

Chapter 1

Delta Bayou and the Civil War Movie Murders

by Scarlett Larouge

Chapter One: A Marrotsville Murder

“Ah, Detective Robbins.” Captain Arnold Payne scratched at the thinning gray hair of his temples, frowning at Delta as she entered his small office. An old-fashioned banker’s lamp was the only light. It cast a warm greenish glow over the room. He had turned off the usual harsh fluorescents, and the shadows were pooling in the hollows under his eyes, settling into the tight vertical lines around his mouth. “There you are. Finally.”

Delta struggled to keep the irritation off her face. It had been less than 45 minutes since he had called. She straightened her spine as she sensed a slight movement behind her, carrying the faint scent of sandalwood-scented aftershave. The smell made her blood boil, and she crossed her arms as if she could stop the surge of anger rising in her chest.

“And here is Detective Stanford! Perfect timing, Detective. Close that, will you?”

The aluminum blinds clattered as James Stanford quickly shut the door, coming to stand near, but not too near, Delta. He was carefully studying the swirling gray carpet, the dingy walls, the shut window—basically anything that wasn’t her. Good, she thought. *He should be nervous.*

She shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other, tugging on a lock of her long brown hair. From the corner of her eye, she saw Stanford cross his arms. The movement made his scent stronger in the small office. She wondered if she still smelled like him. There hadn’t been time to shower after she had taken the call. After a few heated words, they had both left her house—in separate vehicles, of course, having just been interrupted in the middle of... well, Delta wasn’t sure

just what they had been in the middle of. The details were still swirling in her brain. In the moments before the chief's call, she had asked Stanford to sleep with her. And in the moments before that, he had been between her legs, tongue slipping against her skin, licking and probing the depths of her body until her hands had curled into his hair in ecstasy.

Damn him. Her whole body felt warm and electric just thinking about it. She tried to ignore it and focus on what the chief was saying.

"Sorry to call you in after hours," he said, though by the tone of his voice, he wasn't sorry at all. He gestured for them to take a seat in the hard vinyl-upholstered chairs that faced his desk. "I called you both about the death on the edge of the county line. Have you heard of Manderly Plantation?" Stanford nodded, but Delta shook her head. She had not been a resident of Bafford County, Georgia, for very long and spent most of her time at work in the town of Milkinville, where the county police station was located.

Payne made a harrumphing sound at Delta's ignorance. "Well, I'm sure you both know there's a movie being filmed in Marrotsville." This time Delta nodded. She had heard all of the excited gossip that had been sweeping Milkinville about the fancy Hollywood movie that was being filmed a town over. Rhett Castor and Ruby Adams, two not-quite-famous but not unheard-of actors, were said to be starring. Delta had even thought about driving out to Marrotsville herself. Sometimes they let locals onto the set as extras and she had always fancied herself as having a touch of old-school Hollywood glamour.

"Some of the scenes are being shot here in Bafford at Manderly Plantation. We just got a call that there was a death on set. The Marrotsville police responded first, but since it happened on the old plantation, it's technically our jurisdiction." Captain Payne shuffled through a file folder in his hand. "Robbins, I want you to take this one. This is our case now, and it's to do with all those Hollywood types. Make us proud."

Delta grinned triumphantly at Stanford and reached out for the files.

The captain held them just out of her reach. “You were instrumental in the Miss Dixieland case, Robbins. Now let’s put those skills to good use. With certain conditions, of course.” He turned over the manilla folder.

“What kind of conditions?” Delta asked, peeking into the folder. There was almost nothing in it, just a copy of the emergency call that had been routed to the station.

Captain Payne grinned maliciously. “It all has to do with your friend, Detective Stanford.”

“What about me, Captain?” Stanford’s arms were still crossed, muscles straining under his thin gray tee-shirt, but Delta was trying not to notice that.

Captain Payne’s eyes glinted in the lamplight. “It hasn’t escaped my notice that there has been some conflict between the two of you over the past few weeks.” He held up his hand preemptively to stop them from protesting. “I need all of my officers to get along. And Robbins, even with your recent success, you are too inexperienced to take this case on your own. You proved that your judgment is... still developing in certain areas. So, Detective Stanford, I want you on the case as well. Detective Robbins will report directly to you.”

“What!?” Delta choked. “I can’t work with him!” Not after feeling him pressed against her body, writhing on the floor. Not after he had made her want him and then explicitly turned down her offer for something more! She felt her face getting hot in anger. She was certain now that it had all been some sick ploy of his—that he had been toying with her to reassert his dominance at the station. Stanford was an entitled bastard. It was just the kind of thing he would do.

“Oh, you can’t work with me? Is that how it is now?” Stanford snapped, rounding on her. His voice was sharp, cutting. She could feel the condescension as easily as she could see the muscle ticking in his jaw. His hazel eyes were dark, and he raised an eyebrow defiantly. His hair was still rakishly mussed where her fingers had passed through.

The captain glowered at them. "I'm too old to put up with your bickering," he said. "You will learn to work together, or you will both be dismissed from my staff. Detective Stanford, you are one of the most experienced detectives in this office. Detective Robbins is a new talent and she needs to be trained. Can I trust you to do your duty or not?"

Stanford eyed Delta angrily, but he straightened his broad shoulders. The tension seemed to drain from his face. "Yes, sir."

"And Robbins, if you cannot figure out how to work with Detective Stanford, then you do not have a place on this force. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," she mumbled.

"Good. Now both of you get out of here. There's a crime scene that needs investigating." He glanced at his watch. "Marrotsville got the call around 7:30. You need to get over there as fast as you can."

Manderly Plantation was not visible from the road. The only clue to its presence was a wrought iron gate flanked by two white stone pillars that framed a dirt turnoff from the main road. At Stanford's indication, Delta followed the dusty, narrow lane. The dense Southern forest was kept at bay on both sides of the road by twin rows of oaks, dripping in Spanish moss that caught the light of the headlights like phantoms floating above. Just as Delta was beginning to doubt Stanford's directions, she heard gravel crunching under the tires and rounded a corner, suddenly revealing the house and its grounds, lit up on all sides by floodlights.

As she navigated the driveway, Delta held her breath in awe at the Greek Revival masterpiece that lay ahead of her, shining white in the artificial light. Six Ionic columns framed the front of the two-story wrap-around porch and supported the steep triangular roof which formed a base for a small third-floor cupola. Above the elegant front door was a railed balcony with huge overlooking windows that were lit up from inside. Beside the blazing windows, black slatted shutters were opened wide, giving her a tantalizing glimpse into the riches of the interior. It was a breathtaking gem of antebellum architecture, a grand

tombstone of a bygone era. She couldn't believe that she hadn't known that such a beautiful house existed in Bafford County. Her eyes danced over it in delight, even though its appearance was marred by the yellow police tape crossing over the front porch and the swirling red and blue lights of police cars that reflected off of the white siding.

"It's incredible," she said in a low voice.

Beside her, Detective Stanford drummed his hands on the dash as she parked the car in the driveway. "They used to have slaves here, you know. Horrible place." It was the first thing that he had said during the entire drive.

She made an irritated sound at him as she snapped off her seatbelt. There was still a pot of low-boiling rage somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and she had been hoping that he would try to talk to her so that she could turn it loose on him. Unfortunately, it seemed by unspoken mutual agreement that they weren't going to discuss what had happened on hours before. She wasn't sure yet if that was a good thing.

There were people everywhere as they exited the car. Stanford flashed his badge at a uniformed officer as they neared the transomed front door. Delta followed him, ducking under the plastic tape.

"You're the county detectives?" A handsome man, tall with wavy brown hair and hip black framed glasses stood waiting. Delta eyed him curiously. He definitely wasn't with the police, and he wasn't dressed like an EMT or crime scene technician. He was wearing well-fitting jeans and salmon colored button-up that highlighted his lightly bronzed skin and his sun-bleached hair. A light, scruffy beard, barely more than stubble, nestled against his high cheekbones and under the curve of his rounded bottom lip. It gave him a cool, artistic look—very different from the usual pot-bellied men in cut-off tee-shirts and camo hoodies that Delta usually saw around town.

"Detective Delta Robbins," said Delta, showing her badge. The handsome man shook her hand and flicked his brown eyes in Stanford's direction. "And that is Detective James Stanford," she told him, cutting

off Stanford before he could speak and ruin the vibe Delta was getting from the stranger.

"I'm Blake Hartford," the man said. "*Director*. They told me I couldn't leave until you two got here." He scratched the back of his neck anxiously. "So can I go? This is really throwing the production behind schedule."

"I'm afraid we'll have to see the scene before we interview you, Mr. Hartford." Stanford said, frowning at the other man. His notepad was already in his hand. "Were you the one who found the victim?"

"Yes, unfortunately. It was ghastly." Hartford's face blanched just a little under his tan.

"Where did you find her?" Stanford was already scribbling away.

Hartford made a noncommittal sound and pointed across the hall. "In there. All the rest of the cops are there too." He lifted up his glasses and Delta noticed that his hands seemed to shake a bit as he rubbed the dark circles under his eyes. Underneath his blaisé exterior, it was clear that he had been badly shaken. His soulful brown eyes looked haunted.

"Right. Well just wait here, Mr. Hartford," Delta said gently. "We'll get back to you as soon as we can."

Hartford gave Delta a small smile, angling his head in thanks. "Please, call me Blake."

"We'll be right back, Blake." She gave him a small smile in return, looking him over once more.

Stanford was already halfway across the room and Delta had to hurry to catch up with him. Two police officers stood on guard duty outside of the squared archway that led to the dining room. They were both older and round in different ways, one slim except for a developing beer belly, and the other wide in multiple directions. She figured they must be from the Marrotsville police force because she didn't recognize either. They nodded to Stanford and Delta. "What a case, huh?" said the one with the beer belly.

"We'll see," said Stanford. "You guys were the responding officers?"

“Yep. It’s all clear for you to go in. The coroner’s already come by, and the techs. It’s probably pretty cleaned up by now,” said the portly one.

“So what happened?” Delta pulled out her own notepad, not wanting to look unprofessional next to Stanford.

“Got the call from Hartford a few hours ago,” said the one with the belly. “He’s the director. Deceased’s name was Christina Eaves. She was playing a bit part in the film. The team was all here for rehearsals when he found her in the dining room.”

Delta frowned at the room. “Cause of death?”

“Coroner won’t have the official report until later, of course. But looked like blunt force trauma to the head to us. Could have been an accident, even. That dining room table is pretty solid, but I dunno.” The thinner man shrugged. “Seems an unlikely way to fall.”

Stanford brushed past them into the dining room. Delta gave the uniformed officers a nod of thanks and followed him in, letting out a low whistle as she saw the oak wainscoting that ran around the room. Original, she guessed. Above the wood, the walls were painted a pale green. She scanned the room. A fireplace opposite the door was decorated with embossed white plaster tassels and vines. Tasteful stuff.

Stanford was already investigating the large cherry table that was centered in the room. “I don’t see any signs of a struggle, do you?”

Delta glanced around the room. Nothing was out of place. “No, but check the table for blood splatter.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Stanford snapped, glaring at her from around the corner of the table. “Nothing over here.”

“Nothing here either.” She knelt and started inspecting the carpet, crawling over the ornate piled rug. CSI had already helpfully marked the few flecks and spatters of rust colored blood that almost blended into the vines and flowers of the carpet, but she and Stanford needed to comb the area to make sure that nothing had been missed. He was also on his hands and knees, head turned to look under a buffet table against the wall, offering her a good look at his well-formed ass. *Why did he have to be so attractive with that awful personality?*

And better yet, why hadn't he wanted to sleep with her? Of course, she reminded herself, sex hadn't been part of their original bargain—that whoever solved the Miss Dixieland case would win oral sex from the other. But still, she wasn't used to being turned down. It had to have been a malicious joke. There was no other explanation.

She scowled at the carpet. She had to get ahold of herself. She turned her head impatiently, knocking it into one of the dining room chairs.

"Fuck!"

"What's wrong?" Stanford looked over at her.

"Nothing, I just—wait, what's this?" In between the spindles of the chair arm, there was a white blob. She rose to her knees to study it. It looked like it had been stuck to the wood, and she had just knocked it loose.

Stanford hopped to his feet and came over, crouching to have a look. "Looks like plastic, maybe?"

Delta took out an evidence bag and popped it in. "It's too brittle. Wax, maybe?"

"Not sure," he said, grabbing the bag from her hands. He held it up to the light, squinting. "We'll have to send it to the lab."

"All right, let's wrap this up," Delta grumbled. "It's getting late and I'm hungry. But I guess you already ate today," she smirked.

Stanford frowned at her, but she ignored him as they quickly continued their search.

Blake Hartford was leaning back on a floral print sofa when they returned to the drawing room. His head popped up when they walked in, sending his thick rimmed glasses sliding down his nose. "Jesus Christ, just look at the two of you," he said as he stretched and rose to greet them. "You look like you just walked off the set of a tv show! I could put you both in my next movie!"

Delta and Stanford looked at each other in confusion and then looked away, remembering simultaneously that they were on bad terms.

“All right, Mr. Hartford, we can take your statement now,” said Delta, before Stanford could beat her to it.

“Fine, I’m happy to tell you what I know.” He looked at Delta. His warm brown eyes seemed to draw her in. There were flecks of gold around his pupils. “And I thought I told you to call me Blake.”

“Name of the deceased?” asked Stanford, startling Delta. She had almost forgotten he was in the room.

“Christina Eaves. She was one of the actresses working on my film. A supporting role.”

“Did Miss Eaves have any enemies that you know of?” Delta asked before Stanford had time to open his mouth.

“None that I know of, although I didn’t know her particularly well. She wasn’t playing a big part. I just booked her through a casting agency up in Atlanta, so she was more or less local.” He pressed his hands to his forehead. “Already paid them the fee, as well. I wonder if I can get my money back since the accident?” he said, halfway to himself. He rubbed his palms on his pants. “Oh sorry,” he said. “Not important.”

Stanford frowned and jotted something down on his notepad. “Worried about money at a time like this?”

Blake shrugged. “It might sound horrible, but it’s true. Period pieces like mine are expensive, Detective. We lose money every day that we waste during production. Especially with all of the accidents that have been going on, I can’t afford for any more money to be wasted. People’s jobs depend on this, you know. And the studio—”

“Wait, what accidents?” Delta looked at Stanford with her eyebrow raised. “Have there been any other injuries on set?”

He shrugged. “Well, our lead actress did twist her ankle. It was a sprain, so she couldn’t film anything standing for a while. And one of our cameras was stolen. And then all of the cast got food poisoning from the catering two weeks ago. Small things like that. But they add up. And now Christina.” He frowned deeply and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Some of the crew have been saying that my movie’s cursed. If

it gets back to the producers, well, let's just say I'm ruined." He sighed heavily.

Stanford looked unconcerned with Hartford's troubles. "Is there anyone you can think of that would benefit from having the production shut down?"

Blake shook his head. "No. I told you already. People's jobs depend on this. Their reputations. I can't think of a single person who would be out to sabotage us."

"It is possible that Miss Eaves died of an accident," Delta offered. Stanford shot her a warning look, his mouth going thin.

"I would prefer that to the alternative," said Blake. "I wouldn't want to think that anyone around here was capable of such an act. But still, with so many things going wrong..." He sank back down to the couch and leaned his head back as he groaned. Delta watched him with interest.

He abruptly sat straight again and looked between the two of them. The expression on his face had changed into something thoughtful and sharp. "Actually, look, is it possible that we could get an officer to stay on set with us while we wait for things to calm down? I know that it's too early to know if Christina died of an accident or something worse. But what if someone really is out to get me? And since we've had some things stolen." He gestured widely to the room. "It might make the production seem a little safer."

Stanford eyed him skeptically. "It isn't really—"

"—Oh!" exclaimed Blake suddenly, cutting Stanford off as he leapt off the couch. "I have an even better idea! It's perfect! What if you stayed on and took over Christina's role?" He looked at Delta excitedly, taking her by the shoulders. "You have the right color hair. You would probably fit into her costumes." He eyed her chest briefly and then jerked his eyes back up. "Well, some parts might have to be taken out a bit. But you're certainly good-looking enough. It's such a small role, the acting is really secondary."

"That's outrageous!" said Stanford. "Robbins couldn't possibly—"

“—So do you have any acting experience?” he said, ignoring Stanford completely.

Delta pursed her lips. “Well, I was on *The Real MILFS of Atlanta* for a few episodes,” she said. “Not as a MILF, just as a friend. Does that count? And also I won the Miss Dixieland USA competition. It’s a beauty pageant. But there was a talent portion.”

“That’s not acting,” Stanford muttered, but Blake’s eyes lit up. He didn’t appear to hear, or care, what Stanford was saying.

“You’d be perfect!” he exclaimed.

“May I speak to you in private?” Stanford rumbled in her ear. He grabbed Delta by the elbow, not waiting for an answer as he pulled her out of the room into the hall. “You can’t possibly be considering this,” he said. His hazel eyes narrowed, his straight, dark eyebrows low on his face.

“And why not?”

“Because you are a detective, not an actress.”

“I have been undercover, Stanford. Isn’t that acting? Besides, I would really just be going undercover on this case as well. Think about it. It’s actually a brilliant idea! You could continue to work the case as an officer. And I would be here, undercover, actually getting to know the actors and the crew. No one would suspect that I was part of the investigation.” *And also, I wouldn’t have you hovering around me while I was working everyday.*

“Hartford, our lead suspect, would know your cover,” Stanford snorted. “It’s harebrained, and you know it.”

“Oh, come on, Blake isn’t the lead suspect! The case just started! You’re just mad that he wanted to cast me and not you!”

“Oh he’s *Blake* now? I think we both know why he would want to cast you,” Stanford hissed with a meaningful glance at her décolletage.

Delta jutted her chin defiantly up at him and poked him in the chest with a finger. “Because he wants me to solve the case!”

“Ugh, Robbins, don’t be naive!” He leaned his head back in frustration.

“Fine, also because he wants to sleep with me.” She dropped her hand and smirked, crossing her arms so that her breasts were pressed heavily together. She knew how they must look, ready to spill out of the low cut V of her tee-shirt. Stanford’s eyes flicked down for just a second as his face turned red in anger. Delta suddenly knew how to pay him back for turning her down.

He made an aggravated sound and pushed his hand through his short brown hair. “So you see why this is a bad idea?”

“No, Stanford, it makes it an even better idea! Maybe I want to sleep with him too! I mean, I might as well right? It’s not like I’m busy sleeping with anyone else right now.” She was surprised at the volume of her own voice.

“Lower your voice!”

“I will not lower my voice,” she hissed. “Because I have nothing to hide.”

His hand curled into a fist as he smoldered at her. “We should have never made that bet. You were already impossible to work with!”

Delta rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re no picnic either, buddy. Swaggering around work like a jackass, acting like you’re the best detective on the force! And besides, there’s nothing wrong with two coworkers making a friendly, sexual wager at work.”

“There’s *everything* wrong with that!” He clenched his fist and she saw a vein pulse in his sculpted arm. “And screw you, Robbins! Maybe I *am* the best detective on the force!”

“Maybe you *were*, before I showed up.”

“Have you forgotten that you let the kingpin of your last case get away?”

“How dare you bring that up!” She threw her hands up, thinking about how nice it would feel to just punch him in the face. But instead, she took a calming breath. “Look, you hate working with me, right? And I hate working with you. This is the perfect escape clause to the Captain’s orders. I stay on set and away from you. You get to pull the strings on the investigation, while being far away from me.” She put her

hand on her hip, daring him to continuing arguing. Daring him to contradict her.

To her surprise he shifted his weight, thinking. "Do you know what? That's an excellent point."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Really?" Something about his easy capitulation also made her uneasy. Combined with his prolonged silence in the car. Did he really want to get rid of her? Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he hadn't just been messing with her when he had turned her down. Maybe he didn't really care at all about her. She took a step back, confused.

"Yeah. You, for once, are absolutely right. You can take the part." He frowned and rubbed his jaw. "But only if it is actually a homicide, of course. And if Captain Payne agrees."

"Of course," she said, still feeling off balance.

"All right, let's go tell Hartford."

"Let's go tell him."

They looked at each other for a moment. Stanford's face had relaxed, but his shoulders were still tense. She eyed the strong line of his body, the way his broad chest tapered to his hips, his long legs. He caught her gaze and then looked away quickly. "Well, let's go then," he huffed, turning sharply back towards the drawing room.

Blake had taken back up his position on the couch. He looked relaxed, somehow at ease, with one long leg crossed over the other and an arm thrown over the back of the sofa. He rose slowly when they entered the room and gave Delta a hesitant smile. "So what do you think? Will you be my star?"

"Stanford and I think that it is a promising idea, and I'd like to take you up on the offer," she told him with a slow smile.

"Assuming it's approved by her commander," cut in Stanford.

"Right." She crossed her arms. If the captain didn't give his permission, she'd just take a leave of absence and do it anyways. Who could pass up such an exciting opportunity? She'd had more than enough time to think it through.

Blake beamed and took a long step towards her, clasping her hand. Stanford had to step out of his way. "This is my card," he said, pulling out a white rectangle from his wallet. "Give me a call once you have the official go-ahead from the station. Here," he said, pulling a pen from the inside of his blazer pocket and scrawling on the back of the card. "This is my personal number. Call that one first." He pressed the card into her hand. "And leave a message if I don't pick up. I'd hate to miss you." His eyes lingered for a moment on her face.

"I'd hate for you to miss me, too," she said with a wink.

"All right, Robbins, let's go." Stanford stiffly uncrossed his arms and turned without waiting for her.

She smiled at Blake. "I'll be in touch." She had to hurry out of the room to catch up with Stanford. "What the hell was that?" she hissed.

He scowled. "You were taking forever to wrap it up with that pretty-boy director. I've got places to be." He shot a glance over at her. "This was supposed to be my night off." He grabbed the handle of the driver's side door and hopped in.

"Hey!" She raced around to the other side. "I'm supposed to drive!"

"You drove here. It's my turn to drive back."

She frowned, but got into the car and buckled herself in quickly. He had already turned on the ignition.

"Besides," he said, pulling out of the drive. "You drive like a maniac."

She ignored this insult and stared out of the car window, watching the glowing house shrink in the side mirror until it winked out of her sight behind the trees and all she could see was her own face reflected against the black glass. "So do you think it was murder? Or an accident?"

"Well, we haven't seen the body yet," he said tentatively, "but murder."

"Me too," she leaned her seat back and stretched an arm out beneath her head. "I hope it is, anyways. Murder is so much more interesting! Plus it's pretty hard to die of natural causes in a dining room."

"Choking," Stanford contradicted.

"You know she didn't choke to death. There was blood."

“Yeah. I think Hartford did it.”

“Stop calling Blake a suspect! You’re out of your mind. Didn’t you see how pale he was when we arrived? He was really shaken up!”

Stanford glowered at the steering wheel. “Maybe he was nervous because he’s guilty.”

“If he was nervous, it’s because you were a prick to him.”

“Oh, excuse me for not being as *friendly* as you.”

This wasn’t good. They had only managed a few lines of a normal conversation before going for each other’s throats again. Delta sighed and leaned back the seat, lowering herself into a sulk. She just didn’t see how the chief expected them to be able to work together. How had she ever thought Stanford was charming just a few hours ago?

Chapter Two: Honk Tonk and Hanky Panky

Delta spun around in her desk chair, watching the ceiling tiles blur into a solid beige line. Besides all of the gossip about the events at Manderly Plantation, there wasn’t much to distract her at the station while she waited to hear back from the coroner. She had already spent some time reading the notes that the Marrotsville Police had taken the night of the crime, and searched for all the information she could find about the handsome director, Blake Hartford, and the deceased, Christina Eaves.

Hartford had been easy to find online. He had an IMDB page that listed all of his films. There weren’t any that Delta had actually heard of before. They all seemed to be artsy things or period pieces, which were not to her taste. The only thing worse than *reading* about history was *watching* history when you could be doing something better. She hoped that she wouldn’t have to learn anything about the Civil War to be in the film. Hopefully, it would be as easy as memorizing a few lines and

putting on a costume. Maybe she'd even get to be in a scene with Rhett Cator or Ruby Adams, the two fairly well-known names attached to the project. She grinned at the ceiling. She loved her job.

Besides the list of obscure films on Blake's page, there were a few pictures of him at work. In most of them, he stood confidently behind or beside cameras, always wearing his trademark black glasses. One of the photos was an artsy shot in black and white, with him standing in front of a foggy ocean. She thought he looked like Clark Kent, staring broodingly off-screen. Mmm.

She minimized the picture thoughtfully and scrolled through his Wikipedia page. Raised in California, attended a school for the arts, never married though he had been romantically linked to many of the actresses in his films. And speaking of his films, the critics were divided. Some lauded his lush cinematography while others complained that the sensuality of his films bordered on pulp. She wondered if she would have the patience to watch any of his artsy films. It seemed like a good idea to do some research, to see what kind of mind he had.

Her eyes caught the title of another film that had not been on his IMDB page, *A Dream Too Sweet*. It had a whole section devoted to it on his wiki. Apparently, it had been abruptly shut down in the middle of production, costing the studio hundreds of thousands. She wondered how he had ever managed to get another film after such a spectacular failure. An interesting question for later.

As for Christina Eaves, she found nothing but a Facebook profile. There were a few pictures of a cute brunette with awesome boobs, but Delta didn't have access to much on her page. She would have to wait and see what the background check brought up. That would be Stanford's job, assuming she was allowed to work on the movie.

Finally, the phone rang. "Robbins," she answered.

"Hi Detective Robbins, this is Justine Merritt at the coroner's office. I've got the preliminary report on your victim, Christina Eaves."

"Go ahead."

"I'll have all the files sent over later, but the victim definitely died of blunt force trauma. A blow to the head by a heavy rounded object. There were bruises around her wrists as well, suggesting that she was restrained beforehand. The angle of the blow suggests she was hit coming from above. I'd say your suspect is probably male unless the victim was sitting or kneeling at the time."

"Any other clues?"

"Not yet, we'll get the full report to you as soon as possible. Probably be done tomorrow."

"Sure. Thanks." Delta spun around once more in her chair and then hopped up from her seat and over to the chief's office. The door was open, so she knocked on the doorframe and walked right in.

Captain Payne looked at her warily from over the top of his computer screen. "Detective Robbins. Have you heard from the coroner?"

"Just got the call. And it was definitely murder! So what do you say? Am I free to go undercover?"

The chief sighed and absently straightened some of the papers on his desk. "I do have some conditions, Robbins. Especially considering how things went down at the Miss Dixieland Pageant," he said.

She winced. Besides not catching the kingpin of the operation, she had been dosed with an illegal drug, shot someone (not fatally), and discharged her weapon "unnecessarily." All of that had made the report but had luckily been overshadowed by her uncovering the masterminds of the drug ring. She counted it as a big success for the Bafford County PD. "What are your conditions, Sir?"

"You report to Detective Stanford on this. If he tells you to pull out, you pull out."

She tried not to smirk at the use of *pull out* and failed.

The chief narrowed his eyes but continued. "When you get information on this case, you report immediately to Detective Stanford. There is to be no going in alone on the suspects without his knowledge, and no move that you make that he doesn't know about beforehand. You

haven't been with our force for very long and after your antics last time—let's just say you have to earn my trust. Is that clear?"

She frowned but nodded. "Yes, Sir. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be calling the director to let him know the good news."

The chief harrumphed but nodded in approval. She could have sworn that he rolled his eyes just before flicking them back to his computer. But she wouldn't let his lack of faith in her skills shake her today. Her cellphone was in her hand before she had made it back to her desk.

"Hello?" Blake's smooth voice answered. He sounded excited and had picked up on the second ring.

"It's Delta," she said. "Delta Robbins, the detective. Good news—the coroner called, and it *was* a murder! I can join your cast!"

"Delta, that's fantastic!" Blake said. It sounded like he was grinning. "I can't tell you what a big favor this is for me! Why don't we meet up later tonight? I would love to go ahead and give you the script, and we can talk about the character you'll be playing. A business meeting, if you will. Do you know Dirty Willie's? It was recommended to me as a very authentic spot to chill and soak up the local culture."

"Dirty Willie's? Yeah, I know it."

"Perfect, I'll see you tonight. How's eight?"

"Peachy. See you then!"

Delta eyed Blake through the amber glow of whiskey in her glass. Their cups clinked. "To solving Christina's murder," Blake said over the country music and voices that swelled throughout Dirty Willie's. There was already a lively crowd, and the live music hadn't even started yet.

Delta grinned and took a sip of her drink. The whiskey scalded her throat in a pleasant burn. Blake's brown eyes looked almost black in the low light of the bar. "This place is amazing," he enthused. "So authentic!"

Delta eyed her surroundings dubiously. The bar was kind of cheesy with wooden plank paneling and a visible timber frame. A mural of a buffalo was painted behind the stage and DJ booth, and the waiters and

bartenders all wore plaid and cowboy hats. There was also a mechanical bull that was attracting a few riders near the dance floor. The whole effect was more Southwestern than Deep South, but Blake's eyes were shining in delight. She didn't want to crush his spirits by telling him that buffalos had never roamed the woods of Georgia. "If you say so." She grabbed one of the onion rings and washed it down with more whiskey. Her stomach felt pleasantly on fire.

"So, how well did you know her?" she asked, watching his face closely. It was never too early to start doing a little work on the case. Not that she liked to consider Blake a suspect. But it was better to rule him out early, especially with Stanford being a jerk about it.

"Not very." Blake shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the high-topped table. The top of his chambray shirt fell open a bit, already rakishly unbuttoned past his clavicle, and Delta caught a glimpse of his tanned, hairless chest. He fidgeted with his glasses for a moment. "I didn't ask you here to talk about the case, though."

"Well, you said it was a business meeting."

"You know I meant movie business, not police business," he grinned. He had a pleasant smile, open and laid-back, the way she thought everyone from California must be. His teeth were impossibly straight and white.

"Of course." She crossed her long legs and leaned back in her chair, a small smile creeping across her red lips. "So what do I need to know, *director*?"

He leaned back, mirroring her posture with a slow smile. She thought he must like being referred to by his title. He pressed his fingers together, forming a steeple. "I brought the contract for you to sign. But I thought that we should talk about it first. The role requires a certain flexibility on the part of the actress."

Delta grinned. "I've been told I'm very flexible," she confided.

Blake's eyes sparkled, and he took another swig from his glass. "You seem like a very confident woman."

Delta shrugged. "I'm not afraid to ask for what I want."

"I'll be up front then. The role may require some nudity, and you would have to be comfortable simulating intercourse."

"What kind of nudity?" she asked, as if it mattered.

He cleared his throat. "Just the breasts. The role isn't that large, but your character would play a key role in a love scene. You'd be wearing a big ball gown, and in the course of the love scene, the skirts would be lifted, and the collar pulled down a bit."

"Go on."

"Your character, Margaret, would be the secondary love interest for Rhett Castor's character."

"Rhett Castor!" Delta's eyebrows raised, but she kept her voice cool. "I didn't know he was in the movie," she lied. After speaking with Blake on the phone earlier in the day, she had done research on all of the actors associated with the film. Rhett Castor was becoming a very sought-after leading man, having starred in a recent action blockbuster about magic or superheroes or space or something similar that Delta didn't care about. All of the gossip magazines she read said that he was quite the up-and-coming star. Delta bit her lip thinking about him. He was certainly handsome.

"His agent wanted him to take on something more serious—an artistic period piece to show his range after the action stuff last year." He took another drink and the ice cubes clinked in his glass. "Anyways, coming in this late, you'll have missed several of the rehearsals. But I can get the script to you tomorrow. The love scene was set to be filmed in a few days, but we'll have to move some things around. We can get in some of the easier scenes first. We have to reshoot the few things we did with Christina in them, but again, it isn't a big role. We should be able to get those done in a few days."

He sighed and pushed a hand back through his perfectly coiffed honey-highlighted hair. "It's really fortunate that you are able to step in like this and help. The budget is pretty tight and we lose more money every day we stall. It's been a real nightmare."

"I'm more than happy to help," said Delta, finishing off her drink. She grinned at Blake. "I'd like to get that script as soon as possible, though. You didn't bring a copy?"

"Just the contract. I have one in my trailer, though." He looked at her apologetically. "We're all staying in trailers near the studio in Marrottsville. Christina didn't have one because she was local like some of the actors, so I can't offer you one. Normally we'd book rooms at the local hotels, but..."

"Ah," Delta sighed, "the Wild Hog Festival." Delta had already heard a lot about the festival as it caused problems for the police force every year when thousands of bikers rode in on their hogs and joined hunters from all over the state in thinning the overzealous and invasive wild boar population that roamed the woods of the Bafford County area. In addition to the hunting, there were motorcycle shows, concerts, petting zoos, and pork-themed cook-offs to keep the county entertained. And that all meant extra work with permits, accidents with hunters, fights breaking out between the locals. It was nothing but trouble all around, and it hadn't even started yet.

Blake's full lips quirked in annoyance. "Everything in all the neighboring towns was booked as well. Said they'd been reserved over a year out."

"It's a pretty big event." She toyed with the edge of her glass and then looked up, grinning at him. "I don't see why we should have to wait until tomorrow to get the script."

He raised his eyebrows. "You want to read over it tonight?"

"Sure. Are you busy?"

He drained the rest of his drink in one gulp. "No. I'll call a car around."

Delta stood and pulled down her short cutoff denim skirt, which had ridden quite a bit up her thighs. Blake watched her with interest, and she smiled as he stood and followed her to the door. Suddenly Delta stopped. "Do you hear that?" A few bars of music were floating in the air

—the sound of guitar, banjo, and mandolin being strummed while the radio music went silent.

Blake grinned, slapping his hand against his thigh in time to the first few measures of the music. He turned, looking behind him towards the stage. A trio of cowboy-hatted men had stepped up to the microphones and the few first words of one of her favorite songs flooded the air, followed by some whoops and cheers from the patrons. “Real local music!” Blake gushed as couples were lining up on the dance floor.

Delta grinned at him. “I love this song,” she said. “We don’t have to hurry out of here, you know.”

Blake looked from her to the band. “I *have* always wanted to dance in a real honky-tonk bar. Would you join me?”

Delta batted her eyes at him. “I’d love to dance with you, Blake. As long as you don’t mind getting back late. I still really want it tonight.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the other dancers. “The script I mean. So, are you up for a long night?”

A huge smile split Blake’s face. “Delta, I definitely wouldn’t mind a long night with you.”

“Well, in that case,” Delta said, placing her hands on his broad shoulders, “we can’t let you waste this opportunity to experience some real Southern culture.”

“No, ma’am.” He put his hands on her waist and drew her close, grinning rakishly down at her.

The air near the dance floor was already warm with the heat of the crowd, and Delta felt even warmer as she pulled Blake’s body right beside hers. Despite the hipster glasses, he was a surprisingly good dancer. He picked up the two-step she was doing quickly and was soon guiding her around the room, twirling her under his arm as they stepped to the dance. He swung her around as a fast song ended and a slower one began, pulling her close to his chest.

She sucked in her breath, feeling the hard muscle under his shirt and wished that they were dancing something a little more intimate. By the

feeling of her hips pressing against his, she guessed he was feeling the same way.

Several hours and many drinks and dances later, the lights of Blake's trailer flicked on, illuminating the small space in a golden glow. It was cozy but had all of the necessities of home. Delta found herself standing in a miniature kitchen, beside which was a booth with built-in benches. The table was covered with paperwork and files. Blake followed her gaze. "I have an official office inside the studio," he said, "but I tend to bring a lot of my work home with me. Sorry, it's kind of a mess." "It's fine," she said. Further back, she saw a living area with a built-in white leather sofa opposite a large television. Through a door, she saw a bathroom sink and large mirror. And beside that, a large bed sat on a platform, separated from the rest of the living area by only a curtain.

Blake grinned at her. "Want another drink?" he said, slurring slightly. "I think I have some gin in here, somewhere." He edged around her and there was the sound of glasses clinking as he rummaged around in the cupboard. He pulled out a large clear bottle and sat it on the countertop. "Damn, it's bright in here."

Delta played at the panel of light switches. Blake was right. It was too bright, especially for what she had in mind. She turned off the glaring overhead and turned on a softer light.

"Sure, I'll take some gin." Personally, she hated the stuff. Tasted like goddamn floor cleaner, but that didn't matter right now.

Blake nodded his approval at the change in lighting and rummaged around for two glasses. He dumped the alcohol in while Delta waited, leaning against his countertop. Her skirt had ridden up again, but she left it this time. She ignored the spaghetti strap of her crop top, which had begun to slip scandalously down her shoulder.

Blake passed her a glass. "How the hell are you a cop?"

"What do you mean?"

He made an impatient noise. "I mean, look at you. You're like a goddamn underwear model. Christ." He blinked slowly and passed her the glass of gin. "I don't think I have any mixers," he said.

She grinned, letting her strap slip lower as she took a sip of the gin. Absolutely horrid. "Thanks. You're not so bad yourself, you know."

His eyes twinkled at her as she jumped up on the counter. "I suppose I should be finding you that script now."

He took a long drink from his glass and looked at the pile of papers on the table, pushing a few around before pulling up a stapled stack. "Here. It's not the whole thing. But you'll only be in a few scenes anyway."

Delta took the thick sheaf of papers, letting her hair fall over her shoulder as she paged through them. Blake had come to stand beside her where she sat on the counter, and propping himself on one elbow, looked on with her as she read.

"There," he said jabbing the paper. "This is the big scene." She could feel his breath on her neck and smelled the alpine spice of the alcohol in the air.

"The sex scene?" Delta said slowly. Her voice was low and thick. Blake was so near, and she felt dizzy from the closeness, or maybe just the drinks.

"Love scene," he corrected, lowering his voice as well. She could practically feel the vibrations of his voice rippling the air, making the tiny hairs stand up along her arms and neck.

"Blake," said Delta slowly. "How about you show me how you want the scene to go? So I have a good idea, as an actress, of what you want."

She didn't miss the way his breath caught for a moment or the way he bit his lip with a smile. "I don't know if that would be... ethical..." he said, turning to face her, angling himself so that he was right in front of her.

"Who cares about that?" Delta said, placing a hand on his shoulder. She leaned forward just a bit, and her lips met his gently. His mouth was soft, the scrape of his short beard against her face rough. Something

deep within her stomach clenched with desire and she kissed him again, sliding her tongue against his, opening her mouth to him, as she held his head in her hands, passing her fingers through the thick waves of his hair. His mouth was fresh and sharp with the gin, which suddenly did not seem such a bad flavor after all.

He made a groaning sound as her knees slipped apart and he moved against her, placing his hands around her waist as they kissed.

"Is this OK with you?" he whispered into her ear, biting at it gently. She could feel him, growing hard through the layers of clothing that separated them.

She laughed and wrapped her legs around him, pulling him right up against her. She gasped in pleasure at the feeling of his already fully erect cock jutting against her. "What do you think?"

"I'm a man in Hollywood, Delta! I have to be careful..."

"Well, I consent," she purred, rocking herself against his cock, longing for it to be inside of her.

"Mmmm," he murmured, drawing one hand over her knee as he bent to kiss her neck. His fingers trailed up her velvet smooth skin, sliding higher and higher up her thigh and under her skirt. His palm was warm as his fingers reached higher up her legs, searching for the bit of fabric that stretched between. His long fingers slipped under her panties, skimming her labia. She moaned as he pressed a finger between the lips, dipping into the dampness between. Her hips flexed involuntarily against his touch, seeking to draw him deeper inside of herself. He drew his finger in and out slowly as she moaned.

His breathing was faster as he probed her. Bringing his thumb her lips, he rubbed it gently against her clit, making her moan in pleasure, and then to the side, slipping it under the fabric of her panties. Carefully, he pulled them down over her legs, leaving her body open to him. He knelt towards her and lowered his mouth, leaving a trail of hot kisses up her legs.

He paused for a moment, and she drew in a deep, anticipatory breath and she braced her legs against the counters. His tongue snaked

against her, slipping between the delicate folds of her skin, slipping inside of her and rising up and down in intimate caress. She pulled a hand through his wavy hair, and shuddered, suddenly thinking of another dark-haired man who had so recently been between her legs.

She shut her eyes tightly, and moaned, remembering how Stanford's mouth had felt pressed up against her, how his tongue had so thoroughly brought her to climax. How much she had longed to feel him, *all* of him deep inside of her. Her heart beat faster in her chest. She struggled to get a breath. She snapped open her eyes and grabbed a fistful of Blake's hair. "Hang on," she said.

He looked up uncertainly. "What's wrong?"

She slid forward, off the counter, and he backed up, leaving room for her in front of him. As she slid her body against his, she could feel the hard evidence of his arousal stiff underneath his pants. She pressed her hand against him, over the rough fabric of his pants, unbuttoning them at the top and then lowering the zipper. "Fuck me," she said, turning around quickly, and pressing the curve of her ass against his erection.

He placed his hands on her hips, and up around her waist. She bent forward at the waist, rolling against his hips. He pushed her skirt up around her hips and grabbed a handful of her bare ass with a low groan. With his other hand, he pulled down the waist of his pants and stepped away from her for a second.

When he returned, she felt the sticky hardness of his cock, rubbing against her ass. She shifted her legs, still bent over, offering herself to him. The head of his cock pressed at her lips, filling her with longing. She clutched the counter, breathing heavily as he slid his hot cock inside of her. "Oh, Blake!" she moaned as he rocked in and out of her. Her knuckles were white against the... was that *granite* countertops? In a trailer!

He held her hips firmly as he pulled himself in and out of her, breathing heavily. She pushed her hips against him, slamming herself onto him until he groaned, "Not so fast, Delta. Let's enjoy this for awhile."

He pulled out of her and she flipped to face him, hungry for more. He pulled her into his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he lifted her, carrying her over to the raised bed while they kissed.

Her back hit the pillowed duvet gently as he lowered her down, settling himself between her legs. She opened them wide for him as he maneuvered, pushing his hot cock into her, filling her to the brim with his hard length. She grabbed at his back, feeling the smooth muscles, biting at his tanned shoulder as he fucked her. It wasn't long until she was overcome at the feeling, and digging her hands into the blanket, she moaned and arched her back suddenly.

The intense shock of her orgasm pulsed through her body, sending waves of pleasure down to her toes. Blake made a short groaning sound, gritting his teeth as she took her pleasure on his cock, bucking her hips wildly against his length. As soon as she was done, gasping slightly for her breath, he pulled himself out of her and took his cock in his hand, pumping it once, twice, until he groaned again and shot his hot cum against Delta's stomach.

He collapsed, panting beside her. "You are something else."

She turned on her side, propping herself up on one arm, and ran her fingers through the light hairs that ran over his broad chest and down his bare stomach. "Didn't you always hear how Southerners are known for their hospitality?"

He chuckled and kissed her slowly on the lips. "I hope that friendliness doesn't run out soon," he murmured. She raised her eyebrows to see the rakish look in his eyes.

"I've got all night," she promised.

He grinned and flipped her on her back, hovering above her. "Good," he said, "so do I."

Delta stirred at the movement by her side. The trailer was still dark, but she could see by the orange glow of security lights coming in slants through the blinds. "Shhh, stay in bed," Blake whispered and kissed her head.

She rolled over, taking the sheet with her. "Where are you going? What time is it?" She stretched against the sheets, feeling a pleasant soreness in her legs and abdomen.

"I've got to get over to the set. The production crew is coming in early to get the lighting set up. Just lock the door on the way out, will you? You can take whatever you want from the fridge. I'll call you or text you later about your schedule." He paused. She heard him moving around, but had shut her eyes and rolled over. "I had a great night, by the way."

"So did I," Delta mumbled, burying her head back in the pillow. She waited until she heard the click of the door shutting. Then she sat up straight in bed and grabbed her clothes, slipping back on her skirt and tank top. She tapped her phone and saw that it was not quite five in the morning. Sweet Jesus, she was tired. She yawned and stretched, fighting against the protest in her muscles. It was no wonder. She and Blake had exerted themselves fully the night before.

After dressing, Delta peeked through the blinds. No one was in sight. Perfect. She double-checked that the door was locked and helped herself to some crackers as she slid into the kitchen booth that was covered in Blake's papers. She picked through them at random. Bills, contracts, production schedules, lists of props. She frowned as she skimmed the papers, wishing that Blake were better organized. She had no idea where to start. Her fingers thumbed through a contract that looked to be with one of the producers. She wished that she were a lawyer. She wasn't sure what was standard, but the contract looked to be normal. There was only one line that she found interesting. Blake was on the line for a lot of money unless an act of God or some other catastrophe prevented the film from being completed. She bit her lip and took out her phone, snapping a photo of the clause.

At the bottom of the pile, she found another contract and paged through it. This one was a copy of the leading man, Rhett Castor's, contract. It was fairly dry until she got to the list of items he "required" for a good performance on set. Magnum condoms apparently made the

list. Very interesting. She filed that away for further investigation. She had read rumors in gossip magazines that he was well-endowed. Filming the sex scene that Blake had mentioned would certainly help her solve that mystery. She chuckled to herself and then flipped through to the back of his contract, noting that it contained the same act of God clause as the one that Blake had with the producer.

It didn't take long for her to find a copy of Ruby Adams's contract as well. It was similar to Rhett's except that instead of condoms, Ruby was promised that her trailer would be decorated in all white tones with an unlimited candle budget. She was also making considerably less than Rhett. *Interesting*. But was it enough to be a possible motive for ruining the film? Ruby Adams had just jumped to the top of Delta's list of suspects.

Chapter Three: A Dream Too Sweet

A few days later, Delta found herself standing in front of a small crowd—the rest of the cast of the civil war movie. “All right, everyone, there's someone here that I want you to meet.” Blake Hartford stuffed his hands into the pockets of his tight black jeans and cast his eyes sideways towards Delta. She tried not to let her excitement show as she noticed Rhett Castor himself, arms crossed and leaning against the wall near the buffet table. He was extremely good-looking, with a lean, athletic build and blond hair falling over his face. He had grown a mustache for the role, which was something he hadn't had in any of the photos or films she had seen him in. It gave her pause at first, but she found that it made him look rather like an old Hollywood leading man. Classy and timeless. Not many men she knew could pull off the look.

His eyebrow flicked up for a moment as he spared her a glance before returning his gaze to the dark space in the wings of the studio. Was she imagining it, or had there been a bit of a spark there?

Ruby Adams, on the other hand, barely looked up from her phone, only vaguely jerking her blonde head up in acknowledgment of Blake's words. "There's nothing in my contract about meeting extras," she said, cutting Delta off before she could introduce herself to the cast. Ruby's long fingernails made a tapping sound against her screen. "I thought we were here to work. Stop wasting my time, Blake."

"Delta isn't an extra, Ruby." Blake's face was already tight with impatience. "She's taking over for Christina."

"Sorry, which one is Christine?" A strand of honey blonde hair escaped from her ponytail and fluttered down beside her cheek. She still didn't look up from her phone. The glow of it lit up her pale face like an angel. Just like Rhett, she was even more breathtaking in real life, with wide blue eyes, a pouting mouth. She was slim, but very toned—more petite than Delta had imagined she would be.

"Christina Eaves." Blake cleared his throat to say more, but Rhett cut him off, his attention now fully captured as he scowled at Ruby.

"Jesus Christ, Ruby. Be respectful, would you?" His frown compressed his normally full lips as he straightened up from against the wall.

"Oh *excuse me* for showing a little interest in what goes on around here! So, what the hell happened to Christine? She quit or something?" Ruby pushed her long bangs away from her forehead.

"*Christina*," Rhett emphasized, "is dead." There was a slight tremor that passed through the crowd as the rest of the cast shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot. Delta eyed the group warily, searching their faces. One of them was probably Christina's murderer, and she had to find out who.

Ruby finally looked up from her phone, mouth agape. What looked like genuine emotion flashed across her face. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

“Seriously, Ruby? Everyone here already knows. How did you miss the memo?” Rhett’s scowl had turned dangerous, his fair brows lowering themselves into an angry V. Even with the scowl, he was still handsome, Delta thought.

Ruby scowled back down at her phone and the emotion that Delta had seen was replaced with a hard mask of indifference. “Oh, fuck off, Rhett.”

Blake straightened his shoulders and looked between his two stars. “That’s enough,” he said sharply. “This is no way for castmates to speak to each other.”

“I’d rather not speak to her at all,” Rhett muttered, but not so quietly that Ruby (and the rest of the cast) didn’t hear him. She looked up and opened her pink lipsticked mouth to speak, but Blake cut her off.

“As I was saying, I am here to introduce you all to Delta Bayou. She will be taking over Christina’s role, so production can now go on as scheduled.”

Another murmur passed through the crowd. An older woman spoke up and tucked her bobbed hair behind her ear. “Are you sure that’s respectful to Christina’s memory, Blake? To just go on with business as usual?”

Blake frowned but answered evenly. “As all of you know, we are under a tight budget and schedule here. Every second we spend not filming is money down the drain. I know you’re all hard-working professionals and are committed to this film. Christina was too. She would want the show to go on. I don’t know how else to put this, but we are hemorrhaging money right now. If we don’t start filming right away, the studio might close down production.”

Another ripple of conversation passed through the crowd as the actors all spoke quietly amongst themselves. The older woman nodded and walked over to Delta. “Nice to meet, Miss Bayou, I’m Nettie Briggs.” She looked expectantly over her shoulder and the rest of the cast, who all began to follow her lead. A small line formed to shake Delta’s hand and to welcome her into their ranks.

Ruby, she noticed, completely ignored her and the other actors and actresses. Still holding her phone, she slipped out of the room quietly with no one but Delta seeming to notice her departure. Delta didn't have time to puzzle out the mystery of Ruby's unfriendliness, however, as she found herself facing a welcome distraction.

"Nice to meet you," his golden baritone washed over her. His cheekbones were even more impressive up-close, although he was a bit shorter than he had seemed from afar, only a few inches taller than her instead of towering above her like Stan—like *some people* she knew who were quite tall.

"It's nice to meet you, as well," Delta said as they shook hands. She noticed a dimple as he smiled at her. "I hear that we have quite the scene together."

He laughed. "That we do. But don't worry, It will all be very professional. I don't know if you've ever filmed anything similar before, but there's nothing to be worried about."

"Oh, I'm not worried," Delta laughed. "I'm intrigued. I've always wondered how they film sex scenes."

"Oh, so you don't have any film experience?" Rhett's blue eyes lingered on her face for just a second too long.

"Not film," Delta said. "Although I was on the *Real MILFs of Atlanta*. Not as a MILF, just as a friend of a MILF. I don't have any kids." God, was she babbling? She had never lost her cool in front of a man before. She plastered a smile on her face and stuffed her hands awkwardly into the back pockets of her jeans.

Rhett glanced at her again and grinned broadly. "Well, I can't say that I've ever seen the show, but we are very glad to have you aboard, Miss Bayou." He touched her forearm briefly. "I love your accent by the way. I've been trying to work on my Southern drawl for the film. Maybe you can help me practice it sometime. Yours sounds so beautiful."

Her heart seemed to squeeze an extra beat, but she shrugged and tried to play it cool. "Well, mine is from Louisiana, so it's not quite the same."

He laughed and touched her arm lightly. "I can't exactly hear the difference myself. I guess you'll have to help me."

Don't you have a dialect coach for that? she thought, but she ignored these thoughts and instead found herself involuntarily glancing down where he had touched her skin. "We'll see."

"Well, I'm sure it will be my pleasure working with you." He shook her hand again and his palm lingered on hers.

Oh, you have no idea, Delta thought, watching his butt as he walked away. *You really have no idea*. She grinned wickedly, thinking of all the dirty things she suddenly wanted to do to him.

Blake came up just then and put a hand on her shoulder. She had almost forgotten that he existed after her exchange with Rhett. "I have two more very important people for you to meet, Delta," he said. "This is Marvin Kandhari," he gestured to a dark-complexioned, impeccably dressed man whose age was hard to pinpoint, "and Pippa Rose."

Delta shook Pippa's hand first. She was gorgeous, with medium dark skin and a halo of honey brown curls. "I'm in charge of makeup," said Pippa. Gold hoop earrings glittered in her ears. Her eyeliner formed a perfect wing around her lashes, enhancing her dark eyes.

"And I do wardrobe," said Marvin, sizing her up. "I think Christina's costume will do," he said to Blake slowly. "But look at this chest! We're going to have to make some alterations there. Christina was not as well-endowed in that department."

Blake looked at Delta's boobs and then up to her face, grinning. "Do what you need to, Marv. You can have her tomorrow, shall we say one o'clock? For a fitting or measuring or whatever it is you do?"

"What's wrong with now?"

Blake scowled. "I'm giving Delta a tour of the set!"

Marvin rolled his eyes and made a frustrated gesture with one of his long, lean arms. "You said you wanted her costumed as soon as possible."

"OK, I want her costumed *almost* as soon as possible." He put a possessive hand on Delta's shoulders. "We have a lot of other business to see to!"

Marvin shrugged and then looked at Delta again, squinting. "You look familiar." He gasped and then grabbed Pippa's hand in excitement. "Wait! Weren't you on *The Real MILFs of Atlanta*? That's my favorite show!" He clasped a hand over his heart and made a small squeaking sound.

Delta smiled and lowered her eyes, trying to look modest. "In a few episodes."

"I remember! Oh, I loved every minute of it! Do you think they'll do another season?"

Delta frowned. "After all those murders?"

Marvin shrugged. "Well, you know... Maybe a spin-off."

Blake cleared his throat and looked at Pippa who had been watching with interest. "Will everything go smoothly for you, Pippa?"

She gave Delta another look over and nodded. "Sure, Blake. She has great skin. It should be no problem." Her voice was as smooth as honey, low and rich, and she smiled at Delta serenely. "Your character has a very telling birthmark that we will have to paint on before all of your scenes. It's a big plot point, but shouldn't be that much trouble to apply."

"Where is the birthmark?" Delta grimaced. She didn't want to coat her face in weird makeup when she was supposed to be making out with Rhett Castor.

Pippa's hand landed on Delta's chest, right over her heart. She pulled her fingers down, past the collar of Delta's low cut shirt. "Right on the bosom." Her hand was warm and soft against Delta's skin.

Delta sighed in relief. "That doesn't sound too bad." She noticed that Pippa's fingers were still resting against her chest as Pippa swept them in a wide arc with her nose scrunching up in thought. Presumably, it was in the shape of the birthmark she would have to paint on, but her fingers against Delta's skin felt... sensual. She looked at Pippa through her lowered lashes.

Pippa noticed the glance and pulled her hand away as if she hadn't realized she had still been touching Delta. She shrugged apologetically and then smiled, seemingly embarrassed, though her smile was radiant.

“It does take quite a while to apply, so be prepared for that. We’ll probably need to do a test run, just so I can make sure I have the colors right against your undertones.”

“And the dresses are very low cut, so it has to be applied before every single scene,” Marvin cut in. His voice had a slight edge, rising near the end with a hint of hysteria, but Delta was not sure why.

Blake’s eyebrows lowered in response. “Marvin, we’ve been over this.”

“What?” Delta asked.

Blake just shook his head and gave Marvin a warning look. “Not now. Come on Delta, we’ve got to get going. I want to show you around the house. We’re filming some of the interiors here, in the studio, but some of it will be shot on location at the plantation. As much as possible, actually. We’re really striving to be authentic and to get all the shots we can under this crazy Georgia sun!”

“Are we?” Marvin quipped.

Blake’s face tensed and a hush fell over the conversation.

Delta waited a beat or two and then spoke, breaking the tense silence. “Back to the scene of the crime, then!” she said brightly. She watched Marvin from the corner of her eye, but he was already turning away, pulling Pippa with him. She gave Delta and Blake a small wave of goodbye, looking apologetic.

Blake grimaced as they walked away. “Don’t call it that,” he said to Delta. “We still don’t know for sure for what happened.”

As if on cue, her cellphone rang. “Sorry, Blake. Do you mind if I take this? It’s the station.” She turned her back on him without waiting for an answer and walked towards relative privacy a few feet away near the exit.

“Robbins,” she said into the phone.

“It’s Stanford.”

She grimaced just from hearing his voice over the line. “What’s going on?”

“Just heard from the coroner. They found a couple of odd things. First, there was some kind of powder all over her body—they’re sending it to the lab for analysis, and second—wax.”

“What kind of wax?”

“Like from a candle. It was in the victim’s ear, and there was some under her fingernails.”

“Do you remember that bit of white stuff that I found on the chair when we first arrived at the scene? That must have been wax too. Did the lab finishing testing it?”

Stanford sighed. “No results on that yet, but it seems likely. Any candles on set?”

Delta scoffed. “Stanford, it’s a period piece. They have candles everywhere. That’s what all those old-timey dead people used for lights, you know.”

“I’m not an idiot, Robbins.”

“Well, I’m just sayin’—”

“No, let’s not,” he cut her off. “Let’s not get into this over the phone. Keep your eyes open for any... *suspicious* candles, I guess. I don’t know what to tell you. Anyways, I’ll be by the set later in the day to interview some more of the cast. Scope them all out. See if you can get any leads for me to follow up on when I get there.”

“Sure.”

“And Delta?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t get too close to Blake Hartford. You know we can’t rule him out just yet.”

“Whatever, Stanford. You think I don’t know that?” She rolled her eyes and ended the call without saying goodbye.

Stanford always thought that he could boss her around. There was something he was right about though. As much as she would like to, it was too early to rule out Blake. She didn’t like the idea of him being involved in a murder, so the best thing to do was to exonerate him. It was time to do some digging.

It had been a busy morning. After meeting all of her castmates and touring the set, Delta had joined them in her first rehearsal. It had gone well, she thought. Her character, Margaret, didn't really have that many lines. She basically just had to hang around in the background of the scene and make some sexy eyes at Rhett. That barely required any acting on Delta's part. Just looking at the man made her want to drop her drawers. He was basically sex on legs, strutting around the set with an unaffected swagger. When he looked at her during the scenes, Delta could swear that she could feel the sparks flying. But then again, maybe he was just an especially good actor.

As the rehearsal ended, Blake came up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "You were excellent," he said, smiling at her. "I can't believe I was lucky enough to find you on such short notice! I swear you sell this part much better than Christina ever did."

Delta shrugged as she made her way to the buffet nearby. Besides all of the ridiculously attractive coworkers, free food was another great perk. Blake rested his hand against the small of her back, walking over with her, and watching as she piled a plate with salad and pasta.

He sighed. "I wish that I could stay and have lunch with you, but I have to get over to the plantation. We're going to be filming out there in an hour and I have to get everything ready for the actors. I don't have any more work for you today. Just try to work on memorizing all your lines and be ready for shooting tomorrow!"

"You got it, boss." Delta grinned at him. She enjoyed the feeling of his eyes lingering on her as he left. Maybe if things didn't go anywhere with Rhett she would wander back over to Blake's trailer later. He had been reasonably talented in bed.

She was walking with her food over to one of the folding tables that had been set out nearby, trying to choose who to sit with and casually interrogate, when she heard a low voice in her ear. "I would be careful with those if I were you."

She turned her head. Rhett Castor hovered behind her with his arms stuffed casually into the pockets of his slightly too tight jeans. She could see the outline of his pecs through his pale blue cotton shirt. "Why is that?"

"The whole cast got food poisoning a few weeks ago," he said. "They think it came from the lettuce."

She sat her plate down slowly. "Do you have any other suggestions?"

He grinned. "I sure do. There's a little place up the street I like. I was just about to go there, actually. Want to join me?"

Delta bit her lip, glancing at the tables full of cast and crew members on their breaks. It was a good opportunity to gather some basic information about Christina and the people who knew her. But... a personal invitation to lunch with Rhett Castor? That was mighty hard to turn down. She didn't spare a second glance at the abandoned salad as she chucked it into a trash can. "Let's go."

Rhett shrugged on a leather jacket, and she followed him out the door. The wave of heat hit them as soon as they walked out of the studio. "Aren't you going to be hot in that?" she asked.

"No. I'll be catching a breeze." He stopped walking in front of a motorcycle and grinned. "Should I meet you there or do you want a ride?"

It was a shiny thing, painted in sparkling sapphire blue. She had no idea what kind of bike it was, but it was clear that Rhett thought she would be impressed. He was watching her face eagerly. "All right," she agreed. He passed her an extra helmet and she climbed on behind him. Moments later the engine roared to life between her legs in a delicious purr.

"Hold on tight." Rhett grinned at her as she flung her arms around his waist, savoring the sensation of his hard body under her hands. In a few moments, they were off, leaving the parking lot behind them.

The place Rhett had mentioned really wasn't far. It took only a few minutes to get there, although Delta was more than ready to get off the bike. She had not particularly enjoyed the hot wind snapping at her face

nor the precarious feel of the bike between her legs. She was a bit disappointed in herself for not liking it more. She had always thought that she would look good on a bike and a little bit of danger had never bothered her. She *had*, however, enjoyed clinging to Rhett Castor.

The restaurant that Rhett had picked was a small barbeque place that Delta probably wouldn't have noticed on her own, even though it had a pink and red neon sign of a dancing pig. It was set off just a bit from the road, which somewhat hid its ugly exterior. The restaurant, which proclaimed itself to be "The Rutting Pig," was a long triangle of unattractive cinder block, painted white on top, red on bottom. The roof was a broken line, flat but at different levels where one side of the place dipped into a split level. Built in the 1950's, she thought. And ugly as sin. But these places did tend to have good food.

Rhett yanked off his helmet. His blonde hair was perfectly ruffled, giving him a rakish, just-had-sex sort of appearance. Delta ran her fingers through her own hair after pulling off her helmet, hoping for a similar look, though her locks felt a bit sticky in her hand. Despite the heat, she thought she must be succeeding, judging by the look in Rhett's eyes as he watched her climb off the back of his motorcycle.

He looked at her face closely. "I hope that wasn't too scary for you?"

She paused and wet her lips with her tongue. Scary? No. Hot and strangely uncomfortable? Yes. Still, she thought she knew what he wanted to hear. "I felt safe holding onto you," she said, batting her eyes.

He grinned and slung his arm around Delta's shoulders, guiding her inside. A little bell attached to the door chimed and a hostess looked up from the wooden podium she was resting against.

Her eyes lit up as she recognized Rhett, who dropped his arm from Delta's shoulders and walked up to the podium, requesting a table for two. Rhett politely ignored the hostess's fascination, as well as the looks from all of the patrons and servers as they made their way to the table. Delta even caught someone trying to sneak a photo on a cellphone.

“I probably shouldn’t come here so much,” Rhett said with an apologetic grin as he sank into the booth. “I think they’re starting to expect me.”

Delta slid across the bench facing him and then glanced over her shoulder. Another girl was trying to sneak a pic. She narrowed her eyes and the girl’s cheeks flushed pink. She flipped her phone face down on the table with a sheepish look.

“Just give them a few minutes. They’ll settle down once they’re used to me.”

“It must be so annoying being famous.”

He flashed her another million-dollar grin. “You learn to tune it out.”

A college-aged waitress with her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail carried plastic menus to their table. She looked nervously from Rhett to Delta. “Would y’all like a few minutes to look over the menu? The special today is the hickory smoked ribs.”

“No, thank you, honey. I think that we’ll both have the pulled pork sandwiches.”

Delta shifted in her seat. He was the type to order for his date? She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

He glanced at her. “If that’s OK with you? It’s what I always get. It’s very good.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ll trust you for now. But if I don’t like it, you’re in trouble, mister.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

“No dialect coachin’,” she said in her most Southern drawl.

“Is that so?” He imitated her accent. “Maybe I’ll be OK without your help, darlin’.”

“Mmmm. Your tongue sounds a little slow there,” she said. “It’s called a drawl, not a standstill.”

He leaned forward with a smile. “I assure you, my tongue can be quite nimble when the occasion requires it.”

The ponytailed waitress coughed awkwardly, cheeks turning pink. "So, just water to drink then? Or a coke or something?"

"Sweet tea," they said in unison, still looking at each other playfully.

Out of the corner of her eye, Delta noticed the waitress scurrying away. "You'll have to give her a big tip for that."

"Don't worry. I'm known for big tips... among other things."

"Is that a dick joke?"

He smoldered at her from across the booth. "It's not a joke."

The waitress cleared her throat as she returned, setting down the glasses of sweet tea carefully between them. "Food will be out soon," she said and turned to leave as quickly as possible.

"So," said Delta, breaking the silence, "I'm your new sex scene partner?"

His eyes sparkled. "That's right."

"I'm replacing Christina. Kind of sad, isn't it? Did you know her well?" She drew her fingers across the gingham tablecloth, tracing the red and white lines.

He crossed his arms. "Not that well. We only shot a few scenes together."

"And the rehearsals."

He smiled slowly. "And the rehearsals."

"So, did you take her out to lunch, too? Get to know her a little?"

He laughed. "No. I don't ask just anyone out, if that's what you're thinking. I only knew Christina from our time together on set. I never really spent any one-on-one time with her. Honestly, although I hate that she is," he cleared his throat and glanced at his hands awkwardly, "dead, I think it's going to be a lot easier for everyone working with you."

"Why is that? Was Christina not well-liked?"

"I don't want to speak ill of the dead," Rhett said. He absently scratched the stubble on his lower jaw and took a sip of his iced tea. "Let's just say that she kept to herself. She didn't make many friends, and the ones she did were the wrong ones."

Delta frowned and took her own straw between her lips. She could feel Rhett's eyes on her. "You make it sound like she had enemies."

"That's overly dramatic. It's just that... well, the only person she really got along with was the one person that everyone hates. Makes it hard to be friendly with someone, when you're afraid they're going to take what you say right back to the person you don't like."

Delta chewed on her lip for a moment, trying not to sound too eager. "Who don't you like, Rhett?"

His eyes narrowed and he looked away. "It wouldn't be professional to say."

She looked at him from under her long lashes. "Who ever said that you and I had to keep things professional?"

He folded his arms on the table and leaned forward slowly. "I have to say, Miss Delta Bayou, you sure do know how to capture a man's attention."

She flicked her tongue out over her straw, pulling it into her mouth. "Not just a man's. I've been known to attract some attention from the ladies as well."

He grinned. "I think I quite like you."

"So who is it that you *don't* like?"

He didn't break eye contact. "Ruby Adams."

"And she was close with Christina?"

"Yeah, Christina was the only one who could tolerate her."

"I got the sense today that Ruby is a little..."

"Self-centered?"

"Yeah."

"That's putting it mildly. She shows up late on set and when she is around, she's glued to her phone and ignores everything anyone else says to her. Her demands are outrageous and on top of all that she's horribly rude."

"Wow, tell me how you really feel," Delta joked.

He gave her a small smile. "Sorry, it must seem like I'm really venting to you. Ruby and I have a lot of scenes to do together. She's really been wearing me down lately."

"No, it's OK. I asked. I find all of this stuff really interesting. Who knew that there would be so much, well, drama on the set of a movie?"

He laughed softly and propped his head up on his chin. "You have no idea. It's been crazy the past few weeks."

"I heard from Blake that there had been some accidents on set."

Rhett shrugged. "It's true. Bad luck seems to follow him."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've known Blake for a few years. I was actually cast in another movie he was going to direct, but it never really got off the ground."

"Oh," said Delta. "I think I heard about that one. What happened exactly?"

"It was called *A Dream Too Sweet*. It was also a period piece, about some lovers who were caught up in the Boston Molasses Flood. Filming had just begun when there was a big accident on set. The prop tank that they were using to replicate the molasses flood actually exploded itself. Some people were almost killed and a lot of them had some pretty bad burns. The sets were ruined. They say that studio still smells like maple syrup to this day."

"That sounds horrible!"

"It was, but the studio didn't really want it getting out what happened, so you probably didn't hear much about it at the time. They canned the whole picture."

"They must have lost a fortune."

"You have no idea," he shrugged. "We all still got paid though, the actors, I mean. So did Blake, if I remember correctly. There was something in the contract with the producers about how if we were a certain amount of weeks into filming and there was a catastrophe that we would still all get a certain amount of our contract money. I don't quite remember the exact arrangement, but I was damn glad that clause

was in there because it would have ruined Blake otherwise. And although the whole thing was horrible, it ended up being lucky for me too. Since that movie was shut down early, I was able to accept a role as the Black Archer.” He took another sip of tea, scanning the restaurant. “So you could say that the whole incident helped to launch my career.”

“Yeah, that’s been really big for you, right? Even I’ve seen that movie.” She didn’t add that she had only watched it a few nights ago, after learning that she would be working with him.

He grinned. “What did you think?”

“I liked the costume,” she said, thinking back to the way he had looked in the clingy superhero getup. His ass had been very nice, but that was about all she cared about during the movie. “You must have had to work out a lot to maintain all those muscles.”

“Maybe I could show you my workout routine sometime.”

The waitress appeared with their food. She set it down without looking at either of them. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked with burning cheeks.

As soon as they said no, her ponytail bobbed away quickly. Delta smirked as she watched her and then turned her attention back to Rhett. She was getting hungry all right, but not just for food.

Chapter Four: The Bodice Ripper

Delta pulled her fingers through her windswept hair as they parked back at the studio lot. It had been an especially enjoyable lunch. Rhett had turned out to be a fountain of clues as well as a talented flirt and she hoped that she would have the opportunity to see a lot more of him soon. He held the door open for her as they walked back into the studio. A rush of cool air greeted them, and Delta had to blink against the dimness of the interior compared to the harsh Georgia sun outside.

When her eyes adjusted, she wasn't happy to see who was looking directly at her. Stanford strode over to them in a few powerful steps. Delta glanced up at him, affecting nonchalance as Rhett crossed his arms at the new arrival.

"Miss Bayou, Mr. Castor," Stanford greeted them. Delta noticed exactly how much taller he was than Rhett, which made Rhett seem that much shorter. The fabric of Stanford's light green button-up highlighted the green in his hazel eyes, which squinted against the sun. "I'd like to talk to both of you about Miss Eaves's death."

Delta pressed her mouth into a firm line. "Oh, surely you don't need to talk to me, Detective. I was hired *after* Miss Eaves died."

Stanford grinned at her. "Actually, Miss Bayou, I'd like to interview you *first*. Mr. Castor, I'll call you into the office in a few moments. Don't go anywhere, OK?" He grinned wolfishly at Rhett, eyes narrowing further.

Rhett's jaw ticked, making his blonde mustache bob. "Well, I have to do what the director tells me," he said in a rebellious tone. "I'm supposed to start shooting over at the plantation."

"Don't worry, I've already cleared it with Mr. Hartford." He gave Rhett a falsely cheerful wink. Delta wanted to elbow him in the ribs to tell him to cut it out, but settled on rolling her eyes since there was no way to subtly knock him.

Rhett frowned more deeply. "I already talked to the cops."

"I understand, Mr. Castor. We just have to be thorough. The whole cast is being re-interviewed."

Blake jogged over to them at that exact moment. He looked surprised to see Delta with Rhett and blinked at the two of them.

"I thought you were going to be at the plantation?" Delta asked.

He pushed his hip glasses up higher on his nose and sighed. "Another delay on shooting," he said. "So I thought I would come back to make sure that the cast is comfortable while the police are doing interviews." He looked uncertainly from Rhett to Delta to Stanford and crossed his arms over his pink shirt.

All of the men stared at each other, shifting in their postures, broadening their shoulders and puffing out their chests. Delta was practically choking on all of the testosterone, and she suddenly remembered why she sometimes preferred the company of other women. “Well, come on then, Detective Stanford. Let’s get this interview over with.” She cut in front of him, leaving the circle of posturing men.

Stanford grunted and followed Delta as she walked away. He passed her in three steps and pointed her towards an office. “In here,” he said. He didn’t bother to hold the door open for her. So much for Southern gentlemen.

As soon as she had shut the door, he sat down on the edge of the desk, crossing his arms. “Getting friendly with the cast, I see. Or certain members of it, at least.”

His tone was cool, observant. And yet she had the idea that it was meant to rile her up. She matched his unaffected air. “Oh yes, Rhett is a wonderful coworker. Very polite. And talkative.”

Stanford’s shoulders lost their aggressive pose as he took in that bit of news and leaned forward in interest. “What have you learned?”

“Well, he told me all of the work gossip. But I suppose that you think I just spent all that time flirting?”

Stanford’s look darkened. “I didn’t say that.”

“No, just implied it with that tone.” She frowned at him, but decided to be the better person and let it go. “But anyways, Rhett told me some interesting things indeed! Apparently everyone hates Ruby Adams. Except for Christina Eaves. She was her friend. Her only friend, if what Rhett said was true. Maybe it was one of Ruby’s enemies that came after her.”

“Did you get anything on Hartford?”

Delta crossed her arms. “Not exactly.” She was reluctant to say anything that might incriminate Blake. She liked him, after all. Of course, she also liked Rhett. She didn’t think either of them was responsible for Christina’s death, but someone certainly was.

“The only thing I learned about Blake was that he had a movie that failed a few years ago. It was a big disaster, but he still got paid for it. It was called *A Dream too Sweet: The True Story of the Boston Molasses Flood*. I had seen a brief mention of it on his IMBD page, and Rhett told me all of the details over lunch. It seems like a thin connection to me, but maybe there’s something there. Some kind of foul play?”

Stanford frowned. “That man really likes to name his movies ridiculous things.”

“Huh?”

He gestured his hands vaguely. “Did he tell you what this one is called?”

“No. They just call it the civil war movie around here.”

Stanford snorted. “Hartford told me that he wants to call it *A Union of Hearts; A Confederacy of Feeling*.”

“Wow,” Delta snorted. “That’s... a lot.”

“Pretty stupid, right.”

“Blake is very... romantic, I think.”

Stanford shrugged. “Or stupid.”

She caught herself grinning at Stanford and stopped, remembering her game. “Actually, I *love* it,” she said, unwilling to allow a moment of comraderie to settle between them.

Stanford made a face at her. “Sure.” He stretched his broad shoulders and sighed. “So another of Blake’s movies failed. That’s suspicious. Plus he keeps hovering around anytime there is police business going on. Maybe he’s nervous.”

“I don’t think he did it. The man just has bad luck. Why would he sabotage his own films? He doesn’t really have anything to gain from that. These are his passion projects! And he’s around so much because he is interested in what happens on his set! Wouldn’t you want to know, if it was you?”

Stanford cocked his head in thought. “I don’t think you can rule out deliberate sabotage. Less work for the same amount of money?”

"I guess," she grumbled. "But I think that you would be better off following that lead about Ruby."

"I can do both," Stanford rolled his eyes. "But I need you to investigate her as well. She certainly seems to have an interesting connection to the victim, but I already interviewed her once. When I did, she barely seemed to know Christina's name."

Delta lifted her eyebrows. "Funny that you should mention that. She acted the same way this morning."

Stanford pushed back his hair. "So either Rhett wasn't telling the truth about Ruby and Christina being friends, or Ruby is trying to hide something."

Delta leaned against the wall, mind turning. "I told you there was something up with Ruby. I'll try to talk to her next. See if I can get her to confide in me as easily as Rhett did."

Stanford snorted. "Well, you know you have a... certain way with men, right?"

She blinked slowly. "What's that mean?"

He waved his hand and groaned. "You do that thing... with your eyes and your hair and your..." his eyes flicked for just a fraction of a second to her chest. "You know what I mean!" he said sharply, glaring at the wall.

"Hmm," she said, stretching slowly. "You know I have that way with women, too, right?"

"You're so vain!" He scowled. "I can't believe I ever thought you were hot."

"You thought I was hot?"

"Oh, my God. You're incorrigible! Get out!" he said, pulling irritably at the collar of his shirt. "Just go talk to Ruby."

She turned before he could see her smirk and walked out, just a little too slowly, smiling to herself.

Since shooting for the afternoon had been delayed, Delta was sent off to the costume department to meet up with Marvin Kandhari. He was

waiting for her when she arrived, dressed in an impeccable tan suit with a sherbert colored button-up and a patterned silk scarf across his shoulders. He looked at her from under his brimmed hat. "Delta Bayou," he drawled. "What a name."

"Hi Marvin."

"Call me Marv," he said, bracelets tinkling on his wrists as he slunk away from the table he had been leaning against. "Now, let's get a look at those boobs." Out of nowhere, he seemed to have a measuring tape in his hands. He rolled back the cuffs of his blazer expertly, exposing lean and elegant wrists.

"Don't you get hot in that jacket?" asked Delta as she spread her arms, letting him guide the measuring tape around her ample bosom. "And scarf? And hat?"

"Accessories make an outfit... and I stay inside," said Marvin with an exaggerated shrug. "Why would I go out there? Gross. It's like a damn swamp down here."

"Where are you from?"

Marvin took a pencil out from behind his ear and jotted down a number before sliding the yellow measuring tape lower, pulling it snug around Delta's waist. "A different swamp. St Louis."

She frowned. "Isn't it hot there, too?"

He sighed. "Yes. Why do you think I left? Hollywood's nice though. It's warm, but you don't have to swim through the air. And you think when you decide to be a Hollywood costumer that you'll spend most of your time in beautiful, sunny California. If someone would have told me that I'd be out in the back-ass woods somewhere outside of Atlanta, I would have run away screaming." He made an irritated flick of his wrist causing his bracelet to chime again and jotted down another number.

She shifted a bit as the tape dropped lower, measuring her hips. "You don't like your job?"

Marvin bit his lip and scribbled another number down. "Girl, you've got a healthy sized ass, that's for sure."

She frowned at him as he knelt, taking the inseam. "I meant it as a compliment," he said saucily. "And to answer your question, yes and no. I love my job and I hate my job." He sighed dramatically as he stood, snapping up the tape measure into a tidy roll. "We won't have to do too much work on Christina's costume. Just something about the chest area. Let it out a tiny bit."

"Why don't you like your job?"

He turned his back as he went to his side table, writing down some notes. "It's my artistic disposition," he sighed. "I love sewing, thinking of costumes, all of that. But some people don't respect the vision."

"How so?"

He waved her forwards and led her through a rack of clothes. He pulled out an old-timey looking dress, seemingly at random. "What do you notice?" he said. He pulled out another dress and held them side by side.

She looked at them critically. "Ummmm.... They both look like old-fashioned dresses to me?"

He sighed. "Look at the collars," he said. "Notice anything?"

"Uhhhh...."

He rolled his eyes. "The necklines," he said. "What kind of self-respecting woman of the 1860s would own a dress with a neckline like that?" He gestured abruptly to the tops of the gowns, which were, Delta now saw, scandalously low cut. "Only whores," he said. He looked at her face. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the female form. But please tell me why we're going through the charade of filming a period piece, making all of these costumes, doing all of this research, when it's just going to be ignored?" He angrily rehung the dresses. Their metal hangers scrapped against the rack. "So anachronistic, ugh!"

He pulled another dress down. "This one is going to be yours by the way. So you should try it on."

"So, you like history?"

"Girl, I don't *like* history. I breathe it. Now get your healthy-sized ass into this dress."

He had to lace her into a corset and help her into the layers of old-fashioned undergarments before she was ready to try on the dress itself. It was dark green, with a low cut boat neck that was covered in lacy ruffles. She looked at it suspiciously. "I'm going to look like a pair of curtains in this."

"That's the idea," Marvin muttered. "It's a visual reference. Have you never seen *Gone with the Wind*?" He lowered the garment over her head.

"Sounds like an old person movie."

He tugged the skirts down over the enormous hoops. "You're not going to make it to be an old person if you keep spouting that kind of blasphemy."

"Are you always so irritable?"

He eyed her incredulously, yanking the shoulders of the dress down lower. "Are you always so blunt?"

She thought a minute. "Yes."

"Hmm," he said, flipping. "Me too."

He finally got her settled into the dress and stuck some pins in a few places. "There, what do you think? Actually, maybe I won't let out the chest. Hartford will probably love the effect this has on your cleavage."

He let her walk over to the mirror, which was a little difficult, considering the width of the skirt. She cocked her head as she studied her reflection, letting the dark waves of her hair fall over her shoulder. The dress was tight, no doubt about that, but the corset did an amazing job of pushing up her already ample chest. Her boobs looked like they were just about ready to fall out of the low top. She turned and admired the exaggerated curve of her waist and the way her slender arms looked emerging from the off-the-shoulder ruffled sleeves.

"I look like a sexy cake topper," she said approvingly.

Marvin frowned but just at that time, they heard someone enter. Stanford peeked around the corner. The makeup artist Pippa Rose was right behind him.

He stopped in his tracks as he saw Delta standing in the ridiculous dress. “Wow,” he said, eyes racing over her body. “*Very Gone with the Wind.*”

“Thank you,” said Marvin.

“I always did have a crush on Scarlett O’Hara.”

Marvin snorted. “Not me. She was such a brat.”

Stanford tore his eyes away from Delta. “Maybe I like a woman with sass. Say, if you have a moment, Mr. Kandhari, I’m here to interview you about Ms. Eaves’s death.”

Marvin shrugged. “Sure. I already talked to the other cops, though. And I wasn’t there that night, just to get that out of the way.” He flicked his silk scarf back over his shoulder and readjusted his cuffs. “I just have to get Delta out of this dress first, if you don’t mind.”

Stanford chuckled. “By all means, go ahead.”

Delta rolled her eyes at him and went back with Marvin to be undressed. “All this for a dress that’s going to be on screen for five minutes,” he muttered, carefully unpinning and unhooking her. “Do you know how long this took to make?”

“No.”

He jabbed her accidentally with a pin. “Too long. There. You’re done.”

Delta, released from the stiff corset, quickly slipped back into her jeans and dark button-up top. Pippa and Stanford were chatting together in the outer room. Pippa smiled at her when she returned.

“If you don’t mind, Delta, I’d like to get you into makeup to make sure I have everything ready to go for filming. I just want to confirm what colors I’ll be needing to use for the birthmark.”

Delta looked from Marvin to Stanford, who’s head twitched imperceptibly in the affirmative. “OK.”

Pippa looped her arm through Delta’s as she led her away from the men and out into the corridor. “I had the palette set for Christina, but your undertones are a little different—warmer. I want to play with the

colors a little bit, just do a test run.” Her voice was so lovely and husky. Delta wanted to close her eyes and listen to her speak forever.

“Sure,” said Delta. “I don’t mind.” She couldn’t help but notice the scent of Pippa’s perfume. Something flowery undercut with the fresh, crisp scent of citrus. “Is this your first production working with Blake?”

“Oh no, I’ve been on almost all of his films. He’s very loyal.”

“I haven’t heard of most of his movies,” Delta confessed. “I don’t like period pieces.”

Pippa snorted. “They’re hardly period pieces—more like costume dramas.”

“There’s a difference?”

Pippa smiled and Delta noticed the single dimple under her apple cheeks. “Yes. But it’s not important. Unless you were to ask Marv.”

“He seems very opinionated.”

“He just takes his work seriously.” Pippa’s brown eyes rested against Delta’s face. They were soulful, she thought. Deep and dark. Eyes that you could fall into. She gave her a warm smile. She was finding far too many of her coworkers to be alluring. She needed to focus on the case.

“Is it true he fights with Blake all the time?”

“No, not fights. Well—except the once.” Pippa’s mass of tightly wound curls bobbed as she shook her head disparagingly. Her long earrings chimed and glinted gold in the light.

Delta’s ears perked up. “What happened?”

Pippa bit her lip. “Well, Marv was all worked up because he already had done the costumes. They’d been fighting for weeks over the sketches. Marv kept going on about how a woman in the 1800s would actually dress, and Blake kept saying that he didn’t care. He’s of the opinion that showing a little extra skin never hurt anyone. Well, Marv ignored him and had the costumes done anyways. But when Blake saw the actresses in them, he flipped. He went up to Ruby—have you met her yet, by the way?”

“Only in passing.”

“She’s a rare jewel, you’ll see,” said Pippa, “but anyways, Blake went up to Ruby and pointed at her chest, which was pretty covered up at the time. He yanked down the fabric and ripped the dress, and told Marv that’s what he wanted to see more of.”

“And then what happened?”

“Well,” said Pippa, fiddling with her key at a white door labeled “Makeup,” “First of all, Ruby slapped him right across the face for touching her ah... bosom in such a way. And Marv had a conniption. His face almost turned purple and then he walked up to Blake and slapped him as well for destroying his costume.”

“What did Blake do?”

Pippa flicked on a light as they entered a room. “He wouldn’t hit a lady, of course, so he just sort of unleashed it all on Marv. He punched him. And then Marv punched him back, and then Marv’s boyfriend Billy had to run over and break them up because they were rolling around on the floor like wild dogs.”

“That’s a mighty interesting story, Pippa,” said Delta. “So, would you say the two of them are on bad terms?”

Pippa shrugged in her oversized fringed shawl. “They seem to have made up.” She gestured to a chair. “Speaking of...”

“Right.” Delta slipped into the high chair that was placed in front of a mirror. A window against one wall was letting in a good amount of afternoon light. Pippa’s skin seemed to glow under it and Delta noticed that she was covered in some sort of iridescent powder that shone as it hit the light.

“All right, open your blouse for me.”

Delta froze. “Hmmm?” She wasn’t complaining. Pippa was very pretty, but she did find the request a little out of left field.

“The birthmark your character has is right above her breast. Sorry, did I not mention that?”

“Oh right.” Delta pulled open the buttons until the top of her lacy blue bra was visible. She glanced around Pippa’s room, as the other

woman fiddled with some containers on the counter. “So what do you think about working with Rhett and Ruby?” she asked.

Pippa’s makeup room was tidy, but the smell of perfume and cosmetics hung in the air, a soft mix of flowers and fruits and powder. There were some paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling, a few colorful tapestries on the wall, and a plush rug underfoot. The effect was very boho. Not something that Delta would have gone for herself, but it suited Pippa.

Pippa picked up a brush, and as she turned back towards Delta, Delta saw she had smeared some cosmetics on her hand. She pulled the brush through them and then began to lightly dab over Delta’s chest. “Well, I can’t say I know Ruby very well. She...” Pippa bit her lip, “well, she doesn’t really seem to enjoy conversation.”

“I thought I heard that Ruby and Christina were friends?”

Pippa looked away and blinked rapidly, her shoulders tensing under her shawl. “I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Delta filed away her evasive response. Clearly she knew something, but it didn’t feel like the time to press her. “Well, what about Rhett?” Delta asked as Pippa’s soft fingertips pressed against her skin, dabbing the makeup, rubbing it into her skin. Delta closed her eyes, feeling herself relaxing under the other woman’s touch.

“Rhett’s nice enough.”

“Ever work with him before? He told me he did some other movie with Blake...”

“Right, yeah. *A Dream too Sweet*. I guess that’s where we first met. That was before he was famous.” Her fingers paused just over Delta’s breasts, lingering as she thought.

“Was he different then?”

Pippa laughed and grabbed some more makeup from the counter. “He was friendlier. Not so hard around the edges.”

“He still seems nice to me.”

Pippa looked at her shrewdly. “Well, you’re a beautiful woman. And it’s not that he isn’t nice. It’s just that he isn’t so open anymore. I guess

that's what fame does." She shrugged. "All that attention changes some people."

Pippa's fingertips warmed Delta's skin. She was enjoying having the makeup applied. Perhaps a little too much. She grinned at her. "You know, you're beautiful too, Pippa."

Pippa smiled above her and went on dabbing on the makeup. "Stop it, Delta, I might think that you're flirting with me."

"Maybe I am."

Chapter Five: Rubies and Pearls

Delta found her chance to speak with Ruby the next day, after another rehearsal. With filming set to begin again the next day, Blake had scheduled the entire cast on set to run through every scene that Delta would be in, wanting to make sure that she had a chance to learn her lines and blocking before wasting any valuable filming time. Many members of the cast seemed less than pleased to be spending a grueling twelve hours at the studio, running through scenes for what was mostly Delta's benefit, but Blake managed to charm them, reassuring everyone that it was essential to become accustomed to Christina's role being taken over by someone new. It was imperative that filming would go as smoothly as possible. In an emotional speech, he told the cast of his hopes that they could make up for the time lost due to the accident. Even Delta knew enough to realize that it was unlikely.

It was a few minutes after eight in the evening when Blake finally told the exhausted cast that they could turn in for the night. Delta was watching Ruby closely. During the day she had been professional, but distant, arriving the very second that filming was supposed to begin, and slinking off on her phone at every break, not engaging with anyone around her and only responding in one word answers when Delta tried

to make small talk with her over lunch. Anticipating the fact that Ruby would try to slip away the moment rehearsals were over, Delta was ready.

As Blake was coming up to congratulate her after the successful rehearsal, Delta saw Ruby pick up her purse and head immediately towards the set exit. "Sorry, Blake... I forgot something in the car. I'll be right back," Delta cut him off and started after Ruby, not bothering to pick up her own belongings.

Ruby's blonde head was down as she walked, eyes trained on her phone. She didn't notice Delta behind her until she reached the metal door that led out of the studio and to the parking lot. She pushed it open with her hip and then jumped when she glanced up from her phone just in time to see Delta following her out.

"Hi Ruby." The sky was turning purple overhead, a few streaks of deep rust glinting in the west. The crickets were chirping in the dry grass behind the studio parking lot.

Ruby's eyes, smoky blue-gray and outlined in thick, smudgy navy eyeliner, narrowed as she recognized Delta. "What do you want?" She hoisted a large leather bag higher on her shoulder, clutching her phone to her chest.

"I don't think we've officially met," said Delta, extending her hand.

Ruby looked at it, and then crossed her arms. "Yeah, so?"

Delta plastered a fake smile on her face as she dropped her extended hand. "So, I thought that I should introduce myself. Since we'll be working together."

"You some kind of fan or something?" Ruby uncrossed her arms, glanced at her nails (manicured into lavender points), before brushing her blonde bangs out of her face. There were small beads of perspiration already beginning to stick to her forehead. The humidity was intense, but it seemed like too quick of a reaction to Delta. Maybe Ruby was nervous? "I don't do autographs, sorry." Her eyes flicked down to her phone again. She dropped it into her bag with pursed lips.

"What? No." Delta struggled to keep her smile in place. "I just heard that you were friends with Christina and since I'm playing the same

role... I thought I could ask you some stuff about like... what she did with her character.”

She instantly knew that she had made a mistake. Ruby’s eyes narrowed further. Delta noticed that they seemed smaller up close, almost beady. Her shapely lips pressed together tightly, pulling the curves into a glossy line. “Who told you I was friends with Christina?” She squared her jaw defiantly as she dropped her phone into her bag.

“Um... I don’t remember. I just heard it around set.”

“Well, whoever told you was wrong. I didn’t know Christina. We weren’t friends. I didn’t have anything to do with the dead girl.”

Delta shifted her weight uncomfortably to one foot. “OK, sure. Well, I’d still like to talk to you. It doesn’t matter if you knew Christina or not. You’re one of the best actresses I know of, and I’m new to this. Couldn’t you give me any tips?”

Ruby smirked, “Yeah, my first and last tip to you is to get lost. You’re pretty, but there are a million girls easily as good looking as you are in Hollywood. This game is for serious players. I’m not here to make friends and I certainly don’t have time to give nobodies like you a leg up. So, don’t make me repeat myself. Leave me alone and never talk to me again.”

“Right,” said Delta sucking in her breath. “Are you always this charming?” She winced as soon as she said it. Insulting Ruby was definitely not going to help get any information out of her.

Ruby scowled and turned. “I gotta go. Don’t follow me, creep.” She walked off into the parking lot, the talons of her high heels making tapping sounds on the hot pavement. A large man in a black shirt stepped out of a dark car and opened the door for her. Ruby got in without a look behind her. Of course she had her own driver. But where would she be going? Her trailer was nearby, the same as everyone else’s, and God knew there wasn’t much to do in any of the neighboring towns.

Delta bit her lip in frustration as she watched them drive away. If she hadn’t left her purse inside, she could have followed them. She

turned around reluctantly, heading back towards the studio. Ruby was as big of a bitch as Delta had been led to believe, which leant some credibility to everything else that Rhett had told her. It also meant that she was going to have to try something besides befriending or seducing her. Ruby seemed to be immune to her particular charms.

The metal exterior door swung open just as she approached it. "Hey, Marvin." The dapper costume designer had just stepped outside. Another man was beside him, tall with dark skin, a very muscular build, and a shaved head. Delta squinted at him. "You look familiar."

Marvin sighed and waved his hand to the other man. "This is my boyfriend, Billy Perle."

Delta gasped. "I know who you are! You played Lodge Ramrod in *The Dangerous Bones!*" Her cheeks flushed as she realized what this knowledge meant. She glanced inadvertently at his crotch and then jerked her eyes back up to his handsome face, feeling tongue-tied.

Billy grinned. "I take it you've seen some of my work?"

Delta found herself giggling. "I've seen all of it. Big fan."

"Ugh," said Marvin. "There is nothing weirder than a straight girl telling your boyfriend that she likes his work in gay pornos."

"I'm not *straight*," said Delta at the same time as Billy said, "They're not *pornos*."

Marv gave Delta a knowing look. "You've seen them, apparently. It's porn, right?"

Billy frowned. "They're art films, Marv. They're on cable."

Marvin snorted. "OK, art films where you happen to be fucking someone for most of the running time."

"You said that you didn't mind my job." Billy's voice was low, soothing.

Marvin rolled his eyes. "And I don't. For now. But it is porn, Billy, even if it is more or less soft-core. I just want you to acknowledge it." Marvin gave him a long look, his face softening into adoration. The two men leaned closer, and ignoring Delta completely, kissed each other softly. The kiss went on for an uncomfortable amount of time.

Delta cleared her throat. "Still here, guys."

"Oh right," said Marvin. "What *are* you doing standing around in a parking lot, Delta?"

"I was talking to Ruby, but she ran off."

"Typical," said Marv, grabbing Billy's hand. Billy looked noncommittally at his feet.

"Hey, do you know Ruby, Billy? You know since you're both in the industry."

Billy flinched. "What do you mean?"

"You know. Since she's an actress and you're in," Delta paused delicately, "art films."

"Oh, they've never met," said Marvin gaily, "even though I told Billy that I would introduce him if he wants since she's so famous. It seems like everyone I know is dying to meet Ruby and Rhett." He sighed and crossed his arms. "Of course it's the actors that get all the attention. No one is ever excited to meet the costume director!"

"I don't need to meet Ruby," said Billy. "Marvin says that she's very difficult to work with."

"Do you know Rhett then?"

"Sure," Billy shrugged.

"Did you know Christina?"

Billy frowned deeply. Delta was surprised at the change in his expression. "No," he said. "We never met. Shame about what happened to her, though." He looked stonily away into the woods behind the parking lot. He was really quite handsome with expressive, deep-set eyes and perfectly sculpted lips. The lamps in the parking lot cast a golden glow around his shaven head.

Marvin caught her staring and frowned. "Hey Delta, if you don't mind, we've got to get going. And Blake was looking for you, by the way. He's on set, if you want to see him. Personally, I've had enough of him to last a lifetime." Marvin rolled his eyes and twined his fingers through Billy's. They looked at each other hungrily.

“OK,” said Delta. “Thanks. It was nice to meet you, Billy. You two have a good night.”

“Oh, we will,” said Marv with a wink. His eyes were locked on Billy’s.

“Nice to meet you, Delta,” said Billy, twisting his hand away from Marvin’s to shake her hand. “Always good to meet a fan.”

Delta shook her head as she watched them leave, realizing that she had hit a dead end for the night. She wondered if Stanford had made more progress than she had with Ruby and scowled as she went back inside. The shock of the air-conditioning sent a shiver down her spine. He probably *was* making more progress with Ruby than she was, given his good looks and tendency for wanton flirting. It wouldn’t have bothered her if she weren’t so competitive. She just hated to lose.

“There you are, Delta. What’s wrong?” Blake walked towards her immediately, abandoning his conversation with some worker with a clipboard. The lights were dim on the sound stage and everyone seemed to be heading home.

“I was just trying to talk to Ruby. She blew me off.”

Blake slipped an arm around Delta’s waist and walked towards his office. “She doesn’t have a very friendly personality. I’m sure it’s not personal. After all, who in their right mind could resist your charms?” He paused for a moment, tilting his head as he looked at her. His eyebrows raised lasciviously.

“I also met Billy Perle. Know him?”

Blake’s eyebrows immediately dropped in irritation. “Ugh, I told Marv to keep his porn-star friends away from the set.”

“They’re art films,” Delta mumbled.

Blake didn’t seem to hear her. “It isn’t good to have people like that associated with our production. We’re trying to make real art here!” He scratched irritably at his short beard.

“Blake, isn’t one of my scenes a sex scene?”

He scoffed. “Simulated sex, Delta. That’s the difference. No one is actually going to be fucking on camera in my films!”

She switched tactics. "I heard that you and Marv got into a fight once."

Blake coughed lightly as his hand fell away from her waist. "What?"

"Could you tell me what happened?"

He licked his lips. "He was being an asshole." He ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair. "Look, I'll tell you about it, if you really need to know—does this have something to do with the case? You're not seriously considering me as a suspect, are you, Delta? You know my work is my life!"

"I have to investigate every angle, Blake. If Marvin has some kind of beef with you..."

"If he does, it is one-sided. You should talk to him. I try to live my life in the present, to be mindful. Yes, I got into a fight with Marvin when he tried to overstep his bounds, but that's water under the bridge to me. In the meantime, I have something I wanted to talk to you about."

She had forgotten that he had been looking for her. "What's up?"

"Tomorrow, one of the producers is coming to the set. He's got a lot invested in this show, and the studio's been worried since Christina died. So he wants to come out, see our progress, you know, make sure everything is humming along. I thought it would be great if you met him. It might reassure him to know that we've recast Christina's part so easily."

"All right," said Delta. "I'll be there."

"Be at the plantation house at five tomorrow afternoon."

"Sure thing."

"And maybe," his thick rimmed glasses slipped down his nose as he looked her up and down, "you might find some time to meet me privately this evening?"

She leaned towards him and kissed him slowly in response. His full lips were soft and sensual against hers, full of promise and desire. "I'd love to, really I would. But besides memorizing lines, I have an actual job to do here, remember?"

He looked crushed for a moment, but recovered quickly. “Just don’t forget about me now that you’ve met Rhett!”

She kissed him again for good measure, remembering the heat of his skin that night in the trailer. “I won’t,” she said, pulling away. *Probably*. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

It was a few minutes before five when Delta arrived at Manderly Plantation the next day. The house was teeming with activity and the police tape that had been up for Delta’s last visit had been removed. The cicadas were buzzing in the fields behind the house and heat radiated from the parking lot and the concrete steps of the porch. The grass around the house looked brown and sickly in the heat.

“Delta, there you are, darling.” Blake grabbed her arm almost as soon as she walked into the hall. He was surrounded by people—only some of whom she recognized. He guided her up to an older man who had a pale bald head and bushy eyebrows streaked brown and gray. The man squinted at her from behind his wireframe glasses. “This is Mr. Caspar Winchester, one of our executive producers. He just flew in from California this morning.”

“Lovely to meet you, Miss...?” The older man grabbed Delta’s hand and shook it weakly. His hands were clammy. His fingers were fat.

“Delta Bayou, sir. So pleased to meet you. How was your flight?”

Caspar looked at Blake. “This is the girl replacing Christina? She’ll do.” He looked at Delta with an eyebrow raised over his glasses. “You’re a local gal, aren’t you, honey?”

She nodded and he made a chucking sound. “I thought so. It’s the accent. And the Hollywood girls aren’t usually so well-made around the chest. Not without a little extra help, of course.” He lifted his hands to his chest and made a squeezing motion in pantomime. His eyes flicked back to Delta’s breasts. She crossed her arms in front of them reflexively, but he was already looking at Blake again. “Wonderful find, Mr. Hartford. Now let’s see this the site. I hope it was worth dragging your production out into the middle of nowhere for.”

“Of course, Mr. Winchester. But you’ve only just arrived. Would you like some coffee first? We have some waiting for you in the kitchens. Eliza will show you the way.”

“You’re right on the money, son. That would hit the spot.”

A squarish-looking girl in no makeup separated herself from the group of people milling about and led Winchester out of the room, walking in a sullen march. Winchester’s eyes were planted firmly on her rump.

“Did you have to send a woman with him? He kind of seems like a creep.” Delta narrowed her eyes at Blake after Winchester disappeared down the hall to the kitchen.

He grunted and lifted up his glasses, rubbing his eyes. “He’s harmless, Delta. Just a bit old-fashioned. And anyways, he writes our paychecks.”

Her mouth twisted into a frown and she made to walk away but Blake grabbed her arm again. “Sorry. I know he’s repulsive. But Eliza can look after herself. Just talk to me for a minute, OK? I’m freaking out.” He did look tired, she realized. There were bags under his eyes and his wavy hair was sticking out in odd angles. The orange shirt he had chosen for the day only served to highlight his fading tan.

Delta bit her lip to discourage herself from being rude as Blake turned away, scattering the lingering crew. The last thing she wanted to do was babysit another grown man. Not when Stanford already took such careful management. “What’s wrong?”

“Winchester being here is a really big deal. He’s been investing major funds into this movie and has a lot of sway with the other producers and investors. If he’s feeling nervous, well, they might just pull the rug out from under our feet on this one and cut their losses. Not to mention that Ruby and Rhett are supposed to be here to meet him as well, and they’re both late!” He glanced at his watch in frustration.

“Aren’t you kind of late in the game to be shut down?” She placed a reassuring hand on his back.

"We're only about halfway through shooting, and getting more behind schedule every day." He sighed, and pulled his fingers through his hair, upsetting an already messy curl. "We have to make sure that this visit goes well or Winchester could suggest that we be cut off. Will you help me?"

"I showed up, didn't I?"

He swept an arm around her waist and pulled her close to him, planting a kiss on her lips. "Yes."

"So what do you want me to do?"

Blake swallowed hard. "Well, he has always had a thing for pretty girls. Well, actually, he has a thing for all girls, but especially pretty ones. And you are better than pretty, Delta. You're gorgeous."

"*Jesus Christ*, Blake! Are you trying to pimp me out to your boss? I'm a *cop*!" His face turned bright red and he stammered as his hand fell from around her waist. "No! I didn't mean *that*. I just meant, like, flirt with him a little, make him feel special."

"Unbelievable," Delta muttered. "I see why Hollywood men have such a bad reputations."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Blake pleaded. "Now would you please just..." His voice fell away immediately. Winchester was coming back into the room, followed by a scowling Eliza. She shot daggers into his back with her gaze and then scooted out of the room. Winchester beamed at Blake, who coughed nervously.

"What a charming young woman. Latina, is she? I like them fiery!"

Blake coughed again to cover up the awkward silence. "Let me show you the rest of the plantation, Mr. Winchester." He gave Delta a pleading look. She uncrossed her arms and followed them up the stairs, going slowly as Winchester, who had a rather portly belly, seemed inclined to take his time. On the landing, Blake opened the door to a bedroom. "This is the largest bedroom. "The love scene will be shot here," he said, eyes bouncing back and forth between Winchester and Delta. It was like a kid looking to his parents for approval. She frowned

at him before turning her attention to more important details and tuning out his conversation with Winchester.

The bedroom was covered in a lovely antique wallpaper, a yellow flowered pattern, and there was delicate plaster work on the fireplace. She scooted over to inspect it. Too often these old houses had their mantles replaced with something more “modern.” She ran a hand over the cool plaster. She wasn’t an expert, but it seemed genuine. The furniture was appropriate as well. A large four poster bed was the focal point of the room and her thoughts trailed from architectural features to Rhett. And thought of him with her on the large bed.

Winchester interrupted her thoughts. “A sex scene, eh? Is Miss Bayou in it? Maybe I should come to the set for that. When are you filming?”

Blake took a look over his shoulders at Delta’s face. “Errr... I’m sorry Mr. Winchester, but it is a closed set. Such a small space you see. And the actors have to be comfortable. We just can’t have the extra people on set.”

Winchester made a conciliatory sound in his throat. “As you wish, my boy.” Blake looked relieved and followed Winchester as he made to leave the room. Delta grabbed him by the elbow.

“Blake, you best be damn sure that he doesn’t come to set. It will ruin the mood,” Delta hissed in his ear.

Blake opened his mouth to speak, but there was a sudden commotion outside. Winchester made a surprised cry and the sound of a wooden snap cracked the air. Blake and Delta looked forward just in time to see Caspar Winchester tumble over the landing, taking the support rail with him.

Someone downstairs screamed. A chorus of voices bubbled up from the first floor. Blake made to run forward, but Delta threw out her arm to block him. “Wait! He tripped on something!” She edged towards the door and looked down. It was covered in small white beads. “What in the world?”

Blake stood behind her biting his knuckles as she knelt on the floor. The sounds from downstairs grew louder as people began running into the first floor foyer to see what had happened. Deta ignored the noise and Blake's fretting and picked up a lustrous bead, running it between her fingers. It slipped away, seemingly coated in something greasy. "These are pearls," she said, rising. "Do you know anyone who wears pearls, Blake?"

His face went white. "Christina," he said. "Christina always wore a set of pearls."

The commotion downstairs was too much to ignore. They exchanged a glance and carefully exited the room, making sure not to step on any of the beads on the landing and then rushed downstairs.

There was blood on the floor, but someone, one of the medics kept on set, was already kneeling over Winchester, listening to his breathing. "He's alive," the man announced to the circle of people. "It looks like he banged his head in the fall. And landed on his back. No one move him! His neck could be broken! We have to get the ambulance in here."

A quiet murmur went through the crowd. Delta was silent, scanning faces. There were crew members she didn't know, a few of the actors, the girl Eliza, and there was Rhett, looking shocked in the corner. She squinted, seeing motion in one of the doorways. A blonde head was weaving between people, elbowing her way through the crowd. "Blake! What happened?" Ruby Adams made her way to them.

"I don't know!" Blake said, distraught. "This is a disaster! Everything is ruined." He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

Rhett elbowed his way out of the corner and towards the three of them. He looked amazing, Delta couldn't help but notice. His hair was slightly tousled, a loose golden wave falling onto his forehead. "Now Blake," he said, putting a hand on the director's shoulder. "Don't worry. I'm sure he is going to be all right."

"It's not just that," said Blake. "We couldn't afford another disaster. What's going to happen to us now?"

What indeed, thought Delta as she looked over each face. One of the people here was probably the person who had killed Christina. It couldn't have been an accident. She grit her teeth and took out her phone. It was time to call Stanford.

Stanford crossed his arms, highlighting the toned muscles of his shoulders and biceps under his checkered button-up. "Mr. Hartford, we need this room closed off. Police only."

A vein in Blake's temple seemed to throb. "I can't close off the room. We have to clean up this mess and replace these bannisters for the shooting tomorrow! And the money! Ugh! We had to sign a waiver with the plantation owners that they could fine us if any damage happened to the original parts of the house."

Stanford's jaw clenched. "You'll have to wait. We're considering this a crime scene." He dropped his voice low enough so that only Blake and Delta could hear. "Robbins and I are going to need to sweep it for evidence."

Blake began to pace the room in front of them. "You can't understand the stress I'm under, Detective!"

Stanford gave him a dirty look. "Once we've interviewed everyone present and done a full sweep you can have your set back."

Blake grabbed Delta's forearm. "Come on, Delta. Don't do this to me. I can't afford anymore setbacks on this production!"

"I'm sorry, Blake," she said, extracting her arm. "But Detective Stanford," she screwed up her mouth, "is right about this one. With all the accidents on set, this must be deliberate. If you want to catch whoever is trying to sabotage your production, then you have to let us do our jobs."

He made an unhappy sound and took off his glasses. "Fine. Just hurry it up if you could." He looked around at the few members of his crew who were still milling about in the room. "Everyone out!" he yelled, crossing his arms as his assistants fled.

Stanford's hazel eyes shot to the closed door. "Go back to the dining room to wait with the other witnesses, Mr. Hartford. Officer Harper will take your statement."

Blake gave Delta another pleading look, but when she didn't move, he stalked out of the room, closing the door a little too firmly behind him.

"So what do you think, Robbins?" Stanford said, already taking the stairs two at a time. He took out some latex gloves from his back pocket, passing her a pair. She followed him, yanking them on over her hands.

"Quite frankly, Winchester sucked. I can't imagine that he is well-liked. It could be that someone tried to kill him for reasons separate from Christina's murder."

"Hmm." He knelt at the top of the stair, fiddling with an evidence bag. She looked at the carpet to avoid checking out his shapely rear-end. "What are these?"

"Pearls, I think."

"Real?"

"Not sure. Pass me one." He raised an eyebrow but passed her a small white bead. She wiped it against her shirt and placed it against her front tooth, sliding it slowly along the edge before passing it back to him. "They're real."

He took it incredulously, watching her. "And you can tell that with your mouth?" He smirked. "I'm sure you're quite talented in that department, Robbins, but—"

"Real pearls have a gritty texture against your teeth," she interrupted. "A fake one is smooth." She flicked her tongue over her lips as he watched. "Those are definitely real. My mother used to work for a jeweler back in New Orleans."

He studied the pearl for a moment. "Well, I'll be... I've never heard of that one before."

"Well, you've probably never worn pearls before."

He snorted. "Given out a few necklaces, though."

She nearly choked on her own spit. "Stanford!"

He grinned, clearly proud of himself. "That was funny, admit it."

She rolled her eyes. "Very mature," she said, suppressing a smile. He grinned, revealing a dimple on the right side of his face. She had never noticed it before. It faded quickly as his hazel eyes returned to the bead. "So Winchester slipped on them?" he said, getting back to business.

"It looked like they were placed there deliberately, but whoever did it would have had to have been very quick. We were all in the bedroom at the time. We spent only a few minutes looking at the room, and then came back out. Winchester went first. There was no one else on the landing when he went out, not that I saw, anyhow. Plus they seem to be coated in something slippery. This wasn't an accident. And Blake said that Christina used to wear pearls."

Stanford snorted. "I'm not saying he's not a suspect anymore, but is it starting to seem like someone here is deliberately fucking with Blake? He is getting really riled up."

She shrugged. "He seems well-liked. Well, by most people."

"And who doesn't like him?"

"As far as I can tell, just the costume designer, Marvin Khandari."

"Right. Well, let's think. Maybe he got a little too friendly with one of his actresses and she wants payback?"

Delta snorted. "Like who? Ruby? There's no way. She's too busy to orchestrate something like that. She is always rushing off."

"Hm, well, do you remember anything else? Did you not hear anyone outside the door? Footsteps?"

"None that I noticed." Delta sighed. "I was distracted though. Good plaster work on the mantel."

"Well, keep thinking. Maybe you'll remember something useful for once."

She was ready to glare at him, but his expression was lighthearted. "Let's just get this over with. I have a million lines to learn!"

He gave her an exasperated look, but they quickly got to work, taking photos of the pearls scattered all over the hardwood floor before bagging them. Delta knees were starting to ache when she noticed the

large gap in the railing where Winchester had plunged to the first floor. "Look at this," Delta pointed. Stanford knelt beside her.

She traced a finger in the fine grained material on the floor. "Looks like sawdust," she said. "I wonder..." She reached out and grabbed one of the elegantly curved spindles that supported the remaining guard railing. It clipped out of place immediately. "Look at these balusters."

"They've been sawed." Stanford chewed on his lip.

Delta scowled. "I can't believe anyone would damage the woodwork like this! These were probably original to the house!"

Stanford raised an eyebrow. "What you meant to say was that you can't believe anyone would actually pull a trick like this. This is like a classic dime store mystery."

She ran her fingers over the curved wood. "Whoever would do this to original woodwork must be a psychopath."

He frowned. "I'm glad you aren't our profiler. Anyways, who would have access to a saw?"

"One of the set builders? Or anyone who could get to a hardware store."

"Good point. Dead end."

"We can see if we can get any prints off of it."

He sighed. "It's a stair railing. I bet everyone in here's touched it." Still, he took out his kit and tried. They worked in silence for a few minutes, covering the rails. "You finding anything?"

"No." There were hundreds of prints all over the railing, smudged, covering each other. Nothing they found here would be useful. She stood and stretched her back. "All right, we've done all that we can here."

"I guess you have to go comfort Hartford, huh?" His tone was casual, arrogant, dismissive.

She licked her lips and looked away, finding that she wasn't in the mood to try and rile him up. "He's kind of getting on my nerves lately. Not that it's any of your business."

He stood quickly and took a step forward to face her. She suddenly found herself looking up at him and his tightly clenched jaw, his broad chest inches away. Her cheeks flushed as she inadvertently remembered the last time that he had been so close.

“Right, I guess it’s not like we’re supposed to be working on a case together or something,” he frowned. “Why would you rubbing elbows... and God knows what else... with a potential suspect be any of my business?”

“Maybe I will go check on Blake,” she said scornfully, annoyed that he hadn’t responded the way she wanted to her overture of friendliness.

“Fine,” he said, shrugging his shoulders into an affected nonchalance.

“Fine!” She swallowed hard.

Neither of them moved. She turned awkwardly on her heel, and strode past him, steeling herself with a deep breath. The scent of his body filled her nose—soap and sandalwood and something else masculine and primal. She hurried down the stairs, trying to escape it. She didn’t look back, but she could see him as clearly as if she had eyes in the back of her head—scowling down at her from the landing with his cold, hazel-gray eyes.

Chapter Six: Light the Flame

“Oh Delta,” said Blake, raking his hands through his wavy hair, which was in much worse shape today. “I was hoping to run into you.” She had just arrived at the plantation after a blur of a morning—running through lines and having a final fitting with Marin. Besides the scent of fresh lumber and paint, it was hard to tell that there had been an accident at the plantation only the evening before. The crew had

worked through the night, managing to get the house repaired enough to resume shooting.

“How are you holding up?” asked Delta. She was glad that she had decided to make the drive out to Manderly. She wasn’t in any of the scenes that they were planning to shoot that day, but she needed any chance she could get to find more information about the case.

“Not so great.” He swallowed hard and fiddled with his hands. “I’ve just had a call from Winchester.”

“He’s awake? I thought that would be good news.”

Blake waved his hand dismissively. “Yes, well, that’s good news, of course. But what he had to say to me was,” he lowered his head into his hands, “disheartening.”

“What happened?”

“He’s pulling out the production. He said that there have been too many accidents and thinks that it is worth it to pull the plug on the whole thing.” He swallowed hard. His Adam’s apple bobbed under his thick stubble. “He was quite adamant.”

Delta tapped a finger on the table. “But he isn’t the only producer, right?” She noticed the dark circles under Blake’s eyes behind the black rims of his hipster glasses. The dark purple shirt he had put on today only emphasized them.

“No, but he may try to convince the board. And if he pulls out, then everyone might pull out.” He sighed and sunk down into the couch. “I don’t know if I can take any more bad news. I’m afraid that Winchester will win over everyone else. He told me that making this movie wasn’t worth the risk to other people’s lives.”

“Maybe he’s right. Someone did murder Christina. If the incidents are related, then this person will go to any lengths to stop your film.” She sat beside him, tucking one leg behind the other.

He banged a fist on the end table. A lamp rattled. “I’m trying to make art, dammit! Great artists always face setbacks. We just have to persevere. This isn’t just about me anymore. If this movie doesn’t get made, then Christina died for nothing!”

Delta frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means that we can't let her killer win!" His face seemed to brighten. "Hey, maybe this could actually be good for us. I bet we can spin it!" He leapt to his feet with a huge smile. "How did I never think of this before? The publicity could be amazing! A cursed film? Everyone will want to see it when they hear about the hype. This could be it, Delta. This could save us!"

"Are you referring to a young woman's murder as hype?"

"I didn't mean it like that and you know it. But I have to call the board right away. I think I could really sell this to them." He bounced on his feet and yanked open the parlour door.

Delta trailed behind him. "Blake, I think—"

He scowled suddenly. "What's Billy doing here?"

She came over to his side and peered out into the foyer. Billy Perle, looking effortlessly sexy, had just entered with a group of people that Delta didn't recognize. Blake strode into the foyer. She followed.

Marvin was with them, gesturing around to the top of the staircase. He was wearing a pale purple coat today with a bright yellow shirt on underneath. "And this is where he fell..."

"Marvin!" barked Blake, "can I talk to you for a moment? In the parlour?" He turned on his heel before getting an answer.

Delta looked between Billy and the group of strangers and chose to follow Marvin and Blake back to the parlour. She shut the door behind them. The latch clicked softly into place. Blake barely glanced up at her as she strode up to them.

"What did I tell you about bringing Billy and his porn friends on set?" A vein seemed to bulge in his neck.

Marvin scowled and tugged irritably at the hem of his embroidered coat. "What do you care? They're just taking a tour of the plantation."

"First of all, you know we don't need the extra bodies. This place is packed as is! And second, I don't want those sorts of people associated with this movie!"

“You need to get over yourself, Blake. Just because they do porn doesn’t mean that they’re bad people.” He put his hands on his hips, head tilted defiantly.

“It’s not about that. It’s about our reputation. I need this movie to be taken seriously!”

Marvin rolled his eyes. “Then you need to do some serious directing and stop butchering history.” His voice was notably raised and it looked like there was a hint of red flushing the dark skin of his neck, creeping up above the bright yellow collar of his shirt.

Blake threw up his hands. “Not this again! Let it go!”

“How can I let it go? People are going to think that I don’t know anything about 19th century clothing! This shit goes on my resume, Blake!”

Blake took a step forward, pointing a furious finger at Marvin. “I’ll tell you what should be on your resume! That you sure as hell don’t know how to take direction!”

“Boys,” interrupted Delta, holding her hands up. “Maybe you two should take a break. This conversation seems to be getting out of hand.”

Marvin shot Blake a withering glare. “She’s right. There’s no use trying to talk sense into someone with such a thick head. You don’t have vision, Blake Hartford, and that’s what’s ruining this movie.”

“Well, it’s probably the murder and accidents that are actually ruining the movie,” said Delta in an even tone.

Blake glared at her. “I have a plan for that!”

Marvin turned on his heel and marched out of the room. “Finally you have a plan for something,” he muttered.

“Blake, you need to cool off. I’ll catch up with you later. Go call your producers or whatever and tell them your plan.” She frowned as she walked away, following Marvin out the door. She didn’t think that Stanford’s theory about Blake sabotaging his own film could possibly be correct considering how much stress he was under, but it was true that she was growing progressively less fond of him. When she returned to the foyer, Marvin was rounding up Billy’s porn star friends. She gave

them a cursory glance and realized that Billy himself was nowhere to be seen. She walked around the house looking for him.

She finally found him outside, in the shadow of a large oak tree in the ornamental garden, seemingly involved in an intense discussion with Ruby Adams. The two of them were leaning in closely, making sharp gesticulations. Delta narrowed her eyes and approached them slowly. They hadn't noticed her yet, but it was difficult to sneak up on them in plain sight, walking on the dried, crunching lawn.

She had been hoping to get close enough to hear what they were talking about, but their whispers died away as soon as she was a few feet away. Ruby glared at her, and then looked back at Billy, with her lips pressed firmly together. "Think about it," she said before glancing back at Delta and then hurrying away, blonde ponytail bouncing behind her.

"Nice to see you too, Ruby," said Delta to her retreating back. She was pleased to see that Ruby's long bangs were sticking together in sweat and that her ponytail was frizzy from the humidity.

Billy shifted his weight uncomfortably to his other foot as she approached him. "Hi Delta." He fanned himself with one hand and leaned against the thick trunk of the oak.

She cut right to the chase. "I thought that you and Ruby didn't know each other."

His eyes narrowed. "We don't."

"Seemed like you were having a fight."

"We just met. She asked me for a favor. I said no."

"What kind of favor?" Delta kept her voice light, casual.

"I can't say. I'm sorry to be rude, but will you excuse me? I need to find Marv. Plus it's hot as hell out here." A trickle of sweat slipped over his forehead and down his high cheekbones in perfect timing.

"He walked out after fighting with Blake," Delta told him. "But your friends are still inside, I think."

Billy crossed his arms. "Great—more drama. That's all I need right now." He turned to walk away, remembered his manners and gave her a small wave. "See you later, Delta."

Delta leaned back against the tree and crossed her arms. Things about this case just weren't adding up. Blake and Marvin clearly didn't get along, but was that really enough of a motive for Marvin to try to sabotage the film? With his griping about the accuracy of his costumes and his comment about loving history, she found it hard to believe that he would damage the old plantation. As for Blake, could she really be sure that he didn't drum the whole accident thing up to create more publicity for his picture? And what about Ruby, who seemed to be at the center of everything? Disliked by everyone except the murder victim, and now starting fights with people she had just met? Delta sighed. She just couldn't seem to make sense of things.

She wondered if Stanford had made any progress yet. Her hands itched over the pocket of her jeans where her cell phone was stuffed. She could call him to check in. But would it sound like she was asking for help? She shoved her hands back into her front pockets. There was only one thing that she could think to do. She had to try to talk to Ruby again, to get more information. She knew that Ruby was somehow the epicenter of all the drama on set.

She jogged back across the garden and around the front of the plantation, just in time to see Ruby walking through the parking lot. "Hey Ruby! Wait up!" Delta sprinted towards her. Ruby looked up and then down, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder.

"What? Didn't I just see you?" she narrowed her eyes as Delta got within normal speaking distance.

"I feel like we haven't had a chance to get to know each other," said Delta. "Maybe we got off on the wrong foot last time." She pushed a sweaty lock of her own dark hair off of her forehead. The sun shone unrelentingly down from above and heat radiated off the crumbling black asphalt of the parking lot.

"Yeah." Ruby glanced at her nails. "That's on purpose."

"Were you this nice to Billy, too? I saw you guys talking back there. Looked kind of heated."

Ruby's blue eyes met hers aggressively. "So what? Because I was arguing with Billy Pearle, you think that I have something to do with Christina's death?"

"What? No."

"Do you think I'm stupid, Delta? There's something off about you—always following me around, chasing me through parking lots, asking me too many questions. I'm not looking for friends, OK? I don't need friends. So either you're some kind of weird stalker, or maybe you're a cop or a private eye or something. Either way, get lost. I don't have the time to deal with your bullshit right now."

"I'm just a big fan, Ruby. Jesus. Chill out."

Ruby smirked as a dark car pulled up into the lot. Delta recognized it. It was a black sedan—the one that Stanford used when he was on duty. He pulled into a spot nearby. "Maybe you are, maybe you aren't. Like I said, I couldn't care less what you do as long as you stay out of my way."

"Are you threatening me?"

She glanced up at the sound of a car door closing. "That detective over there—you know him somehow, it's pretty clear." Her sharp blue eyes turned on Delta's face.

"I barely know him," said Delta, trying to keep her reaction neutral.

Ruby laughed. "Don't lie to me, Delta. I study other people's behavior for a living."

"I'm not lying."

"You're hiding something, Bayou. I don't care what it is, but if you don't stay out of my business, I'll find out just exactly what it is and make sure the rest of the world knows as well."

Stanford was crossing the parking lot now, eyes darting between the two women.

"Do whatever you want, Ruby."

A calculating look passed over Ruby's face as she smiled. She turned abruptly and began to walk over to Stanford. "Detective Stanford!" she crooned. "I was hoping to see you! Can I talk to you about restraining

orders? I may have a fan that's crossing the line." She laid a hand on his bicep and looked up at him with wide, innocent eyes. "It's getting a little weird." She looked meaningfully at Delta.

Stanford glanced between Delta and Ruby, but Ruby was already steering him away, towards the mansion. She shot a hateful smirk over her shoulder at Delta as she left.

Delta's fingers twitched at her side, curling into a fist. "Bitch," she hissed under breath. "That fucking bitch." She stomped over to her car and sank down into the seat, scowling as she rolled down her windows to combat the wall of oven hot air. She threw the car in drive. It was time to break into Ruby's trailer. It was clear that she was hiding something. It was up to Delta to find out what.

The studio was quiet, most of the staff having been called over to the plantation to start setting up the evening's shoot. Delta ran in to no one as she walked down the carpeted hall that led to Blake's small office. There were no windows in the dingy hall, and the fluorescents buzzed softly overhead. She hummed an off-key melody as she strode confidently to Blake's door. The silver knob refused to turn under her hand. It was locked, of course, but that wasn't surprising. She gave the door a good shake. It rattled slightly in its frame.

She rifled through her purse and yanked an expired credit card from her wallet. Looking over her shoulder one more time to make sure that there was no one around, she slipped the edge of the card into the gap between the door and the frame, dragging it down to where the lock caught in its socket. It was almost too easy. The door popped open quietly, and Delta slipped inside, shutting it quickly.

Blake's office was thankfully more organized than his trailer. All of his files were in apple pie order and it didn't take long for Delta to locate the number of Ruby's trailer and the spare key, hanging up on a corkboard behind Blake's desk. She knew that she should hurry, but her fingers twitched as she noticed Blake's laptop, open on his desk. A stapled stack of papers was lying over the keyboard.

She shook the mouse and the bubbles screensaver fell away to reveal Blake's email. She skimmed. It seemed that he hadn't been lying. The production really was in hot water. The question was just if that was by design or not. She would have liked to look for more on his computer, but she needed to make sure that she had plenty of time to sneak in and out of Ruby's before filming ended for the day. Reluctantly, she let go of the mouse and flipped over the packet of papers on the keyboard.

It was a detailed list of the filming schedule. She paged through and was surprised when an unsealed envelope fell out of the packet. She quickly opened it. Her eyes went wide. It was an insurance claim, signed by Blake. Suspicious, but not damning considering the accident yesterday. She quickly took a picture on her phone and stuffed it back in the packet, returning the papers to his desk. She clicked off the lamp.

Her heart was beating wildly as she peeked through the crack in the door. Seeing that the coast was clear, she let herself quickly out into the hallway. Her mind was racing. An insurance claim did not make matters look better for Blake. She should tell Stanford what she found, but she hesitated, biting her lip and she walked quickly down the hall. Her gut was telling her that Blake was innocent, no matter how bad it looked for him. She knew that Ruby had to be at the center of everything that was going on. She couldn't let Stanford rush to any hasty conclusions.

A door opened down the hall. Her heart skipped a beat, even though she knew that there was no way for anyone to know that she had just broken into Blake's office. Pippa stepped into the hall, humming lightly to herself. She made a small sound of surprise as she looked up and saw Delta.

"Delta! You startled me! I didn't think that anyone would be over here this afternoon with everything happening over at the plantation."

"I... left something on set after rehearsing today. Just coming to pick it up."

"Yeah. Same here! I forgot to bring Ruby's special foundation. Her skin is sensitive so there is a special brand we use just for her. I stupidly forgot to pack it up in my kit to take to the plantation for tonight."

“Oh, so you must be in a rush to get back.”

Pippa smiled. “Lord, no. It’s crazy over there. Blake is flipping out on everyone, and we’re already going to be behind schedule because Rhett was late.” She glanced at her watch. “And I’ve still got to get Ruby into makeup.” She help up a small bottle from her purse. “And they can’t start makeup without me!”

Their eyes met for a moment too long. Delta gave Pippa a charming smile. “What time will you be done?”

Pippa looked at her watch. “I’ll be finished by eight. One of my assistants will handle touch-ups during the shooting tonight.”

“Would you want to get a drink or something with me?” Delta said coyly.

Pippa returned her gaze under her dark lashes. “I’m on set early tomorrow... But... maybe I could use a drink.”

“Text me when you’re done,” Delta grinned.

Pippa smiled back at her shyly and nodded. “I will.” She seemed to remember that she was in a rush and touched her bag. “I’ll see you soon. I have to go!”

“No problem,” said Delta. And it wasn’t. It was time to break into Ruby’s trailer.

The lot where the trailers were parked was completely deserted. Delta walked purposefully through the maze of small metal buildings, cursing the heat. Ruby’s trailer was close to the back, more secluded than some of the others and Delta tried to appear as if she belonged there as she strode up to the door and unlocked it quickly.

The smell hit her first, the lingering perfume of incense and scented candles, a cacophony of scents: jasmine, cherry, orange blossom, and vanilla musk. Delta sneezed and reached into her bag, taking out her phone and taking some pictures as she looked cautiously around the trailer. It was much nicer than the inside of Blake’s. Ruby had decorated with tasteful modern touches—plush throw pillows and cozy blankets, succulents on the counters. Candles cluttered the tabletop, and Delta

bent to examine them. She wouldn't know for sure without a chemical analysis, but none seemed to be the exact same consistency as the wax that had been found on Christina's body. Besides, that hadn't been scented and these definitely were.

Deciding to investigate another avenue, Delta opened all of the drawers and cupboards. Nothing stood out at her at first. There was an unsurprising assortment coffee mugs, bowls, makeup, and clothes. In the bedroom area, she opened a case that contained some jewelry. Her pulse seemed to speed as she spied a strand of beaded pearls. But no, they were fake, she concluded by touching them. And besides, this strand was intact. The beads on the landing had been unstrung. She shut the jewelry case and bit her lip, turning towards the nightstand.

It apparently contained Ruby's reading materials. Delta found an extra copy of the script, a copy of Ruby's contract, an erotic novel, and a plastic three-ring binder. Delta frowned at it and slid it out from underneath the other papers.

The pages inside were covered in a thin plastic film. She studied them in surprise. They appeared to be notes and photographs of various actors and models. On one of the first pages were pictures of Christina Eaves in very compromising positions. The page was circled, Christina's name marked in fluorescent highlighter. A few pages later, Delta saw another familiar face—Billy Perle. His page included stills from some of his films, along with notes about what Delta assumed to be his filmography. His page was circled as well, name emphasized in the same bright highlighter. Besides Billy and Christina, Delta noted a few other pages had been circled. She wondered what it could mean and quickly snapped some pictures, disappointed that instead of answers she had only found more questions.

It was well after midnight when Pippa and Delta returned from the bar, but Delta wasn't tired yet. Pippa had sipped white wine from a long stemmed glass as delicately as a hummingbird from a flower. Delta had slowed down to match her while they traded childhood stories and got

to know each other better. Pippa was something special. Delta could see it. She was sweet, thoughtful, and shy... nothing like any of Delta's previous exes. And because of her naivety, it hadn't taken much at all for Delta to finagle an invitation back to Pippa's trailer.

Pippa's keys jingled in the door as she opened it. Delta followed her into the small space. It was much tinier than Ruby and Blake's trailers had been, but felt cosier. A pleasant scent greeted her. Soft herbs and flowers, with a hint of sandalwood underneath. She breathed in deeply and her heart fluttered. It was not an overpowering scent, like in Ruby's trailer. Pippa's taste was much less garish. She flicked on an overhead light as Pippa sat her bag down.

"Ugh, not that," Pippa said. She bent and opened a row of cabinets near the door, pulling out a tray of candles and a lighter. "Turn those off," she said as she lit the wick of a candle.

Delta obeyed, and the small room was filled with soft candle light. When Pippa finished lighting a few more candles, she sank into the padded bench that was pushed against the wall, across from the mirrored wall. Delta sat beside her.

Pippa gave her a friendly smile as she reached behind her own back to rub her shoulder. "The stress has really been getting to everyone, huh? I've never seen a production with people so keyed up. And now with Mr. Winchester's accident..." she sighed. "I wonder if they are going to cancel the production."

"What happens to you if they do?"

"I've got to find another gig, and on short notice. I try to line things up before shooting wraps so I'll know where I'll be. Who knows what kind of work I'll find..."

"Sounds terrible."

"It's OK," Pippa shrugged. "If I can't find a movie to work on, then I can just try to freelance. I've done it before, in between productions. There are a lot of people in LA who like to get their makeup done professionally."

"You must meet some really interesting people."

Pippa gave her a shy smile. "Sure I do. People like you." Her lashes fluttered over her dark eyes. Her pupils blended into her dark irises in the low light.

"Me? I'm not interesting!" Delta really wasn't. Her life consisted solely of work, HGTV, and the occasional hookup.

"Sure you are," said Pippa. "You're so sexy. And... dangerous. I don't know. Something about you is just... I never know what you're going to do next."

"Pippa... Are you flirting with me?"

Pippa grinned awkwardly and looked at the ground. "Maybe I am."

"Then turn around," Delta said in a low voice. Pippa turned on the couch, exposing her back to Delta, who reached up slowly, and ran her fingers over the warm skin of Pippa's neck, to the tops of her bare shoulders. She ran her hands over them slowly, breathing in Pippa's delicate scent. Her muscles really were tense. Delta could feel how bunched up they were under her fingers. She worked her thumb into the tissue, feeling rewarded as Pippa let out a small breath of pleasure. "I can do even better than this if you have any oil."

She could see the side of Pippa's smile from her half turned face. "In the cabinet on the left."

Delta found it quickly and spread the slippery liquid between her palms, warming it up between her hands. "Take off your shirt," she commanded.

She saw Pippa hesitate for a moment, bite her lip. But then she raised her yellow top over her head, yanking off the loose material and exposing the soft skin of her back to Delta. She was not wearing a bra. Delta took in a quick breath of pleased surprise and slid her fingers over naked Pippa's back, kneading the muscles as she went along, first along the spine, then the shoulders blades, and then up to the curve of Pippa's shoulders.

Pippa was breathing in slow, measured breaths, moaning softly now and then as Delta loosened her muscles. Delta's own breathing was coming in slow gasps. Pippa's skin was like silk under her wet fingers.

She licked her lips and trailed her fingers lightly down Pippa's spin and then around her ribs, following their slight curve forwards. Slowly she slid her hands upwards, until she felt the soft curve of Pippa's breasts in her hands. Pippa moaned softly as Delta cupped them lightly, letting her fingers brush against the hard nub of her nipples. She slid her fingers around them, playing with them gently. Pippa shivered beneath her touch, arching her back against Delta.

"Delta," Pippa breathed softly, "I don't know if we should do this..."

"Why not?" Delta bent her neck to the back of Pippa's, kissing the velvety skin at the nape of her neck, under the mass of her curls.

Pippa hesitated, and Delta drew back her hands, resting them innocently on Pippa's shoulder.

"I was... involved with Christina."

"What?" She almost coughed.

"It was a few months ago, right when the production started."

"Did you tell Sta—the cops?"

"No!" Pippa said miserably. "I... Look, it didn't last long with Christina and things ended so badly. I didn't want them to think that I had motive. And, you know, this isn't California! I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to let strangers down here know that I was a lesbian." She turned to face Delta. Her dark eyes were wild and apologetic.

Delta narrowed her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, suddenly less interested in Pippa's breasts. "Well, what happened to make it end so badly?" She was half afraid of what Pippa would confess to. She wasn't sure if she wanted to hear.

"Me and Christina, we hooked up a couple of times. She was nice, but kind of wild. At first I liked it, but then ... things started going missing from my room, from my office."

"What kinds of things?"

Pippa scooted over, reached for her shirt, and pulled her shirt back over her head. "Small things. Makeup, mostly. It was so small at first that I thought I was imagining it."

"Did you tell Blake or anyone?"

"No, I didn't want to accuse Christina, but it was always after she came over, so eventually I called her on it."

"What happened?"

"What do you think happened? We got into a huge fight. She told me that I was crazy and started insulting me. I yelled at her, especially because she kept ditching me to hang out with Rhett. Plus she had been so shady. I thought that maybe she was selling the things that she stole from me. Some of the cosmetics are quite expensive, you know. She told me that I didn't get it at all and that she was going to be famous one day and that I was just a speed bump along the way."

"Sounds like things got fairly heated."

Pippa sighed. "Yeah. That doesn't mean I wanted her to die though."

"How long ago was that, Pippa?"

"The fight was about two months ago. We barely spoke after that."

"When's the last time you spoke to her?"

"Well I did her makeup the day she died. But..." Pippa hesitated. "The night before, she came to my room, asking me for help."

"With what?"

"A medical problem! And I helped her and then when she was gone, I noticed that she made off with another jar of my makeup!"

"What did she take?"

"A special blend of pearl powder," Pippa scowled. "It's like a highlighter. I use it to... emphasize heaving bosoms and on faces."

"Anything else it could be used for?"

Pippa shrugged and stood. "I don't know. It's expensive, but it's not like anyone would want to buy used cosmetics. I don't know what Christina was up to." She sighed. "Maybe she was just a klepto. Anyways, I'm just... not trying to rush into anything right now. I hope you understand." Her eyes welled with tears. "It's been so hard to pretend like nothing is wrong. That Christina was just my acquaintance, nothing more... And I really like you, I had an awesome time tonight, I just..."

Delta stood as well, and Pippa took her hand. "I get it. We've all been burned by our exes." A face flickered in her mind's eye. Sasha, the beautiful, intelligent drug dealer who had played Delta for a fool.

Pippa rose on her tiptoes and gave Delta a kiss on the cheek. "Maybe we can still go out sometime. Get to know each other a little more first."

Delta smiled to put Pippa at ease. "Sure. Don't worry though. I'm not like Christina. I'm not going to steal your stuff."

"I know." Before she could say more, there was a sudden buzzing sound from the counter. Pippa's phone was going off in her purse. She huffed out a sigh and pulled out her phone, wiping away the tears. "Shit, I've got to go," she said glancing at her screen. "They need me on set. There's one more scene to film and the assistant makeup artist can't seem to find the shade they need to fix Ruby's makeup." She blew out the candle, leaving the scent of a burnt wick in the room.

Delta eyed the door. "Hey, do you mind if I borrow your bathroom?"

"Sure. I just gotta go. Make sure you lock the door after you leave?"

"Of course."

"See you tomorrow, maybe?" Pippa called, already hurrying down the steps.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow." Delta turned back into the darkened trailer and knelt to where she had seen Pippa pull out the tray of candles. She frowned. There, in the back was a box of narrow, off-white tapers. They looked suspiciously like the wax that had been on Christina's body. Delta groaned to herself and quickly took one, stuffing it into an evidence bag she had in her purse. "Sorry, Pippa," she grimaced as she sealed it up, stowing it away for safe-keeping.

Chapter Seven: Lights, Cameras, and Action

The brick station house was prosaic compared to the elegance that Delta had become used to at the plantation. She walked through the plain glass doors grumpily, stalking towards her cubicle, and ignoring the looks from her coworkers before sinking into her spinny chair, feeling inexplicably grumpy as she turned her computer on.

A round freckled face with bright red hair popped into the edge of her cubicle. “Hiya, Robbins.”

“Harper,” she nodded as she logged in.

“Been awhile since you came into the station.” he said cheerfully. “How’s the case?”

She sighed as she took out a folder of notes from her bag. “Complicated. And I’m running behind on the paperwork, of course. I suppose y’all have already run background checks on most of the cast?”

“Still waiting to hear back about a few, but yeah.” Harper grinned. “So did you meet Ruby Adams?”

“Yes. What about the makeup artist? Did you run her info yet?”

Harper scratched his head. “I don’t know. Want me to ask Stanford?”

Delta clicked her mouse with vigor. “No. I’ll talk to him myself. Don’t you have some work to do? I need to work on these files.”

Dylan Harper shrugged as another man, this one with receding brown hair and what could generously be called love handles, or less generously a beer gut, strode up to Delta’s desk. “Heard you’re going to be a celebrity,” Mitch Panier grinned and winked at Harper, who was still hanging over the edge of the gray half-wall that ran around half of her cube.

Delta flashed him an empty smile, eyes returning quickly to her screen as she typed. “I’m already a celebrity, Panier.”

He chuckled. "I like your confidence, girl."

"Woman," Delta corrected. She finished typing Pippa's information into the search database and cracked her knuckles, which made Harper grimace in disgust. She rolled her eyes at him and pushed away from her desk abruptly. "Seriously don't you two have any work to do?"

"What's Ruby Adams like?" Panier said.

She sighed. "Stanford in his office?" She didn't know why Stanford got an office and she didn't, but she tried not to let it rankle her.

Harper blinked. "Yeah. Are you seriously not going to tell us about Ruby?"

"Visit the set yourself, if you're so curious. Now if you'll excuse me, boys, I've got work to do. Apparently I'm the only one who does."

The door was open, so she didn't bother knocking. Stanford looked up immediately from his screen. His brown hair was a bit mussed. He must have been running his fingers through it, she thought, remembering how it had looked that night, after she had run her hands through it. She felt her cheeks getting hot and looked at the wood-paneled wall, where a picture of a Second Empire style Victorian building hung. "What's this?"

"The old police station. They tore it down in the '80s to build this one."

She grimaced. "What a waste of a building."

"I know." He stood slowly and walked around to look at the picture with her.

Her eyes traveled to the other photos on his wall, other historic buildings, a set of blueprints, a photo of a family, huddled around a dog. "I didn't know you liked architecture," she said, eyeing the blueprints.

"My dad was an architect and builder. That's our house right there. He built it." He gestured to the photo of the family, standing in front of a nice house. "I used to help him build houses in the summer."

She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the thought of Stanford, covered in sweat, grouting subway tiles in a renovated turn-of-the-century bath, the way his arms would look swinging a hammer as he

secured shiplap, revitalizing a rustic living room. The muscles of his shoulders bunching as he hung a sliding barn door. *No, no, no.* "I have some info about the case."

He turned away and went back to his desk. Delta shivered. She could almost feel the heat in the air from where he had been standing. She settled herself into one of the hard plastic chairs in front of his desk, effecting an air of nonchalance. "Pippa Rose had a romantic connection with Christina Eaves."

Stanford's brows lowered. "She didn't mention that in the interviews."

"Well, apparently, they argued. She didn't want to seem like a suspect."

He flicked a pen between his fingers, making it dance across his knuckles. "And no wonder. That's incredibly suspicious."

Delta shrugged. "I don't think she did it, but I did find this." She extracted the plastic bag containing the candle from her bag. "It was in her trailer on set. She had a ton of them."

"You don't seem to think anybody did it," he said. When she didn't respond, he squinted at the taper. "It does look like the same color as the wax that was found on Christina."

"There is something else. You mentioned that the victim was covered in a powder? Pippa said that she thought that Christina had stolen some kind of powder from her. Pearl powder, she called it."

"I'll see what the technicians say. I should be hearing back from them today. And I'll send this," he took the candle, "over to the lab to see if it's a match. Anything else I should know about?"

Delta hesitated. "I saw a book in Ruby Adams's trailer. There were pictures of actors in it. Some of them were circled and highlighted. One of them was Christina."

He sat up straighter. "What? Who else?"

"Billy Perle, Marvin Kandhari's boyfriend. A few others, people I didn't know."

"Do you have access to the pictures? Did Ruby show them to you?"

“Not exactly. I sort of snuck a peek in her trailer.”

He cleared his throat. “I trust that you were in there for legitimate reasons and that you would in no way danger the investigation by obtaining evidence that would be considered inadmissible without a warrant.”

“Relax, it was just a glance. I can try to get her to show it to me. Unless you think you could get a warrant?”

“For what? I don’t have anything on her.” He huffed in frustration. “Something is off about her though.”

“What makes you say that?”

He put the pen back down on the desk. “She told me that she might have a stalker.”

“Riiiiight, I heard her say that, but I thought that she said it to get under my skin.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I had been hounding her for questions, and she didn’t like it.”

Stanford snorted. “Well, she doesn’t like you, that much is true. She went as far as to suggest that perhaps you had orchestrated Christina’s murder in order to get the part.”

“Are you joking? What a bitch! I’m surprised she isn’t the one someone murdered!” She stretched back in the chair and cracked her knuckles again. “Well, what else did she say about the stalker?”

Stanford tapped a finger on the desk. “She didn’t say much, just that she had been getting some threatening messages. She wouldn’t let me see them.”

“That’s weird, especially if she asked for your help.”

“Yes, it is. I’m going to head over to the plantation later today to see if I can convince her to let me see. It might have something to do with the case. You can also try to find out if you have time...” he raised an eyebrow, “but it seems that Miss Adams is immune to your particular charms.”

Delta crossed her arms and if the motion pushed up her breasts, straining them against the confines of her shirt, so much the better. "I'll get her to talk somehow. I'll figure it out."

Stanford shuffled through the files on his desk. "Between the two of us, I'm sure we'll make some ground today. Either way, I'll update the chief and then head out to the plantation. You don't have to be there today?"

"I'm going in soon. I just wanted to catch up on my paperwork and make a report. It's been a little hectic."

He glanced down at the bagged candle on his desk. "So Pippa Rose, huh? She didn't strike me as the type."

"I don't think she is the type. But still... candles in her room, a known conflict with the victim. I thought it was worth checking out."

Stanford nodded. "Thanks for keeping me updated. You're doing good work, Delta."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You, too, Stanford." It didn't even sound sarcastic. Weird.

Their eyes met and she drew in her breath slowly. His pupils were big and dark, the irises around them cloudy gray with flecks of golden brown and amber. She blinked and then swallowed. "Well, I should go."

"You should go," he repeated slowly. Neither of them moved.

Delta's phone buzzed in her pocket. She sighed and pulled it out. It was a text from Blake. "I've got to get to the set early. Extra rehearsals. There's been a change to the script for the scene we're shooting tomorrow. Looks like that paperwork is going to have to wait."

His eyes lingered on hers as she rose to leave. "Be careful, Delta. And be careful around Ruby and Pippa. One of them could be a murderer."

"Aw hell, Stanford, at this point in the case anyone on set could be the murderer."

He frowned.

She sighed. "Fine, fine. I'll be careful."

It was just past 3:00 AM, and Delta could feel the need for sleep building in her body, slowing her movements and clouding her thinking. After Blake's early rehearsals, there had been several hours of shooting on location and then again on the set back in Marrotsville. Delta's role was minor, but she still had to remain on set for each take to enter and exit into the scene what felt like 200 times, just to pour some water into a glass while making smouldering eye contact with Rhett, whose character was supposed to be romancing Ruby. Her sides ached from the stiff ribbing of the corset that she had been forced to wear for hours and her feet hurt, and she wanted nothing more than to slink home and pass out for the few hours before the next morning's shoot.

She was surprised, then, when after changing she saw Ruby back in her street clothes, sneaking down the corridor. Ruby had been on set even earlier than Delta, had been doing the majority of the work in each scene. She must be exhausted, though she didn't look it. Her makeup was as fresh as ever, her hair falling around her shoulders in perfectly neat blonde waves.

Not willing to let a chance to tail Ruby go to waste, Delta pushed her need for sleep aside and followed her, hanging back in the shadows. She watched with interest as Ruby headed back into the sound stage. Delta hadn't spent much time there as most of her scenes took place on location, and there was only one set she filmed on on the sound stage.

It was easy to stay out of sight following Ruby. The various sets were unlit, and the red lights of the emergency exits made weird shadows on the floor. Ruby was oblivious as she headed towards the end of the room, approaching a small set in a corner that Delta hadn't noticed before. Low lights were on it, and as Delta approached, she realized that some people were milling around, checking cords and setting up equipment. She ducked behind some nearby crates to observe.

There were two cameramen present. One of them was working one of the large cinematic cameras like the ones that Delta had seen being used on set. The other was holding a smaller handheld camera. They both greeted Ruby, who picked up a clipboard from someone who

looked familiar. It was the girl she had seen at the plantation, Eliza, with whom Winchester had gone with to get coffee.

Ruby called something out and the people around her straightened up. Full lights were brought up on the set, which Delta now saw was an opulently styled bedroom—not a set currently being used in the civil war production. It looked like something that could belong in a castle, with a large four poster bed with red drapes hanging down, and a thick, intricate rug covering the floor.

Ruby consulted her clipboard and nodded as two men came out, both dressed in medieval robes and golden crowns. *Holy shit*. One of the men was none other than Billy Perle. He smoldered at the man by his side, someone shorter and stockier, whom Delta had never seen before.

Ruby yelled action and Delta's eyebrows shot up as Billy turned to the man in front of him, kissing him gently on the lips. The other man pulled the robe off of Billy's shoulder, letting the fabric slide off his dark skin to expose the rows of toned abs, and then finally, his jutting erection. The man fell to his knees, taking Billy's cock into his mouth. Billy grabbed the other man's head, knocking the crown askew on his blond head. This was definitely not an art film.

A hand suddenly touched the small of Delta's back. Her muscles tensed as she spun, grabbing the wrist and yanking it into an awkward angle. She dropped it immediately as she registered Pippa's face, eyes wide and mouth gasping in pain. "What are you doing here?" she hissed as Pippa rubbed her arm, wincing.

"Me? What are you doing here, Delta?" she whispered.

"Did I hurt you?" She grabbed Pippa's arm and inspected her for any damage. Pippa blinked her dark, wide eyes.

"No," she whispered. "You just startled me." Her voice was soft and somehow faraway sounding. She smiled sensuously at Delta and then flicked her eyes back to the set. "Ever see anything like that before?"

"It wasn't what I was expecting."

Pippa blinked again and then furrowed her brow. "So... What are you doing here?"

Delta wet her lips with her tongue. "Ruby forgot her bag on set... I just dropped it off."

Pippa squinted her eyes, looking at the bright lights on set. "Ruby's here?"

"What are *you* doing here, Pippa?" She placed her hands on Pippa's shoulders, turning her away from the action on set, which, Delta had to admit, was getting increasingly distracting as the men climbed into the big bed together.

Pippa blinked, as if confused. "I'm doing the makeup."

"I need to know everything, Pippa."

Pippa's smile seemed to falter as she looked between Delta and the action on set. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Let's go somewhere else," Delta whispered.

Pippa nodded and gave one last look to the set. "My office," she said.

The warm glow of a salt lamp illuminated Pippa's small office as Delta shut the door. Pippa turned to face her, reaching out to Delta, and slipped a hand around her waist. "What did you need to know?" Her breath was hot on Delta's neck, her full lips only inches away. Delta couldn't resist the look in her eyes. She leaned towards her. Their mouths met in a slow kiss. Pippa's lips were gentle and giving against Delta's. There was something familiar about the way she kissed, the taste of her breath, honey sweet with the light taste of something herbal, some kind of tea, perhaps. Delta liked the flavor. She kissed her again, deeply.

Pippa moaned softly into her mouth, her tongue slipping along the edge of Delta's bottom lip. Her hands tightened on Delta's waist. Delta felt her stomach clenching. She pulled her head away. "Pippa, we should talk."

Pippa kissed her again, softly, on her chin, along her jaw, down to the curve of her neck. "Later," she breathed, leaning into Delta, pressing her warm breasts against her chest. "There's something else I want to do first." She drew back her face for a moment, dark, expressive eyes searching Delta's face. Then she kissed her again. Slowly, deliberately.

Delta relaxed into her arms. Pippa was a different kind of woman than her previous lovers. There was something gentle and vulnerable about the way their lips met, an uncertainty beneath the carnal desire. Still, she was surprised after the conversation that they had had in her trailer just the night before. "You don't usually do this type of thing, do you?" Delta asked softly, running her hand against the curve of Pippa's cheek. Her skin was soft and supple.

Pippa grinned shyly. "I'm sort of a serial monogamist," she admitted. "I've never had sex with someone I barely knew before." She bit her full lips, stained a dark, rich burgundy. "But there is something about you that I can't resist."

"I could say the same about you," said Delta, breathing in the soft floral scent of Pippa's perfume. She willed herself to focus, even as she traced her hand up the slope of Pippa's arms, over the ridge of her collar bone.

Delta reached for the bottom of Pippa's white cotton top, lifting it up over her arms. Her small breasts were hidden tonight behind the soft lines of a lacy bralette. Delta cupped them through the yellow fabric, teasing the hard nubs of Pippa's nipples. Her breasts were soft against her hands. Pippa's tongue twisted against her own, and Delta tilted her neck back as she felt Pippa's lips brush against her neck, licking up and flicking against her earlobe.

Pippa's delicate hands slid under Delta's shirt, up the lean planes of her stomach and over her breasts, making her nipples tighten. "Every time I've put that stupid birthmark on your chest, I've been dying to see your breasts. It was very unprofessional..."

Delta laughed and then moaned as Pippa bit gently into her neck. "You could have just asked," she whispered as she finished pulling her shirt over her head. "I'm not very professional, anyways!" In seconds, Pippa was reaching behind her, unhooking her bra. She gasped at the sight of Delta's full breasts, bouncing free from their prison.

Her soft mouth was immediately against Delta's nipples, full lips massaging the aching flesh, tongue nimbly darting around her swollen

areola. Delta gasped and reached for Pippa, yanking down her long skirt. Pippa stepped out of it elegantly and kicked it to the side.

Delta groaned. "Fuck Pippa, I really want to have sex with you, but..." she thought of what she had seen on set, Billy and the other man, the cameras. There were so many unanswered questions about the case.

"Then why don't you?" Pippa said. She reached towards Delta again, sliding her soft hands over her chest, down to her waist. Her fingers edged to the button on Delta's jeans, undoing them nimbly. She pulled down the zipper and tugged.

"You said just yesterday that you weren't ready for something like this," Delta said while allowing Pippa to slide her tight jeans down over her legs.

Pippa looked longingly at Delta, who was now almost naked before her. "I wasn't then," she said. "Now I am." She embraced Delta, slipped a finger under the waistband of her panties, curving her hand downwards. Delta bit her lip as Pippa's fingers stroked between her legs. She shifted her thighs to allow her access as she arched her back, pressing against Pippa's soft warmth.

"Take this off," Delta commanded, pulled at the back of her bra. "Now."

Pippa's hand disappeared as she rushed to do as commanded, unhooking her bralette and pulling it off. Delta cupped her face in her hands, guiding Pippa down to floor. Her bare knees touched the soft rug as she pulled Pippa close, kissing her, sliding her fingers against her scalp, cupping her wonderful soft breasts. They were on their knees now, and Delta guided Pippa backwards against the floor, reaching down to her waist to yank at her skimpy flowered underwear. Pippa stretched out beneath her as Delta pulled them down her legs and then laid down beside her, sliding her own panties down. She rested a hand on Pippa's stomach. She was breathing quickly. Delta guided her hand down lower, between the nest of curls at the apex of her thighs. Pippa spread them willingly, offering Delta easy access to her wet sex. Delta entered her

slowly with a finger, while Pippa's hand reached for her as well. Delta leaned on her side, propping one leg up.

Pippa found her clit almost immediately and began to stroke it softly. Maddeningly softly. Delta slid her fingers more aggressively into Pippa who was shuddering on the floor.

Fucking women was so much easier than fucking men, Delta thought as she slid her fingers between Pippa's damp folds. It wasn't long before Pippa cried out sharply, clenching her legs as Delta's fingers pumped in and out of her. Delta forgot about her own pleasure for a moment, gently rubbing Pippa's clit as she shook around her. Finally she stilled. Delta withdrew her hand. Pippa wriggled to the side, propping herself up to face Delta.

Gently she pushed Delta's shoulder, urging her to the ground. Delta obliged, lying flat on her back while Pippa gently kissed her neck, sucked a nipple into her mouth, trailed down her stomach with kisses until arriving at Delta's entrance.

She bent her curly head and her nimble tongue pressed against Delta. It was heaven. Delta arched her back while Pippa lapped at her softly, tongue teasing her, wetting her more fully. She moaned at the sensation, burying her hands into the high pile of the soft rug. It didn't make her think of Stanford at all. Pippa was soft and gentle. Stanford's tongue had devoured her. The memory pulsed in her body. She felt herself being overcome and moaned loudly as she reached for Pippa between her legs. It was too soon to stop. She wanted more.

"Pippa, you should go get some rest," Delta told her gently. She looked angelic, naked and stretched out against the blanket they had thrown down over the plush rugs. Pippa smiled at her blearily.

"You should get some sleep, too. Isn't tomorrow your big scene with Rhett?"

"Yeah," said Delta, unexpectedly feeling a few butterflies tickle her stomach. "Yeah, it is. I've got a little bit more business to take care of first, though. See you tomorrow?"

“Mmm,” said Pippa sleepily, pulling the blanket up around her, “sounds good.”

Delta left her nodding off in her office and hurried back to the studio. She hoped that she could still catch Ruby.

By the time Delta made it back to the set, Ruby was unfortunately nowhere in sight. Billy and the other actor had already finished their scene and the only people left were two cameramen, taking down the equipment. Delta strode up to them confidently.

“Hi there.”

The man controlling the large camera jumped. “Who are you? This is a closed set.”

“I’m sure it is closed, considering,” she pointed at the camera on a hunch, “that you are using stolen property to film it.”

“Hey! You can’t be here!” The second man charged forward. There were bags under his eyes and about a week’s worth of stubble on his jaw. “And that’s not stolen. It belongs to our company.”

“And what company is that?”

“The Precious Jewel Erotic Arts Company.”

“And you have legally rented this space to film in?”

The two men looked at each other.

“That’s what I thought. So why don’t you tell me more about this little company of yours and just exactly what Ruby Adams has to do with it.”

The first man licked his lips. “She’s the CEO.” His partner with the terrible dark circles elbowed him in the ribs.

“You weren’t supposed to tell anyone, Dwayne.”

“She’s going to report us to the studio!” Dwayne protested.

Delta crossed her arms and did her best to look intimidating. “You got that right. Unless you tell me exactly what is going on here.”

Dwayne gave a look to his partner, who said, “Look, we don’t want any trouble, really. We’re just trying to get this company off the ground, borrowing a few things until we start making more money. The camera

wasn't... stolen... It was borrowed. We're going to return it as soon as shooting is over."

"And just what are you filming?"

Dwayne shrugged. "Pornos."

"I could see that much," Delta snapped.

"It's called *A Clash of Scepters*. It's a high quality pronographic film—tasteful and romantic. Ruby started the company because she thought that there was a big market for well-done, high quality porn with a plot."

Delta's lips thinned. Ruby had a point. "All right, so you guys stole the cameras to film this. That explains the things missing on set. Hey... was Christina Eaves involved with this at all?"

The two men looked at each other. "She was an actress," Dwayne said.

"A porno actress," the other clarified.

And that was when Delta saw Ruby Adams walking across the room, looking madder than hell. "Dwayne! Robbie! What the fuck are you doing? Don't fucking talk to that woman!" They looked at each other and then Delta and then scurried away as Ruby approached.

"Delta Bayou. Just what are you doing on my set?"

Delta glared at Dwayne and Robbie's retreating backs. *Cowards*. "Just what are you up to here, Ruby? I had heard that there were some rumors that you had been in adult films. Never thought that you would be making them."

Ruby grinned, cruelly. "I have an entrepreneurial spirit. And I protect my investments. So if you think that you can just walk in here and—"

"Christina Eaves," Delta interrupted. "Christina Eaves worked for you."

Ruby closed her mouth quickly and swallowed. "So? I didn't have anything to do with her dying, OK?"

"It looks awfully suspicious, you know. An underground production company using stolen goods... Did you have Christina steal the cosmetics from Pippa? I heard about that, you know."

Ruby looked away. "I didn't ask her to steal them! Christina was a little wild. She knew that we didn't have a lot of money to get this company off the ground, but she believed in our vision! We were collecting props and materials anyway that we could. Excuse me if I didn't question how she got them, but that doesn't mean I asked her to steal."

"But you did steal those cameras."

Ruby's blue eyes turned icy cold. "They aren't stolen. They are borrowed. We're going to return them as soon as we're done filming!"

"This looks really bad for you, Ruby. Someone was killed. Another person was gravely injured on set. And here you are with a secret arrangement with one of the victims. Did Christina threaten to tell on you? Did you kill her for it?"

"No! Fuck off, you stupid bitch." She flicked her bangs out of her eyes and glared at Delta.

"Tell me the goddamned truth, Ruby! Especially if you want this little company of yours to stay in business. What do you know?"

Ruby's pink mouth settled into a thin line. "You think you can blackmail me? Someone already is, OK! If you want your murderer why don't you start there?"

"Who is it?"

Ruby rubbed her temples, pushing back her pale hair with her hands. "I don't know. Someone found out what I was doing. I've received letters... pictures. I thought it was just a stalker at first..."

"What did the blackmailer say?"

"They want me to quit Blake's movie."

"Why?"

"They didn't say. Just that if I didn't quit the movie that there would be accidents."

"Like Christina's?"

Ruby nodded, and Delta could suddenly see how exhausted the other woman looked as her tough facade crumbled just a bit. Her blonde bangs seemed to fall flat in her face. Her eyeliner was smudged around

her gray-blue eyes. “But I can’t quit! I sunk all of my money into this production company. All of my crew—their livelihoods depend on making this movie. I need the cash from Blake’s film to be able to pay everyone!”

“Ruby, you need to tell all this to the cops. Talk to Detective Stanford. Call him first thing tomorrow and pray that he can help you because you are quite honestly fucked.”

Ruby pushed her hand through her lank hair impatiently. “Fine,” she said after a pause. She gave Delta another condescending look. “I don’t have time to talk to you about this,” she huffed. “Big day on set tomorrow.” She turned abruptly on her heel, still dragging her fingers through her hair.

Delta watched as she left, lost in thought. The case was really heating up. She would have to call Stanford as soon as she was somewhere private to update him on the details. She was still musing it over as she left, crossing the studio floor when something silver caught her eye on the floor. She bent to pick it up cautiously. At first, she thought it was a condom wrapper. Then she smelled it—herbal, medicinal, with a hint of something fruity. The smell hit her at once, flooding her with memories. She knew it at once—Red Cherry, the party drug she had tried so hard to get off the streets. And Pippa had been on it.

Her fist curled around the wrapper.

It was after 5:00 AM when she got back in her car. She called Stanford immediately, but he didn’t answer. Probably still asleep. She left him a quick message to let him know what she had learned from Ruby. She glanced the Red Cherry wrapper still crumpled in her hand and then mentioned that as well.

Fuck. She leaned her head back on the seat and shut her eyes tight in frustration. She couldn’t believe Red Cherry had made its way onset.

Chapter Eight: Ready for a Close Up

Delta groaned as her alarm went off just after noon the next day and pulled herself out of bed reluctantly. She had a busy day ahead of her, needing to stop by the station to catch up on some work and then to be back at the production by 7 o'clock, in time to get costumed and made-up for the big day—the day she filmed her sex scene with Rhett. It was a shame she didn't feel better rested. She glanced at her phone, but there were no missed calls—just a text message from Stanford. “Talked to Ruby—I'm on it.”

Besides the movie case, there was a lot of work to do with the Wild Hog Festival in town and the station was in chaos. Her work flew by, especially since Stanford hadn't come in to bother her. He was off on various assignments around Bafford County, presumably investigating his leads about Ruby and being called out to put out various figurative and literal fires pertaining to the festival. Delta was up to her elbows in all of the paperwork. Six o'clock had rolled around before she even realized it.

After the bustle of the station, the plantation felt quiet as Delta headed in for makeup. Pippa glanced at her shyly as she set out bottles and creams on the counter. “How are you?”

“Tired,” she said taking a drink of the coffee she had picked up on the way to help her make it through that night's filming schedule. It had brewed too long and was bitter and sharp. “Hey, did you know that Christina Eaves was a porn actress?”

Pippa hesitated, and then came over with her sponge, blotting away the dark patches under Delta's eyes. “Yes.”

“Did you know that she was working for Ruby?”

Pippa's expression was puzzled. "What do you mean working for her?"

"You didn't know she was working for Ruby's company?"

"What company?"

Delta sighed. "The pornos, Pippa. The ones that you are doing the makeup for."

Pippa's thin eyebrows rose. "I didn't know Ruby was involved in that. It was Eliza Ortega who asked me to help out. I only started doing it a few days ago."

"So you never did the makeup when Christina was there?"

"No!" Pippa shrugged. "I mean, now that you mention it, it makes sense why she would have been stealing makeup. She must have been doing it for the company. She was always asking me for little tips and tricks. Eliza didn't tell me much, just that they had an emergency staffing shortage and asked if I could fill in. And honestly, the extra cash sounded good. I guess there was a reason I didn't press too much for the details." She sighed and turned away, dabbing some more makeup onto her sponge. "But why are you so interested in Christina, Delta? Let the past be the past and live in the moment." She folded her hands in front of her and looked at Delta with pleading eyes.

"It doesn't bother you that the makeup you are using on the set of the porno is stolen from Blake's production?"

Pippa licked her lips and cast her eyes downwards. "Look, I know it isn't right, but I'm in a hard place right now. It looks like Blake's picture could be shut down at any moment, and I don't have anything else lined up. The porno company is paying me really well!"

"What Ruby is up to worries me," said Delta, brows furrowed. "There's something that doesn't make sense here."

Pippa gave her a concerned look and sighed before continuing to dab the makeup gently on her face. "I hope you aren't getting drawn into the Hollywood drama, Delta. You seem different to me. Whatever is going on with Ruby, don't let it get to you. Let her do her own thing."

You do yours.” She sat down the sponge she had been using and picked up a new palette, mixing colors on her hand.

Delta watched her thoughtfully. “Do you like Ruby, Pippa? Do you trust her?”

Pippa bit her lip. “She’s not very nice. I would know, I have her in my chair for at least an hour every day. But it’s a tough business... Can make even the good people do crazy things.” Her fingertips were stained purple as she began to blend the makeup for Delta’s stage birthmark. She eyed the mixture thoughtfully before rubbing it lightly against Delta’s skin, applying it just between her collarbone and breast. “The fact that she is the one in charge of the production company gives me pause, but...”

“You seem like a good person to me, Pippa.” Delta grabbed her hand for a moment, pressing it against her chest.

“Thanks.” A silence stretched between them as Pippa went back to work, finishing the makeup on Delta’s chest, blending and smoothing the pigments. Pippa’s face was very close to hers. Delta found herself staring at her rich brown eyes. They were deep and dark, with a hint of red and umber. Delta blinked slowly, remembering their time together the night before. “Pippa... last night...”

She could have sworn she saw Pippa blush, cheeks looking rosier than normal under her dark skin. “Last night was special,” said Pippa slowly. “But if you don’t feel the same way now that you know what I’m doing...”

Delta swallowed, unable to look away. She found herself raising her hand slowly to caress Pippa’s cheek. Pippa closed her eyes softly and laid her hand against Delta’s. She looked earnestly into Delta’s eyes. “I found the Red Cherry wrapper. Where did you get it?”

Pippa’s eyes snapped open. Her long lashes fluttered. “Eliza. She told me that it would help me relax on set... I didn’t anticipate in what way.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No! I mean maybe I would have taken things more slowly, but...”

Delta dropped her hand and sighed. Pippa was cute, but so naive. Still, there was something about her that drew Delta in. "Pippa, would you want to go on a date with me? There's a French restaurant in Milkinville..." The words surprised her. She didn't often go on second dates, especially not nice ones with nice people.

Pippa smiled and her dangling earrings clinked as she leaned forward. Her soft lips brushed against Delta's, hesitant and sweet.

Their kiss fell apart at the sound of a loud knock on the door. "Pippa Rose? It's the Bafford County Police. Open up!"

Pippa jumped up and looked at Delta with wide eyes. Delta stared at the door as Stanford and Harper barged in, one after the other. "Miss Rose, if you could come with me... We need to ask you a few questions down at the station."

"What!" Pippa breathed. "What for?"

"Just a few questions, Miss Rose." Stanford gave a nod to Harper, who quickly cuffed Pippa's hands behind her back.

"What is this about?" Delta barked at Stanford.

Stanford gave Harper a meaningful look, "Take her down to the car. I'll be right out, Officer Harper."

Harper's face turned as bright red as his hair as he met Delta's angry gaze, but he nodded to Stanford and guided Pippa out of the room. Pippa's large brown eyes were full of tears as she glanced over her shoulder at Delta.

Stanford shut the door behind them and turned to face Delta. His face was set in hard lines. His arms were already crossed.

"What the hell was that about?" Delta demanded.

"The wax found in the victim's ear matches the candles that you found in Miss Rose's office. And the powder we found covering the victim's body contained traces of pearl, which, as you know also ties her to Pippa Rose. Given that there are two bits of physical evidence to tie them together, plus the fact that Miss Rose admits to there being some hard feelings between the two of them... Well, we had to call her in, Robbins."

Delta grit her teeth. “You didn’t have to arrest her, Stanford! Plus she said that Christina stole the makeup from her.”

Stanford’s jaw went tight. “I know she doesn’t seem like the type, Robbins. But what if she is? We can’t risk her running off like your last perp. So she’ll be questioned at the station, and if there’s no good reason to hold her, she’ll walk out.”

“I don’t like it when you do this, Stanford!”

He took a step closer to her, eyes smouldering. “When I what? When I follow the rules? When I stick to procedure?”

She stuck a finger into his chest, almost recoiling at the feel of his hard muscles. “When you act like a dick!”

His hand shot out as he grabbed her wrist, pulling it away from his chest. They were so close now that she could basically feel his breath on her face. “Don’t do this.” His fingers wrapped around her wrist. He didn’t let go.

“Don’t do what?” she asked as he jerked her closer. She could feel the length of his body pressed against hers. His cool breath brushed against her skin.

“Don’t pretend like I’m the bad guy because you don’t like to follow the rules.” He dropped her wrist and stepped back. “It’s not fair, Delta. Especially not after... what happened.”

She grabbed onto the counter and nodded at her own reflection. She looked shaken—pale beneath her makeup. Her dark hair spilled over her shoulders, making her face look even lighter. “Fine. I have to go.” She straightened and went to the door without sparing him another glance.

He snorted. “Call me if you need me.”

“Unlikely,” she muttered under her breath, but he didn’t seem to hear.

Blake was rubbing the circles under his eyes when she appeared on set an hour later, her hair and makeup done, and in her costume—the extremely restrictive dress that Marvin had slightly altered to fit her. “Good, you’re here,” he said by way of greeting. “I suppose your police

pal told you about Pippa.” He took a drink from his coffee cup as they walked towards the set together. “I just can’t believe she would murder anyone.”

“He didn’t have to tell me,” Delta glared. “I was there.”

Blake put his glasses back on and looked at her with a dejected face. “You don’t think—”

“I don’t think it was her,” Delta reassured him. “But there is a lot of evidence that she’s going to have to explain away.” She wanted to rub at her eyes, so recently perfectly made up by Pippa.

Blake grabbed her hand. Even his wavy hair was beginning to look flat with the stress. “Delta, who do you think is behind this if it’s not Pippa? I can’t go on living this way! I spent hours on the phone with the studio execs. They liked my idea of how much publicity a cursed movie set could get... but they like their money more. We have to be careful because if anything else goes wrong I could lose my job. Everyone here could lose their jobs.”

“Just give us time. We’re working as hard as we can,” she said, squeezing his hand for good measure.

Blake gave her a wan smile and ran both hands through his limp curls. “Unlike some people,” he grumbled as they watched Rhett Castor stroll onto the set. Rhett noticed them watching and waved lazily at them. He was looking as cool and collected as ever. No one must have told him how close he was to losing his job.

“What’s going on with Rhett?”

“Today is the first day he’s been on time in a week. That, and he’s only had his lines half-memorized. Ever since he shot that superhero movie, he’s been different. It’s gone to his head. But I’m the one who gave him his big break. He should be constantly thanking me!”

“I’m sure he’s just... busy,” said Delta, watching Rhett as he casually pushed back his light hair. The truth was that all the actors were busy, especially the leads. Delta had seen the call-sheets. They were easily putting in 12-14 hour days.

“Hi Rhett,” Delta said as soon as he was closer. He was already in costume, a white linen shirt and gray trousers. The shirt was loose at the collar and she could see the hint of his muscles underneath, a bit of the golden hair that spread across his chest. He looked amazing. Even with the mustache.

“Don’t you look appetizing,” he said giving Delta an appreciative up and down. Blake shot him a warning look, but didn’t have time to talk as an assistant called him over for help with the lights. His eyes lingered on her mostly exposed chest. “I see you managed to get into makeup before they arrested the makeup artist.”

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” Delta said, choosing to avoid any more conversations about Pippa. “What happened to those dialect lessons?”

He grinned. “Oh, I’m still interested in hearing more of what you can do with that tongue, sweetheart, but it’s been a busy week. Though with the way things have been going lately, we’re all going to have a lot of time on our hands sooner than we thought. You know, if they shut us down.”

“If it does get canned, at least it won’t be until after our big scene together.” She looked at him from under her eyelashes leaning coquettishly towards him. She was feeling frustrated and tense after what had happened with Pippa. And feeling frustrated made her feel... frustrated in other ways as well.

His eyes glittered. “And have you been practicing?”

“I don’t need to practice,” she grinned. “I have a natural talent for... well, maybe you’d know if you ever came to see me for those lessons, *sweetheart*.”

He grinned back and her and took a step closer.

“Hey!” Blake suddenly yelled from across the set. “Make sure your phones are off! Ruby’s rang on set yesterday and ruined a perfectly good take. You need to be in position in two minutes!”

Rhett rolled his eyes. “He’s so high-strung.”

“He’s under a lot of stress,” Delta said, fishing her phone out from between her breasts as her costume did not include pockets. She turned it off and passed it to a hovering assistant, who went to store it with the rest of her things. “You don’t have your phone?” she asked Rhett. He hadn’t moved as he had watched her retrieve her phone.

“I never take it on set,” he said. “Too distracting. Now, where were we?”

“I believe that you were about to seduce me. For the scene, of course.”

“Of course.”

“All right,” Blake yelled. “Places, you two! It’s time to get started!”

The candles flickered softly, their light dancing in Rhett’s eyes. His bold stare sent an electric feeling through Delta’s body as she entered the room and placed a heavy ceramic water pitcher down on a table.

The lights on the set were hot above her, and she could feel the sweat clinging to her skin underneath the acres of fabric she was wearing. Rhett watched her wordlessly as she took a cloth handkerchief and dipped it into the water, wringing it out and then bringing it delicately against her neck.

He advanced on her slowly as she ran the handkerchief down her neck over the tops of her breasts, briefly covering the painted birthmark.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Rhett’s voice was a low rumble in his chest. “All night, I’ve been wondering if you would come to me.”

“I couldn’t stay away.” The lines felt natural in her mouth. She meant them, looking at Rhett when she could see the outline of his chest, visible through the thin fabric of his white shirt. His hips were encased in form-fitting gray trousers that clung to the muscles of his thighs and calves. He looked good enough to eat and certainly good enough to divert her thoughts from the stress of the case.

“It’s such a sultry night,” he said, stepping close enough to touch now, and she could feel the heat radiating from his body. He grabbed the damp rag from her hands. “Let me cool you down.”

He dipped the rag in water again. Silver droplets fell into the ceramic bowl as he wrung it out. Slowly, he raised it to her neck, down the slope of her throat and to curving tops of her breasts, which were elevated by the tight corset she wore. Their rounded globes pushed indecently up against the very low-cut lace collar.

She caught his hand. "You must be hot, too."

He didn't answer, only dropped the cloth as he flung his arm around her waist, pulling her dramatically into his arms. His mouth crushed against hers as she clung to his body, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as he guided her against a wall.

His mouth was smooth and slick as his tongue slipped against hers, sweet and sharp. She held onto him, not really acting at all as his hot kisses travelled across her lips, searing her neck even as his mustache ticked her sensitive skin. She gasped in pleasure, feeling the very real well of hot desire building in her lower stomach, while his hands raced over her waist and around to her back where he began to quickly unbutton the trail that ran down the bodice. Delta arched her back against the wall as Rhett yanked the bodice from her arms and then quickly loosened the strings of the corset she was wearing underneath. Her breasts were flushed from the heat and the feeling of his long fingers brushing against her skin.

In a few moments, the corset was loose enough for him to yank down, along with the thin material of the chemise she wore underneath so that her large breasts came spilling from the top. He kissed down her neck, caressing her breasts, and brushing his fingers of over the tips of her peaked nipples. She bit her lips as he lowered his mouth to one, flicking his warm tongue against its tip.

With one firm arm around her waist, he pivoted her to the bed, letting her fall against the mattress as he lifted up her skirts, drawing the petticoats high over her long legs. He fell between her thighs, covering her with his body and she suddenly knew that Rhett wasn't just acting, either. She could feel his cock, hard between her legs, although it was tightly laced underneath the gray breeches of his costume.

They hadn't rehearsed this part, at least not exactly. In rehearsals, Blake had told them that he wanted it to be spontaneous, as real love-making was. He had simply told them where he wanted them to go, from the wall, to the bed, to whatever felt natural from there. In the name of keeping it authentic, they hadn't so much as practiced their kissing scenes before, let alone this.

She acted without thinking, letting her baser instincts take over. Her hand shot out, and she grappled with the laces of his breeches, undoing them, and feeling the hard outline of his cock underneath the fabric. This was all more or less as planned. She was supposed to pretend to do this, but the next part was total improvisation. She angled her legs so that her knee would block the view of the camera. And then, she reached into Rhett's pants and grabbed his cock, eager to see if he really did need the magnum condoms specified in his rider.

He groaned loudly, rolling his hips towards hers as she ran her hand along the hot shaft, up to the damp tip. His eyes seared against her gaze, dark and wild with surprise and lust. She was excited to feel that he was hard and ready for her. She gasped as the tempo of his kisses increased, becoming wilder, less restrained. His hips gyrated towards her and she knew that she needed him inside of her immediately.

With a quick maneuver, she steered his cock between her legs, rubbing his tip against the naked flesh of her opening. Rhett's eyes widened slightly and he swallowed hard as he realized that she was not wearing the modesty undergarment that was expressly designed to prevent her from being penetrated on set. After giving her a rakish look, his eyelids snapped closed in a look of divine pleasure as he followed her lead and pushed his shaft slowly between her legs. And still, the cameras were rolling, no one yet aware that they were actually fucking each other instead of just pretending.

Rhett bit his lip as his hips slid forward, grunting as he filled her. He was big enough that she had to open her legs a bit wider to accommodate him, though she didn't think that he was as well-endowed

as the gossip magazines had speculated. Still, she pulled him deeper into her, body alive with the risk of what she was doing.

What would Blake say if he realized they were actually fucking? What would the crew think? What would Stanford do if he found out? The idea only excited her more fully and she arched her back, pressing the naked flesh of her breasts against Rhett's chest. He bent to her and kissed her neck, teeth gently nipping against her skin as they rocked together, Delta's heart hammering against her ribs, breathing quickly as her lungs struggled to work beneath the tight confines of the loosened corset.

Rhett licked his lips and groaned, pushing his cock in and out of her, spearing her against the bed in subtle, sharp motions. She moaned, and grabbed the sheets as he moved within her. He was soft and smooth inside of her. She didn't think it would take much more for her to come, excited as she was with the whole studio watching. She wasn't sure how long Blake had intended to film, but Jesus... her fingers twined in the sheets. She really couldn't last much longer. She clenched her legs around Rhett, God, how did no one realize what they were doing?

And then suddenly there was a loud pop, a scream, and something like exploding glass. There was a mechanical grinding sound and the set was abruptly plunged into complete darkness. "What the fuck!" someone yelled. Rhett's cock quickly stilled and then suddenly withdrew from inside of her. She could feel him lacing himself back up in the dark, and she swiftly threw her skirts over her legs, hiding her nakedness in case the lights came back on.

"What happened?" she heard Blake say.

She sat up quickly on the bed. Rhett was beside her, and he put a protective arm around her shoulders. "Don't move," he said in a low and throaty voice. "It could be dangerous."

There was a sudden groaning sound and a whirr as the generators kicked in and the emergency lights came up, bathing the set in a saturated crimson glow. Blake jumped out of his chair. "What the actual fuck was that?"

A pale-faced technician came running over. “There’s been an accident downstairs!” she yelled. “Someone call an ambulance!”

Chapter Nine: Sparks Fly

Delta leapt from the bed, tucking her breasts back down under her clothing. She joined the group of people following the technician downstairs, to one of the back rooms. “We were getting everything ready for the shoot tomorrow!” the technician said. She clutched at the collar of her black tee-shirt anxiously. “I don’t know what happened!” Her hand shook as she pointed towards the door.

There was already a small crowd of people circling around a large lamp and other lighting equipment. Delta pushed through, followed by Blake and Rhett. On the ground was a young woman in a dark polo. There was a sharp and electric scent in the air. Underneath it was another odor, smokey and pungent—the smell of burnt hair.

“Eliza!” Blake gasped as he took in the figure on the ground. He pushed his way through the crowd and knelt just as the on-set medic arrived, kneeling down beside the unconscious woman.

“Give me some room!” the medic barked. He knelt his head low to Eliza’s chest, probing her neck for a pulse. “She’s still breathing but she’s in bad shape. We’re going to need the ambulance,” he said to Blake, who nodded and began to dial.

“What happened?” Delta asked the other technician who was trembling beside her.

“She was just walking and she screamed. There was a loud popping sound and she... she fell over.” There were tears starting to build in the tech’s round, dark eyes. Delta patted her arm softly. “She’ll be OK,” she said hopefully. But Eliza, still prone on the ground, had not yet been roused by the medic.

Delta's eyes shifted to the labyrinth of wires near Eliza's prone form. Rhett followed her eyes. "Mind your step, everyone. It could still be dangerous," he said, coming towards Delta.

She stepped away from Blake, who was on his knees watching the medic anxiously, and towards Rhett, who was looking at the mass of tangled wires on the ground. Delta touched his shoulder and pointed. "Look at that one," she said, pointing in the dim light. "It's been sawed." The innards of one of the heavy-duty wires were exposed, bright copper gleaming in the ruddy light of the emergency lamps. The black rubber of the exterior shell was frayed and ragged. "We need the police," she said. She reached for her phone, remembering too late that she didn't have it on her, that she was still in fact, in costume. She put a hand on Blake's shoulder. "Let me borrow your phone."

He gave it to her shakily and she stood, walking away from the assembled group as she dialed Stanford's number. She watched the progress with Eliza while it rang. The poor woman's feet appeared to have been burned. Her partially melted flip flops were lying on top of the swirling mass of black cords. Delta turned her back to the scene as the line clicked.

"Detective Stanford." Her heart seemed to skip a beat as his low voice answered the phone.

"It's me. There's been an accident on set."

"Robbins?"

"Yes, who else?"

"This is Hartford's number."

"I don't have my phone on me. Now look, there's been an accident, and it looks bad. Eliza Ortega, one of the light techs, has been electrocuted or something. We just called the ambulance, but it looks like it was a *planned* accident, if you know what I mean. The wires have been cut. I'll clear the scene, but you need to get over here right now."

There was a pause. "I'll be right there."

She ended the call and walked back towards the crowd. "All right, everyone," she called in a loud voice. "The police are on their way. They

said to stay close, but do not go near those wires! No one should leave the plantation.”

A few people gasped and looked towards the wires nervously. She gave Blake a look and he started rising to his feet and herding people backwards. “Everyone go take a break. Go get some coffee or something!” She heard his voice crack with the strain. “Standing around here won’t help Eliza, especially if someone else gets hurt!”

Delta put her hand on his shoulder. “Maybe you should take a break too,” she said.

He wrung his hands. “I just want to be useful!”

She nodded. “Go take down the names of everyone who was onset just now. Make sure they all stay in the break room. You should know the drill by now. When the police arrive, they are going to need to interview everyone.”

He nodded, and made for the door, following his employees out towards the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, the ambulance had arrived and taken Eliza to the hospital while the crowd of her coworkers watched silently. Eliza had not yet woken up and the EMTs who arrived agreed with the medic’s assessment. She had third-degrees burns on her feet and had most certainly been electrocuted by the wires. Thankfully, she was still breathing.

Within another five minutes, the power company had arrived to take stock of the damage, and Stanford was there with a team ready to case the site of the accident. Delta took the list Blake had made her and double-checked it against her own observations of who had been nearby. She was sure that someone had sabotaged the wires and whoever had done it might be with her now, standing among her coworkers.

She saw Stanford’s tall head from behind the crowd as he finished looking at the site of the accident. He gave her a slight nod as he addressed the crowd. “All right, everyone. You should know the drill by now. Officer Harper’s going to need you all to make statements. You can

go after you talk to him.” He looked at Harper and waved a hand towards the front of the house. “Why don’t you do the interviews in the dining room or front parlour? I’ll take a closer look at the scene.”

Harper’s coppery hair glinted as nodded and glanced at his notepad. “OK,” he said. “Follow me, everyone. I’ll keep this brief.”

Blake and Delta hung back near Stanford, who looked at Blake impatiently. “You’re gonna need to make a statement as well, Hartford. As you very well know.”

Blake grit his teeth. “I want to help. Why waste time making a statement? Delta was with me the whole time. She knows exactly what I know.”

Stanford sucked in the sides of his cheeks in annoyance, but nodded as he crouched to examine the wires. “How long have these been here?”

Blake pushed his hands through his hair. “I’m not sure. I can check the setup schedule.”

“Go get it.”

Blake gave him a curt nod and walked away. Stanford rose and cracked his back. “There’s not going to be a damn thing on these wires, is there?”

“I doubt it. Take it with you for evidence. Maybe you can find something about what was used to cut it.”

“Of course. Chances that it will be another dead end?” Stanford clenched his fist.

“Does that mean that you aren’t getting anywhere with Pippa?” Her heart fluttered, hopeful.

Stanford shook his head. “I don’t think she did it. We have to verify part of her story, but it’s so weird that I believe her. Did you know that some people burn candles in their ears for medical reasons?”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s true. I looked it up. Apparently Pippa is into all that new-agey stuff and does it for her friends. She said she’s done it to a few of the other actors as well. I’ll have to see if her story checks out, but I don’t think we have enough to hold her.”

"I'm glad."

His eyebrows lowered into a frown. "You shouldn't be. It just means we aren't any closer to solving this case."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want it to be her. It doesn't make sense. And what about Ruby's blackmailer? Any luck there?"

"None yet," he studied her face. His eyes flicked lower. "I've got the records she kept about it, a copy of the messages. We've requested information from the phone company with Ruby's permission, but I haven't heard back yet. You know how long these things can take. Paperwork..." He gave her another look from top to bottom and then quickly looked away. "Your uh... costume is falling off."

She looked down and noticed that her mostly unlaced corset was slipping dangerously low on her chest, apparently intent on pulling down the chemise with it. She yanked it back up and looked over her shoulder, noting the very loose laces in the back. "Actually, could you tie this for me? We were in the middle of a scene when the accident happened. I haven't had time to fix it."

"Dare I ask what kind of scene?"

She gave him a look, but turned around and lifted her hair. She felt Stanford hesitate behind her and then walk closer. His hands brushed against her back, sending a chill down her spine as he gathered the laces. He threaded them back in slowly, pulling them lightly together. "How's that?" His fingers grazed her neck again as he lifted his hands, and she felt a rush of blood heat her neck and chest.

"Secure enough for now, thanks."

His hand lingered on her shoulder for a moment. "Are you still mad about what happened with Pippa?"

She swallowed. "No. You were right to be thorough with the investigation. Things are only getting more dangerous."

He pulled his hand slowly away from her skin. His eyes were unreadable as she turned to face him. She looked away quickly, just as Blake returned, clipboard in hand. "Setup was last night," he said.

“Around 4:00 AM, right after we finished shooting. Cords would have all been inspected then.”

Stanford nodded. “Thanks. You can go now, Hartford.”

Blake rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “This is a nightmare. Will we be able to get back to work tonight?” he asked.

“It’s a crime scene, Blake. I’ll get it back to you as soon as we can, but we’re going to have to go over it with a fine-tooth comb first.”

Blake made an irritated sound. “You would think that I could have guessed that by now.” He turned to Delta. “Stay close. The power company is still assessing the damage, but I’m optimistic. Depending on when things wrap up here, I’d like to keep shooting your scene. I don’t want to risk losing that fire you and Rhett were bringing to the set earlier today.” Blake touched her arm lightly. “You were phenomenal.”

Stanford’s eyebrows rose, but he wisely declined to comment, scowling into the corner instead.

“Thanks,” said Delta. “I’ll stay nearby.” She turned to Stanford. “Unless you need me here?”

He wasn’t looking at her when he spoke. “That’s OK. Go get some rest. Sounds like you’ve had a tiring day.”

“You can rest in my trailer, if you want,” Blake offered. “Rhett was the first to give his statement, so he went back to the lot as well.”

Stanford’s brows lowered a fraction of an inch. “Well, then I’ll know where to find you if I need you. See you around, Robbins.”

“See ya,” she said. But it wasn’t to Blake’s trailer that she was heading after she picked up her street clothes and purse.

It wasn’t hard to find Rhett’s trailer. She remembered where it was from when she had studied the map in Blake’s office and besides that, it was the largest one on site. The lights were on, and the air conditioner was humming outside. She knocked on the door softly and saw Rhett’s outline moving from behind the frosted glass. He opened the door a crack.

“Delta!” Rhett’s eyebrows shot up. He was out of his costume and was holding a phone in one hand. He glanced at the screen before looking back to her face. “What are you doing here?” He looked her up and down and gestured to the costume that she still wore. “Did I miss a call from Blake? Are we needed back at the plantation already?”

“I don’t think that the set is going to be open again tonight. I just got a text from Blake. The power company said that the accident caused a transformer to blow out. Sounds like everyone cleared out pretty quickly after that because they won’t be able to get a new one installed until tomorrow. So we won’t be finishing our scene after all.”

He gave her a wicked smile. “That’s a shame. I was quite enjoying working with you.” He moved aside to let her in through the door. She brushed past him on her way in, smelled the soft musk of his cologne and felt the heat of his skin.

“I thought that just because we won’t be filming tonight doesn’t mean we can’t... rehearse. I mean, we’ll still have to film the rest of it later, right? Might as well be prepared.”

Rhett looked uncertain for a moment and licked his lips. He still held his phone in one hand and glanced at the screen for a moment before turning it black and placing it facedown on the counter.

He walked over to her slowly. “What you did earlier today,” he grinned, “was incredibly unprofessional. And also the sexiest thing that has ever happened to me. Can I expect that rehearsing with you will be just as fun?”

“You felt so good,” she said, her voice dropping lower with desire. “I had to have you inside of me again. And since we don’t currently have any other obligations...” She shrugged.

He made a low growling sound as he grabbed her waist, pulling her against his body. They didn’t bother to pretend to go over the lines as he raked his mouth across her neck, down the curve of her exposed shoulders. “I don’t think you’ll be needing this anymore,” he said, unlacing the back of the corset. She cringed for a moment, thinking of how Stanford’s fingers must have fumbled with the fabric as he had

laced her up, but quickly forgot all about it as Rhett pulled the heavy garment off her. In a swift motion, he pulled her into his arms and carried her over to the bed, depositing her in front of him, pushing her back on the bed as he climbed over her, placing his knees on either side of her hips.

Her breasts felt as if they had been freed from a prison without the corset. Just the thin fabric of the chemise was between her and Rhett. He hovered above her, drawing his mouth down her neck as she trembled below him. His hungry mouth reached her breasts, and he lowered his lips against the swell of her chest, sucking at a nipple through the thin fabric. She moaned softly, grabbing a handful of the blanket below her as Rhett's tongue teased her. He pressed his hips low against her as his mouth worked against her nipple, grinding his erection against her hips.

Then he shifted, propping himself up on one arm, using his free hand to caress her raised knees, to work the fabric of the chemise up her legs, sliding it higher and higher. His hand found her hip bone and he ran it luxuriously over her body, over the taut planes of her stomach. She found her muscles tightening in response, toes curling in anticipation as he reached down, creeping towards the crevice between her thighs.

He cupped his hand over her mound possessively, yanking his mouth up from her breasts. The fabric felt cold and rough and wet where his mouth had been. "I am going to fuck you so hard you can't stand up straight tomorrow," he said, "as your punishment for that naughty, naughty stunt you pulled today. Do you understand?" His finger probed inside of her, roughly spreading her dampness across her labia.

"Oh yes," she moaned.

He grunted in pleasure, abruptly shifting to remove his pants and underwear. In a smooth motion, he rolled on top of her, pinning her to the bed as his cock pushed eagerly between her legs. She dug her fingers into his back, yanking him inside of her.

Her legs crossed behind his back as his hips tilted into her. She bit at his neck, felt her breasts push against the muscles of his chest. She

couldn't believe she was actually fucking a movie star. It was enough to make her forget all about the accident, the case, and even Stanford. She closed her eyes and let him roughly take her, gasping in pleasure as she came quickly on his not quite magnum sized cock.

Rhett gave her a tentative kiss on the forehead. "I'm going to go clean up," he said, grabbing his clothes off the floor over an hour later. "Do you want something to eat? Drink? Anything in the cabinets is all yours."

Delta stretched luxuriously against the sheets. "I might take you up on that."

He smiled and grabbing his phone from where he had flipped it over on the counter, made his way to the bathroom. She watched the sway of his naked ass as he walked and grinned to herself. She had just fucked a movie star. Twice in one day. She wished for a moment there was someone she could tell. But she had always been too discreet to brag about her conquests. Still, she sighed. It was a shame.

She heard the sound of water running in the bathroom, and then to her surprise, his voice, low over the running water. The walls of the trailer were astoundingly thin. Who could Rhett be talking to this time of night? Something about the tone of his voice seemed off. It was no longer rich and warm. He sounded clipped and harsh. She strained her ears to hear, not even breathing as she listened. "Then I'll meet you at the plantation," he said. She missed the next few words. "Midnight."

The water in the bathroom turned off. She arranged herself causally on the bed as she heard the door open.

"Hey Delta," Rhett said, "I actually have to get going. I've got to do a little more work to get done tonight."

"Oh. Do they need me too? Are we going to keep shooting our scene? Did they get the set cleared?"

His eyes glinted. "As much as I would enjoy that, no. It's something else. Just Ruby and me. We're going to try to get a tiny little scene out of the way before it gets too late."

"I guess they're done with the crime scene, then?"

He shrugged and reached for his leather jacket, which was hanging across the back of the built-in sofa. "Help yourself to anything you want," he said, and grinned. "If you want to stay and practice some more... Well, I shouldn't be gone for too long. Will you wait for me?" His eyes sparked mischievously in the dim lights.

She grinned back at him wickedly. "How could I turn down an invitation like that?"

He winked. "See you soon." Then he was out the door.

She waited until she heard the growl of his motorcycle before she moved. *Help yourself to anything you want.* Well, she would. First to the pretzels that she found stuffed in his cupboard, and then to everything else, hopefully including his secrets.

There wasn't much that she found at first. Receipts. Tons of receipts in his kitchen drawer. And for very expensive items. Maybe he had a shopping addiction? A man that lovely had to have something wrong with him, she thought. She moved aside the clothes in his dresser, checked the cupboards of his bathroom, in the cabinets. She didn't find anything much until she slipped her hands up under the mattress. Her fingers slid against smooth paper. She pulled it out and found that she was holding a manilla file folder. Her heart drummed in her ears. Why did Rhett keep a secret file under his bed? Delta didn't believe in secrets. She opened it immediately.

The first set of papers looked familiar. It was the same sort of contract that she had seen in Blake's office. A clause was highlighted. "If the Actor is unable to perform his contractual duties due to any force majeure event within eight weeks of production, including but not limited to natural disasters, war, civil unrest, government actions," her eyes scanned the rest of the list of qualifying events, "the Producer will pay the amount agreed upon in Paragraph 3A for compensation and loss of livelihood due to the unlikely event of a contract-ending force majeure."

There was another packet behind the first contract. She lowered her brows in confusion. It was a second movie contract. But not for the civil

war film. This one seemed to be the sequel to Rhett's original superhero movie, and it was scheduled to begin filming in one week in LA. It was the second in a trilogy and he had signed for it years ago. She bit her lip. Blake was expecting their shooting schedule to extend at least another two weeks, and with the frequency of the accidents, probably even longer. She jumped up and looked around for her phone, realizing belatedly that she had left it in the car with her purse and street clothes. She threw the shift on over her head and ran barefoot out to her car. The trailer door banged behind her.

In her car, she scooped her clothes and shoes up under her elbow and rummaged in her bag for her phone. The screen lit up at it touched her hand. Ten missed calls. Nine from Stanford, one from Ruby. She had a voicemail and a text. Fuck. She ran back inside, as she dialed her voicemail box.

"Delta, this is Ruby. You don't have to call me back. I didn't want to tell your cop friend because I don't really want more people involved in this than have to be, but I figured out who my blackmailer is. I'm going to meet him tonight. At the plantation. As I told you, we will be returning the cameras, so don't think that you can start blackmailing me about that. We don't have anything else to say to one another. So bye."

Fuck. She swallowed hard and hopped over to the bed where she had left the file folder she had found. She quickly snapped a picture of the two contracts and then threw off the shift, shimmying quickly into her own button-up and jeans. She stuffed the file back under Rhett's mattress and jammed her feet into her shoes, not bothering with her socks.

She read the text message from Stanford as she ran out the door. "Call me ASAP."

Chapter Ten: Manderly

She dialed Stanford's number as she jumped into her car. The motor purred to life as she threw on her brights and clicked her seatbelt into place. Just as she was reversing from the trailer, Stanford picked up. "Finally," he said. "I have to tell you something. I just—"

"Shut up. I think Rhett Castor is Ruby's blackmailer."

"That's what I was going to tell you!" He sounded annoyed that she had beaten him to it.

"She's on her way to meet him right now at the old plantation."

"That's not a—"

"And I think that not only is Rhett the blackmailer, I think he's the one who has been causing all of the accidents on set. He could even be the one that killed Christina."

"He almost certainly is," said Stanford. "I went to that place he took you, the Rutting Pig. The staff there said that they had seen Rhett there before—several times in fact, with a brunette woman with him. She matched the description of Christina Eaves."

"He was sleeping with her."

"Probably."

"If we don't get to him before he gets to Ruby, she could be in danger. I'm on my way to the plantation now."

"So am I. I'll meet you there. And Robbins, if you make it there before me, do not go in alone. Wait for backup, do you hear me? He could be dangerous. I'm calling this into the station, but I'm in Marrotsville. I'll probably make it over before the rest of the backup arrives. Do not go in alone!"

"I heard you, Stanford." She hung up the phone and tossed it into the passenger seat as she drove down the narrow country lanes,

headlights illuminating the pine trees along the way. Their scraggly bark was pale and ghostly in the high beams. The plantation was not far, only about ten minutes down the road from the old warehouses that had been converted into the studio lots. She made it there in seven, grateful that no deer had chosen that night to jump out in front of her car.

She pulled up cautiously, dimming her lights as her tires crunched on the gravel drive. It was just past midnight. The house loomed before her against the night, foreboding and dark. She saw Rhett's motorcycle in the yard and Ruby's huge SUV in the side parking lot. She didn't bother to park properly, just pulled her car up to the front of the house, leaving it in the circular drive. She cut the engine quickly, barely remembering to grab her gun before hopping out.

The Southern night clung to her skin, thick and moist as she crept up to the porch, clicking off the safety on her gun as she slowly headed up the stairs. The windows were black and still, betraying nothing about the secrets that the house held within.

The large front door was slightly ajar. It opened silently under her touch, and she stood for a moment in the dim entryway, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. There was no sign of Rhett and Ruby. She ran her hands along the wall and tried a switch. As she had expected, there was nothing. It was too bad that she didn't think to bring a flashlight—the only light was slipping in from the sliver of waning moon outside, pushing its way through gaps in the curtains. She touched her pocket to bring out her phone before realizing that she had left it in the car. She frowned, but it wasn't worth going back for.

She squinted in the room, feeling her way around its edges. Her fingers bumped into a prop table, set up for the next day. She stared at it, willing her eyes to find the shapes hidden in the dark shadows. Candles. The characters were always carrying around little tapers and candle holders, as well as larger kerosene lanterns. The table was full of them. She saw glass glinting off of the top of one of the kerosene lanterns and found a lighter near it on the table. The wick sparked to life underneath

the flame, casting odd, sharp shadows against the wall as she adjusted the lantern's globe.

She crept through the ground floor of the house, lantern in one hand, gun in the other, but there was nothing but darkness.

Upstairs, then.

Her little lantern bobbed as she took the steps cautiously. A stair creaked under her foot, but there was no other sound except for the ragged rise and fall of her own breath. The adrenaline surged in her veins as she made it to the landing where Casper Winchester had been sent tumbling to the first floor. It still smelled of sawdust and fresh wood where the bannister had been repaired. The door to the master bedroom was open. She peered inside and saw nothing but shadows. It was the same for every other room on the second floor.

A narrow staircase in the open gallery behind the second floor landing led upwards. She had never been to the third floor cupola, and it made her nervous. She didn't know what rooms were up there, what the layout was. She hesitated for a moment and licked her lips. Stanford had told her to wait for backup. To wait for him. But Ruby could be in danger if Rhett really was the person responsible for all of the accidents. Another thought nagged her as well. If she got Rhett in cuffs before Stanford arrived, wouldn't she get most of the credit for solving the case? She needed the win to redeem herself for her careless mistakes in her last case.

She wet her lips and steadied her grip on her gun. And then she climbed up the stairs.

The staircase was narrow and steep. Delta gathered herself as she climbed, trying to prepare for what she might encounter at the top. Rhett and Ruby had to be there. Where else could they have gone? The paneled door at the top was closed. She paused on the tiny landing, dimming her lantern as she looked for light around the edges of its frame. There was nothing. She pressed her ear to the door, and hearing nothing, touched the knob. It opened with the slightest pressure from her hand.

She was facing a small hallway. In front of her was a wall where paintings were dark against the wooden paneling. A black bench sat empty underneath. There was a door on either side of her. She tried the one to her right first. It opened easily and she jumped as she saw a sudden light and a shadowy face come into view. Her heart was still hammering as she realized it was only her own reflection looking back at her from a bathroom mirror. She angled her lantern inside but saw nothing else in the small half-bath.

She closed the door quietly and slunk across the landing to the other door. It swung open to a shadowed library, with tall bookcases along the walls, in between floor length windows. A baby grand piano took up the center of the room. She edged her way in carefully, across the soft carpets on the floor.

That was when she heard the voices and saw the glow of a light from outside. She held her small lantern low to shield the light and crept forward, footsteps muffled against the thick rugs. Her palm felt sweaty against the handle of her gun. It was hot in the close quarters of the cupola. The air was completely still with no power on to run the air conditioners. She took a steadying breath, and then stuffed the gun into the back pocket of her jeans to hide it from view until necessary. She wiped her palm on her thigh and then glanced over.

The door that led to the outside widow's walk was ajar. She nudged it open and slipped through silently. The night air did little to cool her even as a light breeze moved through the tops of the pines. She looked around, but saw no one. Quietly, she walked around the porch to where she had seen the light through the window. As she turned the corner, she saw them immediately. Ruby's back was to her, but Rhett saw her as she approached and jerked his hands up. He was holding a gun. It was now aimed at her.

"What are you doing here?" he barked.

Delta took a step closer, holding up the lantern and her free hand. "What's going on here, Rhett?"

Ruby looked at her with fear showing in her wide eyes. Her light hair twisted in the wind, looking as pale as silver in the moonlight. "He's threatening to kill me!" she shrieked. "Help me, Delta!"

Rhett's eyes narrowed. "Delta, just turn around and go. This is between me and Ruby. There's no need for you to get involved." He waved the gun between the two of them. She had the feeling he didn't really know how to use it.

"Put the gun down, Rhett." She kept her voice slow and even as she took another step forward. "Leave Ruby be. Why don't we talk, just you and me?"

He jerked the gun, training it on her. "This is your last warning, Delta. Go."

"Were you blackmailing Ruby, Rhett?"

The gun swiveled to Ruby. "You told someone?"

Ruby scowled at him. "He told me that if I didn't pay him three million dollars that he would kill me," she said to Delta without turning around.

Another step closer and she was almost to Ruby's side.

Rhett shut his eyes tight for a second and sucked in the side of his cheek in frustration. "It's the only way I can fix this."

"Fix what?" Delta said, still keeping her voice neutral as she reached Ruby.

"I'm going to be bankrupt," he said through gritted teeth. "Unless she pays me."

"Is that what that second contract was about?"

The gun was back on Delta. "Stop moving! Did you look through my stuff?" He sounded surprised, hurt.

"I found it when I was making your bed."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's for the next *Black Archer* movie. You wouldn't believe how much they are offering me to do it! But the schedule conflicts with this stupid movie, and I would be docked in pay if I delayed filming. So either I get out of this one, or Ruby pays up. Simple."

“Couldn’t you just leave?”

“Don’t you understand, Delta? If they cancel the movie, they still have to pay me. If I leave, they don’t because it means I broke my contract. I’d have to pay them a fee! And I need the money!”

“So why did you kill Christina?”

Rhett’s face drained of color. “She found the papers in my trailer. But she tried to threaten me! Asked me for money as if I had any to give her! I just meant to scare her a little, but things went too far. And then I thought that maybe if the production was cancelled...”

She shifted on her feet, trying to reach Ruby.

“Stop moving, I said!” He jerked the gun over and fired off a wild shot. A window shattered. She flinched. Beside her Ruby screamed. “Put the lantern down,” he told Delta. “And step away from Ruby. I don’t want to hurt you. I really don’t, Delta.”

Delta nodded and slowly bent, placing the kerosene lantern at her feet by the railing. She raised both of her hands as she straightened. Halfway up, she yelled, “Run, Ruby!” as she yanked her gun from her back pocket. There was a flurry of movement. Rhett took a step back in surprise just as Ruby ran, *towards Rhett*, shoving him against the railing. His gun went off in another bang.

“No!” Delta yelled, but it was too late. The railing behind Rhett cracked, and he fell backwards over the widow’s walk, grabbing at Ruby and screaming onto the roof as he slid down, skidding over the shingles.

Ruby yelped as she managed to yank her arm from Rhett’s grasp, slipping after him down the roof. Delta tossed her gun aside and ran forwards, peering over the broken railing and down, where Ruby was clinging to the edge of the roof, fingers clutching desperately in the gutter. That was when Delta smelled the smoke.

Delta glanced behind her and saw a plume of smoke rising above the roof. The lantern she had brought up was nowhere to be seen. She scrambled to the edge of the widow’s walk and carefully began to crawl down the pitched roof. “Ruby, hang on!”

Ruby made a sound that was halfway between a grunt and a scream as Delta approached. She had fallen near the chimney. Delta hoped that it was sturdy as she lowered herself against it, using it to brace herself as she leaned forwards, reaching for Ruby's arm. The smoke was rising with an alarming speed, somehow already thick enough to make Delta cough. The slight breeze that had been blowing earlier whipped up again, sending sparks into the air and all over the roof. Delta risked a glance over her shoulder as Ruby caught onto her arm. Flames were beginning to leap up from the dry shingles, thick plumes of smoke billowing above.

Delta's muscles protested as Ruby's bodyweight pulled against her arm. She leaned against the brick stack of the chimney to reinforce herself as Ruby clung to her arm. Sweat was pouring down Delta's forehead as Ruby managed to swing herself up, looping a leg up to the roof and flopping onto the shingles belly first. The sandpapery texture of the shingles bit into Delta's bare forearms as she strained to help her. Her shoulder felt like it might slip from its socket. And then Ruby was all the way up.

She gave Delta a curt nod. Together, they crawled back up the roof as a hot breeze fanned the flames towards them. Back on the widow's walk, they ran back towards the door that led into the library. The flames were making a roaring sound and the heat made Delta's shirt stick to her back as they raced inside. Delta's feet slipped on a corner of the rug and she stumbled, falling against the carpet. Ruby took a look back at her and then carried on running towards the stairs without so much as trying to help her.

Just as Delta was pushing herself back up to her feet she heard a loud bang and glass shattering. Shards of the windows tumbled around her and she threw her arm over her head as she sprinted towards the door.

A few smaller bangs sounded in quick succession. Her gun, she realized belatedly. The fire had reached her gun. She ran for the stairs as fast as she could, choking on the smoke. The world was bathed in the

eerie orange light of the fire. She could hear it crackling as she ran. It was spreading more quickly than she would have ever imagined.

The grand entrance hall was still cool and dark as she made it to the ground floor, sprinting for the door. That was when she noticed the shrill screech of the sirens over the roaring flames. Her lungs were stinging in her chest as she raced towards the door. She almost ran right into Stanford.

He didn't say anything, only grabbed her arm, half dragging her the rest of the way down the hall through the open door and down the steps to the gravel path. Several police cars were down below.

"Where's Ruby?" she choked as he released her, grabbing her shoulders to turn her to face him.

"With Panier."

Delta squinted through her watery eyes, and saw Ruby's thin blonde form, leaning into the protective arms of Officer Panier. Her bangs were sticking to her forehead and there were some sooty patches on her cheeks, but she otherwise looked quite unharmed. Delta marched over with Stanford trailing bemusedly behind. "Arrest her, Mitch."

Ruby looked at Delta with watery eyes. "What did you say?"

"Arrest her! She pushed Rhett Castor off the roof."

Ruby flinched. "No! I didn't! She's lying!"

"I'm a cop," Delta snarled, flashing her badge before bending over at the waist in a coughing fit. The smoke was billowing all around. "Turns out you were right about me," she added irritably.

Panier looked to Stanford and Delta. "Cuff her," Stanford said over the shriek of the fire truck sirens.

"No!" Ruby squealed. "It was self-defense!" But Mitch was already cuffing her and reciting her her rights.

"Save it for your lawyer," Delta spat, a little testy that Ruby had left her on the floor of the library after she had gone through the effort of pulling her up from the roof. She wheeled on Stanford. "Is Rhett alive?"

"We haven't seen him."

"I'd check the ground near the chimney. That's where she pushed him off the roof."

Ruby scowled as Mitch stuffed her into the back of his cruiser. Delta smiled sinisterly and began marching forward. The fire trucks had arrived and the firemen were already scurrying to pull out their hoses, directing them towards the flames that were devouring the plantation in record time.

Stanford grabbed Delta's elbow. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To find Rhett. If he's alive."

Stanford's grip tightened and he looked at Mitch who was returning from his car. "Panier, we're looking for Rhett Castor. Could be seriously wounded or worse." He jerked his head towards Delta. "Last spotted near the chimney. Tell the others."

Stanford let go of Delta's elbow as Mitch spoke into his radio. "You need to see the medics first," he said gently. Then his eyes flashed in anger. "And then you can tell me what the hell you were thinking going in there with no backup! And after I explicitly told you to wait!"

Delta glared at him. "I thought Ruby could be in danger! And I was right, by the way. If I hadn't gone up there, Rhett would have killed her! He had a gun." She made to walk back towards the house, scanning the grounds for any sign of Rhett.

"Medic first!" he shouted, a vein throbbing in his temple. His cheekbones had never looked so pronounced as they did now in the hot orange glow of the flames. His hazel eyes were pale and grim.

Her mouth fell open as she came to a sudden realization. The plantation was on fire. *Really* on fire. "Oh fuck! Stanford! Are they going to be able to save it?" Her heart clenched in her chest, a wave of sorrow rising from her gut as she realized that one little kerosene lantern might do what Sherman hadn't. She felt close to tears.

He must have seen the distress in her eyes because his face softened. "They'll save it, Robbins."

She nodded as the ambulance finally pulled in, followed by a second fire truck and then a third. They watched the fire together for a moment.

It did seem to be slowing down as the fire trucks sprayed it on all sides. Still, if it was destroyed... She shut off the feelings rising in her chest as Stanford waved over an EMT.

She sat in the back of the ambulance and allowed herself to be inspected, suffering the medic to swab the few cuts and scrapes on her arms with disinfectant, look up her nose and down throat, take her pulse, and listen to her lungs. Stanford leaned casually against the ambulance while this was going on, occasionally glancing at her, but mostly watching the firemen at work and listening to the chatter on his radio.

He straightened suddenly after a buzz in his radio. "They found Rhett," he told Delta. "And he's alive." There was a pause as his radio droned again. "They're loading him into the other ambulance. He must have some broken bones but he was crawling off into the woods somehow." Delta rose to her feet and squinted into the yard where she could see the EMTs loading a stretcher into the ambulance.

Delta swayed on her feet. "What time is it?"

He glanced at the leather watch on his wrist. "Just after 2:00 AM."

"Fuck, my head hurts. I feel like I haven't slept in days."

Stanford's eyes narrowed. "You probably haven't."

The EMT behind them popped up with a cheerful grin, "Or it's from inhaling carbon monoxide," she chirped. "Let's get an oxygen mask on you!"

Chapter Eleven: To the Victor Go the Spoils

At the Captain's insistence, Delta took a half day's leave the next morning and slept in. When she awoke, she had a message from Blake. "Delta," his crisp LA accent buzzed in her phone, "they've cancelled it." She could hear the heartbreak in his voice. "We're supposed to pack

everything up today.” There was a pause. “I realize I probably won’t see you again, but if you’re ever in California, look me up. You could really be a star, you know... And on a personal note... I really enjoyed our time together.”

There was also a text from Pippa. “Thanks for getting me sent to jail! I can’t believe you thought I could be a murderer! I really thought you were different than all of these fake Hollywood people. And then I find out that you lied to me about who you are. I can’t have that kind of negative energy in my life. Lose this number.” Delta’s cheeks burned with guilt. She fought the urge to respond and explain herself. But isolating people you cared about was one of the risks of the job, and Delta loved her work more than anything. More than anyone.

She showered and dressed quickly after checking her phone, eager to get into work and onto the next case, to forget about the bridges... and plantations she’d burned.

Officer Harper was near the door as she walked in. “Delta Bayou!” he cheered. “Movie star and one hell of a detective!”

She gave him a lopsided grin. “Oh, shut up. The movie got cancelled so no one will ever see it, anyway.” Her voice was still husky from the smoke she had inhaled the night before.

The police chief was standing nearby. “I thought I told you to take the day off.”

She smiled. “Half day, sir.”

He pressed his lips together into a line. “If you’re feeling up to it, Detective Robbins, maybe you can clear up some details for Detective Stanford. He’s just going over the paperwork for the case.”

She nodded. “Happy to, sir.”

Stanford was sitting in his office, twirling in his chair when she barged in without knocking. “Working hard?”

He gave her a wry smile. “I’ve always hated the paperwork.”

“Captain Payne said that you needed some help closing everything up.”

He gathered the piles of papers on his desk, flipping for something. "I wouldn't say no to a little help. So tell me, how did you know that Rhett was the blackmailer and the person who had been sabotaging the production?"

She sank into the seat across from his desk. "I found some suspicious papers in his trailer. He was in a great deal of debt, but the contract specified that if the movie shut down early, he would still get paid. Plus he was committed to filming another movie and would be docked in pay if he delayed it in any way."

"And what dirt did he have on Ruby?"

"She's been filming pornos with equipment stolen from the set."

Stanford's eyebrows raised. "That is not at all what she told me."

"Sorry I didn't fill you in. I found out the night before Eliza Ortega was electrocuted and I had to be on set early to begin filming. And with everything that happened... Well, it slipped my mind that Ruby was a thief as well as a would-be murderer."

"And what did happen on that roof?"

"Rhett had a gun. I had it covered and told Ruby to run away. But she ran *at* Rhett instead of away. She shoved him on purpose. Maybe she wanted to make sure that he never told anyone what she was up to."

"But you knew."

"Yeah," Delta snorted, "and she as good as tried to leave me in that burning building." Her fingers curled against her lap. "How is it, by the way? Manderly Plantation?"

Stanford rolled his eyes. "How is the *plantation*?" he scoffed. "Not, how is Rhett? How is Eliza? Is Caspar Winchester recovering? No, how is the plantation? That's your most pressing concern?"

She shrugged. "I really like architecture, *OK*, Stanford?"

He sighed. "Winchester was released yesterday. Only had a broken tailbone. Eliza had a small seizure due to the electric shock, but she is expected to make a full recovery. And Rhett Castor has fractured his spine in three places as well broken an arm and a couple of ribs. But he is conscious and full of things to say under the influence of all of those

pain meds. Unfortunately, the only person he is officially talking to right now is his lawyer."

"Well," Delta sighed, "he's guilty."

"Yes," agreed Stanford, "extremely. As is Ruby."

"These movie types," grumped Delta, "are not very good people."

"It would seem not."

"Anything else?"

He cleared his throat. "I was going to drive out to the plantation when I get done here. The techs were sweeping it for evidence. I thought I would check it out. Do you want to come? See what's left of Manderly?"

"Yes."

Delta crossed her arms and sighed as she looked at the scarred husk of the plantation house a few hours later. The roof had collapsed on the left side, and parts of the walls had burned out, exposing charred black beams and sooty brick walls. Smoke had left its greasy mark across much of the white siding, and many of the windows were empty dark holes where the glass had shattered out from the heat. The acrid scent of smoke and ash was still heavy in the air.

"It was a beautiful house," she said, swallowing hard to try to ignore the tears irrationally pooling behind her eyes.

He snorted. "It's just a house. Plus the people that built it owned slaves and probably fought to keep them. Ugly history."

"I don't care about history, Stanford. Just the house."

"I'm sure they'll repair it, Robbins. There must have been a lot of insurance on it. Or they'll sue the studio and get the money to do it that way."

"True."

"Heard from your friend Hartford?"

"He's going back to LA. Probably already left. I can't imagine that this will be good for his career."

Stanford snorted. "Good. That guy was annoying."

Delta laughed lightly. "Yeah, he kind of was, wasn't he? Handsome, though."

Stanford gave her a long-suffering look as they began walking back to the parking lot. The sun was all but set, and the heat actually seemed to be receding as night surged around them. "Almost fall," he commented over the chirping crickets. She supposed that it was, although Georgia weather never seemed to care much about seasons.

The parking lot was empty except for their two cars. It was odd to see the plantation so still after having been such a hive of activity for the past few weeks. She sighed loudly, wondering if the place would ever be the same.

Stanford elbowed her playfully in the ribs, jolting her out of her thoughts as they approached the cars. "So tell me the truth, Robbins, were you actually stupid enough to go up to the roof alone, or were you hoping you could win another round of oral by beating me to that plantation?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "I didn't know that offer was still on the table." She leaned back against the metal body of her car and crossed her arms, eying him carefully.

He looked away, mouth firm. "It isn't." But his eyes sparkled mischievously.

She licked her lips uncertainty. "Because if it were... you know, technically, you solved the case first."

His eyes flicked to her face. "What?"

"Technically, you solved it first. I mean, you knew before I called you that Rhett was the blackmailer. That was the key to the case. And you knew before me. So... wouldn't it be my turn to do you?"

He swallowed hard and mirrored her posture, arms pressed close to his chest. Jesus, the way the street lamps lit up the curve of muscle that crossed his arms... the glint of the stubble on his chin, his long straight nose and playful eyes. His brown hair was getting a little long, brushing at the tips of his ears, messy almost. "It wouldn't be right, Delta."

“So?” It came out lower than she had meant, a husky whisper instead of a defiant rebuttal.

His arms dropped to his sides, fists balled. “Goddammit, you know —”

“Stanford, do you want a blow job?” she cut him off.

He groaned, and tilted his head backwards. “Fuck, yes.” His adam’s apple bobbed. He pressed his hands through his dark hair.

She didn’t know who moved first or how it happened, but suddenly they were pressed together, and she could feel every inch of Stanford’s lean, muscular frame. Her back pressed against the frame of the car and her arms were around his neck, the heat of his skin flowing into hers.

His hot lips nipped against her throat and she felt the pressure of his hand against her lower back. A sound escaped her lips, something between a moan and a sigh as he kissed her neck. She pressed her hips against his and felt his hand sliding up her back, slipping underneath the thin cotton of her shirt. A hot jolt of electricity shot through her body as she wrapped a leg around his waist and felt the crush of his erection against her hips.

How could someone who pushed all of her buttons be so fucking sexy? His lips brushed against hers. His mouth was soft, uncertain for a moment, until she pulled his head to her. She felt the slip of his tongue against hers, the taste of his mouth, warm and sweet as he pressed it in between her lips. The sensation was disturbingly erotic. She felt her body responding eagerly, her nipples hardening, her stomach clenching as she felt an immediate shock of wetness between her thighs.

Then his mouth was on her neck again, his hand pulling through her hair as his lips raked across the delicate skin of her throat. She felt so tense she could break, body as tight as a bowstring as his hand slipped over her stomach and up, under her bra. She thought she would die in pleasure as his fingers spread across her breast and he pulled his thumb over her nipple.

“Fuck,” she whispered.

He slammed his hips against hers in response and she found herself gyrating against him, pressing against the hard ridge of his cock. She flung her arms downwards, undoing the buckle of his belt and snatched at the button of his pants. A low groan caught in his throat as she yanked down the zipper.

He gasped as her hands found his cock. God, the feel of it, hard and long beneath the fabric of his boxers... She pressed her palm against it and slid her hand over his length. She could feel his muscles stiffen as she took him in her hands. She was desperate for it, and slid down to her knees, knocking them against the rough gravel of the pavement. She didn't mind the pain, she only wanted his cock pressed between her lips, to taste him and feel him, to make him painfully aware of just how much pleasure she could bring him.

And then his phone rang, chirping in the back pocket of his jeans. She jerked her hand away from his crotch in confusion. He was hovering over her. "Fuck," he said, reaching for his phone. "Fuck." It was still ringing, shrill in the empty parking lot. "I'll just turn it off," he said, fumbling for it. His face changed abruptly as he saw the number on the screen. "Fuck," he said for a third time. "It's uh.... It's my ex-wife. I gotta get this."

"What?" Delta leapt up from her knees and stood to him, face to face. "I was about to motherfucking blow you and you're going to take a call from your ex-wife right now?"

He grimaced. "It could be important! Carly wouldn't call for just any old reason!"

Delta grabbed her keys from her back pocket. "I can't fucking believe this!"

"Hello?" he answered the phone, adjusting himself back into his pants.

She could hear the high pitched tones of a woman on the other end. She crossed her arms, waiting, tapping her foot against the pavement. Why didn't she just leave? It was clear that he had things other than her on his mind. She was better than this.

“What happened?” She heard the surprise, or was it alarm, in his voice. “Jesus, Carly. No, you did the right thing to call me. Don’t be afraid. I’ll talk to some people down at the station. I know someone who could help, actually.” He met Delta’s eyes. “Yeah. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He hung up the phone and took a deep breath. “My ex-wife is working on the set of a TV show I think you might be familiar with. *The Real MILFS*. They’re doing a spin-off, apparently, in Macon, and there’s been murders, Delta. Murders like the ones you solved in Atlanta.”

“A copycat.” Delta said breathlessly. A cold rush slipped down her spine, giving her goosebumps.

“A copycat,” Stanford affirmed. They looked at each other for a moment.

“Well, what are we waiting on?” Delta grinned. “Let’s catch the son of a bitch.”