing up. The abuse and neglect she endured in her home life have given her a distorted view of what a simple life in the country actually means. Her life of wealth in the city is a large improvement from what she endured in the country, but ultimately what it all boils down to is *who* she was *with* instead of *what* material things she *owned*. These are life lessons that most individuals must face but are largely what many adolescents are introduced to at that stage in their lives. By providing a character that addresses these themes and more, I can begin to instill the values into my readers that I am hoping to portray.

The plot of *Billion-Dollar Bride* follows closely to that of Disney's *Cinderella*, adapted by Lily Murray. I am drawn to Murray's version in particular because her adaptation of the story is particularly beautiful, and I feel she includes all the most important details of the tale, lending it to be a great reference for my writing process. Additionally, the artwork in this copy is stunning, and provided for much inspiration in the way of attire and scene. I chose Murray's *Cinderella* in part because it is one of my all-time favorite fairytales and partly because it fits with the theme of my book extraordinarily well. *Billion-Dollar Bride* is a rags-to-riches story set 75 years in the future. It features a young lady who, like Cinderella, manages to maintain a hopeful outlook on life despite the hardships she has faced. I wanted Thea's story to be *Cinderella* reimagined because I feel like it is a beautiful depiction of what Christ has done for us. We were broken down, abused, and neglected, then Christ died for us and traded our dead

existence for a life of love and prosperity. *Cinderella* has the added bonus of being a well-loved classic that many people enjoy. I hope that my readers will recognize the plot of the story easily and be excited to see what interpretation I have given it as they read along.

I chose to write the story in first person, as I felt that it created a more intimate relationship between character and reader. Heartling Thein and Sulzer note that “such narration both feels authentic in its intimacy and—on the surface—offers only a single dominant perspective on the adolescent experience” (47). It gives me the freedom to bestow prejudices, opinions, assumptions, and world views on Thea with an authority that third person often times lacks. Thea thinks what she thinks and does what she does and the interpretation of her thoughts and actions are completely at the imagination of the reader. Heartling Thein and Sulzer go on to say that “first-person YAL narration, despite being constructed by an adult, reads as truth about the adolescent experience that isn’t questioned by competing perspectives that are available to other narrative forms” (47). My goal here was to make Thea feel fully human with her own flawed judgments and allow for my own perspectives and opinions to fall quieter into the background as resonance.

With *Billion-Dollar Bride* being a romance, I did not want to eliminate the possibility of a kiss, of romantic dates, and of emotional turmoil. As the title implies, the story ends in marriage which is a wholly adult concept. In this way, *Billion-Dollar Bride* should be seen as a coming-of-age novel. The goal has always been to show what coming of age and falling in love means to a Christ-minded individual. By no means should this story be taken to mean that every human being needs to have their life match Thea’s. She is one example in billions that could be written within this theme. What I want to achieve as a writer is to begin providing options for young readers seeking cleaner content. This thesis is the start of hopefully many novels that

might one day grace the shelves of bookstores and invite young readers to come see what healthy relationships might look like, minus the preachy nature of many Christian-marketed books. If I can provide young readers with this opportunity, I will consider my goal achieved.

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CHAPTER 1—THE “PRINCESS” ACADEMY

I lived in Sandy Grove, Kansas, on about sixty acres of land surrounded by mega farms dozens times the size of ours. The sunset seemed to melt into the tree line that bordered our small farm—a farm that held twenty dairy cows, two goats, and a scattering of chickens. The quaint farmhouse stood at the edge of the property, near the road. The white picket fence should have been the icing on the cake of American dream, but it was so old and dilapidated that it took more work to keep it standing than it did to keep the traveling salesmen out.

The house itself was not much better.

The roof only leaked occasionally, and my best friend, Grant Williams, was quite skilled in repairing it. The peeling and graying walls had been white once. A layer of mold splatter painted the exterior near the roof. Most of the old radiator heaters were broken, and the permafuel pellet stove in the living room didn't do much to heat the upstairs in the winter. Summers were always hot. We had never had the money to install central cooling, despite Daddy's dreams of developing the land into a mega farm of its own which would rake in more income than my meager salary. He died before he could make that happen, the animals functioning primarily to feed our immediate family rather than being sold for a profit. So instead of central cooling, box air conditioners chugged exhaustedly from the windows. The house was tired, just like its inhabitants.

The good news was that it was a solid structure, built years ago by my father when he was still alive. It had been beautiful in its prime, with a gabled roof, whitewashed walls and a wraparound porch complete with porch swing. A huge Rose of Sharon bush grew against the wall beneath my bedroom. It had been a gift from my father to my mother when he had at last finished the house. At the time, the bush had only been a foot or so tall. Now, it towered well

above our heads, almost reaching my window. It accompanied an army of rose bushes, balloon flowers, crepe myrtles, and irises that followed the line of the wraparound porch and stopped militantly at the porch steps. If you sort of squinted your eyes when you looked at the place, you could almost forget its decrepit state and see its former glory, like the house's ghost still clung to its walls, mourning the loss of its beauty.

My mother did very little but tend to her garden and host garden parties with her precious twin step-daughters, Brietta and Fifer. When Dad died, Mom remarried to an unfortunate sort of man named Karl. He was squat and pudgy, with a thick, curling black beard that always seemed to have something or another caught within its bristles. Mom liked him because he was gone half the time. Karl had two daughters, Bri and Fifer, who made for the worst stepsisters in existence (though Mom seemed to prefer them). The dysfunction of my miserable little family chafed at me, though I could do little to escape. The rage I felt for Karl and the girls was only overshadowed by the terror they instilled in me. Mom had no idea of the horrors she'd set loose in my life when she married Karl.

I worked at a bakery in town—partially to try and keep the house and farm afloat, but mainly to escape my family for as long as I could. What I made was mostly siphoned away to bills and to Karl's whims, leaving me with no savings to move out on my own. Karl was a truck driver whose meager income was all too often squandered on beer and my step-sisters' extravagant tastes in fashion. His absences when on the road were a blessing I could not begin to articulate. Mom was a proud blogger, which, for her, meant throwing parties, tanning on the back deck, and watching reality TV, then posting about it on her Society Blog, which had managed to reach a whopping two thousand viewers. That fact never seemed to deter her, and she continued to doggedly post about her life as if she were the most fascinating thing since Donnah Houston

married Key Bryant in the first 2080 *Billion-Dollar Bride*. Their obviously busy lifestyles meant that all the farm and housework fell to me. No matter how much time we spent working, though, we never seemed to be able to gain enough headway to overcome the mountain of bills that sat pending on the old oak scroll top desk that had once been my great-grandfather's.

As much as I loved the house and the work my father had put into it, I longed to be free. The memories that still clung to the walls and lingered in the blades of grass in the yard were enough to help make life tolerable, but memories were all the charm it still held. This place was dirty, haunted by the house's stolen innocence. Every stain in the carpet, every scratched doorway, every broken piece of the once-beautiful house were a reminder of what Karl and the girls had stolen from us. It made me feel ugly.

The heavy formal parchment I held gingerly between my fingers felt wrong in this setting. There were holes in the fence, paint peeling off the wood paneling on the house, weeds growing through the cracked pavement to the front porch, and walnut stains on the driveway. There was a rickety rope swing Grant had made from a milk crate and trussed up into the walnut tree that dominated the front yard. The wooden slats of the crate creaked and bit into my legs as I hung there, lost in a maelstrom of emotion. The curly golden cursive flowed so elegantly across the page in my hands.

Congratulations!

Theadosia Winifred Lee has been formally accepted into Godric's Academy for

Young Ladies.

I never sent an application to Godric's Academy, could never have afforded to. There really was only one explanation to the ridiculously expensive stationery I now held before me. Kansas had

plastered that explanation's face over every billboard in the state—they were very proud of their very own local millionaire prodigy.

Despina Harlow, or as the media liked to call her, “The Angel of Beauty,” was my aunt. My mom's sister. She had been a big nobody like the rest of us until she married Branson Harlow, the Hollywood actor, in the 2090 season of *Billion-Dollar Bride* two years ago. The TV show—which happened to be Mom's and the girls' favorite reality show (and secretly mine as well)—was the little *perk* that Godric's Academy was infamous for. There used to be shows called “*The Miss America Pageant*” and “*The Bachelorette*,” but the creation of Godric's Academy had efficiently erased the others in the span of just a few years. The gist was that Godric's was your standard university with majors and minors, just like Stanford or Harvard. The difference was that it provided the additional services of a girl's finishing school. Godric's trained women to dress, act, and live like classy young ladies of the upper class in the first year of their education. Then following the successful completion of their freshmen year, they were married off to the Regality of the United States in a big over-the-top show of extravagance and money. The brides were expected to complete their four-year education post-nuptials. However, more often than not, they found ways to get out of it.

Aunt Despina had been the lottery winner for her year and had been one of the few to complete her education. Her name had been drawn at random as a sort of “political good-will” ploy the school used to gain public support. I had been submitting my name in that lottery for the past two years. They had already drawn the winner for this year's Bride Season, and it wasn't me. Apparently, *I* hadn't needed a one-in-a-million lottery draw to get me into the academy. Aunt Despina, it seemed, had taken it upon herself to pay the outrageous sum for my tuition, a

sum that cost more than our entire farm was even worth. That thought alone had my stomach churning in excitement and guilt.

I didn't want to be a charity case. I wanted to enter fair and square. Despite the fact that the idea of attending was beyond tempting, I was a bit angry that she hadn't even consulted me first. What was I going to do about the farm? It's not like Mom and Karl were going to take care of the animals. And what sat like a weight in my stomach was the two other identical letters that sat in the pile of mail I had placed on the weed-choked lawn, *Brietta Truman* and *Fifer Truman* were emblazoned across the front in the same elegant curly script as mine. Despina had paid their fare as well, it seemed.

"Whatcha got there, Thea?" came a low voice from the road. I raised my eyes to the handsome figure of Grant Williams, my best friend. His parents were both alcoholics, which left much of the house care and bills to his responsibility. Ours was a friendship forged in the furnace of hard work and mutual misery. His shaggy auburn hair needed trimming. It was curling about his ears and above his collar. Wisps of it kept falling into his eyes, which he would shake out of the way with a practiced toss of his head. His shoulders and arms were massive from all the work he'd done over the years on the Rogerston farm. Combined with the fact that he stood a whole head taller than me, he always reminded me a bit of a grizzly bear.

Expertly avoiding Mom's flower garden, he vaulted himself over the fence, causing it to sway dangerously. He hit the ground nimbly and made his way over to me, his hands shoved into his battered jeans. His overly-observant gaze took in the parchment in my hand and the additional letters in the grass, looking ridiculous amidst the tabloids and advertisements for Septic Draining services. His expression changed to one of concern.

"What's with the fancy letters?" he said.

My palms began to sweat as I returned my eyes to the elegant cursive on the page I held in my lap. He was not going to take this well. Distractedly, I noticed how my name looked strange written that gracefully. *Theadosia Winifred* was not exactly the most contemporary of names. I shortened it to Thea to maybe somehow fit in better, but even that name had fallen out of use with the times. The golden calligraphy made the name look almost pretty, though. Unique.

Regal, I thought, a flutter of nerves zinging through my stomach. If I actually went through with this, my name really would be amongst the Regality. The thought was appealing. I'd dreamed of a nicer, cleaner life more times than I could count. However, nothing quite on this scale had ever crossed my mind as a possibility. It was surreal.

When Grant finally reached me, I just wordlessly handed over the parchment, letting him see for himself. My heart pounded wildly as I waited for his reaction. As he read, his brows furrowed further and further until I thought they'd merge together and become one. Finally, he raised his eyes to meet mine, his gaze demanding explanation.

"Aunt Despina," was all I needed to say.

Understanding mixed with rage until Grant looked positively thunderous. He shoved the papers back at me, wrinkling some of them in the process.

I frowned, smoothing out the battered edges. Could I not be allowed anything nice?

"You're not going to do it, are you?" His voice was cold enough to freeze ice.

I shrugged, noncommittally, not really wanting to admit that I was actually excited if it weren't for my aunt's betrayal of apparently choosing Bri and Fifer as well. "I'm not sure there's a way out of it, to be honest. Aunt Despina's already paid. Also, there's the fact that I'd be disgustingly rich when all is said and done," I muttered that last part, refusing to meet Grant's eyes again. Instead, I traced a finger along one of the flourishes they'd drawn on the T in my

name, wishing Grant hadn't wrinkled the pages. The damage made the pretty paper look fake now, like a birthday party invitation rather than a prestigious acceptance letter. He knew about my daydreams of a grander life and typically disapproved of them. *Money ruins people*, he'd said when I'd mentioned my dreams before. I tried to avoid the topic with him whenever possible now.

"But you'd be nothing but a trophy wife!" Grant spat, pacing the ground in front of me, which was dangerous due to the walnuts that littered the grass there. He was liable to twist an ankle if he caught a nut that had become hidden in overgrown weeds. Somehow, he managed to dodge them all without having to alter his course too drastically.

I watched the stiff set of his shoulders wearily. Grant was only my first hurdle. *Trophy wife* was usually the word anti-Godric's people had for the brides. They saw them as eye candy that contributed little to society or to their spouses beyond *being* eye candy. I was intrigued, though. Surely, it was different for the girls who actually finished all four years. Despina was wildly successful as a business owner and fashion designer. She made a statement with her body-positive clothing line and anti-photoshop photography that inspired women. She was more than just a pretty face. Besides, their lives of luxury had to be far more comfortable than living in Sandy Grove, Kansas, with Karl for a step-dad. And I hadn't known of a single bride to be unhappy with her choice. Godric's track record of happy marriages was surprisingly clean, with only a handful of divorces. Surely that stood for something.

Knowing Mom, she was going to freak out too and likely and forbid me to attend. I had too much to do here to be afforded to leave. I was the primary caretaker of the house and animals. Mom would hate the idea of taking over for me. With Grant, though, there was going to be another issue entirely that I had been ignoring for quite a few years in hopes that it would go

away. I knew he had caught feelings for me, but I simply *could not* see him in the same way. Grant was my best friend. My brother. The one person who existed in my world whom I could trust. No matter how many times I tried to consider him as something more, I just couldn't do it.

"If I marry someone from around here, I'd be stuck as a housewife doing dishes and cooking dinner for a living," I countered, knowing it was a low blow, but true enough, anyway. Grant was old-fashioned and believed that the wife shouldn't need to work—that all the breadwinning fell to the man. "Degree-holding Godric's Brides have *real* jobs, and many of the others are public servants and support charities."

Grant glared at me. "You love cooking and you're doing fine at the bakery—*that's* a real job," he grunted, though I could already see the chink in his armor. This was the first time we'd acknowledged the weirdness between us that had crept in somewhere around three years ago. I couldn't pinpoint when exactly it had happened for him, but I had noticed when he'd driven his beat-up blue pickup truck to come get me from work in the rain, even though he was supposed to be at home building furniture for the Powell family. Grant was a man of many jobs. It was a miracle he found time at all to come and pay me visits. I wondered how often he got in trouble for it. Right now, I was wishing he hadn't been as devoted to seeing me. The look of hurt in his eyes pierced me through the heart.

"I love *baking*," I corrected him, doggedly pushing on. "But even doing *that* for the rest of my life for a husband who expects nothing more from me is a pleasure I'd rather not receive."

He crossed his arms, his glare intensifying. I could see the war within him—it played out across his face in a storm of emotion. First anger, then sorrow, then stubborn resolution.

"They could do anything they wanted to you. What if one of those Regality bastards tries to rape you, Ted? It's not like your family has the money to carry a lawsuit against them. They

couldn't afford a lawyer, even if they wanted to! The more likely outcome is they'd just let you suffer! Happily!"

"I know. Believe me, I've thought of that. Despina wouldn't do nothing, though. She's the one who's sponsored me, not Mom and Karl. And besides," I said as I handed him the second sheaf of papers. "The school's already addressed the whole lawyer issue." These were printed on the normal mundane stuff that still somehow managed to give off a feeling of arrogance. On them was the list of rules, regulations, protections, and legal formalities that concerned the academy and TV show alike. "There's like a bazillion laws to protect the academy candidates. We actually get our own lawyer and social worker upon arrival who will help us with any and every situation that may come up, both legal, business, publicity, and crime related. If we get along well, they're supposed to work for us for life. And as I said before, if Mom doesn't care about what happens to me, Despina will. I could get out of here, Grant. I could finally leave Karl and the twins behind. Can't you see how much I want that?" I said, staring at him searchingly.

"I do but Ted," He ran a hand through his hair. "Doesn't this place mean anything to you? Don't I mean anything to you?"

I turned my face towards the faded red front door, a desperate anger welling up inside of me. Why did he have to bring us here? Why did he have to finally put voice to his emotions? Why couldn't he just leave things well enough alone? I couldn't just leave him looking so desolate, though. My voice was barely above a whisper, but I knew this part would be my ace in the hole. He wouldn't be able to resist the plan I'd come up with. "Once I have the money, I will buy the farm from my mom, they will be told to move elsewhere, and I will hand over the house and land to you."

Grant's eyes went as round as saucers. He sucked in a deep breath, ran his hand through his hair again, and then emptied his lungs with a *whoosh*. "Wow... I was... not expecting that. You'd do that for me?"

"I wouldn't trust the house to anyone else," I said.

His shoulders sagged. I could see the conflict resolving itself in his eyes. He could let me go if it meant he could escape his *own* family.

Grant started glossing over the logistics packet, his furrowed brow softening into a more brooding look. Finally, he raised his glistening eyes to meet mine once more. I had won.

"I love you, you know. I always will. You getting married to some hot-shot millionaire in New York isn't going to change that. I don't think I could ever love anyone else ... I just wanted you to know that—are you sure you really want to do this?" he said.

"Yes. It means freedom." I purposefully ignored the rest of his speech. I didn't want to acknowledge his feelings now any more than I had earlier. It was too complicated. Too awkward. I didn't want our friendship to be awkward.

Grant's eyes flashed. "I'm not sure that's a good enough reason," he said, coming closer suddenly and crouching down so he knelt at eye level before me. "You could have freedom *with me*. I could get us a house. I could make things work." He took my hand as if the contact would somehow convey just how much urgency he was feeling.

I shifted, resisting the urge to withdraw my hand. Normally, I didn't mind touch, but right then, I felt as if he would somehow be able to tell just how much I was lying to him when I said, "We would make each other miserable." Well, it wasn't *entirely* a lie. I knew *I'd* be unhappy at least. Let him believe that he would be, too. "We argue too much, and I always win."

A flash of a smile flickered across Grant's sculpted mouth and was gone fast enough that I wondered if it'd even been there in the first place. He dropped his gaze to our hands, studying them as if they would be able to reveal to him if I was telling the truth or not.

I prayed that they wouldn't. I could feel my palm starting to get slick with sweat as it pressed against my best friend's. I swallowed hard.

"If you're willing, if you truly *want* to do this ... I can't believe I'm saying this, but I guess I think having the Lee Farm to myself wouldn't be so bad," Grant finally said.

My stomach felt like the swing had suddenly broken free from its mooring in the tree and I was plummeting towards the earth. I worked to keep my face composed as relief mixed with excitement. I wasn't expecting to feel as *scared* as I did, though. I wanted this, didn't I? So why did I feel this terrified? My grip on his hand tightened then. When I didn't let go immediately, his brow began to furrow again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked one last time.

Get it together! I scolded myself, before plastering on a smile and peeling my hand away from Grant's. "Of course, It's only marriage after all."

Grant did not look amused at my attempt to brush off the solemnity of this decision, but he said nothing. Instead he stood up and motioned towards the other two letters that lay in the grass at my feet. "Did Jerkelle and Jerkette get accepted, too?"

"Yes. I can't fathom why Despina chose them, as well, but it can't be helped."

Grant rolled his eyes. "That will be drama for sure. At least it will make for some entertaining television."

"Ugh, the TV part! I wish they weren't going to film the whole thing. Falling in love feels decidedly less romantic when I have an audience."

“That’s part of it, though. Comes with the package deal. You know I wonder if you’ll marry James Norvoux.” He knew of my crush on the Hollywood actor.

A blush climbed up my neck. “We’ll just have to see,” I mumbled. I didn’t even know if James Norvoux would be participating in this Bride Season. At least Grant seemed to be adjusting to the idea of me not marrying *him*, though. It was encouraging that he was already cracking jokes. He would be just fine.

“I have to go make dinner. Will I see you again before you leave?” his deep voice rumbled. He bent to pluck a blade of grass.

“This letter says my sponsor will be here to pick me up in three days.” I raised up yet another piece of paper for him to see. “Seeing as you work Rogerston Farm tomorrow and have the two days after to harvest your soybeans, probably not.”

He said nothing, just stared down at his grass blade, tying it in knots.

“I *will* miss you, you know. Don’t think that I won’t,” I said to try and reassure him again. I didn’t want him to be angry with me. I hated it when people were angry with me.

“You’ll never come back. You’ll be so happy in your new fancy life, you won’t even look back.”

I sighed inwardly as I shoved my waist-length blond hair back over my shoulder so it hung down my back in a great curtain of loose golden curls. He was impossible to reason with when he got in these funks. No matter what I said, I knew I wouldn’t be able to comfort him. I’d need to just prove it to him with time and loyalty. I grabbed the rest of the mail from the ground before I stood, disentangled myself from the rope swing, and stepped towards him. Standing up on my toes, I leaned in and kissed him softly on his cheek before moving towards the house. Once I reached the porch, Grant was already back on the street, lumbering down the dry, cracked

pavement in that familiar loping gait that came from sore muscles and riding horses. He didn't look back.

~*~

I steeled myself before I turned to face the door. I wasn't sure how Mom would react. It wasn't that she disliked me, *per se*. She just acted like I wasn't in need of her attention anymore. If we were a nest of birds, I'd have flown the nest by now in her mind's eye. The rest of her little family still needed feeding and nurturing—the twins more than any of us.

I took a deep breath before I opened the door. As usual, the rest of the family was already seated at the table. A plate of baked potatoes was stationed in the center. Karl was reading a newspaper, a beer can sat by his plate piled with food. Brietta and Fifer were both looking at cellphones—new purchases from Karl's paycheck. Mom had a tabloid spread out next to her plate, and she was animatedly reading some kind of news about the princess to the rest of the indifferent table. *Of course*.

Well, here goes something.

"I've received a letter ... Fifer and Brietta, too," I said, holding them up for the room to see.

Silence descended. Even Karl looked up from the newspaper he was reading. Then the room exploded into activity. Fifer and Brietta launched themselves from the table at me, snatching their letters from my hands and tearing into them like a pack of greedy wolves. Mom was fast behind them, pouring over their shoulders to read the words written on the parchment in the same elegant script as mine.

"We're *in*! We made it! We're going to be brides! We're going to be brides, Daddy!" The girls squealed.

Karl took a sip of his beer. “That’s just great, cupcakes! I knew you both would be accepted.”

“Now, now! We need to start packing and getting ready for your departure immediately!” Mom cooed. “We’ll need to find you all-new wardrobes of course. We can’t have you arriving in New York like a couple of country bumpkins. Karl, Honey, do you think that friend of yours would loan us a few more thousand to take the girls shopping?”

“I think he could be persuaded, especially if *you* come with me again, Dear.” I saw him wink over the top of his paper at her.

Her expression lit with an excitement much different from the one before.

My stomach lurched. They were bribing a millionaire with sexual favors to sponsor their kids? Was it not Despina at all who had paid for my fare? What did this mean for my future? This mysterious “benefactor” would oversee my look, my affiliation, my relationships. I wouldn’t be able to decide *anything* without first getting it approved from my sponsor. I was an investment to them. And worst of all, what if Mom and Karl had promised similar favors to this benefactor from the twins *and myself*.

I sucked in a ragged breath, drawing the attention of the room again. My chest felt as if all the air had been squeezed from the room.

“How did *you* get accepted?” Fifer bit out.

Brietta stared at me with cold green eyes off-set by her lovely dark brown hair—the identical copy of her sister.

“I assumed you had paid for all three of us?” I answered slowly, leveling my gaze at Mom.

She shook her head, a frown wrinkling the smooth lines of her face. She was strikingly beautiful, even at fifty-three. She used a ridiculous amount of beauty products to help her maintain that youthful glow—including cheap box dye to get her typically ditchwater blond hair a shade closer to my own. It was yet another money pit that sucked away all our resources and my hopes for saving the house. As if remembering that frowning could cause wrinkles, she carefully altered her expression into a tight smile. “We had assumed you had no interest in attending Godrics. You seemed to be well taken with that farmer boy of yours. What’s his name? Gavin?”

“It’s Grant, and no. We’re just friends. So, if *you* didn’t pay for my admission, *who* did?” My breath was coming fast. I was half hope, half agony as I tried to ignore the sting of pain from the knowledge that Mom and Karl had, once again, thought only of the twins. Mom wanted me to believe it was because she thought Grant and I would be married, but I knew the truth. I knew that she simply hadn’t considered me a possibility.

Mom and Karl shared a look. Karl began muttering under his breath, “That damned woman said she wouldn’t do it”

“Despina,” I answered for them, and for the first time since I saw the letter, relief at that knowledge cascaded through me. I had trusted Despina once and I trusted her far more than I did some mysterious benefactor my Mom and Karl were bribing with “favours,” especially now that I knew that she *hadn’t* chosen to sponsor the twins, as well. “She’s supposed to be coming to get me in three days.”

“*Three days?! How do you know?*” Mom pulled my letter from my hands and began scanning it over quickly. The twins crowded around her, too.

I tried my best not to let my irritation at their nosy impudence show, but even I noticed the hint of a growl to my voice. “It says in my letter that my sponsor will be retrieving me on July 10.” It was a painfully small time, too. I only had three days to pack and prepare myself for the rest of my life. Everything up until this point had felt like I was trapped in some kind of limbo, just waiting for my life to truly begin. Now that it was, I felt like it was rushing at me all too quickly.

Brietta’s face pinched in her classic pouting expression. “Why didn’t Despina sponsor *us*, too?”

“Because she’s a selfish *pig*, that’s why,” Fifer said, rolling her eyes in an exaggerated movement.

Anger zinged through me, making my face go hot. *They weren’t even related to her!* I bit down on my tongue. Despina and I had been close before she won the Godric’s lottery and married Branson. Memories from my childhood of her pushing me on the swing in her back yard, brushing my hair, and going for long walks through the pasture rose in my mind. She had taught me how to bake my first cherry pie. I had to hope that she was still that same woman, and that her absence from our lives had to do with something more than merely being wealthy. Arguing with them about her was futile, though. It only encouraged them to talk about the topic more, and it gave Karl the idea that he needed to “teach me some manners.”

“May I have my letter back, please?” I said. My voice came out tighter than I had wanted it to be.

The twins turned to glare at me. “You better not even *think* about going after Wilder Aldridge. Go get yourself some flouncy singer or something,” Fifer said.

“Who’s Wilder Aldridge?” Karl said with another swig of beer. Some might have mistaken his demeanor for protectiveness, but I knew better. Karl was possessive and greedy—he was more concerned with his daughters making the best choice financially than he was with their safety.

Without turning away from me, Fifer answered him in a way that I knew was going to take all evening, so I finally started moving towards the table, my stomach growling audibly.

“He’s the man who owns Wolf Industries. His family created *The Wolf Pack*—those car batteries that allowed us to drive our cars without using non-renewable resources. *And* he just so happens to be the billionaire in this season’s *Billion-Dollar Bride*.”

“Way to go, cupcake. That’s called learning to dream big.”

I tried to disguise my disgust by taking a big bite of loaded baked potato.

“The *point* is,” Fifer continued, shooting me a pointed look as she took her earlier seat across the table from me. “Wilder is rich beyond belief, which is attractive enough as it is, but the fact that he’s a *beefcake* makes him the perfect man for me. So, to you, Thea, he is *off limits*. *I* am claiming him so you can just go find yourself someone else and stay out of my way!”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Karl caught my eye with a sharp look. He leaned back in his chair and tapped one fingernail against his rodeo belt buckle nonchalantly. To everyone else in the room, it just seemed like a habit he’d formed to admire the heavy piece he’d found in some pawn shop and declared it to be Declan Wait’s, a famous bull rider from 2084. For me, though, the tap-tap-tapping was enough to freeze me where I sat. I knew what that belt felt like coming down across my skin. I tried to remember how to breathe.

“I think you mean *I’m* claiming him. Wilder Aldridge is *the* sexiest man in the U.S. I’d want him even if he wasn’t filthy rich,” Brietta countered.

“If you think I’m joking, Bri, you have another think coming. Wilder’s mine, and I will sabotage you *and* Thea if that’s what it takes!”

“Fifer, you little bi—”

“*Girls!*” Mom’s voice rang out across the dinner table.

Mom’s sharp reprimand was enough to unlock my joints. Instinctively, I took another big forkful of baked potato into my mouth, watching my stepsisters wearily. I hadn’t even considered trying to catch the eye of Wilder Aldridge. I was just happy to have the chance to fall in love and move up in station. It was going to be hard work, what with it being a four-year college on top of a finishing school *and* TV show. I wondered if they even knew what they’d want to do once they graduated—*if* they graduated. For that matter, what did *I* want to do? I’d never even taken the time to consider what I could do if I was given the opportunity. The possibilities were endless! I would have to be careful of the twins, though. I believed Fifer when she said she’d sabotage us. She’d done it before. I’ve had homework ruined when I refused to do hers as well. I’ve had to do double the chores when she went back and trashed everything I’d just done, simply because I had accidentally gotten dirt on one of her jackets. And as vindictive as Fifer was, Bri was clever. The two of them working against me at the same time always turned into a nightmare.

The worst was the time they’d managed to get in trouble because Karl caught me picking up their mess from a house party they’d thrown while Karl had taken Mom on the road in his truck. They’d come home early, and I was still working to scrub the beer from the carpet. The party hadn’t even been the issue—it was that the girls had been drinking Karl’s private stash of moonshine and not the cheap stuff they typically get from the drugstore. The next day, I had gone to my room after having cleaned up the house and taken care of the animals to find my pet

mice dead in their cage. The girls had replaced their water with vodka, and the mice had died from alcohol poisoning. To say I was devastated would be an understatement. I cried for weeks. The girls claimed that they hadn't done it and that someone must have poured the vodka in during the party, but it was a lie. I always gave the mice fresh water every morning and every night before bed. It wouldn't have mattered if the girls had told the truth, anyway; Mom and Karl could have cared less.

"Both of you will have ample opportunity to catch the eye of Wilder Aldridge. Thea doesn't seem to mind if she marries him or not, do you Theadosia?" Mom sent me a meaningful look that said *play nice and agree with me*.

I shrugged. Let them interpret that for what they will.

"If either one of you girls becomes the Billion-Dollar Bride, I shall be proud! Just remember that we're all on the same team, here. I want you all to become happy wives and live happy lives," she finished, even including me in that statement with her gaze.

That was nice, I guess. Even if I couldn't chase after Wilder Aldridge, she wished for my happiness. It was the little things.

"Yes," Karl agreed, finally folding up his newspaper and laying it on the table next to him. "Nothing could make me happier than to see my girls hitched to the arm of a wealthy CEO. You girls do me proud."

"Yes, Father," the twins chorused.

I finished my baked potato in silence. The conversation had gone better than I had expected. Mom and Karl didn't seem to be outwardly opposed to my going, which was worrying. Did they not understand that if I leave, they will have to take care of everything here? The animals would need looking after, too. Neither Mom nor Karl would do it, so I'll probably have

to find a way to sell them off to spare them from mistreatment. Maybe Grant would agree to take on the job of auctioning the animals. I wouldn't have enough time during the next three days to take care of it myself. I'd have to call him and ask him if he'd even have the time.

I cleared the table once everyone had finished and washed up the dishes. Mom liked to cook because it made her feel like a cute and competent housewife and gave her things to talk about on her blog, but she never cleaned. That chore always fell to me. I wondered if she'd start cleaning after I was gone, or if the dishes would just start to pile up and stink. I decided not to think about it anymore. Worrying about the house after I was gone wouldn't do me or the house any good. With one last look around the kitchen to make sure I'd gotten everything, I headed up the stairs to go to bed. With any luck, the girls won't have sabotaged any of my stuff, and I could have a pleasant, normal evening to digest everything that had happened. A girl could hope, couldn't she?

CHAPTER 2—HURRY SCURRY LITTLE MOUSE

Well, I'd *thought* my belongings had remained unscathed from stepsister tampering, but come morning, I found they'd mixed tabasco sauce into my shampoo, making my scalp burn and smell awful. Then when I went to brush my teeth, I discovered that they'd filled my toothpaste container with vinegar. The sad thing was that I was disappointed more than I was angry. This had gone on long enough that I'd ceased to be angry with them and just started accepting that this was my life. With a sigh, I threw the toothpaste and the shampoo bottle in the trash and counted out the money from my savings jar to get new ones.

As I was readying to leave, I found myself wondering how they'd managed to sabotage the toothpaste. Wouldn't it be difficult to pour something else into a toothpaste container? They'd have to have injected it somehow with a syringe or something. Where would they have gotten something like that anyway? I knew Mom used syringes to do her lip filler, so maybe they'd stolen one of those? That would be so like Brietta to think of something like that—especially as she was always trying to convince Mom to let her use the lip filler. It would be revenge on both of us.

I stopped by the store on the way to work so I could get my replacement toiletries and some cracked corn for the chickens. Bill, the store manager, greeted me cheerily without turning around. "Mornin' Thea!"

"How did you know it was me?" I asked as I pulled a cart from the rack.

Bill chuckled. "You're the only one who comes this early that doesn't drive an Alpha Engine," he said, referring to the extra-large battery-and-hydrogen fuel powered pickup trucks that the farmers usually drove.

“Okay, fair point.” I grinned, making my way to the aisle that held the beauty products. Hobbledy Hen was the only supermarket in town, so it had to carry everything—from farm supplies to beauty products and groceries. It was an odd little conglomerate, but it felt like home. It had to when the only other stores in town were a Ferris Wheel Clothing Mart and a Nuts n’ Bolts for car parts and farming equipment. Most everyone shopped online for anything else they might need.

I hummed under my breath as I browsed the shelves. I was about to grab the bottle of strawberries and cream shampoo that I always used, but then I stopped. This was the beginning of the rest of my life, right? What if I *didn’t* wear Strawberries and Cream? A thrill ran through me at that thought. Something *new*. Now that could be exciting.

I began to browse the selves with more concentration, reading labels and even opening bottles to smell a few of them. *Which one says, “new life, new me?”* I thought. My eyes landed on a light blue bottle entitled “Moonlight Masquerade” by Aquater. I flipped open the lid and inhaled.

“Oh my” I said aloud, then glanced around to make sure no one had heard me. The aisle was still empty, thank goodness. The shampoo’s smell was somewhere in the realm of lavender with hints of vanilla and something else I couldn’t put my finger on. I flipped the bottle over and in fancy metallic blue writing above the ingredients list were the words “Transform yourself into something magical!” I grinned. That was exactly what I wanted to do.

With a satisfied nod, I added the shampoo bottle into my cart, not even caring what the price was for once. I’d be living on academy money soon enough, anyway. Since I was short on time at this point, I quickly grabbed the first toothpaste off the shelf that I could find and lugged the bag of chicken feed into the basket from the pallets by the register. After paying for my

goodies, I walked back out into the hot July air and put everything into the rusty red wagon bed I'd jerry-rigged to the back of my bike. The entire time, I could not stop smiling. Who knew that something as simple as changing up my shampoo could make me feel so optimistic?

I wheeled myself down the block to work at Sugar Queen Sweets, all the while humming a romantic tune under my breath that I imagined Regality dancing to at one of their big fancy parties they held. I pulled in behind the cute white-with-teal-trim building and chained the bike to the fire escape. Bringing my groceries into the bakery with me, I shoved the door shut with my hip and set everything down on the "catchall table," as my boss, Valerie, liked to call it. "Hey, Val!" I called through the mudroom into the kitchen, where I could see her curvy form already bustling about, readying the morning's cheese danishes for baking. She had wrestled her afro into a colorful pink and orange scarf this morning, making her look delightfully like a Kenyan queen.

"Hey, honey! How's you farin'?" she called back without looking up from her methodical twist-and-roll method she used to get the danishes into the proper shape.

"Well, you're not going to *believe* what happened to me yesterday." I tied the apron on over my uniform, washed my hands at the sink, and joined her in the kitchen, immediately grabbing bowls, eggs from the fridge, and parchment paper for making scones. I knew she was about to lose her mind and we might even have to redo her danishes if she reacted like I pictured. The woman was obsessed with *Billion-Dollar Bride*, even more so than I was. She even had a contestant board hung in the mudroom where she could visually keep track of who had the best chances with each year's billionaire.

"Those sea hags you call sisters killed your cow?"

I nearly choked on my own saliva. While this was typical Val behavior, she never ceased to surprise me with the things she could come up with to say. “No, thank goodness!” I wheezed as soon as I had enough air in my lungs to breathe again.

“Oh good. You had me worried there for a minute.” She looked up briefly to wink at me.

I waited until she’d finished shaping her current Danish and was grabbing her next lump of dough before I blurted it out. “I’m getting married!”

She froze, staring at me fully for the first time since I walked in the room. With an exaggerated movement, she placed dough-covered hands on her hips, unmindful of staining her crisp pink uniform. “Theadosia Lee, you better not be pullin’ my leg, girl. Who done it? It wasn’t that *farm boy* who keeps moonin’ after you, was it? By golly, I’ve always thought he was a bit of a wet puppy, if you know what I mean.”

I grinned, despite her criticism of Grant—especially because I agreed with her in part. Here we go, brace yourself, Thea. “You’re misunderstanding me, Valarie McGibbins. I’m going to be a *Bride*.”

She stared, uncomprehending.

I jerked my head towards the mudroom, and her eyes bulged out of her head. A scream exploded from her throat as she flung herself around the counter so she could crush me in one of her classic bear hugs. This one was coupled with bouncing and more shrieking, though.

“Thea, baby, I have *always* thought you deserved to be a Bride! This life is just not worthy of you, girl. Nu-uh. You need to be treated like the princess you are! Oh sugar, I’m so excited I could just scream!”

“You already are!” I wheezed again, feeling as if my ribs were going to crack. I was grinning, though. Val’s reaction had been spot-on.

“I know! I know, I’m *sorry*. I’m just so dang excited! You know how much I’ve wanted you to come live with me. If it weren’t for my barely makin’ ends meet and takin’ care of my mama as is ... I can’t believe *your* mama and that trailer trash husband of hers would actually sign you up! Are the sea hags going, too?”

“Well ... here’s the thing,” I hedged, then quickly filled her in on who was sponsoring whom and how Mom, Karl, and the twins had reacted to my enrollment.

“Shoot. That’s better than I expected, and it makes a heck of a lot more sense. You okay with it?”

“I’m great with it, actually. Despina’s amazing, and her being a clothing designer will mean that I at least look the part. I’m mostly just relieved that I don’t have some unknown sponsor who could be any old jerk from the Regality.”

“Amen, sister. You know, I’ve never understood why they started calling themselves the ‘Regality.’ We might have a king instead of a president now, but he basically does the same thing the presidents did. Just because some folk got rich don’t make them royal *or* regal. ”

“I think it has to do with their own sponsorship—who’s supporting their companies and businesses and whatnot. Take Bartolomeu Ford, for instance. He’s rich, but he’s not Regality because his money comes from Vince Barhardt, who’s endorsed by the king.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I still think it’s silly. They ain’t better’n us or nothin’. Anyway. I’m glad your aunt’s got your back. I always liked her. Before she got herself hitched to Branson Harlow—now THAT’S a man!—she always ordered them scones you’re makin’.”

That’s right. Despina *had* loved scones. I used to walk with her to the bakery for one every morning when I was little, and we’d split it. I smiled at the memory. It would be so good to

see her again. I hoped beyond hope that she would be the same woman I remembered her as. It had only been a few years, but it felt like a lifetime.

“Procession Day is in a week and a half. When do you think you’ll be leaving?” Val asked, finally getting down to the most uncomfortable part of the conversation.

I watched her from my peripheral vision as I began cutting my scone dough into triangles and setting them on the pan for baking. “Three days. Is that going to be enough time for you to find a replacement for me?”

“Don’t even worry about that, honey. I know just the gal. You remember Evalyn Rogerston?”

“Sure, I do. Grant works for her family. Is she even old enough, though?”

“Sure is. She’s the same age you were when I took you on—sixteen. She’s been pokin’ around here every afternoon asking questions and trying every pastry she can afford with her allowance. In fact, if you hadn’t told me you were leavin’, I was going to ask you today if you’d mind another kitchen hand in the henhouse.”

Evalyn was young and a burst of energy in red pigtails. She and Val would have a lot of fun in here together, if Evalyn could stay on track and get things done on time. Val was particular about customers having their usual morning selection available. There was also the finicky oven that liked to burn things if you put the temperature where it was *supposed* to be. It ran about fifty degrees hotter than most. Evalyn could be dreamy and lose track of herself, but she learned quickly, and I knew she had a good heart.

“I think she would be the perfect girl for the job,” I said, finishing up my scones and bringing the pan over to the oven. Val was squeezing the last of her danishes full of cream cheese, and she joined me, sliding the two pans in together like clockwork.

“It’s a deal then. I’ll call her up this afternoon. Now you just focus on finding yourself a man as hunky as your uncle.”

“Did you say a monkey’s uncle?” I teased.

Val swatted my arm. “Go make the gosh dang muffins, you brat.”

I sure was going to miss her.

~*~

The sun was dropping to the horizon as I pulled my bike into the shed at home. Bringing my shampoo and toothpaste with me, I hauled the chicken feed out to the coop and topped off their feed pan before securing the bag in the barn next to the calf grain and goat oats. Going through the animal care routine had a fist of sorrow punching its way through me. I loved these animals, it was going to be hard to leave them, and even harder to sell them. They deserved better than what Mom and Karl were going to do to them, though. It had to be done.

I got on the four-wheeler, which was older than I was, and drove out to the field to call the cows in for dinner. At this point, they knew the sound of the four-wheeler and would come running. I cut the engine and just sat, watching the sunset paint streaks of orange, yellow, and pink across the indigo sky. We had pretty sunsets here, for sure. How *much* prettier would they be in California, though? Or New York, even? I’ve heard that the sun setting over the ocean is something that no one can describe—as if the sky is reflected twice over for double the glory. I heard the clang of a bell off in the distance, indicating that Suzette was on her way over to me. Suzette was the only cow we had to bell, as she had a bad habit of pushing on a post in the back fence in just the right spot so that it tipped over and made the whole fence sag. She’d then promptly get lost in the woods behind our back field, seeking juicier vegetation than what our tired, over grazed lot could afford.

I could hardly blame her.

In some ways, I felt like her. I felt like I was trapped in the tired and over grazed pasture of the house, looking for the right fence post to push on that would set me free to greener pastures. I could still hardly believe that it had happened, finally, and by no volition of mine. I hadn't had to find the rickety fence post—Despina had cut the wire for me. I remembered sitting here on her lap once, on the very same four-wheeler, waiting for Dad's cows to come home. I had gotten in trouble earlier that day for coloring a picture of the family on the wall. I had wanted it to be a surprise for Mom and Dad, but they hadn't been as impressed with it as I had hoped. Dad had given me a sound scolding, which had left me in tears.

"Your Daddy's one of the best men out there. He raised this place from the ground up, all on his own. Now look at it ... a nice cattle farm started and a cozy home for you and your mom. I know you hadn't meant any harm by your picture, sweetheart, but when you've worked this hard to build something in just the right way, you want it to stay looking that way without people changing it without asking their permission. Don't you ever forget for one minute that he loves you, Thea. Your daddy loves you more than he could ever express. Next time you want to say 'I love you' back, why don't you do your pretty artwork on a card, so he can frame it and put it on the wall instead."

I'd done it, too. I'd written in big, crooked letters across the top "I'M SORRY DADDY!" and drew a picture of us hugging. He'd loved it so much, that he didn't put it on the wall—he framed it and put it on his desk, where he had spent more time than he did relaxing in the Lay-Z-Boy in the living room. I never colored on the walls again after that.

The spotted brown head of Suzette leading the charge came up over the hill, followed by Daisy, Phillis, Milly, and the rest of the herd. I started up the engine, turning the four-wheeler

around and heading back towards the barn where a roll of fresh hay awaited them. Parking the four-wheeler in the shed, I dismounted and got out the milking bucket for Jackie the goat. I was still lost in memory when the sound of cackling laughter came from the back yard behind me as I was opening Jackie's pen.

"Thea! Thea, where *are* you? Ugh, I hate all this mud. *Thea!*"

"What do you want, Fifer?" I said, coming back around the barn so they could see me.

"We want your opinions on some outfits for Procession Day," she said, twisting from side to side so the skirt of her frilly purple dress floated out around her legs like flower petals. Brietta's dress was identical, only it was green.

I stared at them, half wondering how to answer and half wondering where Mom got the money for such dresses—and where they'd even *come* from. They certainly weren't *Ferris Wheel* dresses. I came closer to the fence to get a better look. They had off-the-shoulder short sleeves with a ruched bodice and a circle skirt that ended far too close to their crotch for comfort. Upon further inspection, I noticed that each had a very subtle floral pattern. I gave a hesitant smile.

"They're very pretty? They show off your legs ... nicely?" I tried thinking of what they'd want to hear. Truthfully, I'd never be caught dead in such a revealing outfit, but I certainly couldn't tell *them* that. Not if I valued my life.

Brietta rolled her eyes. "Come on, Fife. She's probably just saying that so she can sabotage our look and one-up us. I don't even know why we asked her."

"I mean you're probably right, but at least she got one thing right, they do make our legs look fantastic."

“Let’s find something better that can make our legs *and* our boobs look good,” Bri said, already turning around to head back to the house. The movement was enough to make the skirt twist in such a way that I saw her lacey black underwear.

“Oh totes. This top does *nothing* for the tatas,” Fifer agreed, following her sister back up the porch and slamming the door behind them.

I stood on the other side of the backyard fence, staring at the back door for several long minutes. That had been very odd. What had they hoped to accomplish with that? Were they trying to make me jealous? Or maybe they were coming up with another excuse to sabotage more of my stuff. Dear goodness, I hoped not.

I spun around to finish up my animal chores as quickly as possible. If they decided to ruin something else of mine, like my deodorant, I wanted to make sure I had the time to make another trip back to the supermarket before they closed so I could have it for tomorrow. But when I closed up the barn for the night and made my way back inside, I couldn’t find anything that had been disturbed. I even checked all my toiletries and prized possessions to be sure. Maybe this bride thing was a good thing for the twins. Maybe it was just the right amount of distraction to keep them focused on their own success instead of trying to ruin mine.

~*~

The next few days flew by in a blur. They were full of meeting with and training Evalyn for her new job of pastry chef’s assistant, getting Grant to agree to auction off the animals for me when I left, and warding off more stepsister one-upmanship. Their antics were turning outright bizarre. One minute, they were inviting me to help them pack and then the next they were shooing me out of their room with accusations of playing the spy so I could somehow look better than them at the academy.

Mom spent a great deal of time perusing name-brand clothing sites and ordering whatever she wanted for the girls with the repeated excuse of “It’s not like *I’m* paying for it!” I couldn’t help but wonder what millionaire in their right mind would agree to sponsor the twins based on what Mom and Karl were “offering” them. Were they really that desperate for excitement? Did they not know who Mom and Karl were and how disgusting and selfish they could be?

Mom was also writing blog post after blog post about the experience. Of course, due to the popularity of *Billion-Dollar Bride*, her viewer count began to explode, ramping up her page to one of the top-viewed blogs on her host platform in just three days. Karl was thrilled, as Mom’s blog had been monetized, so every subscriber meant more money in the bank. I guess I couldn’t complain about that. We needed the money, and now Mom was able to make her own at a more reasonable level. The twins were thrilled, as well, as they were quickly becoming internet famous before they’d even left for the academy.

I found myself feeling even more relieved about Despina being my sponsor, despite Mom and the twins’ evident success. I was even glad that Mom seemed to be leaving me out of her blog entirely, focusing on the twins whom she had control over. The public was sensationalizing them as “Backwoods Beauties.” It was akin to Willa Banks’ notoriety for managing to be both rich and clueless, or Catreena Flowers’ feat of being a beauty pageant queen who lived in a trailer in the Louisiana bayou with twelve cats and a redneck husband. They were popular because they were trashy, and I could only hope that I could continue to avoid all association with them.

Karl had taken to telling everyone he met that his girls were going to be the next Billion-Dollar Bride—girls plural, as if Wilder Aldridge was going to somehow choose both of them to

marry. The news spread around town like wildfire, and I managed to slip by relatively unnoticed, only stopped by a select few who wanted to know if I felt left out or saddened by their success. I just smiled and assured them that I was just fine and felt no feelings of animosity towards them at all, outside of the “typical sibling rivalry” nonsense I’d grown accustomed to dealing with. I didn’t tell them that I was going to be a bride, too. Let them find out later once I was officially affiliated with Despina.

As my departure grew ever-nearer, my sorrow at leaving Dad’s house and animals was growing dimmer. I didn’t want to abandon the home Dad had made for us, but I began to realize something that I had been willfully ignoring for years: It wasn’t Dad’s house anymore. It wasn’t even mine. Mom’s new family had thoroughly embedded themselves into every fiber of the furniture with their beer stains and cigarette smoke. Their lack of care for the house’s functionality—the roof leaking, the dilapidated fence, the creaking floorboards and the glitchy hot water—it had all corrupted what was once Dad’s haven and turned it into a monstrosity. All that was left were the animals—the originals had long since died of old age and been replaced with their next generation.

I still didn’t want to see the place destroyed or further warped by outsiders, but I was more comfortable with leaving than I had been before, especially because I knew I’d be saving it and transferring ownership to my best friend as soon as I could manage. The knowledge that Dad’s dream had become a ghost still haunted me. He didn’t deserve this, and neither did the house. Regardless, things were falling into place. I felt as if I could finally start to see a light at the end of the tunnel, and I was so excited to venture out into my new future.

With a final goodbye to Val and Evalyn, I stepped out the door of Sugar Queen Sweets for the last time. The bike ride back to the house felt unreal. The sun seemed too bright in the

impossibly blue sky. The grass and wheat seemed to sway in the breeze in a way that was more ocean-like than plant-like. I waved to familiar neighbors who had no idea what was coming for me, and I still wasn't inclined to tell each of them, either. They'd find out soon enough when my name was announced on Procession Day. There was usually a lot of fanfare involved that turned the whole day into a celebration. It was one of the show viewers' favorite days, outside of the wedding day, of course.

The wedding day.

My stomach gave a flip at the thought. Me. Married. *To a Millionaire*. I couldn't imagine it. I didn't even know what I wanted to do with my life, much less how I was going to be married. Before yesterday, my plan was just to scrape enough money together to pay off the property and live out the rest of my days baking sweets and maybe fall in love with one of the farm boys around here—I might have even convinced myself to marry Grant, given enough time.

But now everything had changed, and I had an endless sea of possibilities before me. I felt a smile forming on my lips. I had a chance at true love! And best yet, I could be anything! Anything at all! But, oh dear ... what if I wanted to be *everything*?

I had reached the house now and made my way inside and up the stairs, still lost in my thoughts. I didn't really want to bring that much to the academy with me, for I didn't really have much in the first place. There was one lonely suitcase sitting waiting for me on the bed. I opened it up and checked inside to make sure the twins hadn't bothered anything. They hadn't, thank goodness. What I had decided to bring were the few things that mattered to me the most in the world: A picture of my father, the stuffed animal I was given when I was born (a yellow-and-white rabbit named Bounce), my great-grandmother's cook book (from my Dad's side), my toiletries (including the new shampoo, which was phenomenal), and a few changes of clothes. I

wasn't sure what my clothing situation would be, but I hoped that Aunt Despina would give me a better variety of clothing before school. After three days of watching Mom and the girls splurge on what felt like the entire summer collection of Vanity & Noir, I was beginning to feel a bit worried about that aspect of my new life. The things they pulled out of the mailbox made my shabby farmer girl clothes look like rags. There was no way I was going to turn anyone's eye with some jeans and overalls.

As I closed up my suitcase after making a final check to be sure I had everything I wanted to take, I took a moment to look around my room. When Karl and the twins had moved in, the twins took my old bedroom and I had been transferred up to the attic. It had originally been designed to be a playroom. The slope of the roof met the top of my headboard, so I had to duck when I got in and out of bed. A rickety chest of drawers I'd pulled from someone's dumpster stood on one wall. It was missing a wheel, so it stood at an awkward angle and was precarious at best. The walls were a pastel blue floral wallpaper, now peeling and faded. My rock collection from childhood still sat gathering dust on the windowsill. I breathed in the familiar musty smell, deciding that I would not miss this room.

CHAPTER 3—A VENTURE INTO THE WILD, WILD WEST

The doorbell rang.

My stomach rolled as a rush of adrenalin dumped through my veins. I wasn't sad to be leaving. That part felt good. It felt like growing up. The enormity of my future was staring me in the face now. I was really doing it. I was going to go to college and get married and become Regality. This was the first step.

I stood, pulling my suitcase off the bed, and making my way to the door. The trip down the stairs felt like I was walking in slow motion. I could see Aunt Despina in the foyer with two other women—a gorgeous woman with long black hair, brown skin and flawless makeup, and an adorable redhead with her curls cut into a whimsical bob and a flowy yellow sundress that showed off her shoulders.

Despina herself looked like the runway model she was. She shared the golden-blond hair that both I and my father had, only hers was pin straight and soft as silk. She had a California tan and a French manicure on her hands. Everything she wore was designer, down to the strappy sandals on her feet. I knew that typically, her face without makeup was *almost* an identical reflection of mine, proving I had more of my father in me than I did my mom. Wide eyes the color of polished oak shone from beneath thick lashes that had been enhanced since the last time I saw her—I guess fake lashes came with fame and fortune. It was one of the small differences in our features, as my eyes were a sort of sea green with blues and grays mixed together. She had a perfect button nose with a slight up-turn at the end that I was lacking. Pouting lips sat beneath it, and again, I wasn't sure if she'd received lip filler or if she'd merely used more make up to make

them look fuller. The overall effect was a sun-kissed angel of beauty and her two goddess ladies in waiting standing in my shabby wood-paneled hallway talking to Karl.

The contrast was comical.

“Ah, there’s our beautiful client! Mrs. Harlow, she is your spitting image!” The dark-haired girl said in a warm, velvety voice.

“Thea...” Despina breathed, looking up at me as I descended the last few steps and came to stand before her. For several long moments, we just stared at each other.

I watched as a flood of emotions flashed across her face faster than I was able to pinpoint. A thousand questions were crowding my brain; why hadn’t she come to see us? Or even call? Was she happy with Branson? Did she regret anything? How difficult was the academy? What should I expect? What should I be wary of? Where were we going after this?

Despina spoke first, though. “Thea, I’m so sorry. I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed you.”

Karl still hovered off to the side with his arms crossed over his chest. His expression was thunderous. “Yes, missed her enough to have ignored her for two years rather than using that new husband of yours to give us a hand financially.”

Despina’s eyes went cold. That expression answered the first question for me. She had retreated from Karl’s greedy hands—to protect herself and her husband from his entitled expectations.

“I told you, Mr. Truman, that you would not receive a penny from me as long as you continued to treat Thea like a servant and absorbed her meager income for bills she should never have been thinking about.”

“The girl’s fine. She’s got no interests, really. Work is all she ever really wants to do! Isn’t that right, Thea?”

I said nothing, my lips frozen by rage. The only thing I could do was glare at the floor and try not to bash him over the head with my suitcase. Maybe I’d *have* some hobbies if they’d ever given me the time to explore some, but the cold reality was that I had no idea who I was. Outside of working at the bakery and working on the farm, I had very little time for anything else. The thought was a terrifying one. Who was I? How could I be eighteen years old and not even know?

“We’re done here. Thea, let’s go. Is that everything you want to take?” Despina asked, eying my suitcase with poorly concealed sympathy.

I nodded, my lips still cemented together. I could feel heat gathering behind my eyes, and I willed the tears not to fall this time. I didn’t want Karl to see that he’d gotten to me.

“Don’t you want to say goodbye to your mother, Thea?” Karl demanded.

I shook my head, then followed Despina out my front door with my stomach in knots. I wanted to feel guilty for snubbing Mom, but the truth was, I didn’t really want to face her indifference. I didn’t want to hear about how I would need to look after the twins when we arrived at the academy. And I really didn’t want to see her pretend to care about me for Despina’s sake. I knew that any emotion she might show for me would just be a formality and not genuine. The truth was, I just wanted to be free. It was time I fly the nest.

A limousine was waiting in the driveway for us, looking absurd amongst the decrepit state of the yard. We all got into the back, then the driver, a balding man in his forties, began backing down the driveway. I watched as my family—Mom and the twins included, piled out on

the front porch to watch us drive away. Karl was talking heatedly at Mom, the twins were glaring with hatred, and Mom ... Mom looked sad.

My stomach gave a twist of guilt, so I turned away from the window to face the three women who were staring at me in sympathy and concern.

“You okay, sweetie?” the redhead asked in an adorable southern twang.

“I will be,” I murmured, finally finding my voice once again.

“I’m so sorry, Thea,” Despina said again. “I would have gotten you out of there sooner, but Child Services were firm that there was no viable reason to remove you from the situation. As soon as you became old enough for the academy, I signed you up. I know that this may be unconventional and uncomfortable, and maybe it’s not what you want right now but—.”

“Despina, I want to go,” I cut in, though my mind was stuck on “no viable reason.” If only they could have known about what Karl had been doing to me all this time. What lies had Karl spouted to keep himself safe from arrest?

“I’m sorr— wait, you do?” She blinked.

The two other women broke out into enormous smiles that were infectious. I found myself managing a smile of my own.

“Yes, I’m *excited*. It’s the adventure I never knew I wanted.”

“Oh, what a *perfect* way to think of this!” The redhead crooned, then whipped out a notepad and began scribbling furiously. That was interesting. Was she quoting me?

“I’m sorry, I haven’t yet been introduced to you two ...” I trailed off, unsure of who to address the question to first, though my eyes still followed the quick movements of the redhead’s pen.

Despina, recovering from her shock, gave herself a little shake and smiled wanly. “Forgive me, I’ve been so rude. Thea, this is Sarai, your lawyer, and Kingsleigh, your social worker.”

Sarai was the first to speak, extending an elegant, coffee-colored hand to shake mine. “I’m so excited to be working with you, Theadosia. Your aunt has told me all about you, and I can’t wait to see your success at Godric’s and beyond.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I responded, noticing how beautiful her turquoise-painted nails looked against her skin. She seemed like a kind yet fierce woman; the kind of person you’d want to make sure you stayed on their good side. Her face was regal; I couldn’t help but think that she’d make a fantastic queen.

“Honey, I wish we could have broken you out of Shawshank sooner. Parental rights are tough to work around, though. I can assure you, I’ll work hard on making the rest of your future as bright as can be!” Kingsleigh paused in her scribbling to more like hold my hand between hers rather than shake it.

I could feel the tension easing out of my shoulders at her touch. The woman must be *very* good at her job. “Thank you. Thank you all so much. You guys keep apologizing to me, but I’m honestly just feeling nothing but grateful! Really, I just want to move forward, look to the future.”

“You’ve always had such a positive outlook on life, Thea. I’ve always admired that about you—*oh!* That reminds me. We stopped by your work before we came to pick you up and got some scones. I thought we could all enjoy one on the ride to the airport, and I wanted to see how your skills have improved since the last time I saw you,” Despina said with a wink. She opened up a cabinet in the wall of the limousine and took out the familiar teal-colored bag from Sugar

Queen Sweets. Lemon Blueberry scones made it into the hands of each of us, the glaze swirled delicately across the top in that even pattern that had taken me years to perfect without one line looking thicker than the others, or leaving globs behind. It really was the batch I had been working on before I left. Evalyn had done the chocolate chip and Val had made cinnamon rolls. I bet Val had been over the *moon* to see Despina again—especially now that she knew my situation.

I waited, letting the other women take their first bites. Some of my earlier tension returned as I watched their faces. I had heard praise from customers for years, but this felt different. Praise from small towners like Sandy Grove residents was nothing compared to the pallets of High-Born Regality women and my first mentor, who was now one of them. They would all be used to the posh food served from bistro-style corner shops on Broadway Street or Los Paolos Avenue. What would they think of my humble country scone?

Sarai's expression began to lose its hard edge. Her face melted into a look of pure bliss. Kingsleigh was staring at the pastry in her hand with wide-eyed awe, as if she were considering stuffing the entire thing in her mouth at once. Aunt Despina was smiling discretely around her mouthful, one delicate, manicured hand raised as if to hide her chewing. Was that pride I saw shining from her brown eyes?

"Thea, they're perfect," she finally said, once her mouth was free again.

Kingsleigh was just nodding vigorously, her mouth already full with her second bite.

Sarai gave a little sigh. "Girl, I'm gonna have to ask you to make these whenever I come to visit. This is way too good."

I took my first bite of the scone to hide my embarrassment. I was relieved, of course, but the praise felt undeserved. They were probably just trying to be nice. The scones *were* good, but

I knew that there were better scones in the world. Surely there was *something* better than *anything* that came from Sandy Grove, Kansas.

“Did Val lose her marbles when you went in?” I asked once I’d swallowed, hoping to change the topic away from me.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Despina said grinning.

I chuckled. I could just picture it. I thought her reaction at discovering my Godric’s enrollment was good, I could only *imagine* what meeting the wife of Branson Harlow and her old friend again would be like.

“Screaming and bouncing?”

“Yep.”

“Fast talking?”

“Check.”

“Side-crushing hug?”

“Three of them.”

“Good. I’m happy for her.”

~*~

Fwump! About forty-five minutes down the road, the limousine driver slammed on his breaks, throwing us all sideways against the seatbelts. Aunt Despina whipped out an arm protectively across my chest to keep me from... what? What had even happened? What was going on? Kingsleigh and Sarai, who were sitting next to each other across from us, were now squashed together, sharing twin looks of utter bewilderment. From the front of the vehicle, the driver was cursing harshly, then switched to a whole stream of words in Spanish I didn’t understand.

“Hernando? Hernando! What happened?” Aunt Despina called up to him.

“It was a deer! A really big deer! It had big antlers and everything! I thought they only lived in the forest, like Bambi,” said the driver, his Spanish accent thick.

“A deer? You’ve got to be kidding me!” Sarai exclaimed, righting herself and resituating her outfit.

“Is the limousine still drivable?” Despina asked, all business. That was her. She had always been the one to get things done. Why fuss about the situation when she could do something to fix it?

Hernando turned the key in the ignition and the limousine came to life. He began to move forward when the horrible sound of metal grinding against pavement shook the vehicle. Hernando killed the engine and got out to assess the damage, then returned, his expression grim. “Sorry, Ma’am, no can do. The entire bumper is hanging on the ground. We’ll need a repair shop.”

“We’re going to miss our flight!” Kingsleigh worried aloud.

Sarai nodded, a scowl forming on her lovely features. “I’ve got deadlines I need to meet, or Godric’s will have my hide!”

“Now, ladies, let’s remain calm. We’ll just have to call a cab. We’ll get to the airport in plenty of time,” Despina soothed, ever the voice of reason.

Her suggestion was met with outraged squawks from the other two ladies. A cab? But they hadn’t ever ridden in a cab! How undignified! I unbuckled my seat belt then and opened the door, sliding out into the hot Kansas air. All around us, sorghum fields swished stiffly in the breeze, their tufted ends waving like tassels on a flag. The asphalt felt sticky beneath my dollar-store tennis shoes as I made my way around the car to the shoulder where the buck lay, panting

with pain. It was clear that his legs had broken, and he had taken internal damage. I bit my lip, trying not to cry.

I turned and knocked on the passenger door to the limousine and Hernando rolled down the window.

“Si?”

“Do you have a phone? We need to call Highway Patrol to take care of the deer,” I said quietly.

He looked confused, but handed over his phone, anyway. I took it, dialed the number, and told the dispatch member about the situation. She assured us there would be a trooper on his way in about ten minutes. I thanked her, then hung up the phone, handing it mechanically back to the driver.

Turning back to the deer, I felt my stomach roll. “I’m sorry, friend. You didn’t know we’d be here. It’s not your fault. You didn’t deserve this.”

In the distance, a cow called after its baby. Another slight breeze picked up, rattling the leaves of the sorghum and bringing with it the smell of manure and fresh blood. I hugged my arms across my body, wishing I could do more. The poor thing was terrified, and any attempt to soothe it would only make things worse. I hated feeling so powerless. I hated watching him suffer.

“Thea? Baby, are you okay?” Aunt Despina’s voice came from the car.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. My voice had seized up again, rendering me incapable of speech. Eventually, Despina joined me outside, the other two women following her out. Why hadn’t I just answered? Why couldn’t I have just told them I was fine? I should have just gotten

back in the vehicle, I realized belatedly. The more people who were around, the more stressed the deer would be. And it wasn't fair. He didn't deserve to be made into a spectacle.

"My goodness, that thing is huge!" Kingsleigh exclaimed.

Despina silenced them with a shake of her head as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. "You called Highway Patrol?"

I nodded.

She gave my shoulders a squeeze. "I'm sorry, Baby. You've always been fond of your animals."

For some reason, that renewed the strength of my tears. I wasn't used to her kindness. The dramatics of the twins and the exasperation of Mom and Karl, yes, but not the compassion from Despina. If I had been here with my family, there would have been even more anger and complaining than what the driver and the other two women had done. As much as I resented that, I realized I had learned to bear it more than I had learned to endure kindness. It was several long moments before I felt I had managed to swallow the knot in my throat so I could speak.

"Did you call the taxi company?"

"They're coming to get us, though it'll take them around twenty minutes," Despina said, giving my shoulders another few reassuring rubs.

I nodded, leaning against her and letting myself be soothed by her presence. This wasn't exactly the start of my new life that I had envisioned. Was it really too much to ask to have made it to California without a hitch?

~*~

Thirty minutes later, we were back on the road with a new driver in a new car. Hernando had stayed with the limousine to have it towed to a repair shop. The rest of us piled into the back

seat of a banana-yellow taxi cab driven by a man in his thirties named Earl. The car smelled like Cheetos and old beer. Unidentified stains mottled the upholstery in the back seat—a few more and it might have been able to pass off as the fabric’s actual design. Country music from the mid-2030s crooned through the speakers. Did people these days really listen to this music anymore?

“You ladies sure are fancy! Hey, don’t I know you from somewhere?” Earl directed the question at Aunt Despina through a smile littered with broken and missing teeth.

Her own stiff smile was polite but lacked any real warmth. “I do not believe we have ever met,” was her vague response.

He began to sing along to the radio as if he hadn’t even heard her.

I was practically on Despina’s lap, as none of us wanted to be in the front seat with Earl. Sarai leaned forward to catch my eye and mouthed the words *Oh. My. Gosh!*

I gave a little smile. I guess this would be a bit unusual for ladies like Sarai and Kingsleigh. For me, this was just how things were. Earl was like a lot of the men in my area—beer belly and all. I still knew I had to be careful around him and his hands that kept swiping at his mouth as if trying to erase drool, but it was par for the course for me.

The car was on the nicer side compared to the few I’d ridden in in my lifetime. The truck Grant would drive while working for the Rogerston’s had exposed springs in the seat, holes in the floor, and the fabric casing on the roof drooped down and brushed the top of your head. My own family had a dark green van that overheated if it went faster than forty miles an hour. I *could* actually tell you what was staining its floors and seats, and most of them had to do with animal or human bodily fluids. At least the taxi was in one piece.

We managed to make it to the airport in time, thanks to Earl's outrageous driving. I'd never flown before, and, once we were airborne, I had to admit that I never wanted to do it again. The pitching and bumping from the air currents was nauseating. We rode first class, which gave us these little nooks that had a TV, a fully reclining cushioned chair, and an endless supply of food and beverages delivered by an overly smiley flight attendant who couldn't seem to stop complimenting Aunt Despina. Despite these niceties, I was a nervous wreck. My hands gripped the arm rests stiffly until Sarai and Kingsleigh (who had complained non-stop about the taxi ride since we paid for our fare and sent him on his way) handed me a stack of papers to start reading through and signing. It helped to get my mind off how high up we were, but it did nothing to ease the motion sickness.

Two hours of torture later and we were landing in California. I nearly cried when the wheels touched the ground and the plane came to a stand-still. We made our way off the plane and into the terminal, then an enormous smile bloomed across Despina's face. She broke into a run, dropping her bags on the floor right before she crashed into a handsome man in his forties with nut-brown hair, a pleasantly symmetrical angled face, and eyes the color of caramel. A scruff of facial hair dusted over his jaw in a way that looked both casual and intentional. A gaggle of adorers were kept at a distance by three bodyguards.

"You'd think she hadn't seen him in weeks, not twenty-four hours," Sarai said with a grin.

"That's why they're so sweet!" was Kingsleigh's dreamy reply.

I looked on curiously, taking everything in from the onlookers to the bodyguards to Despina and Branson's embrace. I think I'd be bothered by needing bodyguards to keep women from literally throwing themselves at my husband, but the two didn't even seem to notice, they

were so caught up in each other. Finally, Despina let the man go after giving him a firm kiss on the lips before turning around to address me.

“Thea, meet your uncle, Branson Harlow.”

I smiled shyly. “Uncle Branson Harlow. I can count about thirty people just behind you who’d die to hear someone say that to them.”

“Honey, I guarantee you they’re not thinking ‘uncle,’” Kingsleigh twanged with a wink.

Despina laughed. “Well, unfortunately for them, he’s taken.” She was so casual about it. Didn’t it bother her at all that so many people still lusted after her husband?

“It’s great to finally meet you, Thea. Dessy’s talked about you non-stop!” Branson said, wrapping an arm around Despina’s shoulders and rubbing the place where his hand lay against her arm. He kissed the top of her head to punctuate his last statement. Despina leaned into him, a look of complete bliss on her features.

I couldn’t help my grin. It was *such* a relief to know that Despina was still the aunt I remembered and loved. She still adored me, and that melted away the last trace of lingering reservations I’d been harboring that she’d not only abandoned me for years with Karl and the girls, but that she’d signed me up for the academy without my consent. She’d always had my best interests at heart—she just had her hands tied for a little while. Kingsleigh was right. It really *was* sweet to see them together, even despite the fangirling crowd. That alone was encouraging. It meant that I could find a good man despite their fame and wealth. It happened for Despina, so why not me?

Sarai checked her watch. “Well, Chickies, I need to head out. I have another client meeting me at four. I’ll be in touch soon, though. You have fun going shopping with your auntie, Miss Thea. She’ll have you shining like a star by the time she’s satisfied.” She gave me a hug

that was surprisingly warm, shook hands with Despina and Branson, then hurried off down the airport terminal.

So, I *was* getting new clothes before the academy. That was a relief. I honestly wasn't even sure why I had doubted it, as Despina owned her own clothing store, but it was nice to have that fact confirmed for me. That would be fun, I thought. I'd never actually gone on a shopping spree with the intention to find clothes that were appealing. My wardrobe was strictly practical.

Kingsleigh was checking her watch as well. "It's three-fifteen. I was hoping to get home before four, as well, so I wouldn't have to call a cat sitter. You'll be okay for a few days until we get your paperwork processed, Thea?"

"I'm sure I'll be just fine," I said, hoping my words were true. It was certainly not in my plan to have a nervous breakdown anytime soon or find myself swept up in some horrific scandal. Hopefully, my sponsorship with Despina meant I could avoid anything that happened with Mom and Karl's arrangement with the twins' sponsor. I didn't even want to think about that. It's quite possible that whatever they were doing could ruin the girls' reputations for life. While I wasn't particularly fond of Fifer and Brietta, I didn't exactly wish their doom, either. They were my family, after all.

We watched Kingsleigh hurry after Sarai after a flurry of hugs and kisses on the cheek—including Branson, I noticed. I hid a grin. That left just the three of us alone with Branson's posse of bodyguards.

"Well, do you ladies want to stop for gelato on the way home?" he said.

"What's gelato?" I said.

Branson looked aghast. "Well, that answers that question! No kin of mine shall be allowed to go without knowing what gelato is! Girls: to the baggage corral!"

Gelato, it turned out, was a magical kind of ice cream from Italy that was both creamier and yummiier than standard ice cream. I ordered blackberry goat's milk in a waffle bowl and was instantly in love. My earlier thoughts had been one hundred percent correct—*nothing* that came from Sandy Grove could ever dream of comparing to the wonders of gelato from California. I would die for gelato.

"This is *so* good!" I moaned for probably the thirteenth time as I watched palm trees and fancy buildings wiz past Branson's fancy convertible. The city was magnificent—far grander than anything I could have pictured. The day was hot and sunny with boarders drifting by on shiny hoverboards and women in exercise clothes out walking their dogs. Holo-Lite screens shone from just about every billboard and shop window. In Sandy Grove, we had exactly one of the 3D "hologram" screens that had been the latest and greatest invention of the past three or four years.

"I told you you'd love it," Branson called over his shoulder at me. Though he had one of the self-driving cars that had also been a relatively new invention that was now available for common consumption, he preferred to drive it himself. "Helps me appreciate my purchase more," he'd said when I'd brought it up earlier.

Branson and Despina lived in Beverly Hills, which was as exciting as it was predictable. He was a Hollywood actor and they all seemed to just *flock* to Beverly Hills. Branson even said that he was neighbors with Calloughway Bryant, one of the popular action stars who'd been a bachelor in *Billion-Dollar* bride a year ago. It'd be interesting to meet him and his wife, Liliosa. Would their chemistry be as noticeable as my aunt and uncle's? Maybe they'd even have some valuable advice for me!

At last, Branson pulled up to his house, which lay within a gated community. He had a high brick wall and gate of his own, though, to ward off paparazzi. I watched him punch in the code with anticipation. I was excited to see the house. Judging by the rest of Beverly Hills that I could see, I knew that it was going to be spectacular. From what I could see peaking over the wall, there was an abundance of palm trees and other tropical vegetation I couldn't name.

At last, the gates swung open, and Branson pulled through, revealing what lay beyond his "garden gate."

"Oh, my goodness," I breathed.

CHAPTER 4—BRIGHT LIGHTS AND CITY SIGHTS

Branson and Despina did not live in a house. No, what they had was far grander than anything I could ever have dreamed of. To me, it felt like a palace. Their gardens were extensive, with a long driveway lined with golden medallion trees leading up to the house.

“The trees were strategic,” Despina said. “They’re evergreen, have a spectacular blooming season, and create the perfect food source for our bees.”

“You still keep bees?” I said, brightening. Despina had been famous for her honey back in Kansas.

“Of course! You know how much I love my honeybees!”

I turned back to the scenery, grinning broadly. Beyond the wall of golden medallion trees were hedges, and I could see the sparkle of a fountain glimmering beyond them. As we approached the “palace,” the first thing I noticed were the massive vining trees arching around the porch’s overhang, sporting masses of brilliant fuchsia flowers. “What are *those*?”

“Bougainvillea,” Branson said dryly. “Your aunt insisted upon them.”

“You don’t sound impressed,” I said, catching his eye in the rearview mirror. He was grinning, I saw. So, this was an ongoing couple’s “war” that I had accidentally stumbled upon. At least he seemed to be good natured about it.

Despina rolled her eyes dramatically so that her whole head was involved with the motion. “He thinks they’re too pink.”

“They *are* too pink. It looks like we’re trying to turn the house into an enchanted castle.”

“Well, I personally see nothing wrong with that,” I said with feeling, letting my eyes travel over the rest of the place now. It was built in a modern French style, with lots of archways

and pillars and masonry. The driveway curved around to a six-car garage, framed by even more flowers and greenery. Palm trees rose up over the roof from the back yard, reminding me we were still in California. The air was thick with the scent of the vegetation, and I breathed it in greedily. How much better this was, compared to the manure and pesticide scent of Sandy Grove!

Branson parked the car in one of the bays and helped Despina and I out, stopping to collect my luggage before we went inside. The interior was even more spectacular. The house was open and airy, with hardwood floors and plush white carpets and hardware that gleamed in the smart lights that flicked on with movement.

"Welcome home," a mechanical voice said through a speaker in the ceiling.

I started, gazing up at the speaker in wonder. "How does it know you came home instead of leaving?"

"That's Melly, our alarm system. Branson and I have a key fob that lets her know when we leave, so when we come back into range, she's prepared to welcome us, and the alarm turns off."

"Brilliant," I said. From the corner of my eye, I saw Despina share a look with Branson. Her eyes were twinkling, and her smile was full of such love. My cheeks warmed unexpectedly. I moved further into the house, pretending that I hadn't noticed them. I knew Despina was excited to have me here, but it was embarrassing to me that my ignorance and simplicity was so apparent now. I felt like a burp in a symphony. Everything was so beautiful, perfect, and modern. And I was ... decidedly not. While my stepsisters had managed to make me feel self-conscious about my clothing and looks before I left Sandy Grove, being here amongst Branson and

Despina's finery put the last nail in the coffin. I was hopelessly outmatched. What made me think I could ever manage to pull off attracting a man with this much wealth?

I froze when I got to the living room. There standing before me was the most spectacular fish tank I had ever seen in my life. It was huge, towering one story above my head to where it connected with a walkway on the third floor. I supposed that's how someone, surely not Branson, got in to clean the tank and feed the fish.

"Like it?" Branson asked proudly, knowing what had caught my eye without even needing to ask. He moved past me towards the shining tank, placing a hand lovingly against the glass. Tiny clown fish swarmed to him, no doubt expecting snacks to shower down on them.

A grin spread across my face as I joined him at the tank. I stared into it, enraptured. The little clown fish were a joy to watch, their bright colors flashing brilliant against the blue water. A cube-like yellow fish with black spots suddenly darted out from a hole in the coral reef to join the frenzy. Well, *darted* may be too strong of a word. For him, it probably *felt* like darting. To me, I thought he looked like a little tank cruising through the water. I pointed to him, laughing.

"What's that one?"

"Yellow Boxfish. They can be very poisonous if stressed enough. It was tough getting him integrated in with the rest of the tank," Branson said, eying him fondly. "The little brown dude poking his head out of the sand is a gobi. He's very shy. There's a shrimp in there with him and they're best buddies. The shrimp digs the hole for the gobi and the gobi protects the shrimp."

"Seriously?" I exclaimed, delighted. I bent to see the little fish better and he ducked back inside his hole. I looked back up at Branson, eyes shining. "He's officially my favorite."

"Yeah, he's one of mine, too. Once you're settled in, I'll introduce you to the octopus."

“There’s an octopus in here, too!?” I exclaimed, trying not to plaster my face against the glass. I was sure Branson didn’t want face prints all over his fish tank.

“Not this one. The octopus is in Despina and I’s room. She can’t be within viewing distance of another fish tank or she’ll climb out of hers to go steal fish to eat.”

“Amazing,” I breathed. “What’s her name?”

“Cleopatra,” he answered with a proud grin, then gently put his hand on my back, guiding me towards the stairs. “Come on. Your room will be on the second floor with Despina and me.”

As we made our way through the house, I couldn’t stop staring. Branson kept pointing out rooms as we passed them: the media room, the “hot” room (which was basically a sauna), the game room, the bathroom, etc. “My” room ended up being across the hall from the master bedroom. It had double doors.

I couldn’t help but feel like a princess as Branson flung open them both so we could enter inside. At first, I wasn’t sure if we even were in a bedroom because there was a whole seating area with the comfiest, cleanest couches I’d ever seen in my life. A massive TV that looked wider than I was tall hung proudly on the wall. The words “HoloLite Magma” shone at the bottom of the screen before it was hidden by an elaborate white frame, making the TV look more like a framed picture. Luxurious plush rugs covered the hardwood floors. The walls were a pleasant, relaxing shade of airy gray. The king-sized bed stood opposite a spectacular, ornately carved fireplace. A painting of the beach hung above it. On the far side of the room, I was delighted to see another set of double doors: this set glass and leading out onto a balcony that overlooked the garden. A glorious view of the mountains rose up beyond the property.

I stood frozen in the doorway, feeling stunned.

“Thea?” Despina said.

I was paralyzed and sorely, sorely out of place. Surely, they didn't expect me to stay in such a beautiful place. What if I broke something?

"Sweetie ... it's okay. I know this feels overwhelming right now, but you'll settle in in no time. If you'd like, we could spend the rest of the afternoon shopping? Maybe help you get a feel for California better?"

I released a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding. Yes, shopping felt like it could help. At least the next time I came in this house, I could somewhat look the part. "Okay."

Despina was watching me with knowing eyes. It was then I remembered that she'd done this before. She'd been in my shoes just three years ago. She probably knew exactly what I was feeling. That knowledge helped to ease even more of the tension in my shoulders.

"Honey, do you mind if we go back out for some girl time? You'll be all right here all alone?" She gave him a playful wink.

Branson gave a dramatic, long-suffering sigh. "I suppose I'll survive. I think there's a ball game on, anyway." He returned her wink.

~*~

"Isn't it too fussy?" I said, staring at my reflection in the three-way mirror. I barely recognized myself in the tea-length sundress Despina had me in, with the sweetheart, halter strap neckline in delicate pink. We'd already shopped in several name-brand stores, and I'd obtained thousands of dollars' worth of cute shorts, pants, blouses, and rompers. Dresses and skirts intimidated me, though. I'd never really worn one. They were far too impractical on the farm, and you risked ruining them in the bakery. Despina insisted, though, that I needed to start wearing dresses.

“Not at all. It’s light and breezy without being over-the-top. Perfect for dates,” Despina said, eying me with a critical look. This was her profession. She was in her element, and it showed. The current store we were perusing was her own, and her employees buzzed around like a hive of eager worker bees, vying for Despina’s and my approval.

“Miss, if you’re worried about the practicality, it might help to know that this one has pockets,” one of the more timid worker bees offered, showing me where the slits were in the skirt of the dress.

My eyes went round. “A dress with *pockets*? Despina, you’re a genius!”

She laughed, shaking off my compliment with a toss of her hair that I was growing accustomed to. It was a nervous habit she’d seemed to have picked up since her stint at Godric’s. “I wish I could take all the credit, but dresses with pockets have been around for ages. I just like putting them in my garments because *most* women adore them.”

“And what’s not to love, Ma’am? Without them, we’d still be shoving cell phones into our cleavage!” another bee said.

The dressing room filled with giggles of agreement.

“Well, from now on, I will only wear dresses and skirts if they come with pockets,” I proclaimed, stuffing my hands into the skirt’s pockets and twirling from side to side.

“As you wish, your highness,” Despina said, giving me a silly curtsy.

~*~

And so went the rest of the day. In all, Despina probably spent well over fifty grand on my wardrobe alone. I agreed to eight more dresses and seven skirts on top of the more practical clothing I’d chosen earlier. My style seemed to fall in the realm of sophisticated elegance, Despina had said. Most of what I had chosen was subtle and simple, rather than flashy and

gaudy. I noticed probably midway through the day that I was maybe trying to emulate Sarai and Kingsleigh. The combination of Sarai's sleek confidence with Kingsleigh's gentle openness was my ideal. They were strong women with important jobs, and I found myself admiring them, despite the vanity and closed-mindedness they'd displayed towards country living. They simply just didn't know any different.

We managed to sneak in a haircut and mani-pedis before the shops closed for the night. Despina and I sat in luxuriously soft, leather chairs while the nail technicians massaged lotion into our feet. They'd already done our hands, and Despina had chosen a brilliant shade of sparkling red for her nails. I had chosen a French manicure.

"I've always wanted a French manicure," I said, turning my hands this way and that. "I've seen women wear them on TV, and I've thought they looked so fancy."

"They're a classic, that's for sure," Despina said. "They look beautiful on you, Thea."

"Thank you," I smiled. I loved how my nails looked perfect for once: no ragged edges or peeling cuticles. No calcium deposits or old injuries making white bands through the nail. It was all buffed smooth and hidden away by the magic of acrylic and polish. They made my whole hand look dainty and elegant.

"What color are you going to put on your toes?" I asked Despina.

"Oh, probably the same color as my fingers. I'm a boring old lady like that."

"Despina Virginia Harlow, you are not old!"

She did her little hair toss. "Well. I'm older than you."

"That doesn't make you old," I insisted.

The technician working on my feet looked up then, eying Despina. "She's right, you know."

There were two hair tosses this time. “Goodness, ladies! You’re being too kind. And anyway, Thea, what have you decided to put on *your* toes?”

“I’ve decided to do the pink *and* aqua!” I said, prompting a chuckle from Despina.

“See? I’m not brave enough to do two different colors at once.”

Immediately, doubt settled in like a lead weight. Was doing two different colors bad? Should I only choose one? Would wearing two different colors make me look inexperienced or immature? Was only doing one color not daring enough? Was it better to be daring or safe? I started eying the bottles of polish in my hand with a more critical eye. Maybe I should just do the pink. It’s pretty, and it goes with the French manicure better. Besides, pink was safer.

“Well ... maybe I do just want to do pink.”

“Oh, honey! Please don’t let me change your mind. Pink and aqua are so pretty together and would be beautiful with your skin tone.”

“It’s okay, Despina; I really do just want the pink. I’ll get the aqua next time,” I said, handing the technician the bottle of rosy pink and placing the aqua back on the rack.

Despina stared at me for several long moments. I pretended to be engrossed in what the nail technician was doing. She was cleaning my nails free of lotion before applying the first coat of polish to each nail. Eventually, Despina turned her attention back to her own technician, deciding to believe me, I hoped.

After several long moments of silence, I decided to ask her some of the questions I had been dying to ask since that letter appeared in my mailbox.

“Despina? What was it like?”

“Godric’s? Or getting married? Or ...?”

“All of it.”

“Ah. Well the academy is much like any university, I imagine, except that it is all girls and there’s additional courses you have to take to learn how to be ladylike and, well, *wealthy*. The teachers are strict, but most are very kind. If you have any chance to take Ms. Seltzer for Etiquette, you should. She’s a riot! Speaking of classes, have you given any thought to what degree you’d like to get?”

“I have,” I said, feeling my heart rate pick up. I’d been thinking about it all day, actually. It was something that had never really occurred to me as a possibility until I left home, but the more I thought about it, the more it felt right to me. “I want to be a lawyer for domestic abuse victims.”

Despina’s eyes looked like they were going to pop out of her head. “Oh, Thea. That’s quite an endeavor—a noble and admirable endeavor, of course. You’ll have to continue on in your education after you graduate Godric’s, you realize that, right?”

I hadn’t, but I knew I’d do whatever it took. No one deserved to be treated as I had, and I was determined to seek justice for those who had. “That’s fine. It’ll be worth it.”

“Alright, as long as you’re aware and are okay with that. At least you have a fantastic connection. Sarai went to the best law school in the country. I’m sure she’ll have great pointers for you.”

“That would be perfect,” I said, my nerves turning into butterflies of excitement. I was really going to be a lawyer. I was worried Despina was going to say I didn’t have what it takes, but she seemed supportive. Now all I had to do was get through the classes.

Once we were back in the car and headed home, Despina asked me a question that felt more like she’d handed me a cobra. “Thea, I’ve picked up on some things that I think we need to discuss.”

“Oh? Like what?” I watched the trees and businesses pass by. Though California was still largely unfamiliar to me, I didn’t remember having come this direction to get to the strip.

Despina steered the car down another unfamiliar street that ended at a parking lot surrounded by a rope fence. Sand spilled out over the pavement around the border, and leafy sea grass sprung up here and there, as if gnomes hid beneath the sand and all we could see was their tufts of hair. Beyond the barrier was the sea. Despina cut the engine and stared out the front window, watching the sun setting over the waves in a spectacular array of pink, gold, orange, and turquoise. It was as if someone had set the ocean on fire.

I had been right about another thing, California sunsets on the beach were better than Sandy Grove’s.

“Were you ever hurt by your family?”

The question came out fast. I wasn’t prepared. That was the last thing I expected her to ask me. I thought she had been about to chastise me for my behavior or something I had said. The way she stared out at the sunset made me nervous, still. Maybe my answer would determine if I was still in trouble or not.

“Isn’t everyone hurt by their family at least once?” I tried to laugh it off, to pretend as if I didn’t know what she was referring to. She’d look at me differently if she knew. She’d be disappointed in me. Shouldn’t I have done more to fight back? Shouldn’t I have just found my courage and told someone sooner? I was a coward, and if she knew the truth, she’d also see that I was. I could feel the shame igniting my cheeks, the heat building unbearably. I kept my eyes fixed on that beautiful sunset, hoping that she would, too, so that she wouldn’t notice.

“I meant physically.” Despina’s voice managed to be both firm and gentle at the same time.

She looked over at me then and my palms began to sweat. The sound of Karl's belt buckle rang in my ears. I squeezed my eyes shut against the flood of tears that were threatening to erupt. When I felt like I could talk without waterworks, I squeezed out of my too-tight throat, "What tipped you off?"

"A lot of little things, but mainly your desire to be a lawyer. That is not an easy career field, and it's not something I expected to hear from you."

"What did you expect?" I asked, latching on to the one part of the conversation that felt safe.

"A baker." She smiled, and I felt my muscles loosen slightly. Maybe she wouldn't be mad at me.

"Billionaires don't marry bakers," I said with more confidence, hoping she'd continue to follow this thread and abandon the other, now that I'd all but told her.

Luck was not on my side, however.

"Thea, I don't want to push you, and I don't want to rush you, but I strongly encourage you to tell me, Sarai, and Kingsleigh about your experience in Kansas. I can only imagine how mortifying this is for you, and I hate that you have to have this experience at all, but I want to help you. Can you trust me?"

"You're not mad?" I whispered, terrified of her answer.

"Sweetie, I'm furious, but not at you. Never at you. By no stretch of the imagination is this your fault."

"You've not even heard what happened, though."

"It doesn't matter," Despina all but interrupted. "No victim is ever deserving of abuse."

The tears fell hot and fast, now. The beautiful sunset blurred and turned red. Before I even knew what was happening, Despina had opened her door, come around to my side of the car and opened mine, as well, so she could pull me into her arms. I clung to her with all my might, breathing in the unfamiliar scent of name-brand perfume and hair products that still managed to embody the mental image I had of my aunt. In fact, her new scent was somehow better than before. She smelled clean. She *felt* clean. And clean was something I hadn't felt in a very long time. I don't know how long we sat there, but by the time I pulled back, the sunset had faded into a subtle indigo glow on the horizon and moths danced under the streetlamps. I swiped the tears from my eyes, feeling sloppy and foolish. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"Don't apologize, honey. You're going to be okay. Everything will be okay. I promise."

"Is rape very common at Godric's?" I blurted out, prompting another quick wave of tears.

"Is it common? No. Does it happen? It has before, and not without immediate disqualification of the attacker from the program. You have to be smart and careful of who you're spending your time with and where. We can talk more about that later. For now, we just need to focus on getting you the help you need to heal from your past." She pushed a stray strand of hair out of my eyes, smoothing it flat on the side of my head like a caress.

The touch, like the hug, was so alien to me, I felt myself reacting to it in a way that seemed absurd. My skin felt scalded, and my insides felt as if they were melting into a mushy heap within me. It was like I'd never known what real love was, even though memories of my golden childhood still flashed through my mind. It was easy to see how Despina was my father's sister. They were both cut from the same fabric. In a way, having her here was almost like having my father back. Her expression, on the other hand, told me she'd taken my question to

mean something other than what it was. “Karl never raped me, you know. There were times I was scared it would happen, but it never did.”

“I am more relieved to hear you say that than I can express. I hate that it came so close, but at least you were spared that indignity.” Despina gave me a sad smile before reaching out her hand for mine. “Why don’t we go for a walk on the beach? This one doesn’t close until midnight.”

“I’d love that,” I said, and I took her hand.

CHAPTER 5—A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

We came in smelling of the sea. Most of the lights were already off in the house, though Branson had left the kitchen light on for us. The microwave clock read 12:08. My very bones felt heavy as we trudged up the stairs, the copious bags we'd accrued weighing us down even more. Despite everything that had happened today (or yesterday rather) I felt happy. Despina was right, the makeover had helped me feel less conspicuous this time. Still, I couldn't wait to get my old Sandy Grove clothing off and try on my new silk nightgown that had been one of my many purchases of the day.

We made it to my room, and Despina dropped off her load of bags on one of the couches. "Now, don't you go worrying about putting all this away tonight. They need to be washed, anyway. Just get comfy and straight to bed with you."

"Yes, Mom," I joked, then froze, unsure of how she would react.

Despina's eyes began to fill.

Oh no. Oh dear I hadn't meant to make her upset! "Ma'am! I meant ma'am. Sorry. I'm so sorry, Aunt Despina."

She crushed me into a side-splitting hug. "'Mom' will do just fine, Thea."

I melted. We hadn't been reunited for more than twenty-four hours, and already I felt like she was more my mom than my biological mother ever was. If she wanted me to call her Mom, I would.

"Besides," she continued, pulling back and wiping her eyes with her thumb. "I *was* named your godmother when you were born."

"No way!"

“Yes way! Now, off to bed with you. It’s late, and us ladies need our beauty sleep. You’ve had a massive day today, too. I can only imagine how exhausted you must be.”

Her reminder had me yawning until my jaw ached. “Yeah,” I managed to say. “I’m pretty tired. Goodnight ... Mom. See you tomorrow.” I grinned at the chance to call her Mom again.

“Goodnight, Theadosia.” She placed her hand over her heart before scurrying from the room, closing the doors softly behind her.

I turned and faced my room, taking in the extravagance of it all. This. Was. So. *Cool!* Without Branson and Despina standing here next to me, it was easier to get used to the place. I could pretend I was Princess Camarie, and I didn’t feel quite so foreign and awkward.

Would you like to slip into something more comfortable, Your Highness?

Why certainly, fair chambermaid. I do believe I would.

I giggled at my mental imagery and started rooting through the bags until I came up with the nightgown I had in mind—a beautiful burgundy silk with navy lace trim along the neckline and a delicate floral embroidery beneath the bosom in silver thread. The gown was ankle-length and sleeveless, fitting over me like a sheath until it hit my hips, where it gradually grew fuller as it fell to the floor. After donning the nightgown, I shook out my newly trimmed hair, loving how healthy it felt and how bouncy the curls were. They had taken eight inches off the bottom, but it only brought the length up to my waist rather than my hips.

I still used my toiletries I’d brought from home, as they were perfectly good, and I didn’t want them to go to waste. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I crawled into the massive bed. *Oh dear heavens.* I thought. *This must be the comfiest bed in the entire world!* I switched off the lamp before settling back against the pillows, almost immediately falling into the oblivion of much-needed sleep.

~*~

I slept in until ten a.m. I *never* sleep that late! For a brief moment, I began to panic, thinking I was late for work and that I still had a whole yard of animals to take care of, but then I remembered where I was and relaxed again, settling back against the pillows. I wondered how Grant was doing—had he had any luck finding new owners for the livestock? I know he'd been interested in taking the chickens home for himself. Chickens were relatively easy, as long as you were able to keep their many, *many* predators at bay. I should call him soon. At this point, he'd be at work already, but I could call him tonight and see how he was faring.

After showering and dressing in one of my adorable new outfits—a satin floral jumpsuit in autumn colors—I came down the stairs with the scent of breakfast filling my nose.

“Please tell me that’s your world-famous blueberry pancakes I’m smelling,” I said, coming up behind Despina to peer over her shoulder.

“Yep! Just as you like them.”

“I *love* you! I have dreamed about these pancakes for years!”

Despina gave a toss of her hair. “Well, I’m glad you’re excited.”

I took one of the high benches at the kitchen island as Despina began pulling pancakes off the grill. “Where’s Branson?”

“He had to go in to work today. They have him filming a commercial for Tech-Tonic Industries. Actually, he asked me if you wanted the new HoloPhone Mega+ 7. They’re giving him a free phone for agreeing to film the commercial.”

My own phone? Really? “Oh my gosh, that would be wonderful! I can’t pay for the plan, though. I don’t have much money in savings.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll just add you to our plan.”

“Seriously? You guys are actually the *best*!”

“It’s no problem at all! Thea, I want to spoil you rotten,” Despina said with a wink.

“Well, if I start turning into my stepsisters, please stage an intervention. I never want to become ungrateful for the many blessings you and Branson are bestowing on me.”

“I doubt you will ever turn into your stepsisters. However, should it happen, I will be booking a spot on KEVIN before you can complete your first binge,” she said, referring to the tv show where people met with a psychologist and discussed their problems in front of an audience.

I nodded solemnly before taking my first bite of pancakes with honey. My shoulders sagged, my eyes rolling back in bliss. “Oh my *gosh*!”

“Good, yeah?”

“Amazing. Better than I even remembered! But wait, did you add lemon to the batter?”

“Oh! Yes, I suppose I did. I started doing that when I moved to California. Branson is a huge fan of lemon. Do you like it?”

“Honestly, I think it somehow made your perfect recipe even better. Don’t even worry.” I replied, taking another bite. “Now, I’ve been thinking. I know I need a lot of information before the semester starts. We’re still a month out, but anything I can get would be helpful.”

“Okay, ask away.”

“What was the hardest part about this process for you?”

“That’s a tough question,” Despina said as she started washing the dishes and putting things away. “The school part was challenging but having to basically speed date through one hundred guys added another level to it. You have a lot of things you have to think about at once, and it can feel overwhelming.”

“Did you have anyone you were interested in that wasn’t Branson?”

“Well sure. Actually, there was this one guy who was far more in love with me than I was with him, and that got pretty awkward there towards the end as Branson and I grew close.”

“Who was it?”

“You mean you don’t remember?” Despina said, rolling her eyes. “I think we may have been the biggest drama in my season. Carlisle Vince, the governor of New York’s son. At one point, he even hired a barber shop quartet to sing under my window until I agreed to marry him.”

“What did you do? I mean obviously you didn’t marry him.”

“Branson showed up, and they duked it out on the school grounds.”

“No way!” I gasped. I couldn’t imagine Branson getting into a fist fight with anyone. He was too good natured.

“They sure did. I was so embarrassed. Branson almost lost me that day, too, I was so mad.”

“How did he make it up to you?”

“He gave me a library.”

“A library?” I remembered Despina liked to read, but I didn’t think it was that much.

“Yes.” Despina smiled at the memory. “My charity campaign for my senior year was to renovate a library in inner-city Chicago that was about to be destroyed due to lack of funding. One of my best friends I met at Godric’s lived in that area, and she’d been telling me about this place nonstop. It was her favorite childhood hangout, and she was devastated to see it go. We had agreed together to work to save it, but our campaign was not going well. Most people were in support of demolishing it so that they could put more residential housing in there. Calla and I’s idea, though, was to create a safe space for teens and children to hang out before their parents got

off work, sort of similar to the YMCA or Boys and Girls club. This place would focus on literacy, though, and encouraging kids to stay in school.”

“That’s so cool!”

“Thanks,” Despina said with a smile. There was no hair flip this time. “Anyway, Branson completely funded the entire campaign, including hiring the renovation crews and setting up interviews with educators who would become long-term employees. I was so moved, I couldn’t say no to him after that.”

“You guys are seriously adorable.” I took a sip of orange juice. “Honestly, goals.”

There went the hair toss. “Well, we’re certainly not perfect, so don’t go getting it into your head that we are. We argue just like any couple does.”

“Well, you’re better than Priscilla and Karl, that’s for sure.” I’d decided after our conversation last night that I was going to start calling my mother by her first name. An old saying kept coming into my mind that I felt was more truthful for me especially “Any woman can be your mother, but it takes a true woman to be your Mom.” Despina Harlow was my Mom, not Priscilla Truman.

“Speaking of which, I spoke to Sarai and Kingsleigh this morning about coming to have a talk with you, and they both have a free spot on the 8th. Does that sound okay with you?”

Instantly, the morning felt darker. I stared down at my now-empty plate of pancakes, suddenly feeling sick. “Yeah,” I managed to force out.

“It’ll be okay, sweetheart. I won’t let, er, *Priscilla* and Karl lash back at you. We’re merely seeking justice for what they’ve done to you, and guidance to help you overcome the hurt they’ve caused.”

I gave a little huff. “I don’t need justice, and I don’t need to talk about it. I’ll be okay. I’ll get over it. It’s only a matter of time, now that I’m out of their evil clutches.” I wiggled my fingers like I was casting a spell. I didn’t like the look on Despina’s face. That was pity in her eyes. I hadn’t thought I was a prideful person, but just then I felt wounded and exposed, and I needed to hide.

“Thea, there’s nothing wrong with going to a psychologist. People have been working for years to normalize it and overcome the stigmatism people seem to have towards it. Honestly, it’s not that bad, and it’s for your own good.”

“And if people find out I go to see a shrink, there won’t be a man alive who will be brave enough to want me,” I said louder than I had intended.

Despina’s eyes widened in shock.

Humiliated and suddenly terrified she’d yell at me for my outburst, I brought my dishes to the sink to rinse them off and put them in the dish washer; all the while, I avoided her gaze at all costs. “Sorry,” I whispered before I fled the kitchen.

Somehow, I found myself outside and several blocks over before I came to my senses and realized what I was doing. I had no idea where I was going, and Beverly Hills was a maze of mansions and driveways. Ahead, I could see a Public Transportation box, so I went over to it, tapping on the touch screen to bring up a map of the area and my approximate location. I found Despina’s house easily enough, but I wasn’t too keen on going back there just yet. However, it looked like there was a coffee shop just another four blocks over that held some appeal.

Fixing the street names in my mind, I continued on, counting the blocks and ticking off the streets until something that looked like a country club came into view. There was a discrete sign on one corner of the building that said “East India Tea & Coffee Co.”

“The transportation box didn’t list that it was in a country club.” I said aloud, frustrated with myself and the whole situation. I wouldn’t even be able to go inside without a member’s pass. I sat down on the curb, trying to decide what to do.

I didn’t *want* to tell Despina all of the gory details about my past—and I *really* didn’t want to tell strong Sarai and bubbly Kingsleigh about it. They were my heroes. I couldn’t stand their pity, I wanted them to see me as an equal, as someone who could be working alongside them some day. And with Despina, I could just imagine that every time she looked at me, all she would see was my trauma, my tainted reputation. And what good would it do for people to hear about Karl’s abuse? It was just a sad story. Beyond whatever happens or doesn’t happen with the whole therapy thing, if the men found out, my chance of real happiness will be lost. At best, I would be chosen because I was pitied and a charity case. At worst, I’d never be chosen at all.

Nobody could know.

The growl of a motorcycle startled me out of my self-loathing. I watched as it pulled into the parking lot, into one of the open spaces, and parked, the rider dismounting rather gracefully. He was clad all in black, with armored pants and a thick leather jacket that looked sportier than “biker gang.” The bike itself was black with blue flames licking up the sides. It looked aggressive, like something you’d see a daredevil action hero driving in one of the hot new movies. Then the man took off his helmet, and I gasped audibly.

James Norvoux. The Hollywood actor and my long-time celebrity crush.

And he was standing right before me.

James Norvoux looked at me, one red eyebrow climbing his forehead in a look I’d seen a million times on television. I felt my heart skip a beat. “You forget your membership pass or something?”

Was he talking to me? I looked around the empty parking lot. He had to be talking to me. My heart assumed a breakneck pace in my chest as I struggled to come up with something intelligent to say.

“No? I mean yes. Yes, I did. You’re James Norvoux!”

James looked down at himself as if he were considering my assessment of his identity. “Last time I checked.”

I would have laughed if I hadn’t already been struggling to breathe. James Norvoux was here, right in front of me. *Talking to me*. Oh my gosh what do I even do? For starters I should probably stand up. I look like an idiot sitting here on the ground like this. I bet rich people don’t sit on the curb like a scolded child. Ugh. This is why I needed Godric’s.

“Sorry. I just wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“I come here regularly, though I *don’t* think I’ve ever seen *you* here.”

“Oh. Um. Yeah. I’m new. I mean, I’m the Harlow’s niece. I’m staying with them until I go to college in the fall.”

“Oh really? What college?” James strapped his helmet to the back of his bike with a bungee cord and began stripping out of his jacket.

I found myself staring like a hypnotized idiot for several long moments before I realized he’d asked me a question. “Oh. Um. Godric’s.”

“Oh, really? You’re going to be one of the new Brides?” He was studying me with more interest now.

Ugh, his blue eyes were so pretty! I thought he’d be taller, though. He only had a few inches on me. I probably wouldn’t be able to wear any heels around him. I watched as he ran a

hand through his copper-red hair, making it stand up all over his head in messy spikes that somehow still looked like a legitimate style on him.

“Yeah, apparently.” I laughed self-consciously. Had he seemed disbelieving? Was he unimpressed with what he saw?

“Well then, maybe I could take you out on a date some time. I signed up to be one of the bachelors this year.”

“Oh my gosh, that would be so much fun!” I tried not to shriek or seem over-eager, but it was a struggle. James Norvoux was asking me on a date before I ever even arrived at Godric’s Academy!

He chuckled, his voice low and sexy. “Well, for starters, why don’t I get you inside and buy you an iced coffee. It’s way too hot for you to be sitting out here on the sidewalk.”

We walked into the country club together, James leading the way. A gentleman behind a podium stood just to the left inside the door. “Membership passes please—Good morning, Mr. Norvoux.”

“Good Morning, Jax. Here’s my pass, and this young lady is with me. She’s forgotten her pass today, but I’m vouching for her.”

“Mr. Norvoux, you know I’m not supposed to do that,” Jax said, beginning to shuffle papers around his podium in quick, nervous movements. “Only members are allowed in the country club!”

“We’re just getting coffee, then I’m taking her home. It’ll be like we weren’t even here.” James discretely slipped him a roll of hundred-dollar bills.

Jax dabbed at his forehead with a silk cloth he pulled from the inside of his coat pocket. “Enjoy your coffee,” he said, pocketing the money along with the silk cloth.

He didn't even hesitate! I wondered how many wealthy people there were that were that easy to bribe. Wouldn't they basically be immune to money if they had as much as the people in Beverly Hills did?

"That was a lot of money you gave that man!" I gasped as we rounded the corner.

James gave me a funny look. "It was just a thousand."

When we got to the counter, I did a double take at the menu. The drinks were all around twenty dollars or more! What coffee was worth twenty dollars?

"The usual for me, Fritz!" James called to the barista.

The stout little man nodded and began working on a latte. I was still staring at the menu in awe.

"What can I get for *you*, my dear?" James asked me.

"Um ... the Honey Lavender Iced Latte looks good."

"Ah, typical girl choice." He winked at me.

My heart gave a jump. I didn't even care that his comment had been sexist, I just wanted him to keep talking to me.

James told Fritz my order too and paid for us both. We chose a seat by the windows and watched men of all ages swinging golf clubs and riding around in little white carts.

"So, I never caught your name, 'Oh Mysterious Niece of Branson Harlow.' I've been in a movie with him once, you know."

"I do! *The Baldwin Heist* is a favorite of mine."

"That's surprising. You don't look the action-movie type."

“Not usually, but I love that one. My name is Theadosia Lee.” I took a sip of the latte and knew immediately why it was worth ten dollars. It really was *that* good.

“Sweet. It was a fun one to film, too. Your uncle’s a pretty cool guy. I’d film with him again for sure, especially if his wife keeps sending her baking with him to work. The entire cast had to add in extra workouts to avoid gaining weight!”

I laughed, even though a stab of jealousy spiked through me. That was uncalled for. Why did I have to be jealous of James Norvoux? So, he had a few of Despina’s pastries. So what? “Yeah, Despina’s the best. She made lemon blueberry pancakes for me this morning, and I thought I’d gone to heaven.”

“I can only imagine. You know, I’m really looking forward to getting to know you more, Theadosia. I think this whole *Billion-Dollar Bride* thing is going to be fun.” He took a swig of his coffee, settling back in his chair as if he spent all his time there.

“More like nerve-wracking! But, yes, I’m excited to get to know you, too.” My heart was galloping a mile a minute. I was sure he’d be able to hear it from where he sat.

“You’re not excited?”

I sighed, bringing my cup up for another sip before answering. “I’m excited, don’t get me wrong, but I’m new to the whole dating scene and—.” I cut myself off, biting down hard on my tongue. I didn’t want to tell him I was new to being wealthy, too. He might look at me differently then. The truth was, *I* wasn’t even wealthy. Branson and Despina were. I just happened to be living with them now.

“And what?” he prodded.

“And nothing. That’s just—.”

“Oh hey, did you see *Trap Man*?” He interrupted. He’d pulled out his phone and was flipping through something that I couldn’t see.

I blinked. It took me a few seconds for me to recover my thoughts, and James looked up at me expectantly. “No, I haven’t gotten a chance to see that one yet. It’s still in theaters, you see.”

James looked appalled. “What, have you never gone to the theater?”

“No, I have!” I lied, immediately hating the way it felt on my tongue but pressing on anyway. “I just meant that I still have *time* to see it in theaters.”

“I gotcha. Anyway, that movie was so great to film! There was this time when one of the actors, Bill Newman, do you know Bill Newman? Anyway, he and I got into it once, and”

And so went the rest of our conversation. James seemed content to just talk about the movies he’d been in, and I honestly was just content to let him. It gave me time to think about the things that were happening back home with Despina, and also to consider some of the things that could happen in my future, mainly with James. My mind was already months ahead, envisioning romantic dates with the most attractive actor in my age range in Hollywood, how he’d whisper things into my ears that would make me go weak in the knees, how he’d kiss me like he had Granger Lewis in *Ten Towers*. I imagined him giving me roses just because, and taking me out for gelato on the back of his motorcycle. He was edgy and hot and romantic and I couldn’t wait to see more of him.

All too soon, the coffees were empty, and James was checking his watch with a look of regret. “I’d love to stick around and chat, but I have a conference with some producers in about an hour that I have to make it to—top secret stuff about the next *Breakneck* movie. I can drive you back to the Harlows’ if you’d like, though.”

“Okay,” I breathed. I was going to ride on a real motorcycle, wrapped around *James Norvoux!*

Outside, he helped me buckle the helmet onto my head before mounting the bike and helping me climb on behind him. Tentatively, I wrapped my arms around his waist. I wished I didn’t have the helmet on so I could find out what he smelled like. The feel of the leather beneath my hands made it hard to accurately determine what his body was like, but I could tell he had a firm core. That little bit of mystique made the whole adventure even more exciting. It was tantalizing, wondering what lay just beyond my reach.

The ride was exhilarating. I think he was showing off for me, too, as it felt like the bike was going way faster than the speed limit allowed in Beverly Hills. In no time at all, the bike began to slow, and then he stopped in front of Branson and Despina’s gate. He braced against the ground with his legs as I got off and handed him his helmet back. He grinned at me before he put the helmet back on his own head.

“I’ll see you again, Theadosia Lee. I’ll make that a promise.”

“Okay. Thank you, James Norvoux, for, well, everything.”

He winked, flipped the visor down on his helmet, and then roared away, popping a wheelie before he disappeared out of sight.

I stood at the end of the driveway, staring after him in almost trance-like disbelief. I just had an almost-date with my Hollywood crush, and it had been perfect. I couldn’t wait to tell Despina.