

**S**ierra Blake glanced up at the bank of lights, and tiny dots danced in front of her eyes. People didn't often realize just how hot stage lights could be. The expression "basking in the spotlight"? That stray s had to be a typo, because it was more like "baking in the spotlight."

"Sierra, what do you think separates you from other child stars?" The 90's Con panel moderator directed the question at her, smoothing a hand down his tie as he glanced at the index cards clutched in one hand. She took a breath, the prickling threat of sweat teasing along her hairline. God, was she relieved she didn't have to do this daily anymore. She smoothed her hair over her shoulder and ran her hands over the skirt of her cream-colored silk dress. Hundreds of eyes locked onto her, and a zing of adrenaline shot down to her toes.

She bit her lip and fingered the shooting star pendant at the base of her throat. "You mean, how did I avoid living 'la vida Lohan'?"

Laughter bubbled up from the audience, and she relaxed a little. Although it was par for the course at events like this, she'd always hated that question and the quagmire of emotions it dredged up.

She took a deep breath and dove in. "Quite frankly, being a child star is pretty messed up. You're working with adults, keeping adult hours, making adult money, and trying to live up to the expectations of everyone around you. Any kid would find that kind of pressure confining. And that's where the rebellion comes in. Drinking and drugs and sex. And all of this is happening when you're trying to figure out who you actually are. How are you supposed to do that in that environment?" She paused, contemplating how much to share.

"But you didn't go down that road," prompted the moderator.

“I didn’t. I think part of the reason is that *Family Tree* was an ensemble show.” She looked across the stage at her former costars, smiling warmly. “There wasn’t one star carrying everyone else. We were a group, and the older actors looked out for the younger ones. I think the shock of suddenly being in the spotlight was easier to absorb when it was shared between all of us.”

“That’s definitely true,” interjected Rory Evans, one of the other stars of the show. “We all bonded in that environment, and we became a pretty tight-knit group. We were a support system for each other without really even realizing that’s what we were doing.”

“Totally.” Steven Simmons nodded. “We were a crew. No one had pressure on his or her shoulders to make the show a success. I think part of the reason it was a success was that the bond Rory mentioned shone through on the screen. We were all friends.”

“We’re all *still* friends,” said Rory, taking a sip of his water. And it was true. Rory was a good friend, who’d seen her through the loss of a parent, through a change in career, from her teens to her thirtieth birthday just a few months ago.

“For sure,” said Sierra, grateful that she hadn’t had to shoulder the question on her own. “I can’t speak for everyone else, but I think if I’d started in movies instead of on a TV show with the cast we had...” She shrugged. “Well, I don’t know. I might’ve given Lindsay a run for her money.”

“We all might’ve. In fact, some of us tried,” said Steven, looking around innocently and drawing laughter from the audience. Although he had it together now, the antics of his early twenties were well documented.

“We did,” said Sierra, her fingers once again straying to her star pendant. Rory reached over and squeezed her knee, giving her an encouraging nod. “You know the drinking, and the drugs, and the sex that I just referenced? All of that was true, at least

for me. There was a period, between when *Family Tree* ended and when I started working on *Sunset Cove*, that I...” She trailed off, her fingers knotted together. “I lost control. I was seventeen, and my dad was dying of cancer. I was trying to figure out...well, everything, I guess. I was lost. Scared. So I drank, and I partied, and I hooked up with boys, trying to find a way to quell the fear that my world was about to end. Keep in mind that I also lived in a world that completely facilitated this behavior. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t legal, I had no issues getting into bars, finding someone to sell me pot, or getting boys’ attention. That whole Hollywood world was so toxic. I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was. Especially for a scared, lost kid. Everything came crashing down when my dad died, and then I had a pregnancy scare.”

She forced herself to take a breath, and Rory gave her knee another squeeze. “I’m telling you all of this to partly explain that in some ways, I’m not so different from other child stars. I was messed up. And that toxic environment is why I’m not really in that world anymore.

“When I thought I was pregnant, I went to Choices. For anyone who doesn’t know, Choices is a nonprofit organization that provides confidential reproductive, maternal, and child health services at low or no cost, and has centers across the country. I didn’t know where else to go. I didn’t want to tell my mom. I didn’t even know if I was pregnant, and I was too chicken to even go buy a pregnancy test. What if someone recognized me?

“I was able to take a test there, and it turned out that I wasn’t pregnant, which was a relief because clearly I would’ve been ill equipped to deal with an unplanned pregnancy at seventeen. I didn’t have my own life together. How could I even think about a baby’s life? The support I received at Choices played a huge role in turning my

life around. They offered me counseling, birth control, and support at a time when I felt alone and scared. So after I finished working on *Sunset Cove*, I went to college, and now I work for Choices. I'm proud to be their spokesperson, because I know firsthand what a difference they can make in someone's life. Frankly, I—”

“Shut your fucking mouth, whore!” A male voice erupted from the crowd, and stunned silence fell over the audience. Sierra froze, her mouth still open. A chill ran up her spine as a feeling of naked vulnerability engulfed her, pinning her in place. Rory's hand tightened on her knee and she scanned the crowd, but with the bright stage lights, she could see only the first few rows of people. Everyone else was hidden, shrouded in the shadows and beyond the reach of the lights. She glanced at Rory and the panel moderator, unsure what to do next. She'd spoken about Choices in public dozens of times, and no one had ever hurled obscenities like that at her.

And that's when something heavy, soggy, and cold slammed into her chest. It was as though someone had hit the slow-motion button on her life, and she felt as though she were suddenly underwater, dizzy and unable to get enough oxygen. Slowly she looked down, and all she could see was red, blooming in large patches on her dress, soaking it through. She ran her trembling hands down her torso, trying to figure out where all the blood had come from. But there was no pain, and the blood was cold.

Not her blood.

Shaking, she stood, and that's when she saw it, crumpled at her feet. A diaper with an exploded red dye pack. It was supposed to look like a bloody diaper. And someone had thrown it at her. A boiling anger ate at her chest, and her cheeks burned with humiliation. She clenched her jaw against the hot, stinging tears prickling her eyes.

“Oh my God, are you OK?” Rory’s hands were on her shoulders, and the slow motion of the moment morphed into fast-forward. She shook again, a shiver racking her as a wave of dizziness washed over her, making the room tilt nauseatingly for a second. She nodded, her chest tingling hotly as her mind scrambled to make sense of what had just happened. The overwhelming urge to get the hell out of there took over, and she spun, almost tripping over the chair she’d just been sitting in. Shoving it aside, she ran offstage, needing to get away from the lights, away from the exposure.

Just away.

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Sean Owens pulled his sunglasses from his face, squinting for a second against the bright Los Angeles sunshine as he strode toward the back entrance of the convention center, slipping them into the pocket of his suit jacket. He scanned the small aboveground employee parking lot, on the alert for any unusual activity, but nothing stood out. The standard perimeter check complete, he reached into another pocket for his phone, ready to check in with De Luca, the new guy on his team, before heading back to the office.

Before he could send the text message, the nondescript door at the back of the convention center flew open, slamming against the brick wall with a sharp bang, and he tensed, his hand edging toward the Glock 19 in the shoulder holster under his suit jacket. A woman came rushing out, one hand clutched to her chest, her face pale.

She was covered in blood.

Ten years of training and carefully honed instinct kicked into high gear, and he rushed toward her, his legs kicking into motion before he even had time to think about it. He raked his eyes over her tiny body, trying to figure out where all the blood was

coming from, and if it was hers. She wasn't moving as though she was injured. She almost collided with him, but he anticipated her and braced his hands in front of him, his fingers curling lightly around her upper arms to steady her. She gasped and looked up, and a pair of bright-green, terrified eyes met his. Immediately he looked behind her, trying to determine if someone was pursuing her.

"Are you hurt? Is this your blood?" he asked, keeping his voice calm as he held her steady, his eyes still scanning the area for potential threats.

She shook her head, the ends of her golden-brown hair brushing against his fingers.

"No," she said, her voice strained. "It's dye."

He frowned and once again scanned the area behind her as he swapped places with her, putting himself between her and the door.

"Are you all right? You're not hurt?"

She laughed, the sound shaky and hollow. "Am I all right? Not really. But I'm not injured."

Sean's heart eased out of his throat from where it had leaped at the sight of a woman covered in blood running out of the convention center. But only slightly.

She pulled away, moving back a little.. "I need to go."

He nodded, wanting more than anything to help her. "Where? I can drive you."

She took another step away from him, one eyebrow arched, a frown on her face. "Yeah, I don't get into cars with strange men, but thanks for the offer." A bit of color returned to her cheeks, making her green eyes look even brighter.

"Understandable. My name's Sean, and I'm a security expert." She eyed him warily, and he continued. "A bodyguard. I'm here at the convention to check on a new

member of my team, see how he's doing with a client." He slipped his hand into his pocket and fished out a business card, handing it to her, wanting to earn her trust. Even though she was uninjured, his instincts told him that she needed him. She studied the card with narrowed eyes for a second before crossing her arms over her chest.

"This doesn't prove anything. You could've had these made."

He bit his lip, trying to suppress the smile he knew wouldn't get him anywhere. But he couldn't help it. Not only was she cute, she was smart.

"I just..." She toyed with his card, running it back and forth over her knuckles. "I just need a minute."

"Why don't you sit down?" He gestured to a bench several feet away. She glanced from him to the bench before finally nodding. Still keeping himself between her and the door, he let her lead the way. She sat down heavily, her elbows on her thighs, her face in her hands. He eased down beside her, sitting so as to block her from view of the convention center's back door. He watched as she took several deep breaths, and his chest tightened slightly. She was scared, and upset. Even if she didn't trust him, he could protect her from whatever had her so upset, and no way in hell was he going to leave her on her own. He couldn't. Not only was it his training, but there was something about this woman. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt drawn to her. Wanted to protect her and look after her.

The parking lot was quiet except for the distant rush of traffic from the front of the convention center, the rustling of the leaves of the trees lining the parking lot, and a bird chirping softly somewhere above them. Her slender shoulders rose and fell as she took several deep breaths, and he said nothing, giving her space. After a few moments, she straightened and leaned back against the bench, smoothing her hands over her

stained dress that had once been white or yellow. It was so ruined, he couldn't tell for sure. Her eyes raked over him, and he let her look, hoping to put her at ease. Finally her eyes met his.

“What happened?” he asked, needing to know so he could keep her safe.

She sighed heavily, and her shoulders relaxed, easing down from around her ears. “I was speaking at the convention,” she said, gesturing to the building behind them, “and someone threw a diaper full of dye at me.”

“Someone attacked you with a diaper?”

She nodded, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She looked up, her eyes once again meeting his, and there was that tug in his chest again. That pull.

“Why would someone do that?” he asked, propping one ankle on his opposite knee and threading his fingers together, forcing his body into a relaxed posture to hide the tension radiating through him.

“I guess because I have some unpopular opinions.”

“About?”

“Equal access to birth control and family planning. I'm a spokesperson for Choices, the women's health nonprofit.” She looked down at her splotchy dress and sighed again, rubbing a hand over her face.

“Ah. Explains the diaper.” The knot between his shoulders loosened just slightly. Chances were this was nothing more than idiot protesters, looking to make a point by embarrassing her. He looked back at the door again, but there was no sign of anyone following her.

Her lips moved, a tiny ghost of a smile. “I'm sorry I kind of accused you of...lying, or whatever. I didn't mean to be rude. I'm just...”

He held up a hand. “No apology needed.”

She glanced down at his card, still clutched in one hand, now slightly crumpled. “I’ve heard of Virtus,” she said, referring to the security company he ran with his father. The blue-and-gray logo was emblazoned across the top of the card he’d given her. She extended her hand across to him. “I’m Sierra, by the way.”

He nodded. In the back of his brain, he’d recognized her almost immediately, but his concern for her had taken precedence over everything else. “I know. I’m Sean.” He enveloped her small, delicate hand in his, and a warm, electrical tingle worked its way up his arm. Slowly she pulled her hand back, and damn, the friction of her skin against his felt good.

“I know.” She held up the card.

He rubbed a hand over his cheek, his closely cropped beard bristling against his fingers. “Right. So, any idea who might’ve attacked you?” He scanned the quiet parking lot again. No way in hell was anyone getting close to her right now.

She blew out a slow breath and shook her head. “Not a clue.” Some of the color dropped out of her face again, and he knew he needed to keep her talking. The urge to comfort her was nearly overwhelming. He couldn’t change what had happened to her, but he could try to make the present suck a little less. He wanted to ask her about her own security, if she had anyone working for her, but thought that might come off like too much of a sales pitch, and that wasn’t what she needed right now. So he headed in another direction.

“Were you on a panel?” he asked, tipping his head toward the convention center.

She nodded. “Yeah. *Family Tree* reunion. We do it every year for 90’s Con.”

“I remember that show. You were cute.”

She smiled, fully and genuinely this time, and that smile aimed in his direction felt just as good as the slide of her hand against his. “Thanks. It was a long time ago. I’m surprised people are still interested in it twenty years after the fact, to be honest. Surprised, but glad.”

He tilted his head, considering. “People grew up watching that show. I know I did.”

Her eyebrows rose, and she leaned toward him slightly. “You did?”

“Sure.”

“I guess I thought...I don’t know. That it was mostly dweebs who watched it. It was kind of a goody-goody show.” She shrugged, wrinkling her nose. Fuck, she was cute. His chest tightened again, but this time there was something else there along with the protectiveness.

He arched an eyebrow. “Who’s to say I wasn’t a dweeb?”

She laughed. “I seriously doubt that.” Her eyes skimmed down over his body again, this time leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

“And why’s that?” His eyes met hers, and a flush crawled up her neck and to her cheeks. Her eyes dropped to his mouth, just for a second, and something hot and thick pulsed in the air between them. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and his fingers itched to repeat the motion.

Damn. She wasn’t just cute. She was gorgeous.

“You don’t look like a dweeb,” she said softly.

Several feet away the door swung open again, and Sean leaped to his feet, putting himself between whoever had emerged and Sierra. She stepped out from around him and into the arms of Rory Evans, her former costar and...what, exactly?

“I’ve been looking for you. Are you OK?” he asked as he held her.

She nodded, and Sean was surprised at the jealousy swirling through him at the sight of this woman—who was pretty much a stranger—in someone else’s arms.

“I’m OK. I just needed some air.”

Rory smoothed a hand over her hair, completely ignoring Sean. “The police are here, and they want to get a statement from you about what happened.”

She nodded again, and started to walk back toward the convention center.

Turning suddenly, she laid a hand on Sean’s arm, giving it a squeeze. She smiled up at him and it was as if someone were squeezing his heart with a fist.

“Thank you, Sean.” Her hand lingered on his arm for a second, the air between them once again thickening.

How good would it feel to pull her into his arms the way Rory had just done? At least there she’d be safe. “You’re welcome. Listen, if you ever...need anything, give me a call.” He pointed at the card still in her hand, reluctant to let her go, but knowing he needed to get back to the office. Trying to reassure himself she’d be all right, with her *friend*, or whatever the hell Rory was to her, and the police. “You sure you’re OK?” he asked, wishing he could go back inside with her to keep an eye on her. Not wanting to let her go. It felt...wrong.

Another fierce tug yanked at his chest.

“Yeah. I am.” Her eyes held his for a second, and then she turned, slipping her arm into Rory’s.

Sean pushed a hand through his hair as he watched Sierra walk away, his heart punching against his ribs as she glanced back over her shoulder at him one last time before disappearing back into the convention center. He took a deep breath, and then

another, and then he walked back to his SUV. He looked back over his shoulder, contemplating going inside, just for a few minutes, just to make sure everything was under control...yeah. It couldn't hurt. He'd taken a few steps back toward the convention center when his phone rang, vibrating in his pocket.

"Owens."

"Who you are sending on the Robinson job?" his father asked, no greeting, just a barking question. Typical.

"Davis and Anderson. Why?" Sean's jaw tightened, tension seeping down his neck.

"You don't think it needs a third?"

Sean shook his head, irritated but not surprised that as usual, his dad was questioning his judgment. "It's a pretty standard job, so no. I think Davis and Anderson can handle it just fine, and keeping it to two keeps it within Robinson's budget."

"Uh-huh," said his father, sounding unconvinced. "This goes wrong, it's on you."

"It'll be fine. They've got it, and I'll check in with them regularly," said Sean, yanking open the door to his SUV and dropping into the driver's seat. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, used to his dad's blaming him for everything that went wrong. But just because he was used to it didn't mean it went down any easier.

Especially the blame he deserved. After all, it was his fucking fault his mother wasn't around anymore.

Phone jammed between his ear and his shoulder, he pressed the ignition button and tugged his seat belt on.

"You check on De Luca?"

Sean grimaced. “Didn’t get the chance. Something else came up, but I’ll check in with him by phone. I’m sure he would’ve made contact if there were any issues. I’m on my way back to the office now. Did you get the proposal I sent about the revised marketing plan?”

His dad sighed heavily. “It’s a waste of fucking time. Not to mention money.”

Sean leaned his head back against the seat, his jaw clenched tight. Nothing was ever good enough. “Let’s talk about it back at the office.”

“Fine. But it’ll take a lot to convince me you can pull it off.”

Sean almost snorted. Story of his fucking life, right there.



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