



Dead and a Strawberry Daiquiri (Tallulah James Mystery #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: After the Coffee Bean, Tallulahs coffee shop, buzzed with rumors about the upcoming wedding of two outsiders, there was no keeping her and Penelope away. Who knew crashing a wedding could be so much fun? The strawberry daiquiris flowed freely until Tallulah picked up on the grooms impending death.

It's now up to the two amateur sleuths to save the groom. However, nothing is ever as it seems, and before they know it, they are once again dipping their toes into the criminal underworld that the residents of Sugar Briar only whisper about

With Tallulah and Penelopes uncanny ability to get into sticky situations, it won't be long before the Hallen brothers put a stop to the sleuths shenanigans—one way or another.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

A month ago, the weather in Sugar Briar was cold and there was snow on the ground. Lots of it. That weather had quickly cleared, and the sun had come out, warming the town and melting the snow. Today was no exception. The huge golden ball in the sky put me in a happy mood. It was one I hadn't felt lately with the goings on in the town. It still bothered me that Donna had died in the sheriff's jail before they had a chance to question her.

Penelope and I thought she had a partner. We also never found out what George had seen that got him killed. So, who Donna's partner could be, we hadn't found out. The good citizens of my small town were shocked and dismayed by what had happened. I was frustrated that we didn't have any answers.

I walked in front of my café, Coffee Bean. There were flowers in white planters under the windows, and I checked to see if they were doing well. The splashes of color from the petals looked lovely against the white window frames. I smiled as I stepped back and admired my business. It hadn't been easy getting what I wanted because my parents thought I was "playing" at being a business owner. I certainly was not. I enjoyed my work and looked forward to getting up in the morning. In fact, I would soon be living above the coffee shop.

I lifted my face and grinned when I saw Jessop Hallen leaning out of the third-floor window. He grinned back. Jessop ran the construction company I had hired for the renovations. He'd done an excellent job as well. The kitchen had been installed last week. The painting and tiling had been finished yesterday, and the carpets would be laid in a few days. The butterflies in my stomach flapped their wings with nervous excitement. I couldn't wait to have a place of my own. It would be nice not to be judged by my father every day or have my mother trying to marry me off.

She hadn't stopped after the fiasco with Trevor. I wish I could say it was over, but it wasn't. Trevor told me that he considered me his fiancée whether I liked it or not. I figured the best thing to do was ignore him. At least I had the support of my brother, albeit silent support, as he was best friends with Trevor.

The weather had brought out an abundance of tourists, earlier than expected. The businesses in the town square enjoyed the tourists because they spent money. However, they clogged the roads into town, which was a constant complaint of mine. "You can't have it both ways, Tallulah!" Pen would say.

The red, purple, yellow, and pink flowers swayed gently in a light breeze as I gave up my fussing and stepped into Coffee Bean. I smiled over at Bernie, who was a full-time employee. I had two other employees who worked part-time, Sam and Jessica. They were both twelfth graders at the local high school.

As I was about to head behind the counter to my office to finish the dreaded paperwork, I spotted Lionel Bloom with a small cup of coffee in front of him. I smiled and headed his way. "Lionel, it's good to see you out and about." The poor man had been sick for a few weeks with a bad chest.

"The sun warms me." He waved his hand toward the opposite chair. I sat down and he continued, "To tell you the truth, Tallulah. This is the first time I have left the house in two weeks. It feels good. But I am nervous."

I frown. "Why are you nervous?"

"I'm old, what if someone wants to kill me?" His eyes flitted around the café before meeting mine.

"Oh!" I sat forward. "The killer was arrested, remember? It was Donna. There hasn't been another incident since."

"I suppose."

"Mr. Bloom, is there anything else on your mind?" I asked with a thought. "Is everything okay with Ms. Larson?"

The older man blushed, but his eyes were downcast. "She says I'm too set in my ways to move in with me." He lifted his eyes. "I'm old, Tallulah, and I don't want to be alone. I thought Mildred felt the same way."

"Did you tell Mildred that when you asked her to move in with you?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, maybe Mildred would like to know that you care about her and that you enjoy her company. Tell her that's why you want her to live with you. I mean, you do care about her?" The man in front of me looked embarrassed by my question.

He nodded.

"That's good. I'd take a bouquet of flowers to Mildred and tell her that you made a mess of asking her to live with you and that you'd like to explain. This time be sure to tell her that you care about her." I smiled. "I can't guarantee she'll agree because I just don't know. But it certainly sounds better."

"Hmph, maybe." Lionel sat and stared into his cup of coffee.

"I'd better get home." He stood and pushed his chair under the table. "It was good to see you."

Bernie gave me a look I couldn't quite decipher. Before I could ask her, the door to the cafe burst open. Four men in their twenties walked in. They were all well-dressed,

and from what I could tell, one of them was getting married that weekend. Staff from The Iris Hotel and Spa had been gossiping about an upcoming wedding.

I hurried behind the counter and waited while Bernie took their orders. They sat at the corner table in the window. It was my favorite table because you could see the town square as well as the flower lined street leading out of town. It was nice to look at.

"Did they order food?" I asked Bernie.

"Four pieces of the lemon tart with whipped cream."

"I'll take care of it." I washed my hands and put on gloves. When I had everything plated and, on a tray, I took off the gloves and very carefully carried the tray to the table. The guy with the red hair stood up and took the tray from me. I smiled. "Thank you." I emptied the tray. "Enjoy."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," the guy with the dark curly hair said, followed by a wink.

He was a flirt.

"Is there anything to do around here at night?" This time it was the guy with the dark straight hair who asked. The one I thought was the groom.

"Depends on what you're looking for. There is an Italian restaurant that serves great food. La Cucina Italiana is to the right. Then you have the Roadhouse, which is on the west side of town. They have good food, drink, music, dancing and pool. If you want a good time, that's the place to go."

The groom swept his eyes over me and grinned. "Do you hang out there?"

I grimaced. "Not since I hit a pool ball on the table, only to have it escape and hit a

guy in the crotch. Not one of my finest moments."

They laughed. The groom said, "That really happened, huh?"

"It did."

They chuckled.

The guy who hadn't said anything held out his hand. "Lyle Green." I hesitated, but shook his hand, thanking God I had not had a vision of death.

Ginger held out his hand. "Barry Cooke."

Again, no vision.

Dark curly haired next. "Jason Lambert."

No vision.

The groom scanned my body again before extending his hand. "Marshall Westcott," he said as I slid my hand into his. He grinned as I stared blankly. The vision of death shot into my head. I also saw more than I wanted to of the man whose hand I held.

He pulled his hand free and said awkwardly, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I just remembered something." Pull yourself together! "It's nice to meet you all, I'm Tallulah James, the owner of Coffee Bean."

"Well, Tallulah, it was certainly nice to meet you." Marshall grinned.

Irritated by the grooms' flirting, I said, "I hope you have a great wedding."

His friends burst out laughing, while Marshall's eyes filled with glee.

I hastily retreated. I passed Bernie and shot down the hall and into my office.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

I was sitting at my desk with my forehead on the desk. Since my car was struck by lightning on a stormy night, I saw visions of death. I had to touch the person for it to happen. And it only happened if that person would die within forty-eight hours. The groom was going to die.

The vision was not like anything I'd ever seen before. I mean, Marshall Westcott would be naked when he died. I winced at the sight. I wished it was something I could forget. Unfortunately, I didn't forget my visions. I wanted to put them out of my mind because they made me uncomfortable. I wasn't blind and I had noticed that the man was handsome. So were his friends. I rubbed my eyes with trembling fingers, then pressed my palm to my forehead as I relaxed back into my chair.

What was I going to do?

Stay calm.

Relax.

And think.

By the time there was a knock on the office door, followed by Jessop Hallen filling the doorway, I was relaxed. In fact, I was half asleep, not that I'd admit that to the man grinning from ear to ear. "Catching up on work, I see," Jessop drawled as he walked into the office. He shut the door behind him.

"I had a distraction."

"Is that what you call it?" He slumped into the visitors chair.

I narrowed my eyes. "What am I missing?"

"Bernie," he grinned, "told me four guys flirted with you."

A laugh came out of me. "You'll probably see them at the Roadhouse later."

He raised a brow. "You, too?"

"No," I snorted. "I'm surprised I haven't been banished."

"Yeah, well, my crotch is awfully glad you haven't been near a pool table again."

Heat flared in my cheeks. "That was an accident, and please can we not talk about it...ever again?"

Jessop chuckled. "Not a chance." He sat forward and put his hands on the desk. "So, what happened out there to make you hide in here?"

My eyes snapped to his. "You saw that?"

"I came downstairs and saw your face when you ran in here. I'm your friend, Talla—" he paused while he searched my eyes, "at least I'd like to think we are."

"We are friends, Jessop." I reached out and took his hands. "I just have a bad feeling, that's all."

I could tell him the truth. He'd understand. Maybe he'd think I was crazy. And if I had to be honest, I wasn't sure the groom had died under suspicious circumstances. There was no blood. He was just lying on the bed with... with...

"How's it going upstairs?"

"Nice change of subject." He sat back, eyes narrowed. "You can move in by the end of next week."

I gave a loud squeal of delight, ran around the desk and threw myself at Jessop.

He wrapped his arms around me. The momentum knocked Jessop off his chair. He cursed under his breath as he landed on his back. His arms gripped me tightly as I landed on top of him. I shook my head and raised my eyes to his. "You are a dangerous woman to be with, Tallulah." He groaned. "I can't get up until you do."

"Oh!" I struggled to get off him and ended up pressing my knee into a sensitive spot. "Oops. I'm sorry." I continued to scramble until I was on my feet. I stared down at the man as my cheeks burned. "Here, let me help you up." I offered my hand.

Jessop looked at it doubtfully, but then grinned. "Nice panties. I like pink."

"What? Oh, you, you, pig!" I quickly rounded my desk and crossed my arms over my chest.

The man burst out laughing and sat up before getting to his feet. "I'm not going to apologize, considering there was nowhere else to look with you standing over me like a fox."

I closed my eyes and took a few calming breaths, then glared at the man. "I'm sorry I knocked you off your chair."

"I'm not." He grinned. "Though I could have done without the knee to the nuts."

The door burst open. "What's all the racket..." Pen's voice trailed off as she caught

sight of Jessop before her gaze flickered between the two of us. "Um, am I interrupting something?"

"No." I rolled my eyes and moved to pull my best friend, Penelope, into the office. She jumped when I took her arm. Whatever smile I had on my face instantly vanished. So did the one on Jessop's face. "Pen," I said quietly. I wrapped an arm around her back and led her to the chair Jessop was pulling up. She burst into tears.

"I'm going to kill that son of a bitch!" Jessop growled and stormed out of the office. I didn't follow, hoping Jessop would kill the asshole.

I carefully removed the dark glasses Pen wore and gasped. Tears began to fall. "It was bad, Talla. I thought it was over."

"You're not going back there, and I'm going to take pictures of what Aiden did to you and give them to the sheriff."

Pen grabbed my arm. "Don't do that."

"Pen, he needs to be punished."

"If I leave, he'll have my house." She cried harder, so I held her.

I always felt helpless after Pen's husband used his fists on her. For me, it was always a challenge with Aiden. I was afraid that if I upset him, he would take it out on Pen because he knew we were best friends. I struggled with Pen's insistence that she was fine. That Aidan wouldn't really hurt her. Not anymore.

"Pen," I said quietly, "I am your friend, and you are not going back to him. Please," I begged, on my knees in front of her with her hands in mine. "We'll get you a good lawyer. The house is in your name, right?"

My heart sank as she avoided my gaze.

"Oh, no, Pen. When did that change?"

"When we got married. He insisted."

"Okay, well, we'll work it out. You can move in with me until we kick him out," I said firmly.

"Can I really do that?" Pen asked, her voice small and soft.

"You, Penelope Bailey, can do anything you put your mind to."

"Gee Talla, I haven't been a Bailey for a few years." She winced. "I hurt all over."

"Can you stand? I'll take you to the hospital. I think you need to be seen there." I stood and helped Pen to her feet.

She whispered, "You don't think Jessop is going to hurt Aiden, do you?"

I didn't have to think. "Don't worry Pen, he'll bury the body, and no one will ever find it."

"What?" She hissed in horror.

"Just kidding." At least I thought I was. The way Jessop had taken off when he saw Pen told me that maybe I was only half joking.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

I paced outside the consulting room at the hospital. It smelled like hospitals—antiseptic and floor cleaner. I figured it was a good thing because it meant the hospital was clean. It certainly looked that way. I shook my head and wondered what on earth I was doing thinking about cleanliness at a time like this. My best friend was black and blue because of her asshole husband.

On the way over, I'd talked Pen into letting the doctor make a report, like he would if the police had asked. I wanted every injury documented. I realized that Pen was embarrassed about all of this. If only she'd believed me when I told her she had nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing that had happened was her fault.

I turned and bumped into my brother, Tate. I frowned. "Why are you here?" My eyes darted quickly over his shoulder.

"I'm not here for me, I'm here for you," he admitted, a slight blush appearing on his cheeks.

His appearance was so unexpected that I burst into tears and wrapped my arms around his neck. Tate grabbed my waist and held me as I cried. My brother could be a jerk. He could ignore me for a month. But when I needed him, he was my brother and my friend.

"I love you, sis, but do you think you can avoid wetting my shirt?"

For some reason, that made me laugh. I pulled away and put my hands on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're here."

He gave me a wry smile. "Where else would I be when you need me." Clearing his throat, he stepped back and asked, "How's Pen?"

"She's badly bruised, Tate." He paused. "Will you stay here in case the doctor comes out? I need to clean up."

Tate nodded.

In the bathroom I washed my face. I looked like a panda with mascara clumping around my eyes. I had to pull myself together. Pen needed me and I was not going to let her down.

I left the bathroom and noticed that Jessop had arrived. His back was to me as he chatted with Tate. When he turned, my eyes widened. "What..."

"Don't start, Talla."

I grabbed a pack of tissues from my purse and reached for the side of his face. He flinched, but finally held still. I pressed the tissue to the cut. "You found him, didn't you?"

"Maybe," he mumbled.

"Hold the tissue in place."

When his fingers replaced mine on the cloth, I gasped. "Your poor knuckles. Jessop!"

"He's worse than me."

"I don't care about the asshole, but I do care about you. Jessop!"

A cleared throat distracted us. "Are you here with Penelope?"

"Yes." Jessop, Tate and I said together. I wouldn't mind, but I was the one who brought Pen here, which the doctor knew.

"I have documented each of her injuries as you requested, Miss James." He paused. "Nothing is broken, but the bruising is extensive. I have prescribed a non-addictive painkiller, which should help her get around more easily. I won't be admitting her, as that would be against her wishes, and I think as long as she's away from the man who did this to her, she'll be fine...physically at least."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Doctor. Can we see her?"

"You can. She'll be ready as soon as I get the script from the pharmacy." He looked at Jessop and sighed. "Are you one of those Hallen boys?"

"I haven't been called a boy in a long time, but yes, Jessop Hallen."

The doctor nodded. "Wait for me in that room. Looks like you need stitches." He grinned and went to the nurses' station.

"Hell," Jessop muttered. "I hate needles."

"I can come in with you and hold your hand," I offered with a raised eyebrow.

"With how accident prone you are, I'll go in alone."

Tate turned to me. "What did he mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing." I quickly walked into Pen's room. She was sitting up on the bed, looking a little worse for wear, but she had a little smile on her face.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"They gave me some juice," she replied.

I frowned and looked at Tate. "I think she means morphine."

"Ah!" I sat down on the side of the bed and took her hand in mine. "We're going to be roommates, Pen." I smiled. "We're going to get Aidan out of your house."

"What's going to happen to him?"

"You'll have to press charges."

"I'm not sure I can do that," she answered in a low voice. "I just want it all to go away."

"He has to be punished for what he did, Pen. You know that."

"Jessop certainly punished the asshole," Tate said.

Pen's eyes went to my brother. "What?"

"Maybe this isn't the time for this, Tate."

Tate scoffed and said to Pen, "When Jessop saw you, he went looking for Aidan. He found him. They're both being patched up as we speak."

"Oh, no!" Pen pushed herself into a more sitting position. "Is Jessop, okay?"

"He will be. Don't worry about him."

"Talla, he's hurt because of me. I'm worried." She paused and focused on my brother.
"How are you here?"

"I ran into Jessop. He told me what happened." He shrugged, embarrassed to be put on the spot. "I thought Talla might need me."

I reached for my brother's hand and squeezed it, noticing that his cheeks were flushed.

"I'm glad you're here," Pen said. "When can we get out of here?"

"I think the doctor is taking his time with the discharge because they've given you the good stuff." Tate looked at me. "I'm going to check on Jessop. If he's still around, I'll get a ride from him to Coffee Bean. Let Bernie know how Pen's doing."

"Thanks, Tate." I stood and put my arms around my brother.

"I had a vision," I told Pen just as the door closed behind my brother. Even as I said the words, I felt my cheeks heat up.

Pen frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Interesting."

"We really, really need to prevent his death." I collected myself and admitted, "He died naked."

My friends' eyes widened. "I didn't expect that. Tell me everything."

"Marshall and his three friends were at the café this morning. I shook hands with them as they introduced themselves. That's how I saw Marshall's death." I paused.
"He's the groom, Pen."

"Groom?"

"He's getting married this weekend over at The Iris Hotel and Spa. At least I think he's getting married there. I have no idea how he died. There was no blood that I saw. He was just lying naked on the bed." I put my hands to my face. "Pen," I whispered, "he had a, um, erection."

She burst out laughing and winced, which turned her laughter into a chuckle. "He didn't. You made that up."

"I swear I didn't. Angel lust is a thing, especially when the man was killed by hanging or ingesting poison."

"How do you know that crap?"

"I have no idea. But I saw him lying down, so he couldn't have been hanged."

"Maybe he died of natural causes while he had an erection," Pen said thoughtfully.

"I don't think that would work. I mean, if he's dead, then his blood stops pumping, which means his penis would go flaccid."

"If he's dead, whether by hanging or poisoning, wouldn't that have the same effect?"

"Apparently not in some cases."

"Okay, well, let's stop talking about dicks and come up with a plan of action."

"There's the wedding."

"We could crash it."

"Are you sure you'll be okay, Pen?" I asked, having second thoughts. It would be a good distraction for Pen, but I didn't want her to get hurt more than she already was.

"Oh yeah. I don't want to miss this. I've always wanted to go to a wedding at The Iris." She avoided my gaze. "Your wedding would have been there."

"Trevor's been quiet on that front, so let's not rock the boat. It's frustrating having to keep telling him it's not going to happen."

Pen snorted. "I think the morphine is wearing off, would you mind finding out about the discharge?"

"I'll find a nurse." I kissed Pen's cheek.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

"You know," Pen sighed, "as much as I'd love to attend a wedding at The Iris, I'm not sure I'm up to it."

I glanced at Pen, who was propped up by a pile of fluffy pillows in a guest room at my parents' house. My parents had no idea that I would be moving out next week, nor did they know that Pen would be my roommate for the time being.

"See how you feel this weekend. Today is raw and nerve-wracking." I crossed my ankles on the arm of the sofa while my head rested on the opposite arm. "I'll get us something to eat soon," I suggested. "Then I have to get back to the café."

"I can walk downstairs, Talla. I don't want you waiting on me."

I swung my feet to the floor and ruffled my hair with my fingers. "You need to be taken care of for a change," I said in a no-nonsense tone. "I'll be right back with lunch." I quickly left the room and hurried downstairs.

Julie, our cook—personal chef—was manning the kitchen, for which I was grateful. Not only was she a lovely person, but she cooked like a dream. My mother could cook, but only basic things. That is probably where I got my skills in the kitchen. My father, on the other hand, rarely set foot in the kitchen. He was a snob.

Julie closed the refrigerator door as I entered the room. She smiled. "I'll make lunch for you and Penelope."

"I have to go back to the café, but I'll take Pen's lunch upstairs before I go." I pulled up a chair at the counter and watched Julie putter around. "I think we'd all starve if

you weren't here."

Julie raised her eyebrows, a frown on her wrinkle-free face. Her skin had always fascinated me. She didn't like the sun, which was odd considering we lived in sunny Tennessee. Her pale skin was flawless for her nearly sixty years. Julie had never been married, never wanted to be married, or so she once told me.

"You're staring, Tallulah."

"Oh! I was just thinking about you." I shrugged. "Do you think I should go see Aidan? Ask him nicely to move out of Pen's house?"

"That might be embarrassing, Tallulah. From what I've heard, Penelope put Aiden on the title papers. Legally, that means he owns the house, too. Can't expect the guy to move out just because you say he has to."

"Yes, but-"

"No buts, Tallulah James." Julie waved a knife as she added, "You need to stay out of Aiden's business."

"I'm not letting Penelope go through this alone," I said incredulous, she'd even ask me to stay away.

"I meant confronting Aiden. That's not something you should do alone. I've never trusted that man."

"I liked him at first, then I put up with him because that's what Pen wanted."

"I must say I was surprised when I saw Penelope. I had no idea she was being abused." Tears hovered in Julie's eyes. "Did you know?"

"Yes." I felt sick to my stomach that I hadn't done anything to help my friend get away. Instead of listening to Pen about staying with him and everything being okay. I should have listened to my head and my heart. "Why didn't I help her before, Julie?" I hiccuped, followed by a sob. "I should have done something."

"Oh, now." Julie came over and put an arm around my shoulders. "Pen is strong-willed, Talla. You know that. She stayed because she wanted to, and I think you know that too."

I nodded.

"So, dry your tears and let me finish Pen's lunch."

"Any chance of an extra plate?" said Tate, appearing in the doorway.

I wiped away my tears and gave my brother a smile. "Why are you home?"

"I live here." He rolled his eyes. "I'm home now so I can look after Pen."

"Really?"

"Don't be so suspicious. I really care for the girl, not that I would admit it to anyone again. She's like another sister." He smiled and kissed my cheek. "I promise I have no ulterior motives. Now go."

"I have to let Pen know I'm leaving." I looked at my brother. "Please don't let Dad know that Pen is here. I'll tell him later."

"I know what battles to pick, Talla, and telling Dad about our guest and the reason she is here is not one of them."

"Thank you." I hugged my brother and reached out and squeezed Julie's arm.

At the café, I wiped down the counters while my mind wandered back to the groom and his impending wedding. I had told Pen that she would have time to recover, but in fact she didn't. Saturday was tomorrow. What was I going to do?

I hadn't done enough with the late George Forester. Hardly anything, when I thought about it. My need to keep my secret visions, just that, a secret, hadn't helped. Of course, I had no idea that Doreen Sommers was about to join him. The old lady had discovered who had killed George. Then the killer, Donna, had been killed in prison. Her death was still unsolved, which bothered me.

There was a possibility that I knew the killer. That didn't sit well with me. Then there was the strange comment Tate had made to me about not trusting Aiden—which I already knew. But he'd added Monica to his statement. That confused me and since then Tate has refused to say anything more.

Monica had been my best friend since the first day of preschool. She'd been killed, and her youngest brother had gone to prison for killing her killer. That asshole, Joshua Allenick, deserved everything he got for what he did to my friend. Monica's oldest siblings were Carlisle and Jessop Hallen. Rhodes was the one who served time. It was a sad situation. But what did Tate mean by his comment? Not knowing irritated me.

A throat cleared as Bernie stepped into my line of sight. "You know the gold in the countertop is part of the pattern, right?"

"Oh!" I stopped scrubbing.

Bernie laughed. "I guess you got something on your mind trying to get the gold out of there, huh?"

I winced. "You have no idea."

"I'll make you a coffee and a sandwich," Bernie said after a moment. "I haven't seen you eat or drink anything today."

"I haven't. I wasn't hungry before, but I could eat now." I tossed the rag into the cleaning tub and closed the closet door. "I'll go wash my hands."

I ran down the hallway toward the staff bathroom but stopped short as I bumped into a large body. His hands immediately reached up and grabbed my arms. I was so surprised to see Carlisle Hallen that all thoughts fled. The man had a habit of doing that to me. "Where are you running to?"

"I wasn't." I cleared my throat and stepped back. "I was cleaning. Going to wash my hands before I eat." I felt the heat on my cheeks as Carlisle's eyes lingered on my face.

"How is Penelope?" Carlisle asked, his gaze unwavering.

"Resting in the guest room at my parents' house. At least she should be there. She can move around a little easier. At least her ribs are bruised and not broken."

He nodded.

"How's Jessop?"

"My brother has a hard head."

"Aidan's ring really got him." The silence made me fidget. "So, um, I have to go to the bathroom." I moved closer so I could get past him, but Carlisle didn't move. I raised a brow.

A smirk on Carlisle's handsome face made my knees weaken. The man knew what he was doing to me. There was glee in his eyes. "Who am I to keep a lady out of the bathroom?" He still didn't budge.

"Hell in a handbasket," I muttered. "Will you move so I can get by?"

"Why didn't you say so?" he snarled, dipping his face so that his lips brushed my earlobe. I shivered. He whispered, "Stay out of trouble, Tallulah." And then he was out the back door.

My heart was pounding so hard I thought it would fly out of my chest to run after the man. I reached up and held one hand there while the other, pressed against the wall, kept me on my feet.

"Now that you're done playing with the handsome man, go wash up." Bernie laughed.

My cheeks heated up even more. "He was the one playing with me," I muttered.

Why had he been back here?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

After setting the alarm, I left through the front door of Coffee Bean. I'd managed to snag a spot out front, which I much preferred. I'd have to get used to parking in the back once I moved upstairs, though.

The day had settled into dusk as the sun began to set, casting a beautiful pink and yellow glow across the sky. I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed before opening them again. Today had been a stressful day and I wasn't sure how things were going to go tomorrow. Penelope still had a long way to go. She would recover physically soon, but the mental toll would take time. All I could do was be there for my friend.

My eyes wandered over the town square, which was blooming with color. Flowers and shrubs were well tended by the gardeners. My heart went into fight or flight mode when I spotted Aiden making his way toward me. The man's posture told me he was angry, though he had a smile on his face. As he stood in front of me, his eyes blazed with fury. I swallowed hard and took a step back. "What do you want?" I asked, sounding braver than I felt.

"Where is she?" He ground out.

"At my parents' house."

"I didn't think you'd tell me." Surprise etched into his features.

I shrugged. "It's not a secret, Aidan. Nor is it a secret what you did to her." I glanced around, noticing how quiet it was on the street.

"You know nothing," he hissed, taking a step closer.

"Tallulah, there you are!" Trevor rushed to my side and wrapped an arm around my trembling shoulders. "Aiden, do you mind if I take my fiancée? We're late for our reservation."

Aiden swallowed his anger and stomped off, glancing back over his shoulder. He hadn't finished with me.

It took me a moment to realize that Trevor was leading me toward La Cucina Italiana. "Where are we going?"

"We both have to eat." He effectively maneuvered me into the restaurant. "Table for two, please."

"I'm going home."

"Nonsense. There is nothing wrong with us eating together. Stop being childish. Besides, it's the least you can do after I saved you from Aiden."

I snapped my mouth shut, angry that he would take advantage of the situation. "Look," I said as we sat down at the table for two, "I appreciate what you did out there, but I don't think this is a good idea."

"What, eating?"

"Don't be obtuse, Trevor," I snapped, opening the menu in front of me. "You know," I continued, "I'd like to know what you meant about me having to marry you. What do you have on my family?"

His eyes lit up with amusement. "I was wondering when you would get around to

asking me." He grinned. "I promised your father I wouldn't repeat it to anyone. Sorry."

The thought of picking up the knife on the table and stabbing him crossed my mind. I wondered if he knew I had murderous thoughts about him. That wasn't like me. I frowned.

"Talla?"

I snapped my head up to see Jessop striding across the restaurant. Trevor groaned and swore under his breath.

Jessop glanced at Trevor before focusing on me. I was surprised by the bruising on his face. Getting to my feet, I reached up and cupped his face. His eyes widened in surprise and a blush formed on his cheeks. I grinned. "Stop being a baby. Let me see. The swelling has really come out." He held still as I ran my fingers over the large bruise on his cheek.

"Will you stop fondling the guy," Trevor hissed. "You shouldn't feel sorry for someone who fights."

I faced Trevor. "He wasn't fighting. He was defending my friend." I turned to Jessop. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me. How's Pen?"

"I left her with my brother to take care of her." I smiled. "I'm not sure he knows what he's getting himself into."

"Hmm."

I hugged the man and squeezed him tightly. "Thank you." I knew Jessop had a thing for Pen. Although for a while now I thought it was a lot more than 'a thing'.

"Tallulah!" Trevor snapped. "Get your hands off the man!" He threw his menu on the table and stood.

Jessop put me behind him. "Calm down, Trevor. The lady doesn't belong to you, so back off."

"What the hell is going on?" Carlisle appeared next to his brother, his eyes on Trevor before they briefly passed over me. "Trevor, is there a problem?"

"Your brother is manhandling my fiancée."

"Ugh! I'm not your fiancée." I moved in between the two brothers. "And Jessop was not manhandling me. I hugged him in thanks for what he did earlier. This whole dinner was you manipulating me."

"Why don't we go to my office and sort this out, the guests are here for a quiet meal."

"I'm sorry about this, Carlisle. I'm going home."

"I'll drive you," Trevor said.

"I'll drive myself."

"Let me walk you out," Carlisle said. He took my elbow and led me through the restaurant. "How did he manipulate you?" The question hit me the moment we stepped outside.

"Aidan confronted me as I was locking up. Trevor came to my rescue. He then led me

to La Cucina before I regained my senses." I shrugged, suddenly feeling tired. "Thanks for helping me escape." I smiled.

"I don't like that he won't leave you alone," he admitted. "This town and the people who call it home have dark secrets, Tallulah. You must be careful."

A shiver ran down my spine as I gave him my full attention. "Is my family involved?"

He looked away before leaning toward me. The scent of his cologne wafted into my nose. "You smell good." I quickly covered my mouth with my hand. "I mean, oh my." I blushed. "You do smell good."

He chuckled. "Glad you think so." His dark eyes held mine as he opened my car door. "You know, I have my suspicions about who Donna was working with. I can't prove anything yet. But I haven't given up." He hesitated, which surprised me. "Call either me or Jessop if you run into trouble." He grinned. "As long as it doesn't involve a cue stick."

I rolled my eyes. "Very funny."

He put his mouth to my ear and whispered, "And no more fondling my brother," then bit my earlobe. "Drive safely, Tallulah." The man walked back down the sidewalk to his restaurant.

Where he got his strength from, I don't know, because I fell into my car from how weak my legs suddenly felt.

By the time I pulled into the driveway at home, my heart stopped pounding so hard. Carlisle Hallen was a sexy man, and he knew what he was doing to me. I patted my cheeks and there was only a hint of warmth to them, so my blush had faded.

I grabbed my purse from the passenger seat and got out of the car. It wasn't a big deal. I called it my mini-SUV because it looked like one in shiny red. I mean, what did I need a big car for? I didn't see the point, plus it was easy to maneuver in tight spots.

As soon as I entered the house, I knew something was wrong. I stopped at the door and looked around, not quite sure what I was looking for.

"Tallulah, may I speak with you?"

My eyes snapped to my father's office. The man himself was standing in the doorway. My father had the body of a runner; tall and lean. Although I hadn't seen him run in a long time. His hair had begun to show signs of aging, with silver running through the dark strands. His face was lean, and when he smiled, I thought my father was a handsome man. Unfortunately, his bite could be deadly.

He cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows.

"Um, yes, of course." I walked towards him, and he followed me into his office, the door closing behind him. "Is everything okay?" I asked, taking a seat in front of his large, ornate desk.

He didn't speak until he was seated in his chair, which I knew made him feel powerful. "It would have been nice to be asked about our guest."

"Pen is my friend. She had nowhere else to go. It's temporary anyway." I relaxed back into the chair as tiredness caught up with me.

"Penelope should be at home with her husband."

"Her husband doesn't deserve her!" I said, sitting up straight. "How can you expect

her to go back to him after what he did to her?"

"Allegedly did to her."

I stared at my father. "What in the world are you talking about? There is no alleged or anything like that. The fact is, he hit her. Aidan should be locked up for assault!"

Dad scoffed. "That's not going to happen. The man had a bad day at work. So what?"

I shot to my feet. "What is wrong with you? I can't believe you would be so callous to my best friend. No one deserves to be hit by their spouse. If Aidan is having a bad day, he should know better than to take it out on his wife. He's a cop!"

The door opened. "What's with all the yelling? I can't hear myself think," Mother said, a crystal glass filled with bourbon in her hand.

"Father thinks Pen should have gone home to Aidan," I said stubbornly.

"The poor girl doesn't need that man in her life, Duke."

Father looked ready to blow a gasket. "Women! Get out of my office, both of you."

I hesitated. "Can I ask you about Trevor?"

Father snapped, "What about the man?"

"What does he have over you?"

Father gave me a surprised, disbelieving look. "He has nothing over me."

He was lying. He'd spoken in a low and dangerous voice. He only used that tone

when he was bluffing.

I swallowed hard. "I'd better go see how Pen is." I fled the office and made my way upstairs. I glanced back over my shoulder and caught my mother's gaze before I locked eyes with my father.

My stomach filled with nerves.

Tate met me at the top of the stairs, his complexion pale. He reached out and grabbed my wrist. We ended up in his room. "Something's going on and I'm scared."

I stared up at my brother and got scared myself. Tate could be a bit of a jerk. Well, a big one. He had surprised me lately. The side I saw confused me. "Who are you afraid of?" I asked.

"I'm not sure it's any one person."

"Tate, you're not making much sense. What is going on?" I thought about him and what he had said for a moment, then I asked quietly, "Does this have anything to do with what you said behind Coffee Bean after Donna attacked me?"

He paled even more and stumbled back until he fell into a chair. I sat down at the end of his bed. "I never should have said anything."

"You never expanded?" I raised my eyebrows and waited.

"And I'm not going to either. Me and my mouth are going to get us both in big trouble, Talla." He paused. "So, I think it's best if we just let it go."

"Wait a minute." I grabbed Tate's arm as he walked past me. "You brought me here to tell me something."

"I told you something was going on. I don't know what exactly."

I narrowed my eyes. "There is something else. I see it in your eyes."

"Honestly, Tallulah, everything is fine. I feel better." He led me to his bedroom door. "I'm meeting Trevor soon, and Pen is waiting for you." With his last words, he pushed me out of his room and closed the door in my face.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" I muttered to no one in particular.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

"I'm bored, Talla," were the first words out of Pen's mouth when I entered the room.
"I'm not used to lying around doing nothing."

Penelope had showered and looked much better than when I'd left her. "How do you feel about a little investigation? It can't do too much harm if you walk slow."

"That depends on where you want to go snooping."

"I thought we could eat at Hallen's. The groom and his friends will be there, I imagine."

Pen snorted. "I remember the last time we were there. You almost unmanned Jessop."

I rolled my eyes and paced. "That won't happen again. Besides, I have no intention of playing pool. We need to keep an eye on the groom, though. See if we can figure out who's after him."

"I'm in." She winced. "It'll have to be someone strong, though, if we suspect he was strangled, with a stiffy and all."

"Oh!" My cheeks heated. "I forgot about that. How on earth am I going to look him in the eye if I know I've seen his private thing?"

Pen snorted. "Private thing... Talla, really, you can do better than that. Penis, dick-"

"I get it." I winced.

Pen started to laugh, clutching her ribs. "Don't make me laugh."

"We shouldn't laugh. This is serious."

"I know. I think I'm more amused by how red you get when it's mentioned."

"At least you don't have the picture in your head."

"I wouldn't mind." Pen moved stiffly around the room as she searched for her purse.

"I never asked you, is the groom a hottie?"

"You'll see for yourself." I frowned. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Pen stopped in front of me. "You know me, Talla. I can't sit around. My legs work fine, besides, there's no way I'm going to miss this." She picked up her purse. "Are you ready?"

"Give me five minutes." I fled to my bedroom and changed into a flower tea dress in record time. I straightened my hair, put on fresh mascara and lipstick, and slipped my feet into a pair of red sandals with spiky heels. The sandals made my legs look amazing. I had forgotten deodorant, so I ran back to the bathroom and squirted some on. I smiled at myself in the mirror. I was ready.

The roadhouse was busy as we pulled into the parking lot. Pen was fidgeting with the dress I'd talked her into wearing, even though we'd both decided she'd be better off in ballet flats while she recovered.

I slipped my arm through Pen's, smiled, and entered Hallen's Roadhouse. I loved this place. The food was amazing. Most of the live bands that played here were excellent and drew large crowds. It was kept clean and free of fights. Well, the odd one would break out occasionally, but it was quickly broken up. Give it an hour and security

would be at the doors and anyone who asked would be escorted to their vehicles.

The music could be loud though. As it was when we entered. We couldn't find an open table, but I spotted the groom and his friends. They were with a group of women, and I was pretty sure the bride was not one of them. The fact that the groom was flirting with some of the women gave it away.

"Should you be out?" A harsh voice came from Pen's right.

I felt my friend bristle at the question, which was asked in a rather annoyed tone.

I grabbed Pen's arm and said, "How's the head?"

"Tough," Jessop muttered.

"Is there a place to sit so we can order food?" I grinned. "Does being friends get us any favors with management?"

For the first time, I noticed that Pen was trembling. I looked at her face and quickly met Jessop's gaze. He cleared his throat and nodded. "Follow me."

He led us to a quiet corner where Carlisle was sitting with a laptop and papers on part of a table. His eyes bored into mine as he looked up and saw us. His eyes swept over me, pausing on my shoes and slowly moving up my legs before meeting my gaze.

"Sit down," Jessop urged.

I slipped into the seat before Pen could, thinking that Jessop wanted to be close to Pen. Carlisle gathered his papers and closed the laptop. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We're here to eat and enjoy some music," I replied.

"They want to eat, no other tables." Jessop motioned to his brother. "Do you want menus, or do you know what you're having?"

"Beast Bourbon," I announced happily. "With thick salt and pepper fries and a Stella, please."

"I'll have the same."

Jessop's gaze lingered on Pen for a moment, then he went off with our orders.

The heat I felt around Carlisle was becoming ridiculous. With that in mind, I turned my attention to him, only to find his on me. He gave me a slight knowing smile and turned his attention to Pen. "How are you really feeling, Pen?"

"I'm sore," she said. "Grateful to have good friends." She brushed a trembling hand across her cheek. "Is Jessop okay? I heard what he did?"

"He's a big baby with needles," he chuckled. "Don't tell him I told you that. He's fine, Pen, so don't worry about him."

Pen nodded, her eyes scanning the guests. "Where's the groom?"

"Groom?" Carlisle frowned.

"Talla thinks something bad is going to happen to the man, we're here to check him out."

"Is that right?"

Pen didn't seem to pay attention to Carlisle's tone, but I certainly heard the underlying anger in his voice. He glanced toward the bar and motioned for Jessop to come over. "Keep Pen company." He turned to me. "A word. Now!" He slid out of the booth and waited for me to follow, then took my hand and pulled me through to the back of Hallen's and into his office.

As soon as the door closed, he turned and pinned me against it, his face so close to mine. "Did I hear Pen right? You're here to see another man?"

"What? No! Not like that. Carlisle," I moaned. "Let me go." My heart was pounding, and my body felt hot and tight from how much of the man I could feel. We were pressed thigh to thigh and chest to chest. I didn't miss his reaction to me because he was hard and throbbing against me.

Carlisle closed his eyes and let his forehead fall on mine. We stayed like that for a few moments. I broke it when I raised a hand to his cheek. He pressed into my palm and planted a soft kiss there, his eyes now open and holding mine. "I don't know what to do with you?" He confessed.

I frowned, feeling a little annoyed. "I'm not one to play with, Carlisle. You keep doing this to me and then you back off. It has to stop."

"Do you really want it to stop?"

Good question.

"Why do you do it? You keep giving me a glimpse of what you and I could be, and then you push me away."

"I keep doing it," he rubbed against me, "because you drive me crazy." He grabbed my bottom and lifted me into his arms, my back pressing against the door again. My

legs wrapped around his hips.

I moaned as his hardness pressed against a very sensitive spot. I couldn't breathe normally as he squeezed my bottom and rocked forward. Every thought fled as the sensation built. "We have to stop this," I whispered.

His mouth was on my neck. I shuddered and felt him tremble as my fingers dug into his neck. His wet mouth moved up and along my jaw. "I want you so badly," he moaned into my mouth seconds before his lips pressed against mine.

I clung to the man for all I was worth, he kissed me hard and wet while a hand pulled up the back of my dress. He slid his hand into my panties and squeezed my bottom. I gasped into his mouth as a large digit slipped inside me. Carlisle shivered and ground his erection against me. Then I experienced something unique for me; I came fully clothed. I arched and moaned and panted as I tried to consume his mouth.

"You," he said breathlessly, "need to stop talking about other guys when I'm around."

Totally embarrassed, I pressed against his chest until he released me. I stood on wobbly legs, my eyes glued to the bulge behind his zipper. Carlisle sat behind his desk and winced.

"I didn't mention another guy. Pen did." I dropped into a chair. "I-I mean, I've never done that before." I blushed fuchsia and cleared my throat. "I don't understand you."

Carlisle wiped his face with a hand. "I want you. Is that easy to understand?"

I nodded.

"You already know there are things going on in this town. I've told you many times. That is why you must stay away from me. I don't want others to find out that you are

my weakness." His eyes held mine, and I knew then that he meant it. "I need you to stay out of whatever it is you are about to get into."

I burst out laughing. "How do you know I'm about to get into something?"

He glared. "I know you and Pen."

I got up and went to the door. I reached out and as my hand touched the doorknob, Carlisle said, "Tallulah?"

I glanced over my shoulder. "What?"

"It won't happen again."

Tears hovered, so I quickly exited and fled to the bathroom. Inside a stall, I grabbed a tissue and dabbed at my eyes. I wasn't even sure what the hell had happened. How had I gone from having dinner with Pen to having Carlisle Hallen give me an orgasm? Then to be told it wouldn't happen again!

Oh, that man!

Angry was good. It meant I wouldn't cry. I stormed out of the restroom and joined Pen. Jessop stood up as I sat down. "I'll bring your food over." He glanced in my direction as if to say something else but changed his mind.

"You look like you've been thoroughly kissed," Pen commented, her eyes widening when she saw I wasn't smiling. "Wait? What? Tallulah James, what did you do to Carlisle?"

"It won't happen again. The arrogant ass told me that after he kissed me senseless." I certainly wasn't going to confess the rest. "I noticed the groom is still here."

"I think you should go over and say hello, since you know him and all." Pen smiled sweetly and took a long sip of her Stella.

I followed suit, a thirst had come over me. "What were you and Jessop talking about?"

Pen looked away. "Nothing much."

I wanted to push, but after what happened with Carlisle, I thought better of it. "I'll go say hello." I paused. "Do I look okay?"

"Redo your lipstick." Pen chuckled.

Red lips reapplied; I slipped out of the booth.

Barry 'Ginger' was the first to see me approach. He did a double take when he recognized me, which I found amusing. He started a chain reaction by nudging his friends. Marshall, the groom, had a huge grin on his face when he turned and saw me. I didn't miss the way his eyes swept from the tips of my spiked sandals to my face and back again. His tongue came out and he licked his lips.

"Hello boys, having a good time?" I asked, allowing Jason to slide me into their group.

"We are now," Marshall said, pushing Jason out of the way. "What can I get you to drink?"

"I've got a drink and some food waiting for me." I nodded in the direction of where Pen was watching. She raised a hand and waved. "I just wanted to say hello."

"Looks like there's plenty of room." Marshall headed toward the table while Lyle

came up to my right and said, "He's harmless." He then headed toward Penelope as well. I glanced over to the bar and noticed Jessop watching with a deep frown on his face. Carlisle looked angry before turning and leaving the bar.

I quickly followed the men and managed to slip into the booth across from Pen. That meant I had Marshall on one side and Barry on the other, now everyone was seated. I grabbed a French fry and started to eat. The burger was going to be a problem. It was huge and it wasn't the kind of thing you ate in the company of men, whether you were attracted to them or not. Pen seemed to have the same dilemma.

"So, which one is the groom?" Pen asked.

"That would be me. I'm Marshall, and these are my groomsmen, Jason, Barry, and Lyle. I don't think I mentioned it to Tallulah here, but Lyle is also the bride's brother."

Lyle didn't say anything, and I felt an awkward silence between the men, except for Marshall who seemed to miss it. I looked at Pen who had noticed it too.

Pen asked, "What time is the wedding tomorrow?" while I continued to munch on the fries. Eventually I got hungry and decided to try the burger.

All heads turned my way as I picked up the burger. I shrugged. "I'm not going to let this get cold just because I have an audience." I took a big bite and put the burger back on the plate as I chewed. I covered my mouth with a napkin and munched happily. I washed it down with another long drink from the Stella. "This is so good."

"I think I need what she's having," Barry commented.

"We just ate at the hotel," Lyle added.

I grabbed the bottle of ketchup from the middle of the table and tried to turn the cap.

It wouldn't budge. I tightened my grip. Nothing.

"Here, let me." Marshall reached over.

"I got it." I insisted.

There was a loud pop, and the lid was free along with a glob of ketchup. It flew out and hit Marshall in the face. Silence fell. It was his own fault for leaning so close to me.

Pen started to choke on a French fry. Lyle, trying to help, smacked Pen in the back, causing her to scream in pain. Lyle froze. We all did. Then we all started talking at the same time.

I shot to my feet and grabbed napkins to pass to Marshall. "I'm so sorry about that."

He brushed me off with a laugh. "I think I should go to the restroom and clean up."
He slipped out of the seat.

Jessop had come over at the sound of Pen's scream. He glared at Lyle. I shoved Jessop out of the way. "Go easy on him. He didn't know Pen was hurt. He was trying to help her when she choked." I crouched down next to Pen. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I think we should go."

"That's not a problem." I helped Pen to her feet and grabbed my wallet. Jessop covered my hand. "It's on the house."

"I'm not going to argue." I turned to the wedding party. "I hope you all have a great day tomorrow. Say goodbye to Marshall for us and tell him I'm sorry."

Lyle grinned. "I will."

Dusk had turned to night. Jessop walked us to the car. "Are you two ladies going to be okay driving home?"

"I drank about three-quarters of the bottle. We'll be fine." I hugged Jessop after he helped Pen into the car. "Thank you."

"Don't let my brother push you away, Talla," he whispered.

"Ugh! Does everyone know what we did in his office?" I pushed away from the man who had a shocked look on his face.

He cleared his throat. "I didn't, until now." Grinning, he crossed his arms and watched me. My face was on fire when I stumbled into the car.

I took one look at Pen's face and said, "Don't say a word." My friend clutched her ribs as she tried desperately to hold back her laughter. "Nothing happened!" I started the car and drove out of Hallen's. It was pitch dark, but fortunately there were not too many people on the streets, so I could drive with the high beams on. I knew these streets, but they scared me in the middle of the night.

"I know you, Tallulah James," Pen began, "don't tell me nothing happened. I know the look of someone who has been ravished."

"Okay, we kissed. A lot. It was the hottest kiss of my life. Then he pushed me away and said it wouldn't happen again." I swallowed hard as I fought back tears. "I think we need to look into what is going on in this town. We must be very careful, because if it has Carlisle on edge, then it must be bad. Dangerous even."

"I'm still stuck on you and Carlisle making out in his office."

I snapped to attention. "Who said anything about that?"

Pen snorted. "Power of deduction. I don't see Carlisle cornering you in the bathroom or the supply closet, so it had to be his office."

"Hmph."

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes, I did! Your face is bright red." Pen chuckled. "What did the guy do to you?"

"Can we leave it alone?" I asked quietly. "Please Pen."

I felt more than saw, her searching my face before I felt her fingers wrap around my hand and squeeze it. "Yes, we can." She paused. "The groom has a wandering eye. I wonder if that's why he gets killed. Oh! Maybe it's the bride that kills him."

"I thought we decided he would be hanged. I don't see how a bride could do that."

"With help she could."

I thought about it for a few moments, relieved to have something other than Carlisle to think about. "Lyle is the bride's brother. Did you notice how he wasn't friendly with Marshall? Maybe it's the siblings." I snapped my fingers. "We're going to the wedding."

"Good, because I'd be very disappointed if we weren't. The Iris Hotel and Spa is supposed to be 'the' wedding venue."

"I really hope we can prevent Marshall's death, Pen."

"So do I, Tallulah."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

It was a beautiful morning, so we had breakfast on the back deck. Pen had a huge bruise on her cheekbone that had really grown overnight. It looked extremely painful, but the way Pen hadn't stopped talking since it appeared, I guessed it wasn't causing her too much pain.

As it was, my mind kept wandering to Carlisle's office and the feel of his hand in my panties. He made me tingle all over, and if I didn't think of something else, I would need the man again.

"Tallulah, are you listening to me and why are you squirming in your seat?"

My eyes widened. "I wasn't squirming. I was...rearranging." I narrowed my eyes as Pen's lit up with mirth. "What did you say about the motel?"

"I knew you weren't listening," Pen rolled her eyes. "I was saying we need to stake it out. We know the mayor goes there, but I wonder who else does. It would be a start in our investigation of what goes on in the town."

"Hmm, I suggested that didn't I?" I take a slow sip from my cup of coffee, pondering the reality of what I'd suggested when I was trying to distract Pen from what I'd done with Carlisle. "We need to be extra careful with this."

"You could change the name of coffee bean to Coffee, Cake and Investigations," Pen suggested.

I winced. "I think the name is fine for now." I raised a brow at my friend. "You're really enjoying this?"

"Hell, yeah, I am. It's a lot better than working at Richardson and Son Attorneys at Law."

"Speaking of which, when are they expecting you back?"

"Monday. Drew Sr. said I could take the week off. Drew Junior said he had two reports that needed to be typed up by Thursday. I don't think his father was so happy with him. I had a feeling they were already late."

"Okay then." I looked at my watch. "Do you want to come to the café with me? The wedding isn't until three. I checked."

"If it means I don't get to run into your dad, then I'm game."

I winced. "I'd like to avoid him too, so let's go."

"Not so fast," Tate said. He moved into my peripheral vision, and I groaned inwardly when I noticed Trevor with him.

"What are you doing here?" I snapped at Trevor. "It's a little early."

"I haven't been to bed yet." Tate yawned and dropped into one of the spare chairs. Trevor followed. "Heard you had some excitement at Hallen's last night."

My mouth fell open before I caught myself and snapped it shut. I cleared my throat. "What do you mean?" There was no way he knew what had happened in Carlisle's office.

"The guys you were hanging out with," he paused, "and the ketchup."

"Oh, is that all." I sighed in relief. Pen chuckled.

"Why, what else happened?" Trevor asked.

"That was it," I said quickly. Too quickly for Trevor to give me a suspicious look. "So where are you two coming from?"

"Out of town," Tate said. Trevor looked at my brother before looking away.

I caught Pen's eye. "We're going to the café, so we'll see you both later." I dropped a kiss on my brother's cheek, which was funny because Pen did it at the same time.

Pen slipped her arm through mine as we walked into the house. "That was weird," she commented under her breath.

"I agree." The words had barely left my mouth when a booming voice called, "Tallulah, a word in my office."

I groaned and patted Pen on the arm. "You go upstairs and get ready."

"Will you be, okay?"

"Yeah." I untangled my arm from Pen's and waited for her to head upstairs before I slipped into my father's office. I was surprised to find the mayor, Tim Murphy, in the room as well. I frowned as I looked at the two of them. "Everyone seems to be up early today," I commented, my nerves getting the better of me.

"I haven't been to bed yet," the mayor commented.

"That's odd, neither have Tate and Trevor." I tilted my head to the side and watched the mayor closely. His cheeks had turned rosy, and I was sure it had more to do with his annoyance than his embarrassment. "So, what can I do for you?" I asked Father.

"An apology is long overdue."

"An apology? For what?" I took a seat in front of my father's desk without being asked, drawing a frown across his brow.

"You accused the mayor of unsavory behavior. It's time for you to apologize."

"Unsavory business? You mean I accused him of going to the motel to have sex with young girls."

"Now wait a minute!" the mayor shot to his feet. "They are adult women!"

"So, you don't deny it?"

He opened and closed his mouth. "You made me sound like a sleazy lowlife. I am an upstanding citizen of this town." His eyes narrowed.

"I will not apologize for speaking the truth, which the mayor has just acknowledged as such." I looked at my father. "Is that all?"

"No, it isn't!" Father was good and angry. "We raised you better than that, Tallulah James. I will not tolerate you talking to my friends in that way."

I stood and faced him across the desk. "I have a mind of my own. I refuse to be bullied into apologizing when I have no desire to do so. What I said was the truth." I turned and faced the mayor, "And you are old enough to know that the rumor mill will only stop when you do." I started for the door. "Have a nice day." As soon as the door closed behind me, I ran upstairs, but I didn't miss Father yelling my name at the top of his lungs.

"What the hell did you do?" Tate asked. I'd caught him on the way to his room.

"I refused to apologize to the mayor." I stormed into my bedroom. I closed and locked the door before falling against it, my heart pounding. I hated confrontations with Father, and they had begun to happen far too often.

I backed away with shaking hands as I went into my closet. I took out a pair of ballerina pumps. Then I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth and smoothed my curls. The last thing I put on was a pale pink lipstick. No one would know I'd had a fight with my father by looking at me. I needed something or someone to bring out the sparkle in my eyes.

Unfortunately, the only man who could do that would probably keep his distance from now on.

The hall was quiet as I approached Pen's room. My father had left. I didn't know how or why, but when he was here, the house felt wired. It was the only way I could explain it. When he wasn't here, the house felt quiet and calm. I stopped thinking when I knocked on the bedroom door.

Pen opened it with a smile. "I'm feeling much better." I winced, but caught myself as Pen continued, "I know I have a huge bruise on my face and my ribs are tender, but inside I feel better. What Aidan did to me yesterday made me realize that I was living in a bubble, and I was waiting for it to burst, and it did."

"Pen, I wish I had talked you into leaving before this happened." I had a lot of guilt about that.

Pen put her arms around me, and we hugged. "You're my best friend, the only one I trust. I wasn't ready to leave Aidan until now, so anything you said wouldn't have mattered." She kissed my cheek. "Let's go see what's going on in town."

We headed out and used my car to get us there. The streets lined with colorful

flowers looked pretty. As we approached the center of town, it got busier, so I drove around back of the store. I didn't mind parking there during the day or when Pen was with me. We'd be leaving in a couple of hours to get ready to crash a wedding.

The whole ten-minute drive into town, I'd been thinking about several things. Marshall's upcoming wedding and death was one of them. The other was what was going on in town. Although a little hesitant, I was looking forward to staking out the motel and catching whoever else was using the rooms by the hour.

"You smiled." Pen narrowed her eyes. "What were you thinking?" She paused. "Wait. Carlisle Hallen?"

"I wasn't thinking about the man. I was thinking about what was going on at the motel."

"A lot of unsavory things are going on," she rubbed her hands together, "and we're going to find out what. Now, I need you to tell me what Carlisle did to you. I'm your best friend. We tell each other everything."

"Carlisle is not up for discussion." I fidgeted, hoping she'd let it go. But I knew Pen, and she wouldn't. She was like a barracuda when she wanted to know something.

"More than kissing went on. Oh! Did he get you naked? No, that wasn't it. Not enough time. But he had his hands all over you."

My face heated up.

"I knew it!"

"I didn't say anything."

"It's written all over your face."

"Ugh, you are impossible." I quickly slipped out of the car, Pen catching up with me at the door. I fumbled with the keys until I got the door open, knowing all the while that Pen was staring in my direction. "Pen," I sighed. "I'm embarrassed I let what happened happen." Then, just to tease my friend, I added, "I will say that the man has magic hands."

Pen gasped, which turned into a chuckle. "I think you mean magic fingers."

About to burn up with heat stroke, I went into my office and locked our purses in the filing cabinet. "Not another word."

Smiling, Pen squeezed my arm. "I promise."

"While we're promising things, I want you to promise to give me all the details when you finally get it on with Jessop." I raised my eyebrows, keeping a straight face while it was Pen's turn to blush.

"No comment." She turned tail. "I'll make us both some coffee. I love playing with that fancy coffee maker."

Panic made me chase after her. "Don't touch that machine. I mean it, Penelope."

"I only broke it once."

"Once was enough." I faced Bernie. "Morning, how are you?"

"Excited. My son and his unit are back home. Scott called me last night to let me know. He'll be here in a day or two." Bernie smiled, her eyes glowing with happiness.

"That's wonderful news!" I hugged my assistant. "How long will he be in town?"

"He's not sure yet." She paused as she watched Pen approach the coffee machine. "Let me get you both a coffee." With ease, she slid Pen out of the way and got us both a brew. Pen rolled her eyes.

I chuckled as I looked around at the few customers who were eating their breakfast rolls. There was one person I hadn't expected to see. I approached him. "Lionel, it's good to see you again."

He looked up. "Tallulah, you are a ray of sunshine."

"Oh, you flirt." I giggled and sat across from him. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Really well." He winked. "I have a girlfriend," he whispered as he leaned closer.

"That's nice. Do I know her?"

He shook his head. "No, she's moved into Mildred's house. I warned her about Linc Duffy."

"Good thinking."

"Is she joining you for breakfast?"

The older man blushed. "Yes."

"Oh, good. I'll get to meet her."

Lionel stumbled to his feet. I turned to see a petite woman with white hair hovering in

the doorway. She looked to be about Lionel's age, and when her eyes landed on the man, they lit up until she saw me that was.

I quickly got to my feet as she approached. "Hello, I'm Tallulah James, the owner of Coffee Bean. I was just saying hello to Lionel." I offered my hand, and the woman shook it.

"I'm Sheila Connors."

"Nice to meet you. I'll send someone over to take your order in a few minutes." I made a hasty retreat.

"He's dating?" Pen asked.

I nodded and said, "I think they're cute together."

"I think so too."

"What are you two doing today?" Bernie asked as she watched Jessica take Lionel and Sheila's order.

"We're crashing a wedding," Pen whispered. "At The Iris."

Bernie's eyes widened. "Are you sure that's a good idea? There are strict rules at that place."

"Well," I said, "we know the groom and his friends, so maybe we can get an invitation from one of them."

"I wouldn't have thought the bride would be too happy with the groom for allowing two pretty girls to attend their wedding." Bernie raised her eyebrows.

"Two pretty girls who are about to get themselves in a lot of trouble," Jessop grumbled.

"Where did you come from?" I asked, noticing that Pen avoided looking at the man. Interesting.

"I was moving some stuff out of the apartment to make room for Pen." The man blushed. Bernie pushed a large cup of coffee into his hands. "Thanks." To me he added, "I'll be back this afternoon with a mattress."

"Mattress?"

"Where do you want Pen to sleep?" He asked.

"Oh! Of course. I hadn't thought of the logistics." I smiled. "I'm glad you did."

"I'm a guy, I think about these things."

Pen snorted. "If I did, I'd be sleeping on the floor."

Jessop narrowed his eyes at my friend. "I offered you my guest room. I can assure you it has a large bed. It's feminine for Rhodes girl decorated it."

I turned to my friend with shock on my face. She hadn't told me about Jessop's offer.

Pen hissed, "Can you imagine the gossip if I'd moved in with you? Besides, Aiden already thinks there is something going on between us, it would be like adding fuel to the fire."

"I don't give a fuc-"

"Stop!" I snapped, stepping between them. "This conversation either needs to be over or taken somewhere else."

Jessop cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Talla." He fixed his eyes on Pen. "I'm not mad at you, Penelope. I hate what happened, okay. It makes me angry. But I'm sorry I got on to you about it."

Pen inhaled and gave Jessop a soft smile-one that made me think the big guy was going to scoop my friend up in his arms and carry her off into the sunset. Instead, he cleared his throat. "I'd better be going."

"Jessop!" Pen said, grabbing his hand. "Thank you. For everything."

He nodded.

Pen turned to Bernie and me and paused. "What?"

"What? What was that?" I waved a finger between Pen and where Jessop had been standing. "You didn't tell me he offered you a place to stay." I raised a brow. "After all the grief you gave me about Carlisle, too!"

"Wait?" Bernie crossed her arms. "I think I'm missing a lot of what's going on here. Carlisle and Jessop Hallen, huh? You two are involved with the brothers?"

"No! Not at all." I became nervous. "We saw them at Hallen's last night, that's all. Nothing going on there." Tallulah, shut up! "Absolutely not!"

Bernie grinned. "You protest too much."

Pen shoved my coffee into my hands and directed me to my office, all to the sound of Bernie's chuckle.

"We have nothing to do with the brothers, Pen."

"I know." She giggled. "But the way you've been acting, I don't think Bernie believes you."

"I wouldn't believe me either," I muttered.

The fifth dress I tried on was the one. It had been a while since I'd been to a wedding, and certainly not since The Iris Hotel and Spa had opened. My parents were members of the golf club there, but me and Tate were not. Dad had asked me to be fair, but I'd said no. I could kick myself for that. I wasn't sure of the reason for Tate's refusal.

I turned this way and that as I cast a critical eye over the vision of my body in the mirror. Slim and toned, but not overly so. The slight freckles across my cheekbones and nose were covered with makeup. My hair curled around my face and down my back. It was shiny and glossy. The mint green dress I'd chosen stopped an inch above my knee. The skirt was flared, while the body had small cap sleeves and a love-heart neckline. It was cute and appropriate for a wedding, even if it was one, I was planning on crashing. I completed the outfit with a pair of emerald, green high heeled sandals. They made my legs look fantastic.

"Come in," I called when I heard a knock on my bedroom door.

It was Pen.

I did a double take at my friend. "I've never seen that before. It's really pretty."

"You think?"

My eyebrows knitted together at the sound of Pen's uncertainty. "Pen," I walked over to my friend and took her hands, "you look beautiful."

"You're my friend, you have to say that," she mumbled with a smile.

"Because I'm your friend, I'm going to tell you the truth, even if you don't want to hear it." I squeezed her hands and let go. "If only Jessop could see you."

"About him." She inhaled and I noticed tears in her eyes. "I can't think about another man. I have the Aiden mess that will take a while to sort out."

"I understand, and I'm here for you every step of the way. Just remember that I'm not the only one who cares about what happens to you."

She took a breath. "Jessop makes me nervous."

"Why? He'd never hurt you."

"He's so... so masculine."

I burst out laughing. "That's the Hallen men for you."

Pen chuckled. "I hope we don't find the groom in the same predicament you saw him in your vision."

I cringed. "Me too, because that would mean he's dead."

"I wasn't referring to that part."

"I know exactly what part you referred." I rolled my eyes and added when I caught Pen fidgeting with the dress, "I really like this dress. It's different from your usual style. Shorter. You have great legs. The blue really makes your eyes pop. The highlights mixed in with your natural blonde hair look good, too."

Pen held up her hand, laughing. "You can stop. I believe you. I won't fidget anymore." She stopped and looked at her phone. "Tate arrived in my car." She smiled.

"My brother Tate?" I asked in surprise.

"How many guys do you know named Tate?"

"One."

"Exactly. Tate said he felt helpless and wanted to help me in some way. I mentioned that I could use my car if he didn't mind helping with that. He messaged me earlier and said he would have it cleaned for me."

"That's good of him. My brother has been acting very strange lately."

"I was surprised too." She smiled. "He hasn't been hanging out with Trevor as much. I think that makes a difference."

"Hmm." I slipped my phone into an elegant purse. "I hadn't really thought about that." I'd noticed that Trevor hadn't been around the house as much, and I wondered if that had more to do with his falling out with Tate than me breaking off our engagement. Something to think about later.

"Let's go crash a wedding."

Pen grinned but caught herself with a wince. "That hurt."

"How are the ribs?"

"Sore, but manageable." Pen opened the bedroom door with more spring in her step

than I'd seen in a long time.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

The Iris was a huge, one-story white building. It had an air of grandeur with its large columns and manicured gardens surrounding the grounds. The building branched off in different directions, with circular verandas overlooking the golf and tennis courts. The overall atmosphere exuded luxury and exclusivity, making it a popular destination for social events and gatherings. My parents loved it here.

Valet parking was the only way to leave a vehicle on the property, so after we got out of the Cadillac, I watched the man get into Pen's car with a big grin on his face. Boys and their toys. Pen stepped up beside me. "Are you ready to look like we belong?"

"We do belong, Penelope. No one can tell us otherwise." I put my arm around one of Pen's and moved us forward. I didn't recognize the man at the door, but he was smartly dressed in a suit. He smiled. "Afternoon, ladies."

"Good afternoon," we muttered in awe as we entered the lavish foyer. The spacious room was elegantly decorated with luxurious furnishings. I swallowed nervously as I glanced at Pen.

"You're Tallulah James and I'm Penelope Bailey. We can do this. The groom is unknowingly depending on us."

"Hell in a handbasket," I muttered.

We stepped further into the room and read the event notice, which was an electronic tablet mounted on a fancy gold stand. "Upstairs," Pen said.

At the top of the stairs, I turned and looked down at where we'd entered The Iris. My

breath caught at how pretty it was, and excitement coursed through me at where I was. I had to reconsider why I'd refused my father's invitation.

"Talla, isn't that Shelia?"

I frowned. "Shelia who?"

"Lionel's girlfriend," Pen said at the same time I spotted the woman. She was near the stairs, sitting behind a long table covered with promotional items.

"Hi girls!" Sheila waved us over.

As we stood by the table, I realized the pamphlets were health related. "Are you from the doctor's office?"

"I am." Sheila beamed. "Part-time, but I like what I do. I'm a nurse." She waved her hand across the table. "I'm advertising next week's free health screening at the clinic. The Iris has graciously given us this space." She leaned closer. "A golfer dropped dead a few weeks ago, so they're anxious to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"I heard about that. An out-of-towner," I said, trying to figure out what the flat yellow things with an emoji on them were. Pen had no problem.

"An eraser," she grinned. "I can never find one when I need one. Mr. Richardson, my boss, always takes mine and never gives them back. He must have a drawer full of them by now."

"Help yourself," Shelia offered.

I gave Pen a warning look, which she ignored, and picked out five different emoji erasers. I rolled my eyes at Shelia. Then I noticed the squishy balls. My eyes lit up. I

didn't know how I'd missed them. A slim, black cardboard box sat on the floor and burst open above the table into a large bowl. Inside were bright yellow balls. Emoji images covered them. Not only were they cute, but some of them had hearts on them.

I took one out and smiled as I squished the stress ball.

"Oh!" Pen gasped. "I need one of those." In her rush to grab one, she bumped into me. I spun on my heels, lost my balance, and began to fall. Time froze. Or so it seemed. Horror filled me for seconds before Pen quickly reached out and grabbed my arm, preventing me from crashing into the box of balls. "Oops, sorry about that," she said sheepishly. I laughed and handed her a stress ball, saying, "Here, now we both have one."

"Tallulah, Penelope, what a surprise."

Shocked to hear Carlisle behind me, I turned abruptly, wobbled, and stumbled into the box of balls. My stumble was not graceful at all. I caught myself on the box, smiled in relief, and then watched as the balls began to burst from the box. To my embarrassment, they began to bounce downstairs. I cursed under my breath.

"Oh dear," Shelia said with a chuckle.

Carlisle chuckled and said, "Looks like you two could use some practice in coordination."

My cheeks felt flushed as I quickly rushed forward and began to clean up some of the spillage. The side of the box was cracked. I looked down at the balls still making their way into the foyer and noticed people staring. One guy shook his head in disgust. I was so tempted to throw one at his head. Pen tried to get down to help but took a sharp breath. "No, Pen. I've got this."

"Ma'am, please leave them. The staff will pick them up," a man in a suit said. He took my arm and pulled me to my feet. I stared at the man in shock at his treatment of me.

Carlisle stepped forward and removed the man's hand from my arm. "You will not touch her," he said in a cold, hard voice. The man immediately backed away.

I turned to Shelia. "I'm so sorry about this."

She waved me off. "This is the most fun I've had in a long time. Don't worry about it." She tossed me a ball, which Carlisle caught.

He looked at the thing and gave me a wicked smile. "Looks like we have a new game to play."

I cleared my throat. "I wasn't aware we were playing a game."

He grinned. "Be careful you don't get into any more trouble, Tallulah."

It wasn't my fault if I stuck my tongue out at his retreating back. Pen muttered, "Very mature."

"I don't know what to do with that man."

"I would let him have his wicked way with me," said Shelia, who had come up beside us. "Who is he?"

"Carlisle Hallen," Pen replied.

I pulled myself together. "Shelia, I really am sorry for the mess I made."

"It brightened my afternoon, so don't think anything of it. I can't wait to tell Lionel."

Shelia walked back to the table.

"I'm not safe anywhere."

Pen chuckled. "Let's go see what kind of mess you can make at the wedding."

As we approached the large terrace at the back of The Iris, an official-looking man stepped into our path. "Guests for the wedding?"

"We are," I said with more confidence than I felt. The man looked at both of us and said, "Follow me."

The man led us outside where a group of people were gathered. Pen and I exchanged nervous glances before we stepped onto the patio, ready to blend in with the crowd. The atmosphere was buzzing with excitement, and I couldn't help but feel an adrenaline rush as we made our way through the elegant setting.

Pen grabbed two glasses of strawberry daiquiris and handed one to me. As we sipped the delicious drink, I whispered to Pen, "Do you think we can do this?" She gave me a mischievous grin and replied, "Absolutely. Just remember to act natural."

"Ladies, what a surprise!"

I glanced at Pen before smiling at the bride's brother. "Lyle, how nice to see you."

Pen chuckled under her breath.

"I couldn't miss my sister's wedding," he said, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "But I have to admit, seeing you here is a pleasant surprise."

"Um, about that," I chuckled nervously.

Lyle crossed his arms over his chest and grinned.

"What can I say?"

"You could try saying, 'We're crashing your sister's wedding, Lyle, so chill.' That would work."

I sighed. "You caught us." I winced. "Look, we're not going to eat or anything; we just wanted to watch the wedding." I moved closer to him and put a hand on his arm.

"You're not going to kick us out, are you?"

"That would be a shame, you're all dressed up." His eyes roamed over me. "Nice legs. Come on. I'll show you where to sit."

"Really?" I grinned.

Lyle rolled his eyes. "Yes, really. I'm related to most of these people, so it's nice to have two beautiful women here that I'm not related to," he murmured.

A blush crept across my face, which I covered by letting my hair fall forward. Lyle motioned for us to sit in the back row of white chairs before leaving us with a wink. I ignored Pen's knowing look and enjoyed the beautiful decorations. Large black bows had been tied to each chair, and black and white garlands were strung along the chairs leading up the makeshift aisle. A stunning arrangement of white roses and black calla lilies sat on the altar, creating a serene and elegant atmosphere for the upcoming ceremony. Soft music playing in the background added to the romantic ambiance, and I felt more determined than ever to prevent the groom's impending demise.

Then a terrible thought crossed my mind. I grabbed Pen's arm. "What if it's too late?"

"What?" I could tell by the look on her face that she hadn't thought about it either.

"It could happen at any time."

Pen sagged in relief. "The groom is behind you with his friends."

I turned and clutched my chest when I saw him. The relief was real. I hated knowing what was going to happen. I had felt like a failure when I couldn't prevent George's death. I would not fail again. Marshall caught my eye and gave me a surprised second look. He laughed and came over to us. I asked, "Are you nervous?"

He winced. "A little, if you must know. Anyway," he paused, a smile on his face, "I had no idea you were planning on crashing my wedding."

"Well, I had a strange feeling that something was going to happen, which is odd, I suppose. I felt I had to be here." I winced. How lame was that? I shrugged.

Marshall chuckled. "Well, whatever the reason, it's good to see you both." He was distracted when an older man put an arm around his shoulders. His father, I thought. They had the same build and hair color. Same nose, too. He pulled Marshall away.

"Maybe I should have been more direct," I muttered to Pen.

"I'm not sure there was much else you could say without blurting out the truth."

The guests began to be ushered to their seats.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

"Do you think the bride is acting weird?" Pen whispered.

We'd planned to mooch around after the vows, but Lyle had insisted we stay for the meal, which was a buffet. The most elegant I'd ever seen, with some strange dishes. The bride in question had filled her plate and sat next to her groom. Marshall ate while his eyes kept wandering to one of the bridesmaids. There were five in all, and the one Marshall couldn't tear his eyes away from looked like she was about to fall out of her dress. My breasts weren't huge, but they weren't small either, I thought as I watched the woman laugh with another, her breasts bouncing.

I glanced back at Marshall and noticed his fixed gaze, as if he was begging for the dress to fall off so he could get a glimpse. I followed his gaze back to the woman, and just as I thought they'd make an appearance, her friend pointed, and the woman pulled her dress up.

Pen gaped. "Back to the bride," she said.

I found the bride in her meringue-style dress and wondered why they'd gotten married. They were the strangest couple. Not a very nice thing to think about at their wedding, but other than their vows, I hadn't seen them talking to each other. "I wonder if they had a fight before the wedding."

"She's not strong enough to kill the groom."

My eyebrows knitted together as I stared at Pen. "Marshall sure has a wandering eye."

"I noticed." Pen finished shoving the small French pastry into her mouth and sighed. "I'm going to need a gym membership after today."

"No one forced you to eat one of everything." I snickered.

"I might not get the chance to come here again, so I figured I'd make the most of it." I paused. "Lyle keeps staring at you."

"No, he doesn't."

"Yes, he does, and he's certainly not thinking about the food in front of him when he does." She wiggled her eyebrows. "He's kind of cute. The tailored suit fits him well."

I decided not to mention that no one fills out a suit like Carlisle Hallen.

"I caught him looking at Marshall in a weird way." I thought about it and added, "It's like to his face, he's friendly and one of the boys, but when Marshall isn't looking, Lyle doesn't look so friendly. I wonder if it's an act."

"Maybe he knows that Marshall has a wandering eye, and it annoys him. I mean, the man married his sister." Pen seemed to freeze; her gaze focused on the entrance to the terrace. I followed her gaze, and my heart sank. Aiden Winters. Pen's husband. "What's he doing here?"

Aiden spotted his wife before his gaze shifted to me. His gaze hardened and a shiver ran down my spine. I swallowed hard and then pulled myself together. "Don't leave here until I get back."

Pen reached for my arm, but I hurried out of her reach. I had a few things to say to Aiden Winters, even if the man scared me. He saw me coming and backed inside. "You're a bully and a disgrace," I hissed. "How could you?"

"Stay out of this, Tallulah," he warned, his fists clenched.

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you going to hit me too?"

He took a step closer when a voice said, "If you so much as lay a finger on Tallulah, I will kill you." Carlisle came into view and gently took my arm, pulling me away from Aiden. "Stay away from Tallulah and Penelope. You've done enough damage."

"You don't know shit," Aiden said quietly, his temper barely under control. "Pen is still my wife. I will talk to her and none of you can stop me."

"You want to talk to her, I'll let you know who her lawyer is. You can talk through them."

Oh, he didn't like that.

Aiden glared at Carlisle. "I'm not afraid of you," the man sneered. "Nice to know you have a weakness." Aiden glanced at me before continuing to stare at Carlisle. "Does she know what you're up to? I doubt it, huh?" He winked at me as he backed away. "Tell my wife I'll be in touch, Tallulah."

Carlisle swore under his breath. He didn't meet my gaze.

"Why are you here?"

"Meeting. I was taking a break when I saw you confronting Aiden. That wasn't a wise idea, Talla."

"Maybe not. The man scares me to be honest, but he's not going anywhere near Pen."

"I agree." He frowned. "You have to be careful around him. I don't just mean because

of what he did to Pen. I think he's involved in what happened to George, Doreen and Donna."

My mouth dropped open. "Really?"

His eyes narrowed. "Don't get mixed up in this, Tallulah. You hear me?" He stepped close enough for me to feel the warmth of his body. A hand rose to my face, his fingers brushed my cheek. All I could think about was those fingers touching me elsewhere as I met his gaze. "Stay out of trouble." He turned abruptly and headed for the bathroom.

My heart pounded as I walked into the reception room on unsteady legs. Pen met me as soon as I did, an extremely worried smile on her face. "What happened? What did he do? You looked flushed?"

"He didn't do anything. I'm flushed because Carlisle showed up and threatened to kill Aidan if he touched us." I looked over my shoulder, but the coast was clear. "Pen-" I couldn't go on. I had to think about what Carlisle had said before I could even consider telling Pen. "Marshalls at the bar alone," I changed the subject.

I left Pen with her mouth open and a frown on her face. I inhaled slowly and exhaled just as slowly. What the hell was going on around me?

"How does it feel to be a married man?" I asked Marshall.

He turned and smiled. "Are you glad you and your friend crashed my wedding?"

I grinned. "I'm glad you're okay with it."

"You're pretty, why wouldn't I be?" He flirted. "Did someone knock your friend around?"

"That's her story."

He nodded. "Fair enough."

"You didn't answer my question."

He leaned against the bar and gave me a sideways glance. "It is what it is." He shrugged.

"Those aren't the words of a happily married man," I commented, sneaking closer. "What's going on, Marshall?"

He sighed. "It's been going on for a while. Nothing to worry about."

It didn't sound like nothing to worry about. "How long have you and Lyle been friends?"

He paused with a drink halfway to his mouth. "Not long. Why?"

"Just curious."

"I looked you up." He turned and faced me. "Some psycho tried to kill you, but you got her in the end. The article I read said that you and a friend," he glanced at Pen, then back at me, "figured out what was going on. Like a detective."

I wondered what he was getting at. "Why did you look me up?"

"First, because I thought you were hot!" He grinned. "I still do, but I want to hire you."

My frown deepened. "I'm not even a private detective, Marshall. Why would you

want to hire me?"

"Not here. I'll be in town until Monday. We'll talk tomorrow. Two in the afternoon at the café." He put his empty glass on the bar and walked away, calling out to some friends.

It occurred to me to go after him. Tell him I didn't think he'd be alive tomorrow at two. Instead, I stood and stared at his back.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

"I'm bored," I muttered to Pen. A band had set up at the far end, with a makeshift dance floor in front of them. The music and songs were lovely and sweet - nothing too loud and boisterous. But I'd had enough. I could see that Pen had, too. She'd taken some painkillers earlier and had some sparkling water with lemon and ice.

Nothing had happened. The groom hadn't left the deck. No one had acted suspiciously.

Then...I saw it!

My hand reached out and grabbed Pen's thigh. "Did you see that?"

She slapped my hand, which I quickly snatched back. "I'm sorry. Did you see them?"

"I have no idea what or who you're talking about."

"The groom gave a head signal to the bridesmaid who has the big," I leaned closer and whispered, "boobs."

Pen chuckled. "I wish I had big boobs."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Pen." I jumped to my feet. "I'll follow the groom; you follow the bridesmaid. Wait! They're going to the same place."

"I'll follow Lyle, who keeps watching Marshall and the woman. I bet he follows them."

"Too many cows in the pasture," I muttered.

Pen gaped. "That's a new one."

"I have my phone." I kept an eye on Lyle as I made my way around the deck to leave without him seeing me. I looked around the corner into the hallway and didn't see anyone. Well, I didn't see the groom or the bridesmaid. I hurried down the plush carpeted hallway and peeked around the next corner. Where had they gone? I heard voices and recognized Marshall's, and they were heading toward where I was standing. I turned to go back the way I'd come, but I spotted Lyle. I spun around on my heels, unsure of what to do. Like an apparition, Carlisle stood in front of me. "Where did you come from?"

He grinned and pointed behind him. "Meeting. What are you doing?"

I heard Marshall's voice and my eyes widened. "I need to hide." I whipped around, pushing the door open behind me and grabbed Carlisle's hand.

As the door closed behind us, I heard Carlisle chuckle. "If you wanted me alone in the dark, all you had to do was ask."

"Shush. They'll hear you."

Seconds later, the handle to the storage closet jiggled. My blood roared with nervous energy. Carlisle intertwined his fingers with mine and moved across the large room to the back. I didn't know how he could see in the dark. We hid behind a storage unit that, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed was piled high with towels and toiletries. This must be the maid's supply closet. Oh, great!

The door suddenly opened, and Marshall and the bridesmaid stumbled in. They were laughing and whispering to each other, completely unaware of our presence. Carlisle

squeezed my hand, quietly urging me to stay calm and quiet. I held my breath as they pounced on each other. I gasped, wishing the ground would open and swallow me whole. Carlisle released my hand and quietly turned me so that my back was against his chest. A large hand landed on my stomach as his mouth brushed my earlobe.

The bridesmaid moaned. Marshall hissed. "I've been wanting to see your tits all night."

My face heated.

"Your nipples taste so damn good," the breathless man said.

I felt Carlisle flinch as a soft chuckle reached my ears. I squirmed against Carlisle but froze when I felt his excitement. His hand on my stomach trembled as he held me in place. "Don't move," he whispered before nibbling my lobe. My heart thundered as I pressed against the man. I could feel the tension growing between us, the desire palpable in the air.

The rustle of clothing being removed or pushed out of the way was loud in the dark room. "Oh! God!" Marshall let out a harsh sound. "Nobody sucks me as hard as you do."

I really don't want to hear that, especially while I'm in Carlisle's arms. I could feel the throb of his erection against my bottom.

"I need to fuck you." I wasn't sure who said it. Marshall or Carlisle.

"Yes," the bridesmaid said. I caught a glimpse and saw Marshall's erect penis as it disappeared under the bridesmaid's dress. Then the moaning told me they'd joined forces. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

I'd be lying if I said that Carlisle, standing behind me, rubbing gently against me as I watched the couple make love, didn't make me hot and jittery. The wet slap of skin against skin as things heated up was loud. When they finished, their panting became erratic and harsh. Marshall swore under his breath. "I fucking love you, Bree," he confessed to my surprise.

"I love you too," Bree said before bursting into tears.

Overheated, I could still hear the seriousness beneath the words they exchanged. It sounded like they were more than just sex.

"It won't be long," Marshall said as I heard his pants being zipped. "I promise."

"I hate Crystal and her family. It kills me to be nice to them."

"I should have had the backbone to refuse to be a part of this."

I watched as Marshall helped Bree into the dress. It was the first time I'd seen him show affection for anyone. His actions told me that he truly loved her.

Carlisle planted a kiss on my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. I squeezed my thighs together, hoping to ease the tension that was pulsing there.

Marshall kissed Bree gently and held her close, his hand in her hair. The scene, though embarrassing to me, even more so because Carlisle was with me, made my heart melt. I somehow felt sorry for them. Whatever had forced Marshall's hand might be the reason I saw him dead.

"We better get back."

"I'm going to my room," Bree said. "I can't face them again."

Their voices muffled as they left the closet. I sank into Carlisle. "Well," I said, stepping away from the sexy man, "that was awkward."

He chuckled. "There's nothing embarrassing about having you in my arms."

Even though he couldn't see me, I rolled my eyes. "You know I wasn't talking about us."

"Oh, you mean watching a live sex show?" He stalked closer, his eyes glittering in the dark.

"What are you doing?" I backed away, but he caught me around the waist.

"What I can't stop thinking about," he growled as his lips crashed against mine in a hungry kiss. His hands roamed my body with urgency, sending shivers down my spine. My toes curled up from the assault on my senses. I'd only felt this way with Carlisle. I moaned into his mouth and reached up to run my fingers through his dark hair. His hands cupped my bottom and lifted me against his hard body. The heat between us ignited a fire that threatened to consume us both. As he deepened the kiss, his hands found their way under my dress. His hand slipped into my panties as he gripped me tightly, rocking me on his erection.

Breathing heavily, I moaned loudly. Carlisle pulled his mouth away and stared into my eyes, his chest heaving and pressing against my sensitive breast. "You're mine," he growled possessively before capturing my lips again in a fierce kiss. The intensity of his touch had me ready to throw my clothes aside and let him have his way. To tell him to take me. I'm yours. I longed for more of his intoxicating presence, but I knew I had to stop what was about to happen. It couldn't happen. He'd warned me before to stay away.

"No," I muttered.

Carlisle was silent before he helped me to my feet and then backed away. "I can't keep my hands to myself when we're alone."

"I want you too," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. "But we have to stop this before it goes too far." With a heavy heart, I turned and walked away, leaving Carlisle standing there with a conflicted look on his face.

The scene in the storage closet was still on my mind when I bumped into Pen in the hallway. She took one look at my face and frowned. "You looked ravished." My eyes widened. "Why do you always notice these things?"

"I'd have to be blind not to." Her eyes wandered over my shoulder before she let out a surprised laugh, her eyebrows wiggling. "That man can't leave you alone."

"Never mind that," I said. "Did you see where Marshall went?" I paused. "Did Lyle follow him?"

Pen took my arm and led me toward the patio and the wedding. "Lyle followed and stood by the room you came out of, listening, and yes, the groom went back to his wedding." She raised an eyebrow, so I quickly filled her in on what had happened in the room, leaving out what Carlisle and I had done in the dark. No doubt she'd fill in the missing details.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

"Hmm." I gave her an absent nod as I caught sight of Marshall and Barry—ginger. I rubbed my temples and walked over to the buffet table. Unlike Penelope, I'd barely eaten.

With a small pastry in my hand, I headed for the large bowl of strawberry daiquiri. I could do with another drink, but I sadly thought it best to abstain at the moment.

Nothing wrong with taking a whiff of the stuff. Maybe I'd change my mind.

"How was it?"

The voice startled me. "Marshall, I didn't see you there."

"I'm sure you saw enough of me in the closet," he whispered, a smile on his face.

I blushed to the roots of my hair. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He chuckled. "Tell me, does the guy you were with measure up to me?"

"Stop!" I poked him in the chest. "I admit to being in there, as you obviously already know." I frowned. "How did you know?"

"I saw you and him disappear in there." He grinned. "Thought I'd give you a show."

"What's going on with you and your bride, and of course Bree? Is this some kind of love triangle?"

"There would have to be love involved between the bride and me for it to be a love triangle." He suddenly looked tired.

"I know you don't know me, but if you need to talk, I'm a good listener." I put my hand on his arm. "I'm serious, Marshall. Maybe I can help you."

"It's complicated and involves both our fathers," he admitted, then clarified, "Crystal's and mine." He rubbed his forehead.

A sudden thought popped into my head, so I went with it. "Do you like being choked?"

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline before amusement lit up his face. "You mean during sex?" He gasped and tried to hold back his laughter. "Are you asking me if I like kinky sex?" He leaned in closer. "Why Tallulah, what on earth is going on in your head?"

Embarrassed beyond belief and needing to get away, I jumped back, slammed my hip into the table, lost my balance, and fell into the bowl of daiquiri. Only Marshall's arm around my waist kept me from landing fully on the table. From my waist up, I was covered in red alcohol. At least it smelled nice.

Marshall held me and I felt him shake until I realized he was laughing. I pushed out of his arms, ignoring the others who were giggling. Pen came running over. "I can't leave you alone for a moment." Her eyes danced.

"Don't say a word."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Pen glanced at Marshall, who cleared his throat. "What happened?"

The man held his hands up. "Don't look at me, she started it by asking about kinky sex."

Pen gave me such a look with a raised eyebrow that I felt myself turn as red as the drink I was covered in.

"If you'll excuse me," I said to Marshall, grabbing Penelope's arm. I pushed her away from the patio and into the bathroom. "I asked him if he liked being choked," I said under my breath. "I should have known how that conversation would go sideways."

Grinning, Pen grabbed some paper towels and stood in front of me. "I don't know how to clean you up." She hiccuped and quickly covered her mouth before the

laughter came out.

I couldn't help myself and grinned. "I didn't mean to jump into the strawberry daiquiri."

"Oh!" She giggled and fell into one of the chairs in front of the vanity. "I didn't think you did."

I grabbed a handful of paper towels and dabbed at my sticky chest. I winced. "I'm not sure any of this is salvageable."

There was a knock at the door, then a male voice said, "I have a shirt and sweatpants for you."

Relieved to get out of these clothes, I hurried to the door. "These should be fine," Marshall said as he handed me the clothes. "Bree lent them to you."

"Thank you." I started to close the door, but he stopped me.

"When you get changed, can we talk?" He asked quietly. "I told Bree what you said earlier."

"Oh, God!" I moaned.

He laughed. "I meant before all that. About helping."

"Give me a few minutes to clean up."

I closed the door and quickly cleaned up while I told Pen about my earlier conversation with Marshall.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

Pen and I were in Bree's room with Marshall. His friend Barry was also there. The room was a standard size for a queen bed, so there wasn't much room for all of us. I chose one of the two chairs by the window. Pen sat in the other. Bree and Marshall sat side by side on the bed facing us, and Barry propped up the wall in the background.

My stomach clenched with nervousness at the scene, for I sensed that there was much more going on here than a mere 'future' death. I had gotten that impression before, but not as much as I did now. "Who wants to start?" I decided that someone had to get them talking, and that someone would be me.

"I started working for Maxwell Devereux about fourteen months ago. He's Crystal's father." He paused and Bree slipped her hand into his. "The job went well, and the big man liked me. He kept giving me more and more responsibility, which I handled well. He promoted me." He winced. "I hadn't realized that with the promotion came his daughter. He had hinted about her, but I hadn't taken him up on it because I had fallen in love with Bree."

He shrugged and continued, "I know I seem like a flirt and a manwhore, but I'm not. I've always been a one-woman guy. Things got complicated when I panicked at a function and told Maxwell that Bree was my sister." He ran a hand through his hair. "Not my finest moment. Things basically went downhill from there."

"Why didn't you quit?" Pen asked.

"Good question." I frowned.

"I had no idea what I was getting into when I took the job. Anyway, once I got there, I became friends with a guy who'd been there a few months, Roger." He paused and looked at Barry before meeting my gaze. "Roger was Barry's older brother. He told me that things weren't what they seemed and that no one was allowed to leave. I thought he was being paranoid. It turned out he was quitting. Two days later he was killed in a car accident."

"Oh, Barry! I am so sorry for your loss."

Barry nodded but remained silent.

"May I ask what kind of business the Devereux's run?" I asked.

"An import-export company." Marshall glanced at Bree, then added, "I'm sure you can imagine what they transport between countries."

"Drugs," Pen suggested.

"Sometimes," Marshall said, leaving that unsaid.

"So let me get this straight. You signed up for a position in a company you thought was legitimate, but it ended up being a cover for illegal activity, and now you can't get out?"

"Alive," Bree said, her voice shaking. "Crystal doesn't want to be married to Marshall either, but she always does what her father wants. Devereux knows I'm not Marshall's sister. He keeps Marshall on a leash by threatening my life and his father's." Tears streamed down her pale cheeks. "Marshall's father," she said. She looked at Marshall, who nodded. Her watery eyes flicked between Pen and me. "He's in law enforcement, and he took some bribes to look the other way, and someone got killed. Devereux has Marshall's family firmly under his control."

I reached out and grabbed one of her hands. "It has to stop," I said. "What's going on is huge, and I don't know how to solve your problem alone. But I do know someone who can advise us on how to sort this mess out."

Pen looked at me with a raised eyebrow and a frown on her tired face. "I hate to say this, but I don't think we're equipped to handle this situation. You need to go to the police or the FBI or someone who knows what they're doing."

"I agree." I suck on my lip before smoothing it with my tongue. "It wouldn't hurt to look around though."

"Talla-"

"There's this building a few miles north of town. It belongs to Devereux. I remember seeing the sign, now that I think about it." I shrugged and looked around the room. "We could check it out." I raised my eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

Pen cleared her throat. "Before we do anything, there is one pressing matter."

I met her gaze and watched as she flicked her eyes pointedly at Marshall.

Of course!

"I have a plan!" I stood up. "The five of us need to go to Hallen's Roadhouse, right now."

"I support the plan," Pen said.

"I've been gone too long." Marshall stood, took Bree's face in his hands and kissed her senseless. "I want you to stay with them, Bree."

As they looked into each other's eyes, I decided. I had to touch Marshall again to see if anything had changed.

He moved away and I grabbed his hands. "We'll take care of her. Don't worry." The man frowned at our hands. I let them go quickly, my stomach in knots.

All I had to do was look at Pen and she knew. Nothing had changed for Marshall.

"I think you need to give up on this farce of a wedding and come with us." I looked at Barry. "You too. You'll be safer together than apart." There was no way I was going to fail this time. Marshall would live to see another day, even if I had to kidnap him myself. "We have to go before we're missed."

"I think," Barry said, "we need to continue as usual. If we leave together, it will arouse suspicion, especially on Marshall's wedding day. Until we can figure something out, we don't have a choice."

I knew that what Barry was suggesting was the best course of action, but knowing what I was doing about Marshall's impending demise, I did not want to agree. I turned my panicked gaze to Pen.

My best friend did not look well. Her complexion was pale, and she looked tired. Guilt gripped me as I reached out and took her hand. "You need to rest."

"I can't leave you," she said softly.

"I'll be fine." I turned to find three sets of eyes on us with a mixture of expressions. "Pen hasn't been feeling well," I said, explaining. "If you insist on continuing as usual, there is nothing I can do to stop you. All I ask is that you all stay in the same room."

"That won't be difficult for a few hours," Barry said. "After that, it will be uncomfortable."

Marshall rubbed his hand over his face and winced. The happy-go-lucky guy I'd met earlier had been long gone since we'd been in the room. I felt sorry for him. His tired frame slumped as he said, "There won't be a traditional wedding night. I can't go through with this. I hope Crystal feels the same way. It will make things easier if she does."

I took Pen's hand and said, "So it's decided. You will all stay together. Please don't go anywhere alone and I'll be back soon."

"No, Talla. I'm not going to leave you here."

"Pen, I'm going to ask Tate to come with me."

She snorted. "Tate is not made of the same stuff as you, Tallulah James, and you know it."

I winced.

"I know who I'd call." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"Not going to happen."

"Excuse me," Barry cleared his throat, "if you two are finished, can we go? I need a drink after this."

He was right. "Let's go."

"I wish you hadn't called Jessop," Pen groaned.

"He cares, Pen. I don't want to throw you at him, but you need him right now. Aidan wouldn't dare confront the man."

"They've already had a confrontation."

"Jessop went after Aidan as soon as he knew what he'd done to you. That was different." I sighed. "I need to know you're okay. Tate's on his way to stay with me at your insistence, so I couldn't ask him to take you back to the house. He'll take care of you, Pen."

"I know he will. It's just that I'm afraid to act on my feelings for him. He's always been there, waiting in the wings. Now that my marriage to Aidan is over, I can no longer hide behind it where Jessop is concerned."

"Oh, Pen, Jessop may have strong feelings for you, but he won't act on them right now. I know he's a scoundrel, but he's also kind and caring." I smiled. "I don't think you need to worry."

"You're right." She inhaled and winced. "Damn my ribs. The painkillers wore off."

"I should have known. If only I hadn't been so wrapped up in what was going on at the wedding." I spotted Jessop's truck as it pulled into the circular driveway.

"None of this is your fault, Tallulah." She kissed my cheek. "Don't go back inside until Tate gets here."

"I won't." I smiled. "He just pulled up behind Jessop."

Jessop climbed out of his vehicle and walked toward us. His eyes swept over Pen as if to make sure she was all right. He met my gaze. "Thanks for calling, Talla. Do you need a ride?"

"No. I'm not ready to leave just yet. Tate's here to keep me company."

He frowned and I sensed he was going to say more, but he took Pen's elbow and helped her into his truck. He glanced in my direction before walking closer.

"Tallulah, please tell me you are not involved in anything with Devereux?"

"I, um, well, not exactly."

Jessop took my arm and pulled me around his truck so we couldn't be seen from the doors into The Iris. "Devereux is not someone you need to know. You need to stay away from him."

"What do you know about him?"

His mouth tightened. "Too much."

"Jessop," I hissed, "tell me!"

He shook his head. "Carlisle would kill me if I told you about this man. Leave it alone. Whatever you know, ignore it. I'm begging you. Pen would never look at me if I let anything happen to you."

I grinned. "I knew it!"

He flushed. "Out of everything I said, this is what you want to focus on? Seriously, Tallulah, Devereux is very bad news. Stay away." With that, he hurried to his truck and drove quickly down the driveway.

Tate came running up to me, looking disheveled. I raised an eyebrow. "What have you been up to?"

"It's 11:30 Talla, I was in bed. Alone."

I grinned. "Poor you."

"So, what's going on?"

"We have to prevent a murder," I'd blurted out the words before thinking better of them. My brother's face went white with shock. "It's complicated, Tate." I slipped my arm through his and pulled him into The Iris. "The groom," I whispered, "is going to be killed tonight. I think he might be hanged, but that doesn't really make sense. I can't see anywhere in his room where that could happen. Maybe someone strangled him."

"Sis, do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?" He took my arm. "Maybe we should go home. It's getting late."

"Tate," I cried quietly, "it's true." I rubbed my temples, knowing I had no choice but to tell him the truth. "Can I trust you, Tate?"

My brother frowned as he met my serious gaze. "Lately, I've come to realize that we may have a mother and a father, but in reality, Tallulah, you're the only one I can count on. I've been trying to make it up to you ever since Donna attacked you in the café. That opened my eyes. So, yes, you can trust me."

His admission floored me. I cleared my throat to clear it of emotion as I offered him a gentle smile. "I love you too, brother." I leaned over and kissed his cheek. I stayed close. "You remember when I was struck by lightning?"

"Damn, how could I forget. It was my fault."

"It was no one's fault. A freak accident of nature." I paused. "The thing is, I started

having these visions. If I touch someone, if they're about to die, I see it. I know it doesn't make sense how and why I can do that, but it's there. The only one who knows is Penelope."

"You are serious?" he commented.

"Yes. I failed George, Tate. I knew he was going to be killed, and Pen and I rushed to find out what was going on, but it wasn't enough to save him. I'm not going to let that happen to Marshall."

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard, even for you. But it's so crazy that I believe it." Even though my brother said the words, his face told me he wasn't quite there yet.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

The moment Tate and I stepped onto the patio; I knew something was wrong. In a panic, my eyes searched for Marshall, but I didn't see him. I saw Barry and Bree standing together in some kind of argument. I grabbed Tate's arm and dragged him towards the arguing duo. "Where is he?" I asked urgently, my heart pounding in my chest. Barry turned to me with a worried look on his face, and I knew then that Marshall was in trouble.

"We don't know," Barry said.

I saw Bree's face and panicked. The poor woman was terrified. "We didn't see him leave."

"This is my brother, Tate. He's going to help us. Let's not panic until we know there's something to panic about." Easier said than done, Tallulah.

Tate nodded in agreement; his jaw set with determination. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the task at hand, praying that Marshall would be found safe and sound.

"He didn't go out the doors you just came through. I was leaning against the wall next to them with a drink when we got back here." Barry looked out over the golf course. "Which means he must have left by the steps at either end of the patio."

Bree shook her head. "He didn't leave at that end because I was sitting at the far table."

"That narrows it down." I smiled. "Tate and I will go down the steps. You two go

through The Iris and out the front door. Take a left and keep your eyes open. We'll meet you in the middle."

Barry took Bree's arm and led her away from the terrace. Hopefully the inebriated guests wouldn't notice their abrupt exit. With a hand on Tate's arm, I held him close as my eyes scanned my surroundings once more. The father of the bride was sitting at a table with two other men. They looked as if they were discussing business. Maxwell Devereux looked up and met my eyes. I swallowed hard as I turned to face my brother.

Tate frowned and put his arms around my shoulders. "What's wrong, Talla?" he whispered in my ear.

Instead of answering him, I pulled myself together. "We've been here too long. Will you lead me to the steps, so it looks like we're looking for some privacy?"

He snorted. "Lean into me, honey," he drawled. "Let's finish this party in our room," he said in a louder voice.

My cheeks heated even more when I saw the knowing smirks on some faces. My brother was just doing what I asked, but jeez. I didn't ask him to yell about it. Tate snickered. "If only you weren't my sister, this would be a lot more fun."

I winced. "I don't need details." It was a relief to get to the bottom of the steps, because all I felt as I walked was Devereux's eyes focused in my direction.

There were lights along the path around The Iris, so I kept my arm in Tate's as if we were going for a walk. No one would be up to anything unspeakable in the light. The further we walked, the more I looked out over the golf course. We hadn't gone far when I spotted a faint light flickering off to the left. "Did you see that?" I pointed.

"What?" Tate pulled my arm down so that if anyone saw, they wouldn't see me pointing. "I see it now. I think it's a flashlight."

"Is there a building out there, do you think?"

"I know there is. It's a small barn where they keep the mowers and other supplies."

I stared at my brother. "How do you know that?"

He got uncomfortable. "Never mind that." He took my arm and led us off the path and out of the light.

"Maybe we should meet Barry and Bree before we check it out," I suggested, nerves getting the better of me.

"When a life is in danger, Tallulah, you don't wait." His hand slipped into mine and I had to run to keep up with his longer stride. As we approached the small barn, I heard muffled voices coming from inside. My heart raced when my brother finally stopped. "I think we're outnumbered."

"Call Sheriff Kendrick. I don't think he likes me very much."

"He found you amusing, sis." Tate pulled out his phone and dialed. Their conversation was short. His eyes met mine. "He said not to do anything. To wait for him."

"What if they kill Marshall right now?" Tate's grip on my hand tightened. "We have to trust the sheriff, Tallulah. He'll know what to do." I nodded, trying to ignore the fear gnawing at my insides as we waited for help to arrive.

The voices in the barn came closer to where we were hiding in the back. There was

no doorway, so at least they wouldn't discover us. Unless they left the barn, that was.

"We have to hurry."

"I know nothing."

"Shut up, Westcott! I'm surprised the boss hasn't told us to get rid of you before now."

I grabbed Tate's arm. "We've got to do something," I whispered.

"That chick you've been screwing on the side will be next."

"No way. You leave her alone! She knows nothing."

"Are you sure the rope is secure?"

"Yes. We'll tie it as soon as Westcott's neck is in the noose."

"Oh!" Terrified, I made my way to the front of the barn. I wasn't going to let them kill him. The sheriff would be here soon to save the day. He had to be. I heard footsteps from behind and knew that if Tate caught me, he wouldn't let me interrupt the murder that was about to take place. I should have been more aware of my surroundings because I bumped into someone.

The man gasped and grabbed my arms. "What the hell!" he yelled before grabbing me tightly and pointing a gun at Tate. "Move. Now!" He pointed to the large barn doors that were partially open. "Get inside."

What had I done?

"I'm sorry, Tate." I cried softly. "I should never have gotten you involved."

As Tate entered the barn, he froze. The man who had me pushed me forward, and the scene that had frozen Tate was revealed to me. My blood ran cold. Three more guns were pointed at us. I spotted Marshall sitting in a chair with a burly guy over him and a knife in the guy's hand.

"What's going on?" I asked in as firm a voice as I could muster with the fear in my stomach.

"Who are you and why are you snooping around outside?" one of the men asked. I didn't see his face because he stayed in the dark shadows at the back of the barn.

"We were out for a walk. I never expected to be pulled in here at gunpoint. We don't want any part of what you're doing. We'll be on our way now." I tried to wriggle free of the guy, but he wouldn't let go.

"You two are not going anywhere." The man stepped forward. "You, Tallulah James, have been seen with Westcott several times."

"How do you know who I am?"

The man said, "Let her go."

I was released and moved quickly to my brother's side as the man looked at me before continuing, "You are friends with the Hallen brothers."

I remained silent.

"Answer me!" he roared.

"You didn't ask a question."

My brother snarled under his breath. "Talla, now is not the time."

"Yes, I am friends with them. What about it?"

"I'm debating whether we can get away with killing you both or whether the Hallen brothers will come after us."

"I can answer that for you."

I turned around in shock. Carlisle Hallen stepped into the barn and Jessop followed.

"This is not a fucking party!" The man had lost his cool.

"Devereux is setting you and your buddies up. He wants you to take the fall for Westcott's death." Carlisle stepped forward. "Devereux is not only hoping to get rid of Westcott, but he also wants to get rid of you. The sheriff is on his way as I speak. Who do you think called them, huh?"

Carlisle blocked the man's view of Tate and me, but I didn't like it. It meant the man would have to shoot him to get to me. I wasn't sure I liked that idea at all.

"You're full of shit." The man snickered, though I saw a nervous twitch in his hand. "Why would Devereux want to get rid of me and my men? We know too much that could put him away for a very long time." The gun he held pointed at Carlisle.

Is the guy an idiot? He just pointed out why Devereux would want to get rid of him.

I whimpered, catching a slight twitch from Carlisle. "Devereux doesn't like loose ends," he said, his voice growing more menacing. "And you, my friend, are definitely

a loose end that needs tying up." The tension in the room was palpable as we all waited for the next move.

"Just kill her. After tonight we will be over the border. No one will reach us there." The man who spoke stood beside the leader; his arm outstretched with a steady hand as his weapon pointed in our direction.

The leader nodded in agreement, a cold smile on his face. "Make it quick and clean," he ordered, his eyes fixed on us with a chilling intensity. With a feeling of dread settling in my stomach, I knew we were out of time.

Carlisle glanced over his shoulder and met my anxious gaze. "On three," he muttered before glancing at Jessop. I watched, hoping that what they were planning wouldn't get one of them killed.

As if in slow motion, I watched as Carlisle slowly approached the two men. The man behind me moved into my line of sight, as did the man on the opposite side. Jessop was watching the man closest to me. Marshall, in a sudden burst of energy, flew forward and tackled the man giving the orders. A gun went off. All hell broke loose. I felt a rush of adrenaline as chaos erupted around us. Jessop and Carlisle worked together seamlessly, taking out the remaining threats with precision.

I grabbed a shovel and joined the melee, whacking the brute who'd been holding me. He was a big man and didn't go down easily. He immediately grabbed the shovel out of my hand and lifted it, approaching me with a malicious grin. He didn't get a chance to hurt me because my brother came to the rescue. Tate hit the man over the head with a gas canister. I don't know where he got the strength from, but I was so glad he did it.

I stumbled and fell onto my butt on the cold, hard floor. As I caught my breath, I saw the man lying unconscious close by. Tate reached out to help me up, his face filled

with relief.

The relief was short-lived as a fist came sailing towards me at the same time as Jessop yelled my name. Carlisle knocked the man to the ground as his fist connected with my cheek. I winced in pain as I felt the sting of the blow on my face. Carlisle quickly subdued the man, but not before he'd punched him in the face a few times too many. Jessop grabbed his brother and pulled him up. "He's had enough. The sheriff's here."

Carlisle stumbled toward me, his eyes burning. Despite his anger, he gently cupped my face in his large hands. "I'm sorry, Tallulah," he said in a raspy voice. "I'm angry; I didn't catch the asshole before he hit you."

Tears were already falling, but at Carlisle's gentle touch and words, I burst into tears. I found myself held tightly against his warm body. I buried my face in his neck and sobbed my heart out. I wasn't usually such a baby, but I was tired and exhausted and so damn relieved that it was over. I hurt too. The man had caught me hard with his fist.

"How is she?" Sheriff Kendrick asked Carlisle.

"Took a left hook to the cheek."

I released my grip and turned my teary face toward Kendrick. "I'm fine, really. It's been a long day either way."

"I'm taking Talla to Hallen's. Can you take our statements there?"

"I could really use them at the crime scene."

"Talla needs ice and to be comfortable."

Kendrick ran a hand through his hair. "I'll be there."

"Thanks," I muttered when no one else bothered. "He's a good sheriff by all accounts. Stands up to the mayor and my father."

"If you weren't hurt," Carlisle said. "I'd wait." His fingers brushed my hair back from my face as his eyes swept over me. "What am I going to do with you?"

Jessop suddenly appeared. "If you don't know by now, you can't be my brother," he said. "Kendrick said we could go. He'll catch up with us."

"Pen's Cadillac is parked here. I can't leave it."

"I came with Jessop, so I'll drive it to Hallen's."

I nodded. "Let me check on Marshall first." I winced because I'd forgotten about him in all the chaos, even though he was the reason we were in the middle of this.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

"Why were you there?" I asked Carlisle, admiring the way his pants hugged his butt.

He glanced over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow when he saw the direction of my gaze. I grinned. "You were saying."

"I didn't say anything." He picked up a towel and wrapped it around the bag of ice as he walked toward me. "Pen told Jessop she was worried about you when he dropped her off at your house. He came and got me when the sheriff called to tell me you were in trouble."

"I'm so glad you came when you did. It could have been so much worse."

"Hmm." He placed the ice pack on my swollen cheek and held it gently. His free hand stroked my face. "Devereux is not a man to be crossed."

"So, I've been told. You know he's the one who wanted Marshall dead, don't you?"

"I believe so, Tallulah. The thing is, I don't understand why the man would kill his son-in-law on his wedding day if he wanted him to marry his daughter. That's the part that doesn't add up."

"Well, neither Crystal Devereux nor Marshall wanted to get married. I think it was to keep Marshall in line so he wouldn't betray the family. I don't know what tipped the scales, but they planned to hang Marshall. They were going to leave him in his room on the bed. It's very complicated, but I'm sure Marshall will tell the sheriff everything."

"How the hell do you know how they were going to leave him?" Carlisle searched my eyes.

Nervously, I reached up and took the ice pack from him, or at least I tried. A chunk of ice broke free and landed between my breasts. I gasped at the cold and wriggled on the table where Carlisle had placed me.

"Damn it, Tallulah, stay still." Carlisle grabbed my hips and used light pressure to steady me. "Let me."

I watched his face sink to my chest. My body grew warm and swollen in other places—something that seemed to happen around this man. As Carlisle licked his way to the ice, I shivered. His mouth closed around the cube. I couldn't help but notice the intensity in his eyes. His closeness made my heart race and I found myself hoping he wouldn't move away too quickly. The tension between us was palpable, and I wondered if he felt it as well.

That question was answered moments later when he pulled my legs around his hips, bringing me close to his thick arousal. "Why can't I stop touching you?" he murmured, his eyes focused solely on my lips. "Even if you are dressed in sweatpants and smell like strawberries and alcohol." He grinned.

"I fell in the bowl of daiquiri," I muttered as I reached up and slid my fingers into his hair before pulling him close. Our mouths crashed together in a frenzy of desire and our bodies pressed tightly together. As we lost ourselves in the moment and the passion that erupted between us, the tension between us only increased. His hands explored my body with a hunger that matched my own desire, igniting a fire between us that was impossible to ignore. The heat of his touch sent shivers down my spine and made me long for more of him.

Just as I had that thought, Carlisle abruptly pulled away. He kept his back to me as he

walked over to the drinks table in the corner of the room. He poured himself a shot of whiskey with shaking hands. My body ached for fulfillment, and I knew it wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Carlisle turned and faced me, though he remained on the opposite side of his office. He watched me pull myself together as he knocked back the amber liquid. I tilted my head and asked, "Why can't we go out, on a date?"

I felt my cheeks heat as Carlisle moved to sit behind his desk. "You can't be around me," he said.

I was hurt by his blunt answer. I jumped off the table and threw the remaining ice pack on top of it. "I'm going." I grabbed my purse and headed for the door.

I didn't get very far when a warm male body surrounded me. His arms wrapped around my stomach as he pulled me close. He whispered, "I didn't say I didn't want you, Tallulah, because I do. Very much. I keep telling myself that keeping you away from me will keep you safe, but all I have to do is be close and I can't think of anything else but touching you." He planted a wet kiss on my neck. "For now, you're safer at a distance."

Turning in his arms, I pushed him away so I could breathe and searched his face. "What are you doing that makes it unsafe for me?"

His eyes dropped and a hand came up and rubbed his forehead. "As much as I want to, Tallulah, I can't." He glanced at the door behind me. "Jessop's waiting to take you home." He leaned down and kissed my cheek. "I won't come for you until it's safe," he whispered. His eyes met mine briefly as he walked past me to the door. Jessop leaned against the opposite wall.

He looked at his brother and then at me. The man frowned for a moment before

smiling and offering his arm. "Come on, Talla. You must be exhausted by now."

"I am." My eyes roamed over Carlisle, but he refused to meet my gaze until the last minute. He allowed me to see the need that swirled in his dark gaze, which knocked me to the ground.

Jessop pulled me out of sight, muttering under his breath.

As I gently crept into the guest room occupied by my closest friend, Penelope was hidden under the white cloud of the duvet. Standing there for a few moments, I considered the wisdom of sneaking into bed with her. It was something we had done many times over the years, usually at Pen's house. We'd double up because the house did not have a guest room.

Pen muttered, "Stalker," while hiding somewhere under the covers.

"How did you know I was here?" I hurried to the bed and let out a sigh as I began to sink into the pillow. I had taken a strong painkiller to ease the discomfort in my face.

"I heard the door." As she turned to face me, Pen blinked a few times before focusing her gaze on my face. "You're hurt. How?"

"I'm fine, Pen. I was hit by one of the bad men. The sheriff put him in jail. Marshall is safe." I sighed. "I'm tired now."

"You didn't mention Carlisle and Jessop," she said quietly. "Tate said he was coming to check on you."

"Okay. I know they took you to Hallen's. What exactly happened?"

I looked up at the ceiling and began to feel emotions that eventually led me to reflect.

"Carlisle said he was keeping me safe by staying away." Pen grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "I want to know what's going on."

"You've said that before. Maybe it's time we did something about it."

"What do you suggest?" At the same time the words slowly came out, I felt sleep take hold of me.

"Tomorrow night we stake out the motel."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:23 am

The motel was on the outskirts of town. The neon sign flickered in the dark, casting an eerie glow over the parking lot. Despite its grimy image, the motel always seemed to have a steady stream of customers coming and going at all hours of the night. Rumor had it that our illustrious mayor liked to use it often.

This was our first legitimate stakeout. The previous one hadn't lasted long. We'd waited with Doreen—God rest her soul—outside the clinic in broad daylight. Tonight it was dark and ominous from our parked position set back from the road. The trees shielded us from anyone watching from the motel.

My parents were out of town, so we'd spent the day at my house. It had been pleasant and quiet. Tate had been good company. Something had changed in my brother, and I wasn't sure if I should be alarmed or not. Maybe he'd seen the wisdom of his ways by hanging out with Trevor Carmichael and decided he'd be much better off hanging out with me. Tate was older and about to graduate from college with a doctorate in psychiatry. I was very proud of my brother. He was intellectually intelligent, but he lacked common sense.

I'd talked to Marshall earlier that day, not to mention the sheriff. They had confessions from the individuals who had tried to kill Marshall. The individual had given a statement detailing what he knew about Devereux's company. Apparently, he knew much more than he had told me. The man was involved in human trafficking, not drugs, and the prospect made me shudder. Several agencies were now involved.

While I was doing this, Pen was taking calls from her soon-to-be ex, Aiden. The man had decided he wanted his wife back. He seemed to be apologizing for taking his frustrations out on her. I was proud of my friend for standing her ground and telling

Aiden where he could shove his apology.

Leaving my thoughts alone, I looked at my friend in the passenger seat. Binoculars were glued to her eyes. They weren't just any binoculars. I had borrowed my father's, which he knew nothing about. They had night vision, which was why I hadn't been able to get my hands on them after telling Penelope. At least she felt better.

Pen quickly reached out and grabbed my arm. "I think that's the mayor."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, it's his car."

I followed her gaze and saw a sleek black sedan pull into the parking lot. He got out of the car quickly, and as he walked under a light, I recognized him. "That man looks guilty of something," I said with a sneer. Mayor Tim Murphy looked around as he hurried up the outside stairs and stopped halfway along the first floor. "I wonder who he's meeting."

"Whoever it is, they've obviously been here for a while, because he's the first person we've seen."

"Either that or they haven't arrived yet," I replied.

"Wait! Two more cars just pulled up." Pen jumped in her seat. "This is exciting."

"Not if they see us; it won't be."

Pen laughed. "This is the most fun I've had in a long time."

"I think that's Carlisle." Pen moved the binoculars and looked in my direction. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Let me see." I grabbed the binoculars before she could complain. "He's going into another room. Ground floor. The end one. The door opened. "He's gone in." I carefully lowered the binoculars and let Pen take them.

"You know the Hallen's do things that aren't necessarily legal," Pen said quietly. "I wouldn't read too much into his presence here, Talla. I bet it's a business deal or something."

"Hmm."

"Did you see who was in the second car?"

"No." I was distracted, wondering what had brought Carlisle to the motel. I didn't want to think about him with a woman after the way he'd touched me. He wouldn't be that cruel. Would he? But he had no idea that Pen and I were watching from the trees. I couldn't ignore the uneasiness Carlisle's presence at the motel had given me.

"I don't recognize the girl going up to the first floor," Pen replied.

"Let me see if I do." She handed me the binoculars. "She's got big, um, assets."

Pen snorted and said, "I bet she's on her way to see the mayor."

"You'd be right. I don't recognize her."

"Looks like this is where it all happens," Pen said. "So we have Tim and the woman upstairs. We have Carlisle downstairs."

"I doubt he's alone." Sadly, I refused to meet Pen's eyes.

"He could be in there meeting with a guy about something. We both know there's more going on in that motel than meets the eye."

"I suppose. Let me see who's arrived." I raise my binoculars and curse. "It's my father."

"No way." Pen grabs the glasses. "Oh, Trevor's with him."

"Let me see." I took the binoculars back. "What the hell's going on?"

Pen looked outside again. "They're going into the room next to where Carlisle is."

"I think we should get out and snoop," I said, unbuckling my seatbelt.

Pen's hand on my arm stopped me. "I'm not sure that's wise. We don't know who else will show up."

"I agree, but we can't just sit here and do nothing," I said, feeling energy coursing through my veins. "Let's at least try to listen from a safe distance." Pen nodded in agreement, her eyes fixed on the room where my father and Trevor had disappeared.

I'd already gotten out of the car when Penelope joined me, peering through the trees. At least we'd dressed appropriately—jeans and sneakers. We remained silent. Another vehicle pulled into the motel lot. They're getting some action, huh?"

Pen chuckled. "More than I've had in a long time."

"Me too," I muttered, ignoring what Carlisle and I had been upto. "Can you see who it is?" I warmed up by rubbing my hands up and down my arms. There was a chill in the air tonight.

Pen peered over, trying to make out the people getting out of the car. "Looks like a couple," she said softly. "Wonder what they're up to?" I shrugged, a feeling of unease creeping over me as we continued to watch in silence. "I think they have a gun."

My heart pounded heavily. "Which room are they headed for?"

"I'm not sure. I can't see them without the binoculars." Pen grabbed my hand. "Let's run across the street. If we go to the parking lot on the right, I doubt we'll be noticed." We immediately crossed the street, trying to stay hidden in the darkness. As we approached the parking lot, I felt my heart race with fear and anticipation.

We walked quietly to the back of the motel. Carlisle had gone into a room with a window overlooking the back of the lot. I was determined to put my ear to the glass. I didn't know what I would do if he was having sex in there. I shuddered at the prospect as we approached. Penelope gave me a look that I quickly understood. She, too, was worried about what the man was up to. Pen and I were pinned to the wall on either side of the window, facing each other, and I noticed that the window was slightly open. As my heartbeat slowed, I could hear voices. I narrowed my eyes.

There was a woman in the room. Her breathy gasp: "Don't stop. Don't stop," made it clear. My cheeks flushed as my heart broke. A loud male grunt of fulfillment, followed by the woman's scream, enraged me. What an idiot! I stomped for the door, but Pen caught me before I could bang on it.

"Don't." Pen flinched. "Breathe through it. Please, Talla. We have two other rooms we can listen to."

She was right. I hastily blinked back tears.

"I feel used, Pen," I murmured. "He said we could not be together. He led me to believe it had to do with his plans. You know, illegal methods. I never assumed he meant because he had someone else."

"Shush." She led me around the motel to the room my father and Trevor had entered. The window was closed, but the curtains were open. I frowned at Pen. She looked cautiously around the corner. "I don't think anyone's inside."

"I didn't hear any vehicle leaving."

"Well, the room is empty. I doubt they're in the bathroom together."

My gaze shifted to my hairline.

Pen laughed. "Don't be ridiculous." She took my hand and we walked back to the parking lot. I frowned. My father's car was still in the lot; where had he and Trevor gone? I was also right: none of the cars had left the lot.

"Something's wrong, Pen," I said quietly.

Pen squeezed my hand reassuringly. "Let's check upstairs," she advised. As we made our way around, I couldn't shake the sinking feeling in my stomach. "Although," she said, "I don't want to hear Tim having sex." She grimaced.

We went upstairs and entered the middle room. The curtains were drawn and the window was closed. I had lost interest in snooping tonight. Pen rolled her eyes and approached the door. Her face fell and she went pale.

I raised an eyebrow.

"I think I'm going to throw up." She took my hand and led us both downstairs, then back to my car. It wasn't until we sat down that she said, "I'll never be able to look the mayor in the eye again after this."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

Pen took a deep breath and said softly, "He was, um, being spanked."

I burst out laughing. "You're not serious."

Pen nodded vigorously. "I'm not kidding!" I heard him say, "Spank me harder." She said in a low voice, "Oh God, Candy, I'm coming. Keep spanking. Oh yeah! Harder." She laughed. "You should see your face."

"Oh, you! You didn't hear that."

"I sure did, honey. I think he jerked his own chain, if you know what I mean."

"Ugh, I wish I'd never asked."

"Oh, someone's leaving." Pen picked up the binoculars. "It's your dad and Trevor." The car pulled out of the parking lot. "Carlisle's leaving too."

I looked toward the room he'd been in and saw him under a light. A woman with brown hair was following him out. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. There was no denying it, and there was no excuse for what he had done. What an idiot! "Well, at least he got his wish. I'll stay away from him now."

"Tallulah—"

"It's all right, Pen. I guess I already knew it was too wonderful to be true. Let's move on." I detected movement. "I think the mayor and his girlfriend are leaving."

"You mean candy?" Pen snorted. "Wait a minute. They're leaving in a hurry. Is the mayor wearing a towel?" She leaned forward to get a better look. They got into the cars and pulled out of the parking lot at high speed.

"Yes." I frowned. "I'll go back and check the room."

I was across the street when Penelope walked up to me. She grimaced. "I think my painkillers are wearing off."

"Let's just check the room and then go home, okay?" I left out the part about wanting to lock myself in my bedroom and cry.

They had left the door wide open. I looked in and started to yell, but Pen stopped me with a hand over my mouth. "It's a doll," she muttered.

"A doll?"

She nodded. "Mannequin."

We stood in the doorway, holding hands. Pen turned on the light. The mannequin, dressed as the mayor, stood in the center of the room, a knife in its chest. My pulse raced as I realized we might have stumbled into something far more sinister than we had imagined.

"Ladies!"

We both screamed.

The End (For Now)