

K I M A N I TM R O M A N C E



The
BACHELOR
AND THE BEAUTY
Queen

Once Upon a Tiara



Carolyn Hector

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The Bachelor And The Beauty Queen

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Spotlight on temptationThe tall, sexy stranger who just barged into Lexi Pendergrass's shop looks like a perfect ten to her. But not only does Stephen Reyes accuse the former beauty queen of selling his young niece a scandalous dress, he then prevents Lexi from buying her dream property next door. Not exactly Mr. Congeniality. Even still, beneath their bickering simmers an inconvenient chemistry that's shaking Lexi's legendary poise to the core.Real estate mogul Stephen has had his world rocked twice in recent months. First, he became guardian to his late brother's children. Now he's falling for a feisty Southern beauty who, when she isn't coaching his pageant-crazy niece, is schooling him in desire. He misjudged her once. Now he's using all his seductive talents to win Lexi for now and forever...
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Stephen blocked her path. Just as when they danced, his eyes stayed fixated on her hairline and then her lips. To create space, Lexi pressed her hands against his chest and wrapped the top of the apron strings around his neck. "Turn around and I'll tie you."

"You'll tie me up?"

Laughter of relief broke the strange tension between them. "In your dreams. Now here, I'll need you to continue stirring the grits while I cook the shrimp."

Thankfully Stephen did as she asked, stopping every so often when she needed to add some cream, tomato paste, spices and lots of butter into the grits while her shrimp sautéed. They cooked together in silence but rhythmically, reminding her of how they danced together. On the dance floor he took the lead, but in her kitchen she did. He stepped out of the way when she added something new to his pot and back into the empty space. The spiced shrimp took no time to cook, and in her haste to get out of the kitchen, Lexi reached for the handle of the pan to pour everything into a serving dish behind her. She underestimated the weight of the pan and her wrists weakened. Stephen anticipated her misstep and swooshed right behind her, wrapping her in his arms and his hands over hers.

"Here, let me help," he whispered in her ear.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Southwood, Georgia. Home to Grits and Glam Gowns, where the one-of-a-kind dresses can bring you good luck or scandal. And when the wrong dress gets in the wrong hands, sometimes you get both.

Allow me to explain that each plotted scene written was fueled with laughter and based on revenge—sort of. In the process of writing *The Bachelor and the Beauty Queen*, my family grew from a four-member house to an eight-member house. I love my boys, but the testosterone in my home is through the roof. My personal hero, my husband, felt having four boys in the house would be a piece of cake. This of course sparked the idea of placing an alpha male in a predominately glitzy pageant world.

Carolyn Hector

The Bachelor and the Beauty Queen

Carolyn Hector



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Having your story read out loud as a teen by your brother in Julia Child's voice might scare some folks from ever sharing their work. But CAROLYN HECTOR rose above her fear. She currently resides in Tallahassee, Florida, where there is never a dull moment. School functions, politics, football, Southern charm and sizzling heat help fuel her knack for putting a romantic spin on everything she comes across. Find out what she's up to on Twitter, [@Carolyn32303](https://twitter.com/Carolyn32303).

I would like to dedicate this book first and foremost to my husband and our growing family of now five boys and one young lady. Thank you for allowing me the time to write. And much love to Monique and

Pablo Baez: thanks for inspiring me all the time, as well as setting the example on how to raise a big family.

[Acknowledgments](#)

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[Chapter 1](#)

“Mr. Foxx,” Lexi Pendergrass began with a big, toothy smile, hoping to distract the elderly couple seated before her from the thumping music outside of her office. “I assure you this proposal of mine will not attract what you’d call riffraff.”

Mr. Foxx, the man holding the deed to the shop next door—the deed to Lexi’s dream of expanding her Grits and Glam Gowns Boutique—relaxed his pinched shoulders and gave a squeeze to the hand of his wife of over forty years. Lexi did her homework. She understood Mr. and Mrs. Foxx wanted to sell the inherited piece of prime property located between her boutique and their café.

“You are aware Mrs. Foxx and I plan to retire soon?” said Mr. Foxx, squeezing his wife’s hand once again. Mrs. Foxx tilted her head up toward her husband and smiled. Lexi swore the woman batted her lashes, as well. “And though we won’t be here, we do want to leave this block in good moral standing.”

Commercial property in Southwood, Georgia, sold like hotcakes these days. Morality seemed to be the invisible clause in every contract. Everyone wanted to make the move to the small Southern city to enjoy the peace and security. Companies were moving into town, buying up properties and turning them into businesses with a down-home hospitality feel. Like many twentysomethings trying to find their way, Lexi had left her job and apartment in Atlanta and came back to her hometown.

Instead of staying with her parents, she had tried to pay a small rent to her grandmother until the day Grandma Bea sold her Victorian home. With the money Grandma Bea made from that, she'd given Lexi the funds to start her own boutique, a dream the two of them had shared since Lexi played with dolls.

Now, with her business booming, she needed the space next door to expand. She just needed to assure the owners she would take care of the property. Armed with a 3-D model of what the block would look like once the renovations happened, she'd just given the best pitch of her life. Knowing what was at stake, Lexi was wondering why her assistant, Chantal, had decided now, of all times, to turn up the music.

"Yes, sir, I am aware." Still holding her smile, she tried to brush off the condescending tone in the man's voice. This man spoke of decency, morality and Southern hospitality when he never as much as lifted a hand to wave when they passed each other on the block. This morning she'd jumped through hoops with a model, the speech and a finger-sandwich display, set up in case they were hungry on the credenza propped against the wall opposite the mirror.

Lexi's eyes moved toward the one-way mirror positioned against the soft pink wall to the right of her desk. The mirror typically helped Lexi pick out the customers having a little trouble deciding on a dress. Today, during the biggest meeting of her life, the one-way mirror provided the image of a tall man dressed in a dark suit, with a bald head and dark beard. His lean frame belonged on the runway. She was always a sucker for a man in a suit, and he'd easily caught her attention. The tailored suit fit well against his broad shoulders and tapered waist. Glasses rested on his sleek Roman nose and chiseled cheekbones. The close-cropped black beard covered his square jawline. The flat line of his luscious lips indicated he was not a man to mess with—dangerous, even—yet tempted the curiosity within her of what those lips might feel like against her neck. The mirrored glasses covering his eyes added to the mystique of the stranger. For the first time in a long while, Lexi felt a faint quiver of desire for a man.

As far as beauty pageants went, this man scored a ten in at least half of the eight score categories. He owned poise, beauty, stage presence and overall appearance. What he'd win in swim, evening, interview and special category were yet to be determined. If he stuck around until after she finished with the Foxxes, she might try and find out. He stood at the counter holding a dark garment clenched in his fist. With no sound she heard no words but knew from the frown on his face the customer was not happy. Given the chance, she would never leave this man unsatisfied.

Clearing her throat to distract from the commotion on the floor, Lexi stood up and smoothed the palms of her hands against the wrinkles of her black pencil skirt and flattened the point where her black-and-white pin-striped shirt tucked into the waistband. She waved her French-manicured nails toward the small structure of the city block where their businesses were. "You both may have noticed my kitchenette when you entered. I would love to patronize your establishment, maybe buy your coffee every day or send the customers' families to you while they wait on fittings and things along those lines. And so..."

The whole purpose of standing was to distract the Foxxes, but Lexi's attention suffered. The stranger slipped his sunglasses off his face. His onyx eyes pierced the one-way glass. When he half smirked, Lexi gulped and clutched her neck, stumbling over her words. The slow ease of his lopsided grin sent a shiver down her spine. She'd been so focused with the store and resettling in town that she'd unknowingly set her carnal desires aside. Chantal had failed to keep the chaos outside contained.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Mrs. Foxx. The dangling green-stemmed daisy flower at the top of her hat caught Lexi's attention.

"Yes," Lexi exhaled.

The door to her office banged open. Poor Chantal, her mocha cheeks filled with red, flattened herself against the door as the massive man stormed through. At five foot eleven, Lexi took notice of

men taller than her, especially when she wore her signature four-inch heels. Quickly, she came around her desk offering an apology to the elderly couple, who were now coming to their feet at the intrusion.

With as much grace as she could muster, Lexi crossed the hardwood floor of her office and patted Chantal's arm, excusing her with a smile of assurance that this was not her fault.

"Good afternoon, sir," Lexi said steadily as she looked up into the man's angry eyes, "but if you wouldn't mind sitting outside, I will be with you in a min—"

"I will not sit and wait." The man cut her off. "I came to find out who would be so reckless as to sell a provocative gown to a sixteen-year-old." He cast a glance up and down Lexi's long frame. "Now I understand."

"I beg your pardon!" Lexi gasped and reached for the pearls around her neck. This morning she'd smoothed her honey-blond hair into the perfect chignon. She knew her high cheekbones became heated with red after being reduced to some scolded teenager.

Mr. Foxx's voice rose, "Young man, is there a problem?"

The man peered over Lexi's shoulder and offered a half smile. "Please forgive me," he said, offering a dazzling smile in Mrs. Foxx's direction.

This time Lexi did not miss the batting lashes, though she did not blame the woman for blushing. Two seconds ago, she would have melted at the same smile. Despite the angry tone, his deep, velvety voice purred in her ears.

"I needed to come back and hand deliver this piece of garbage this woman sold to my young niece. You ought to be put in jail for this." He clenched the black material in his fists and shook it in the air.

Over her shoulder, Mrs. Foxx gasped. Lexi twirled a pearl between her thumb and forefinger as he held up the barely there dress she'd designed and worn once during her youthful indiscretions. Of course, seeing the black dress held up in this man's meaty hands caused Lexi to finally understand her parents' concern at the time on her direction in life. Mary Pendergrass had warned her about it coming back and haunting her one day.

At the time, Lexi had paid no attention to her mother. Lexi was never quite the angel her sister, Lisbeth, was. She had designed the dress in order to get noticed by design schools and modeled it, something she did to supplement paying for college when pageants weren't covering the bills. Designers wanted the iconic dress in a vault. Lexi wanted it burned. Her assistant, Andrew Mason, had insisted on holding on to the dress as a memento, reminding her what launched her career.

"Do you deny this belongs to you?"

"Well, yes." Lexi bit the corner of her lip. The last time she'd laid eyes on it, she'd played a game of tug-of-war over it in her loft upstairs with Andrew, who wanted the dress hung on a platinum hanger and sealed in a glass case. How the dress had come to be sold was beyond her.

"Miss Pendergrass." Mr. Foxx stepped forward with his wife, who adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder. "We'll be leaving now."

Lexi's heart sank even before Mr. Foxx made his excuse to leave. Mrs. Foxx offered Lexi a curt smile as they quickly exited the office. Once the door closed behind them, Lexi craned her neck toward her intruder.

"Are you serious?" Lexi ground her back teeth together. Her body began to shake with bubbling anger.

"Did I ruin something for you?" the man spat out, sarcastically amused. "Imagine how I felt being called down here from an important meeting, only to discover your garment on my niece."

"I don't understand how your niece got my dress."

"Clearly you're in need of some capital." He strolled over to the 3-D model of her proposal on her desk and she followed. "And you want to get it by any means necessary, so you sold a skimpy dress. No decent woman would even think about wearing this." For emphasis, he shook the garment in the air again.

Typically, Lexi always liked to keep her cool, but this man had possibly cost her a building sale—not a dress sale, but a building sale. She narrowed her eyes at the dress before reaching out and snatching it from his hands. “Look, I have no idea how this dress got in your niece’s hands.”

“Of course you don’t,” he said folding his arms across his broad Black Label Ralph Lauren suit.

As a designer, Lexi familiarized herself with the difference between an off-the-rack ninety-nine-dollar suit and one costing two grand. This man reeked of money and entitlement. And armed with the knowledge, Lexi realized he would not give up—or leave—without an apology. She wanted him out of her office. She wanted him out of her store, hell, out of her life. “Look, Mr.—” Lexi realized he’d never even given his name before ruining her day.

“Reyes,” he provided in a clipped tone, “Stephen Reyes.”

Thanks to the suit and the introduction of his last name first, Lexi imagined him as some secret spy, like in the movies. Instead of a James Bond British accent, she detected a slight Caribbean accent, which wasn’t the point. Lexi shook the image of him in a black tuxedo holding a vodka martini out of her head.

“Mr. Reyes,” Lexi said with a slight nod. “I cannot explain how my dress ended up in your niece’s possession. It has never been on the floor. I apologize.”

“Are you telling me you don’t know who you sell your dresses to?”

Lexi’s mouth gaped open for a moment at his belittlement. She braced herself by placing her hands on the edge of her desk. “Did you hear the part where I apologized for this mix-up?”

“I heard it. I want an explanation. Do you not keep track of your customers and their purchases?”

“For the most part, yes,” she said, pressing her lips together and biting the inside of her cheeks. “We don’t make a habit of carding customers.”

“So you carelessly sell hooker dresses?”

“Hold on one damn minute, Mr. Reyes!” Her employees glanced toward the mirror as her voice rose. “I am sorry your sixteen-year-old got ahold of this dress, but I do not understand how. Either way, you have no reason to hurl insults at my work.”

Mr. Reyes closed the three-foot gap between them. His square jaw twitched as his back molars ground together. His dark eyes narrowed on her face, judging her, as his creamy, café-au-lait skin turned a slight red. “Your work—” he used air quotes “—nearly got a sixteen-year-old assaulted at a club.”

Immediately Lexi’s mind wheeled. The dress would certainly bring unwarranted attention to a naive woman. Her mouth dropped open. “Assaulted? What a woman wears has no bearing on an attack. Is she okay?” She didn’t know what to say.

“No thanks to you.” Mr. Reyes took a step back and sniffed the air. His eyes skimmed over the pictures and trophies of her beauty pageants on the shop walls.

“Again, I am so sorry for the mix-up.”

“Sure you are,” he said, as if no longer interested in her explanation. His eyes fell on the curios representing her past.

The accolades ranged from her time as a teen pageant queen and crossed over into her world of modeling and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Parsons The New School for Design. His eyes focused on Lexi’s party-girl images, including one of her wearing the infamous dress his niece had somehow got ahold of. The corners of his mouth turned into a frown; obviously her accolades did not help her apology. Just as her mother had predicted, people were going to judge her by her past.

Lexi cleared her throat, “Please let me know if I can do anything to help. I have two—”

Whatever Lexi wanted to say fell on deaf ears to Mr. Reyes. He snapped his gaze back at her. Not sure what had brought on his newly formed coldness, she shivered and stepped backward.

“What you do with your...whatever is your business. You need to keep underage girls out of here, so you don’t influence them with floozy dresses. ”

“Floozy?”

The smirk spreading across his face chilled her. “If the dress fits, lady.”

“I suggest you keep a better eye on your niece, instead of looking to blame other people.” Her statement clearly shocked him. With him off guard, she continued. “I think you should leave, Mr. Reyes,” Lexi said, tight-lipped, her heels clicking across the hardwood floors as she opened her office door. When the door swung open, Chantal and Andrew jumped back half a foot. “We’re done here,” she told him.

Mr. Reyes cocked his head to the side. The smile turned into a snarl as he approached. Stopping in front of her body, he leaned in close to her ear. Lexi turned her head, hoping to block out the delicious scent of this arrogant man.

“Lady, after what my niece went through, we’re far from done,” he whispered before straightening upright and squaring his shoulders at her assistant.

Andrew squared his lineman-sized shoulders backward. To the naked eye, Andrew appeared to be just a six-foot-tall mass of muscle with a long scar that raked down the left side of his cheek. One might assume the scar came from a knife fight, but in actuality it was from a hard lesson learned after running with scissors. Thankfully, today Andrew puffed his chest. Most people found him intimidating before they realized he was a teddy bear.

Mr. Reyes was not most people. He cast a rueful glance over his shoulder and laughed at the lack of danger. “I’ll be seeing you around, Ms. Pendergrass.” Without another word or glance he walked out. Lexi stood in disbelief.

“Who in the hell does he think he is?” Chantal breathed.

“My future boo.”

Giving a heavy sigh, Lexi rolled her eyes toward the natural lighting of the sky roof. “Too soon for jokes, Andrew, too soon.”

* * *

The emotional roller coaster Stephen had ridden in the past twenty-four hours was beginning to take its toll on him. At least sitting down in the backseat of his Lincoln Town Car, while his driver rode through the streets of Southwood with the air blowing on full blast, allowed Stephen to get a grip on his mental state before seeing the girls. He did not believe the ferocious protectiveness he’d felt when he learned his sixteen-year-old niece was in danger.

Since the death of their parents, Stephen had indulged his two nieces’ every whim. When Ken and Betty Reyes had passed away earlier that year, Stephen, along with his younger brother Nate, tried to honor the will and testament that left them with guardianship of the two girls. Together, the brothers tried to keep the living arrangements as simple as possible. They both packed up their respective homes in Atlanta and moved into Ken’s house.

The living arrangements weren’t ideal. Neither of the brothers wanted to move into the master bedroom, which left both of them taking two of the smaller bedrooms downstairs. Stephen didn’t put up a fuss. He wanted the girls to still live in the house they grew up in and attend the same school as their friends. The uncles let Kimber and Philly spend as much time with their elderly maternal grandparents as they wanted, from which stemmed part of the problem.

Stephen had no problem packing up his business in North Atlanta to move into the girls’ home. The business he created allowed him to work from any location, which currently meant out of the bedroom he occupied. Reyes Realty provided a number of services. One was helping families find their dream homes, and the other was Stephen’s brainchild. As a location scout for producers in the entertainment world, whether movies, television or musical productions, Stephen traveled a lot. To make up for things he missed out on, he knew he overindulged the girls, especially Kimber, who had taken her parents’ death hard and become withdrawn in the first few weeks. Finally, after spring break, Kimber had started to open up.

The night in question, Kimber had asked permission from Stephen and Nate to spend the night with a friend instead of going over to her grandmother's. Now they had learned Kimber and her friend had sneaked out of the two-story home to attend a party across the Georgia-Florida border. "Another spin around the block?" His driver, Keenan, hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses, craned his neck to see through the rearview mirror into the backseat.

"I think I'm good now, Keen." Stephen inhaled deeply and blew out a smooth breath. Seconds after leaving Grits and Glam Gowns, Stephen's breath had been ragged and quick. Lessons from anger-management classes had taught him to breathe through his emotion. Something about Lexi rubbed him the wrong way, in a way he did not expect. Miss Pendergrass's tantalizing perfume clung to him. The time spent in the car cooling off should have helped Stephen gain control of himself and his recent interaction with the boutique owner. Much to his dismay, he had a soft spot for women who smelled as delicious as her—a mixture of flowers and cake. Stephen shook his head, snapping himself out of his erotic daze, and reassured Keenan of his decision.

Women like Lexi Pendergrass came a dime a dozen. He'd had her number the second he stormed into her office. Gold trophies, diamond tiaras, sashes, photographs of herself and what he assumed were her parents posed in front of a mansion-style home. She was a spoiled party girl with an expensive hobby to keep her occupied until—judging from her ringless finger—marriage.

The dress confirmed his impression. The dyed blond hair paired with her maple-sugar skin, while sexy as hell, supported his theory, as well. Stephen loosened the knot of his tie and tried to focus on the matter at hand.

As an uncle, he needed to look beyond the tempting Miss Pendergrass and remember what a bad influence a woman like her was on impressionable young girls. Kimber had nearly gotten herself attacked when she was wearing such a provocative dress. The police had no new information on her attackers, but someone needed to pay. He had decided to start with Lexi Pendergrass and her store. She needed to be put out of business.

As one of the top realtors in the nation, Stephen recognized a sales pitch when he saw one—especially when it came with a 3-D model. The boarded-up business next door to the gown shop had clued him in even more. Lexi Pendergrass planned to expand her shop? Over his dead body.

While he wasn't a parent himself, he relished his role as uncle for two very impressionable nieces. If Lexi thought she would update the wardrobe of this sleepy town, she had another think coming. It would serve her right if he outbid her on the purchase of the bakery next door. Stephen had started off his career as a location scout for a Hollywood producer and kept up with his connections. A lot of the Southern producers in Atlanta were looking for a picturesque, one-streetlight town; Southwood, Georgia, could hold the title. Norman Rockwell couldn't have painted anything better. Hell, he might just keep it, considering his bedroom-slash-office was becoming cramped.

The locksmiths were pulling out of the driveway by the time Stephen's driver dropped him off. He shook hands with the elder man and thanked the crew before waving them off with the invoice for the completed job in his hand. The two-story brick home with black shutters sat in a typically quiet neighborhood. The setting reminded Stephen of the street he grew up on in Florida. They were far away from the hustle and bustle of downtown but not too far for a morning job. One of these days Stephen planned on taking the girls down to the park, but with a pool, slide and jungle gym in the spacious, fenced-in backyard, he'd become lazy. Things were going to change around here.

The unmistakable catchy tunes of a PBS show echoed down the hall. Five-year-old Philly had clearly returned from weekend visitation with her grandparents. The beige carpeted steps were littered with pink doll clothes and shoes. Sticky pink handprints covered white walls right under the family portraits leading the way to the second floor. Thank God for wipe-away paint.

"I'm home," Stephen called out, shutting the door.

"Uncle Stephen!" Philly, in her favorite pink tutu and purple unicorn top, came tearing into the foyer and threw herself into Stephen's arms. "I had cotton candy."

"I can tell." Stephen shifted Philly onto his hip and walked into the family room. The child ate like a horse but weighed next to nothing. Her biggest downfall was her sweet tooth, something her grandparents overindulged. "Did you have fun?"

Philly nodded, the two ponytails high on her head, wrapped with pink ribbons, bobbing back and forth. "We went on a picnic this morning."

Sprawled out on the couch, Kimber Reyes glanced up and rolled her hazel eyes toward the spinning ceiling fan. She sighed heavily and stomped one foot on the hardwood floor, then the other. Was she supposed to be mad at him? And when did she get her phone back? Stephen was sure he'd taken the bedazzled gizmo from her. Her colorful nails swiped the pink screen of the phone in her hand and she popped a piece of bubble gum between her teeth.

"Philly, will you find the coloring book we were using last week, the one with the princesses?" Stephen leaned over and placed Philly on the ground. Knowing he'd put the book up in the desk in his room, he banked on a few extra moments of quiet with Kimber. Stephen turned off the TV and sat down on the empty cushion beside her.

An audible sigh emerged from her, clearly warning him to tread carefully. "Kimber, put the phone down."

In dramatic fashion, Kimber tossed it beside her and folded her arms across her chest. "Do we have to do this?"

"What?" Stephen chuckled. "Talk? I can't help being concerned about you, Kimber. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I would hang out with my friends. Some of them happen to be boys."

"Boys?" Stephen spat.

As he choked on her news, Kimber pleaded with him, batting her lashes. "C'mon, Uncle Stephen, don't act like you didn't date when you were my age. Abuela told me all about you, Daddy and Uncle Nate. She didn't imprison you in your home."

"I dated," he said with a nod, "but growing up in Villa San Juan back then was a whole lot different than growing up here where you're sneaking out at all hours of the night, dressed as you were, to meet up with...boys." The term barely came out of his mouth. "Besides the new bars on your window, I've also eliminated some of the other temptations."

Kimber turned her face toward his. "What did you do?"

"I went to the dress shop. Can you believe the owner claims to not recall selling this to you?"

Kimber banged the back of her head against a pillow. "Tell me you didn't." Kimber, a miniature replica of her beautiful mother, turned bright red. "You went to Grits and Glam Gowns?"

"Where did you think I went?"

"Maybe the police station or something." Kimber gaped. "I wish you wouldn't have gone."

"I wish you'd tell me where you got the nerve to put a piece of trash on and walk out of the house."

"Okay, fine. I went to meet my boyfriend, okay?" Her bottom lip quivered.

The sound of bones cracking when he rolled his head filled the family room as Stephen squared his shoulders and cracked his neck. He glowered at his niece and clenched his fists together at the idea of some boy trying to grope her. Wasn't it last Christmas she'd asked for a Barbie dream house? "You're sixteen."

Kimber hugged herself and shrugged, not making eye contact. He doubted Ken would have allowed such shenanigans. "I'm not too young."

"Okay, Kimber." Stephen chuckled. "I don't know what's going on here or who even said you could have a boyfriend, but I say you're too young. Do you understand how much danger you were in last night? Thank God that police officer spotted you."

"I wouldn't have had to walk to meet Marvin if I had a car."

The absurdity of this request for a car did not fall on deaf ears. Stephen found the other part of what she said important. “Who in the hell is Marvin?”

“Uncle Nate met him.”

Stephen’s mouth twisted into a crooked smile. Marvin was not the name of some three-hundred-pound high school boy with the arms of an octopus. Marvin was the name of some pimply, brace-faced bookworm kid. “Don’t even bring Uncle Nate into this.” Stephen shook his head and tried to focus on the matter at hand.

Kimber blinked innocently at him. In an instant his anger disappeared. She needed the guidance of a woman. Obviously, she’d been at a loss, and he quickly put two and two together. Kimber must have befriended Lexi Pendergrass and under that friendship had gotten some seriously bad advice.

He softened his glare and smiled gently. “Listen, I’m not good at this parenting thing. I almost had a heart attack last night.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I still don’t get what possessed you to sneak out,”

Pressing her lips together tightly, Kimber shrugged. “I don’t know. The football team had an overnight game, and I needed to see Marvin and I thought...”

The thought of his niece dating a football player at an away game at a hotel and in that dress—Stephen covered his face with his hands and shuddered. “You thought wearing a dress like that would get his attention?”

“He’s a senior and all the girls around here are throwing themselves at him!” Kimber squeaked.

Any minute now, there would be tears, which Stephen did not handle well. He hated when his girlfriends cried, and buying something sparkly for them did the trick. “Look,” he sighed, “sneaking out to meet him is not the way. I need to meet this Marion.”

“Marvin,” Kimber drawled out with a whine.

“Whatever. I need to meet him first before you start giving yourselves labels.”

Kimber’s brows shot upward with excitement like a kid on Christmas morning. “You can meet him at the fair tomorrow!”

“Who said you could go? You’re still grounded.” Stephen stifled a smile.

“I have to go. Philly’s in the pageant and I need to help.”

He frowned now with the thought of Lexi Pendergrass and her case full of trophies. His anger shifted once again to the dress-shop owner. He still was not through with her.

Chapter 2

Cursing under her breath, Lexi cringed at the ring of the front bumper of her car banging into the meter on Sunshine Boulevard as she misjudged how much room she had for her diagonal parking space. Lexi shared the blame for her lack of parking skills with the eye-catching Sale Pending sign wedged in the boarded-up glass window of Divinity Bakery. Her heart soared and all she wanted to do was run over to Mr. and Mrs. Foxx’s café and thank them. Their sign however wasn’t just turned over to Closed, but an On Vacation notice hung below the sign.

All week, she and the elderly couple had passed each other like two ships in the night. Considering the way things had ended Monday morning, Lexi feared Mr. and Mrs. Foxx had reconsidered selling the store. Now finally, she was inches closer to achieving her goal, having an all-in-one boutique. “Well, damn, girl!”

After reminiscing over her past the previous night, Lexi had decided today to wear a pair of skintight denim jeggings with an old T-shirt knotted to the side.

“Safe to assume the sign is good for us?” Andrew asked, pulling her into his arms and then dipping her backward, causing Lexi to gasp. “Did they call you from the road?”

Lexi straightened herself upright and shook her head. “I only saw the pending sign when I pulled up. I hope they left a message on the machine. Did you hear anything?”

“I haven’t checked yet,” said Andrew.

“Uh, no, ma’am. I don’t care what day of the week it is.” The corners of Chantal’s mouth turned upside down as she shook her head back and forth. “You haven’t dressed like this because you’re a businesswoman now, a consultant, the owner of a one-of-a-kind dress shop with a reputation for being the good-luck charm for every girl that comes here for a dress. Everyone knows a dress bought from your shop is guaranteed a placement, if not a title, in any pageant. If one of the sponsors or parents comes in here while you’re dressed for the club, you’re going to lose a lot of credibility with the mothers bringing their kids in for the pageant workshop.”

With Chantal following Lexi into her office and rattling off the agenda for the day, Lexi picked out more appropriate work attire from the closet. She chose a red A-line skirt and matched it with a scoop-neck red-and-white polka-dot sleeveless blouse.

To generate an interest in pageants in town, Chantal had set up a workshop for two Saturdays a month where kids could learn the art of energetic and confident pageant walks. She spent at least thirty minutes of each workshop making the girls practice holding their wrists and hands in a cupcake-like style. Her team, made up of Chantal and Andrew, helped hone talents and emphasize their beauty.

The classes ended up overcrowded with young parents eager to find a venue that would put their kids on track for a reality show.

As a business major at Lexi’s college, Chantal had recognized the full potential of Grits and Gowns by adding pageant coaching. She had approached Lexi and asked her to take Chantal on as an intern to help maximize the boutique. “Roll your eyes if you want, Lexi Pendergrass,” Chantal continued, “but you know I am right. Expanding costs money. So I need you to dress appropriately for the kiddies at the fair trying to win one-on-one time with you.”

Chantal quickly crossed the room and took hold of Lexi’s elbow, steering her toward the dressing rooms. “I’m making sure you don’t ruin your reputation—because of what some jerk said to you,” Chantal scolded. Her eyes darted outside the large glass window. “We have a lot at stake here. Your pageant workshop was so successful. Let’s concentrate on the next few paying classes.”

“Fine.” Lexi sighed at Chantal. “I’ll go upstairs and change.”

“On second thought—” Chantal snapped her fingers “—I made sure we have all the dresses ready for pickup for the Peach Blossom Pageant tonight.”

At the beginning of every summer, the town held its annual Four Points County Fair. Lexi had once held the title of Miss Peach Blossom. Once she was in high school she went on to bigger pageants.

“The girls’ dresses are already steamed and in the back for them to try on,” Chantal said. “I need to go over to the hardware store and get the tape so the girls know their marks when they’re walking.”

“Don’t worry about taping anything.” Lexi snatched up her keys. “I’ll run upstairs to the loft. I’m sure I have some.” A few months ago she’d purchased a condo in the downtown district after spending several months living out of the loft above the boutique.

“Well, hurry up.” The bell above the door jingled. A strange vibration filtered through Lexi’s veins when the man stepped fully inside. The afternoon sun glowed behind him, but warning bells went off in the back of her mind as she realized the visitor’s identity. The room went silent with awkwardness.

“Mr. Reyes?”

The way his black eyes pierced her, she felt naked, exposed. She reached for the collar of her T-shirt and gave the material a modest tug. Mr. Reyes’s eyes focused on the two other people in the room before settling his glare on Lexi and giving her body a once-over. Once again, he earned a perfect ten on her personal score card in overall appearance and stage presence. Decked out in khakis and a white button-down Oxford, he commanded the attention of everyone in the store. Even the music stopped when he walked inside.

She didn’t scare easily, not really. At least not usually. Lexi folded her arms beneath her breasts and raised an eyebrow, hating herself for giving him a perfect ten for his walk. He’d strutted into the shop with confidence. “May I help you?”

"I just was looking for Mr. and Mrs. Foxx."

"They're gone." Andrew perked up and offered. "If you would like coffee, I can make you some while we wait for them to return."

Mr. Reyes gave a tight smile. "No, but thank you for the offer. I came by to get the keys. They didn't happen to leave them with you, did they?"

"Keys?" Dread washed over Lexi. In the back of her mind, she replayed his eyes scanning over the model of her planned expansion. She mentally calculated the price of his suits, guessed the ballpark figure of his net worth. Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach. A tear threatened to form in the corner of her eye. The lack of a phone call and the Sale Pending sign next door... The blood rushed to her head and swelled against her ears.

"Yes, the property next door." Mr. Reyes gave a half smile, clearly enjoying dropping this news. He pointed toward the space standing between her boutique and the coffee shop.

"Mr. Reyes, I am busy."

"Yes, you are." His voice trailed off as his eyes cast disapprovingly over her. "Please, since we're going to be neighbors, call me Stephen."

As a former beauty queen, Lexi held her composure with a stiff smile. All this over a dress? What a petty man. Contestants received extra bonus points based upon behavior. Stephen's score now dropped to a zero.

"Neighbors?" Andrew asked for her.

"Well, we need to go over the legalities," he said casually, "but I need a place to move my business, so I put a bid on the place next door."

"This is ridiculous!" Chantal spouted what everyone thought. "You seriously outbid her because of a dress?"

Stephen's attention turned toward Chantal for a brief moment, then to Lexi. Unlike Chantal, Lexi did not cower. She squared her shoulders and jutted her chin forward.

"You gave me some sound advice," he said to her. "You told me I needed to keep a better eye on my niece, so here I am—making sure she never sets foot in this shop again."

Silence fell over Lexi, who was not sure what to say. "I did promise we weren't done."

"All this because you think I sold your niece a dress?"

"I don't think," he clipped.

Lexi inhaled a sharp breath. "I would like to meet this niece of yours. No one here has sold my personal dress to a child."

"So now my niece is a liar?"

"I am saying there has been a mistake."

"She's either a liar or a thief?" Stephen raised a brow.

The room grew hot. Lexi's cheeks flushed red. She had to get her bearings. Pressing her nails into the palms of her hands as she made a fist, Lexi slowly breathed in and out. "If you would be so kind as to bring your niece in here, we can get to the bottom of this mystery."

"Ha!" he scoffed. "I think you've done enough damage to my family."

Lexi opened her fists. "So this is like some sort of revenge plot?"

Stephen sniffed the air and contemplated his next words. "Actually, it's going to be a lot like that. I think, instead of never selling my niece a dress again, I may decide to have you never sell a dress again, period."

From the arrogance in his voice, Lexi imagined him to be the type of man to stroll into a restaurant without a reservation an hour before closing and order Lobster Thermidor or a rack of lamb. His entitlement irked her.

"Well. I see that no one left my keys here with you. I guess I'll be on my way to their home and pick them up." He nodded his head goodbye in Chantal and Andrew's direction.

Once the bells over the door stopped chiming, Lexi let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "What just happened?"

* * *

Turning a bakery into an office would take most of the summer, but doing so made sense. Things in his current home office were too close for comfort. Technically he blamed himself for the loss of his keyboard. One of these days he needed to remind Philly not to take food out of the kitchen. The wonderful cotton candy her grandparents had bought deflated and brought in a trail of ants on his desk. The new building was hardly turnkey ready. Thankfully he had Nate and his toolbox to help get things in order to open up the brand-new location of Reyes Realty. He needed this space. The fact it irritated the beauty queen was icing on the cake.

The brief glimpse of upturned pink lips displaying her disappointment, however, did not satisfy him. For a brief moment, a twinge of guilt hit him. Stephen did not, by nature, set out to be cruel to women—just women who threatened his niece. Is this what parenting did to a person? Made them vengeful and spiteful? Stephen refused to believe her story about not selling the dress to Kimber. Anyone could have made the sale.

The sound of the gravel crushed beneath the tires of his brother's SUV reminded him of the crushing of Lexi's dreams. Since last seeing her, he couldn't get her face out of his mind. Sad or mad, the woman was beautiful. He wondered what a happy smile looked like on her, or better yet—a satisfied smile after being thoroughly made love to.

"Are you smiling because we're going to the fair?"

The sound of his brother's voice broke Stephen out of his daze. In the passenger's seat, he glanced over to his left at Nate behind the wheel and offered a lopsided grin. "Of course." Stephen cast a glance toward the backseat, where the girls sat wearing matching Atlanta Braves jerseys. He wanted to be able to peer over heads at the small fair and locate any of them if they got separated. "I'm ready to get on some rides and eat some food. How about you, ladies?"

"I'm ready for my crown," Philly called with a bright smile from her booster seat. Her soft brown hair, pulled back into one ponytail by his own two hands, bobbed back and forth. It had taken him six tries, but finally Stephen had gotten the ponytail to stay.

Nate groaned and banged his head against the headrest. "Did you remember to bring your caboodle?"

"Her what?"

"Her caboodle," Nate replied. "The pink case holding all of her makeup—"

"Makeup?" Stephen choked as they parked. Three of the four doors opened while he remained firmly in his seat. "What are you talking about?"

"The Miss Peach Blossom contest?" Nate said with a slow mocking tone before he stepped out from the car. "Where has your mind been all week? It's the only thing Philly's been talking about."

How did parents keep up with two children? What an ass he'd been. And again, he placed the blame on Lexi. If she hadn't sold the dress to Kimber, he would be able to focus on everyone.

"I didn't realize this contest included makeup. Kimber and I already spoke about growing up so fast, and now you want to put makeup on the baby?"

Someone opened his passenger door and Philly stood in front of him with her hands on her hips, glaring up at him. "I am not a baby!"

He reached out and, like a child, Philly eagerly climbed into his arms. "Sure you're not a baby." She smelled like one—baby lotion from the pink bottle, to be exact.

"It's just make-believe, Uncle Stephen," Kimber said, patting Philly on the back. "Soap and elbow grease."

"I don't like the idea."

* * *

Inside the walls of the county fair, a wave of screams shattered the air. Metal wheels screeched through the daylight, and the shadows of the fast-flying cars zipped through the air and circled into a loop with another wave of screams.

Nate rolled his neck around. "Can we go inside the gates now?"

"Yeah, everyone is staring at us." Kimber popped her pink bubble gum against her back teeth while she looked up from her turquoise cell phone.

Stephen's brows furrowed together. He was sure he'd taken away a phone earlier this week that was pink and then purple. Was he going crazy?

"Marvin is waiting by the corn-dog stand," Kimber informed them.

Stephen didn't give a flying flip where Marvin was. Instead of saying something rude, he tightened his hold on Philly and tightened his smile. "Well if he's waiting..." he said sarcastically.

"Uncle Stephen," Kimber said in a warning voice. "You promised."

"Yeah, Uncle Stephen," Nate mocked with a wink, "you promised."

He couldn't make any guarantees. Maybe since he'd done one not-so-nice deed today, his time at the fair could be tolerable.

Whatever his mood had been prior to walking through the gates of the county fair, it dissipated the minute he entered. He inhaled deeply and a nostalgic smile spread across his face. It was something about the smells of the fair. Smells of animals, hay, popcorn, elephant ears and other fried inventions mixed throughout the breezy air.

The weather was unusually cool for this time of year. Philly insisted on getting a candy apple before seeing her favorite part of the fair, the animals. The barns were filled with pigs, llamas, goats and other animals that kids could feed by hand for only a quarter's worth of carrots. Stephen fed the zebra caged in the corner, while Kimber pretended not to be interested but held control over the plastic Baggie of veggies.

Stephen let the five-year-old dictate where they would go for the late afternoon. Gnats clung to the humid Southern air. Employees taunted fair patrons, challenging them to win prizes. Not able to resist his basketball skills being tested, Stephen played a few rounds and won an oversize Scooby-Doo dog. Kimber's friend, Marvin, met up with them. The tall, lanky boy, with his thick Coke-bottle glasses and a mouth full of metal braces, smiled. Kimber is too good for him, he thought defensively. But on the positive note, a guy like him would be easy to intimidate, which he had to do the few times Marvin and Kimber held hands.

Ah, to be young and in like. Him being "so old," as Kimber called him, he barely remembered the days when he looked forward to spending time with his high school crush. "Dang, bro," Nate said, snapping his fingers in Stephen's face. "You going soft on me?"

"What?" Stephen said, checking his phone as it buzzed. He chalked up Mr. Foxx's all-caps message to unfamiliarity with electronic mail. The keys would be delivered to the house in the morning.

"Whatever." Nate nodded. "What's got you smiling, then?"

"I made a business transaction."

"So soon?" Nate's voice and brows went up.

"We've been here for six months," Stephen reminded him. "I can't work out of my bedroom forever."

"At least this way you'll get out of the house and start meeting people, meet you a nice woman."

"Not interested in any women from this town," he said. The image of Lexi flashed through his mind, causing him to envision her hips swaying to the salsa beat on the dance floor or in his bed.

They continued their trip around the fair. Stephen reluctantly purchased the young couple a pair of unlimited passes and gave them one hour to meet back at the tent for Philly's pageant. Philly bossed her way around, holding both their hands so she could dangle and swing her legs. Stephen offered to get her another corn dog when Nate stepped in and vetoed him.

“She’ll be too sick to perform tonight.” Nate looked down and tweaked Philly’s nose. “And you’re going to be a rock star tonight, aren’t you?”

Philly smiled brightly. “I’m gonna rock!”

Stephen tried to keep his upper lip from curling. “Seriously, Nate, a toddler pageant?”

“What?”

“Is this why you guys had me watching those stupid reality shows?”

“Philly enjoyed the workshops last month.”

The picture of one pageant queen in particular popped into his mind. All this beauty talk forced her image in his mind. Southern belles were quiet and demure. She was loud, flamboyant and obnoxious to say the least. Stephen’s anger worked him up all over again. Irritated, he talked himself into being glad he’d bought the property next door.

“You’ve got an evil grin again,” Nate noted.

Stephen shook his head. “This time it is a woman.”

“So you agree this beauty pageant workshop is a good way to meet women?”

Maybe that was exactly what Stephen needed, a woman. It had been six months since he last went on a date.

Oblivious to the grown-up part of the conversation, Philly tugged on Stephen’s right hand. “If I do real good today, I get to compete in the next pageant where you used to live.”

“Where I lived?” Stephen kneeled down to her level.

She beamed at him, batting her long lashes. “Yep,” she answered proudly, “the winner today gets a big trophy and a trip.”

“And if Uncle Nate is lucky,” Nate chimed in, “Philly will share her prize with him.”

Stephen straightened to his full height and ignored the pain in his knees. What prize did Uncle Nate think he was going to get out of this?

“A dress!” Philly jumped excitedly. “I get a new dress and I get a personal coach until the big pageant.”

Off in the distance, Stephen’s eyes narrowed on a long gold Cadillac behind the pageant building. He’d seen the car earlier today and had wondered who owned the old-lady car. While Stephen craned his neck, Nate pumped Philly up with encouragement. He held her by the arms and she swung her around in the air. Philly’s legs accidentally kicked Stephen in the process just as he locked eyes with Lexi Pendergrass.

“I get to wear a dress from Grits and Glam Gowns!”

The words sank into Stephen’s brain. As she sang the name of the dress shop, Stephen swore he’d heard wrong. “What?”

“Grits and Glam Gowns,” Nate provided, “is my part of the prize. When Philly wins tonight, she’ll get more lessons from the one-and-only Lexi Pendergrass. Man, Stephen, you ought to meet her.”

His brother practically drooled. Stephen began to shake his head. “We’ve met.”

“When? You’ve barely left the house since we came down here.”

“She’s the one who sold Kimber the dress,” Stephen said quickly as Nate’s words slowed down. Taking in the revelation, Nate closed his mouth and bit his lip. “Did Kimber tell you that?”

Philly’s hand tugged his arms. “Yes, baby?”

“Uncle Stephen, look!” Her fingers pointed toward the doorway of the pageant building. Her voice gave a melodic tone to the word look. “There she is!”

Both of the brothers turned, Nate staring, as well. This time, he made no attempt to stop drooling. “Yep, the future Mrs. Reyes.”

The back molars in Stephen’s mouth ground down as their eyes met again. Philly dropped her uncle’s hands and went running the few feet in front of her, arms wide-open, and barreled into her arms—Lexi Pendergrass.

Chapter 3

Something magical always took away Lexi's bad mood when it came to the variety of treats offered at the county fair. She knew she'd have to work a little longer with her Zumba workout disc, but it was totally worth it. Sort of. A mouth filled with a bit of exotic fair food—a fried Oreo cookie—was not the way Lexi wanted to remeet Stephen Reyes. But as she swallowed down her treat, the horrific frozen smirk on his face lessened the humiliation of being caught stuffing her face.

"A pleasure seeing you again." Lexi washed down her treat with a sip of tea through her long swirly straw before extending her hand, silently praying not to have any of the chocolate cookie on her teeth. The smug smile he'd showed off earlier in the day faltered when Mr. Nate introduced her to him as the judge of tonight's pageant. Stephen's hand wrapped around her icy one, cold from holding her drink, and sent a sizzle through to her skin.

"Yes, my brother mentioned you two already met?" Stephen dropped her hand and gave a quick nod.

Lexi's attention turned toward his brother. She'd met Mr. Nate a few weeks ago when he brought his five-year-old niece to Grits and Glam Gowns for the Saturday-morning workshop. In fact, Nate had unknowingly spawned the idea of buying the café when her kitchenette did not have the space to accommodate his fan club.

So when Nate introduced Stephen as his brother, she wasn't sure she could keep her perfected pageant smile from faltering. How was it possible the two of them were related?

Earlier, Lexi had given Stephen a ten in the evening-wear department, but if tonight was a casual look, he definitely earned another perfect score. She hated him for making a pair of denim jeans and a blue Atlanta Braves jersey look so good. Even his choice in shoes, a pair of tan Timberlands, was perfect. He oozed sex and confidence and she hated herself for noticing. So what? Not like she hadn't seen a handsome man before.

Stephen cleared his throat and ran his large hand over his bearded face. "We're hoping after tonight we'll spend more time together," said Nate.

The double innuendo was not lost on Lexi's ears but she did not encourage with a flirtatious smile. She did not get involved with parents of clients. Not anymore, a bitter voice whispered in her ear.

"Not if I can help it," Stephen injected over a cough into his balled-up fist.

Lexi cocked her head to the side. "Bless your heart, are your allergies getting to you?"

"We went to see the animals," Philly Reyes said, tugging on the pocket of Lexi's denim overalls.

She'd forgotten about the attire for the judges, the camaraderie it gave the panel, and now she bit her bottom lip. Dressing up as a farmhand wasn't Lexi's first choice, but she knew how to make it work, accessorizinng the attire with a pair of red cowboy boots. "Hi, sweetie," Lexi cooed, and squatted down to get to Philly's eye level.

"I am going to remember my cupcake hands." Philly beamed, holding her hands out to her side and pretending to cup the invisible hem of an invisible cupcake dress. The five-year-old nailed the movement. A lot of other girls from the pageant workshop kept curling their fingers under as if holding a bar. Philly held her arms out to the side and left her hands limp at the wrists, as Lexi had taught her.

Proud, Lexi gave Philly a hug. Smart of whoever decided to dress the family in matching clothes. At an event like this, things became crowded. Already she'd seen a bouncy house filled with lost kids waiting for their parents to arrive. "I can't wait to watch, Philly. Don't forget to have fun, though."

"You've met Philly," Stephen's deep voice said. He loomed over them with a smirk across his devastatingly handsome face. "Here comes our other niece, Kimber."

The niece in question practically skipped over toward her two uncles before skidding to a halt when Lexi stood up. Things began to click in Lexi's mind. Nate had come into the boutique followed

by an entourage of women and their daughters. With him had been Philly and another girl. During the chaos, Kimber Reyes had appeared to be in the middle of an argument with someone on the phone. Lexi recalled the girl being close to tears and that she had allowed her to use the private bathroom in the loft—where the dress was kept. Given the teenager's wide, deer-in-the-headlights stare and the way her barbaric uncle had overreacted, Lexi planned on keeping Kimber's secret—for now.

"Kimber," Stephen said, his eyes steady on Lexi, "you remember Lexi Pendergrass."

Kimber chewed nervously on her gum and avoided eye contact with everyone. Instead she studied her canvas-covered feet. "Um, yeah, hi," she said, tugging a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Hi, Kimber." Lexi tried to keep her voice cheerful. Stephen stood behind Kimber with his arms folded across his judgmental chest. Screams from kids on death-defying rides filled in the awkward silence.

"Um, Uncle Nate, can me and Marvin get on the Ferris wheel?"

"Marvin and I," Stephen corrected. Lexi mentally rolled her eyes. Of course he'd correct the child. The boy named Marvin gulped.

Kimber cocked her head to the side. "You want to go on the Ferris wheel with Marvin?"

"Girl, go," Nate growled. "Be back in time for the pageant."

Kimber took off, grabbing Marvin's hand and dragging him away with her. Lexi shook her head and smiled, watching the two run off.

Her attention was captured by Stephen clearing his throat. "Well?"

"Well, what?" she asked him.

"Does seeing her bring back any memories for you?" Stephen asked. He stepped close to her, toe-to-toe. His dark eyes searched hers for an answer she did not want to give. Lexi did not waver. She folded her arms across her bibbed top and raised one brow, challenging him.

"What's going on here?" asked Nate.

Behind them, someone sounded a cowbell. Lexi cringed at the noise. "Well, there's the cue for me to get over to the judging table. I'll see you all around." Lexi smiled sweetly at Philly, waving toward her. "Don't forget—have fun this evening." Before leaving, she nodded at Nate, then purposely dropped her smile at Stephen.

A lot of cupcake dresses from Grits and Glam Gowns adorned the stage. The above-the-knee dresses with the layers of tulle were the bestsellers. The tulle material helped poof them out at the hem. The bigger the better and these dresses sold quickly.

Philly definitely stood out in her peach-colored OOAK, as Lexi had dubbed the garment. The one-of-a-kind dress stopped above the knees and was fluffed out with layers of tulle and stones. Andrew had worked hard and today it paid off. Nate had chosen the right color for his niece to represent the festival, as well as the state symbol. What did Stephen think?

Settling her nerves, Lexi took a seat next to the judges' table beside one of Southwood's first ladies, Mrs. Ramona Ramsey. Her daughter, Rosalind, had attended Cypress Boarding School for Girls with Lexi and was one of her best friends in the world. The Ramseys had encouraged Lexi to open up her boutique downtown.

"Stop turning around, dear," Mrs. Ramona scolded, tilting her head to the side.

"Was I?" Lexi realized when her body relaxed that she had been twisting around.

Mrs. Ramona nodded her head and patted Lexi's denim-clad thigh. "Who is the young man?"

"Who said I was staring at a man?"

"Because the stage has been filled with all types of gorgeous gowns and you have yet to coo over any of them," Mrs. Ramona noted.

Lexi grinned. "Because I created most of them," she replied with confidence. "But if you must know, there is a gentleman back there who accused me of selling something to his niece, and I did not."

"Well, if you were honest, what's the problem?"

“I don’t know.” Lexi shrugged. “It doesn’t sit well with me he thinks so little of me.”

Ramona Ramsey stopped fanning herself. “Since when do you, the Southern Hellion, care what other people think of you?”

The beauty walk for the young girls of the Peach Blossom began, and Lexi smiled and clapped for all those who attended her workshops. The Peach Blossom Pageant, held every year, was made up of girls from all four local counties. Not every parent took their child to a pageant coach, and Lexi respected and understood, but she easily picked out the girls who did not have any training. She also noticed the beauty walks of some girls whose parents clearly took them up to Atlanta for some coaching. The judges were going to have a hard time here. Things always took a turn during the talent portion.

The other judges were Mrs. Beaumont, Lexi’s retired Sunday school teacher; a veterinarian from the nearby town Samaritan; and a teacher from Peachville. From peering over everyone’s shoulders, Lexi guessed the judges gave tens to their hometown heroes. But after the talent completion, they were all on the same page. Every time the judges smiled and nodded at Philly Reyes singing on stage, Lexi cast a glance over her shoulder to catch Stephen Reyes clenching his powerful jaws together.

“So that’s him?”

Lexi turned her attention to her best friend’s mother and accepted the napkin-covered plate she handed her. Mrs. Ramona blinked aimlessly at Stephen.

“Yes.”

“Well, he is hot, if you like the type.” Mrs. Ramona shrugged her shoulders.

Afraid he was her type, Lexi took one last glance over her shoulder. Stephen returned the glance, his dark eyes frowning toward her. She dismissed the cold chill and turned her attention back to the stage. As the judges took a break to deliberate and grab a bite to eat, the contestants were allowed to wander off. Philly stayed on stage with a few girls from the workshop and played ring-around-the-rosy. She clearly stood out from the rest. She sported a natural smile and knew how to work the judges, even when the spotlight wasn’t on her.

“I am not shallow,” Lexi said. “I care more about a man’s character than his appearance.”

“Right,” Mrs. Ramona drawled out. “How long has it been since you went on a date?”

A date? What was a date? Where a man came to her house to pick her up in his vehicle and took her to dinner and a show without expecting anything? Since the falling-out with her parents, she had no one setting her up on blind dates. Who would have thought she’d miss those not-so-random meetings her mother used to arrange?

Single men without children did not come into her shop—well, not every day, she thought, refusing to cast another glance in Stephen’s direction. To get out and find a date for herself took too much effort. After working at the shop, doing alterations, making calls and critiques, or whatever her daily routine called for, she was too tired. Thankfully, her neurotic brides had already picked up their dresses for the June weddings. Dealing with them was a job all in itself.

Lexi sighed sadly and lifted the paper napkin. She smiled at the powdered-sugar-covered elephant ear and mentally tacked on another thirty minutes for her workout regime. “A while.”

“I understand, but you need to make time, Lexi.” Mrs. Ramsey gave a sad sigh. “Now, what are we going to do about McHottie?”

Caught off guard, Lexi inhaled a bit of the confectioners’ sugar and began to cough. “Who?”

Mrs. Ramona jutted her chin in the direction of Stephen Reyes. “Him.”

“He’s the uncle of a potential client,” Lexi said as if that explained everything.

“Nathaniel Reyes filled out the paperwork for Philly as her guardian, not McHottie. So there’s your opening, dear.”

She thought about Stephen’s pending sale on the property next door to her shop. Hell-bent on avenging his niece’s mishap, he clearly planned on being a daily bane of Lexi’s existence. Recalling

his pettiness reminded Lexi of the low score he'd earned in congeniality. No amount of hotness would bring his score up from such an act. This was a man to hate, not desire. Pondering her decision, Lexi cast one last glance over her shoulder before vowing not look at him ever again. He met her eyes with a raised brow and a smug smirk across his devilishly handsome face.

By the end of the afternoon, thirteen girls stood on the stage. The three judges never turned to Lexi for her input. The votes were unanimous and their scorecards all matched. In with a group of other girls ranging from five to thirteen, Philly stood perfectly still in front of the smaller trophies she'd already won—most photogenic, best walk and best face. The poor girl's arm had to be sore from constantly raising her hand when her name was called. No one seemed surprised when little Philly Reyes won the overall title. Lexi's services, part of the package for the winner, allowed her to stand onstage with Philly.

Team Reyes approached for a photograph. Nate stood on one side of her with Philly in his arms; due to their height, Lexi and Stephen were forced to stand together. Bulbs flashed, blinding them. Through it all, Lexi smiled and gritted her teeth.

"Well, neighbor, looks like I'll be spending more time than you thought with at least one of your nieces."

* * *

Stephen Reyes hated to lose.

He hated being proven wrong more. The tables of revenge had turned on him and karma bit him hard. He watched his family circle around Lexi Pendergrass as if she were a celebrity. Nate nearly tripped over his tongue.

Stephen did not deny Lexi's beauty by any means. She made denim overalls sexy. The entire time he stood adjacent to her, his eyes kept falling on the curve of her waist right where the snaps of the overalls and the white T-shirt she wore underneath did not quite meet. His fingers itched to test the softness of her skin.

Typically he did not date women with children. Women with kids—like Lexi and her clients—wanted a father figure for their child and he did not make for a good role model. His job kept him too busy. Nate, on the other hand, liked a woman with kids because the relationship never got any further due to the kids. Given both circumstances, Stephen needed to step aside and let Nate continue to make a fool of himself over Lexi Pendergrass. She was not the woman for him. Despite the way Philly wrapped her arms around her neck, despite the way Lexi stroked Kimber's hair, despite the way Kimber hung on her every word, there was nothing motherly about Lexi. She didn't seem to freak out or overreact when Philly's second candy apple got stuck in her hair. She just smiled and pulled it away.

"Can she come with us, Uncle Stephen?"

"What?" Stephen found himself blinking at Kimber.

Kimber's eyes blinked back innocently. "Can Miss Lexi come with us to celebrate?"

"Oh, Kimber..." Stephen tried to think of a reason why Lexi shouldn't come with them. For starters, she was dressed like a farmer's daughter. He didn't want to embarrass her by going out to eat at a five-star restaurant. "We don't want to pull Miss Lexi away from her evening plans, now do we?"

"According to my itinerary," offered the petite woman from the clothing store, "she's free."

Thankfully Lexi tried to decline. She shook her head back and forth, the pigtails she wore flipping over her shoulders. Stephen found himself focusing on the rubber bands securing the ends of her hair. He wondered if he pulled them loose, how soon her hair would untangle from the braids.

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Well, it's settled," Stephen said cheerfully. "She doesn't want to intrude."

Lexi paused for a split second. Her left eyebrow rose in amusement. "Well, if you guys don't mind?"

His nieces cut her off with cheering and chanting her name. Even Nate chanted along. Stephen willed his brother to shut up. “Apparently, they don’t think I’d be intruding,” Lexi told him.

Women didn’t challenge him. “We’re going to DuVernay’s.” He ignored Nate’s raised brows. The only plans they had discussed were to go to the local Dairy Queen for ice cream. DuVernay’s had come highly recommended by the concierge at his hotel. “I’m not sure if you’ve heard of it...”

“I am from here, Mr. Reyes,” Lexi said through her gritted teeth.

“I’m sure, then, you’re aware of the dress code.” He gave her denim outfit a once-over.

With Philly in her arms, Lexi dramatically clutched her heart. “Oh, my bad!” She gaped, mouth open so wide, offering him a view of the white gum in the back of her mouth, “You think I can’t clean up?”

As she spoke with a snarky tone, he understood she was taunting him. Game on.

“She owns a dress shop, Uncle Stephen,” Kimber volunteered.

“Don’t remind me, Kimber.” Stephen gave a tight-lipped grin.

“On any occasion, I promise you, I clean up nicely,” Lexi said through the thick tension. “Unfortunately, I am going to decline.” She hiked her thumb over her shoulder. “I’ve got to take my friend home.”

“I am not an invalid,” said the elegant woman walking up behind her. “Lexi, dear, may I speak with you for a moment?”

She’d said “friend,” but from the way the woman had leaned in and chatted with Lexi during the pageant, Stephen guessed an aunt or close relative. He cocked his head to the side, hoping for another glimpse of Lexi’s skin. As Lexi spoke with the other woman, she twirled her hair around her finger with one hand while wrapping her arm around the woman’s waist with the other.

Nate stepped into Stephen’s view. “Whatever you did to Lexi, you better undo it tonight,” he warned his brother, then turned around and called out to the two ladies, “Lexi, I insist you bring her along. We’re going to—where’d you say, Stephen?”

“DuVernay’s,” Stephen gritted out from between his teeth.

“What do you say we head over to DuVernay’s to celebrate Philly’s win?” asked Nate. “We ought to all get to know each other, since we’re going to be spending a lot more time together.”

“DuVernay’s?” the older woman said. “That’s—”

Whatever she planned on saying died away when Lexi tugged the woman’s arm. “Well, if you insist.”

“Of course,” Stephen replied.

“I think we should all head home and change into something a bit more celebratory,” Nate went on, looking down at his jeans.

“Lexi.” The larger guy from the shop made his way over; obviously he’d been listening. “I’ll grab your dress you wore earlier. You can change in one of the rooms in the back.”

Lexi gave Stephen one more tart smile before she handed Philly back to him. “I think I’ll at least shower first. What do you say? Plan to meet in an hour? Your reservations are under your name? Or should I ask for Nate Reyes?”

Not wanting to lie to his family, Stephen shifted Philly in his arms and bluffed. “We’ll meet you in one hour.”

* * *

One hour later, the Reyes family was dressed to a T. Keenan opened the backseat door of the car for the clan to step out. A line formed outside the small restaurant located in the center of town by city hall. Well-dressed children played in the last of the daylight while their parents waited for their reservations. People waited in line, dressed in heels, gowns and shawls. Men wore suits and ties, and no one seemed to mind the evening heat. Did everyone decide to celebrate tonight? Stephen wondered if he should have left well enough alone and taken everyone to the Dairy Queen.

“You say the reservations are in your name?” Nate asked, tightening the knot of his paisley tie. They walked on the red carpet, bypassing the waiting guests, and headed inside to the hostess.

“I’m Stephen Reyes,” Stephen said cockily. “I don’t need to make reservations.”

Behind him, he heard a chuckle from Kimber and Marvin. He preferred that over the groans he’d got from them when he’d forced them to dress up for tonight’s occasion. Hell, they needed to give him a medal for allowing Marvin to come along.

Philly couldn’t wait to spend time with Lexi. You’d think the woman walked on water. After the way things had happened between yesterday and today, Stephen admitted there was a slight wave of nervousness fluttering in the pit of his stomach from the idea of being with her again. He couldn’t wait to see what kind of attire she concocted tonight.

“I’m sorry, but your name is not on the list.”

Stephen tilted his head to the side as he listened to a maître d’ with a thin mustache and slicked-back inky black hair inform him of his nonexistent reservation. He cleared his throat. “I’m Stephen Reyes.”

“I understand,” the tiny man clipped, “but as you see, we’re swamped. Everyone from the four counties is here tonight. Without a reservation, I can only put you on the waiting list. I will get you in within the hour.”

“The hour?” Nate shook his head, “No, the kids need to get into bed.”

Nate patted Stephen on the back before he had the chance to tell the little man what he could do with his hour’s wait. “Guess you’ll taunt Lexi some other time.”

“Lexi Pendergrass?” the little man repeated.

Both men stopped in their tracks. “You know Lexi?” Nate asked.

The maître d’ smiled widely as he nodded his head. “She is here already.”

“She had a reservation?” Stephen heard himself asking as the man ushered the Reyeses through the ivory-covered white fence.

“No, no, no.” He chuckled with a shake of his head. “Ms. Pendergrass needs no reservation.”

The restaurant’s interior seemed spacious, despite all the full tables. The tables scattered across the black-and-white-tiled floor were each crowded and adorned with white candles and crystal vases with two single-stemmed roses. Somewhere in the background, a live pianist played music over the various conversations and clinking of toasting glasses.

“Hi!”

Lexi appeared. She wore a champagne-colored dress made of some sort of body-hugging silk. The halter top gave him a perfect view of the swell of her breasts. Stephen cleared his throat. Hoping to stamp down the desire bubbling within, he yanked the hem of his black suit coat. The red color of her lips made them kissable and, with her long, blondish hair pulled to the side and secured with a white gardenia, his lips itched to press against her neck. Her maple-sugar skin begged for him to stroke it. The gold accents of his tie and thin stripes in his button-down Oxford couldn’t have matched Lexi’s attire more if he’d tried.

“I’m so glad you made it.”

“We’ve got a special seat for the queen,” cooed Lexi’s assistant from before.

After introductions, everyone started to take their seats, with Philly at the helm. A waiter walked in, carrying a tray filled with champagne glasses. Lexi took two and handed one to Stephen. They lingered uncomfortably behind while everyone else got situated. Stephen took a sip, Lexi staring at him. He willed her to read his mind.

This thing between us isn’t over.

She’d returned the look with a coy smile as those red lips pressed against the glass. Something about this woman irked him to no end. “Shall we?” he said, inclining his head toward the elegant table.

“Much obliged.”

Everyone had taken their seats. Philly sat at the head of the table with Kimber and Marvin to her left, followed by Chantal. Across from them sat Andrew and then Nate. The only remaining seats were next to each other, as if purposely designated for Stephen and Lexi. Stephen wasn't sure why but he took the seat closest to Nate, thus leaving her to his right, all to himself.

"Lexi," Nate said, leaning forward, "thanks so much for arranging everything."

"Oh, sure." Lexi gave his brother a toothy smile and possibly a flirtatious wink. "I figured, since I have this room as a standing offer, it was probably best to let your brother's reservation go to someone else."

"You were lucky to get one," Chantal said in awe. "DuVernay's is in the center of the four surrounding counties. It's tradition for everyone to get all gussied up and come here after the fair."

"Really?" both Stephen and Nate chorused.

"Don't act so surprised. We're small-town, Mr. Reyes, not backwoods," Lexi said.

Chantal cleared her throat and turned the conversation on to something positive. She made a toast to Philly and to Lexi producing another Ultimate Grand Supreme.

Her words made Stephen think about what Lexi brought to the table for Philly. Obviously Philly had the right stuff because she was a beautiful child. She'd surpassed all the other children in the entire pageant tonight. Did the pageant world mean that much to her? She seemed happiest on the stage. After her parents died, Philly went into her own little world. She stopped talking as much, clung to her dolls more, and now here she sat with a crown too big for her head, the life of the party and entertaining everyone.

It was priceless. No amount of money or cool toys from Uncle Stephen brought the same smile Philly sported while seated next to Lexi. She did this.

The music from the other room filtered through to their area. The big fella, Andrew, cooed over Philly's crown. Nate chatted with Chantal, while Marvin and Kimber were in their own world. Stephen pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. He reached his hand down for Lexi to take. For a moment, he thought she was going to stab him with her salad fork. Her dark eyes flared at him. The table grew quiet.

"Dance with me."

"I'm good," she declined politely.

"I didn't mean to sound as if it was a request," he said, trying to smile, "I need to speak with you."

"No," she said, shaking her head, "I don't dance." Of course she danced. Women with her beauty danced. They were the center of attention on the dance floor, seducing men with their moves. Lexi leaned in close; the sweet smell of gardenias teased his nostrils. "As in, I can't dance. I'm horrible."

"I don't plan on judging your skills."

He enjoyed the way her eyebrows rose in shock. What he liked even better was that she pushed her chair away from the table and took his hand. A spark shocked his fingers when their hands touched. Flicking them apart after the jolt, Stephen glanced around the table to make sure no one noticed. Everyone stared.

"Are we allowed to dance, too?" he heard Kimber ask. Fortunately Nate vetoed the idea.

Stephen pulled Lexi away from the table and hard against his body. Her soft skin reminded him of rose petals, her irritated glare of the thorns. Their shoes clicked against the wooden dance floor. Her body trembled from the stems of her stilettos. "Your legs are shaking."

"I don't like to dance."

"Yet here we are." The warmth of her body against his made him clear his throat.

"Everyone is staring," Lexi responded in a clipped tone. She stretched her left arm across his shoulder. He squeezed her hand and placed his right hand against the small of her back. If his pinkie finger slipped an inch downward, he would feel her tailbone.

“Let me guess, you’re not one to make a scene?”

“I’m a Southern lady. We don’t cause scenes.”

Oh, if only all women were that simple. The women he’d dated lived for scenes. There’d been several occasions where he’d had a drink thrown in his face for showing up to an event late due to work or simply forgetting. Women didn’t like the honest truth. Women liked to play games. Lexi was playing one now. She knew he hadn’t wanted her to come along. She knew that he was going to need reservations for dinner tonight, yet she let him stand there and make an ass out of himself at the fair.

“No scenes, huh.” He mused over her statement. “Is that right?”

She tightened the slack in her arms. “Why did you want to dance with me, Mr. Reyes?”

For a moment he’d forgotten, lost in her dark eyes and the color of her hair. “How do you get your hair so blond?”

“I am sure you did not ask me to dance to find out about my hair-care products.”

He’d dated bottled blondes. There were ways of finding out the truth. A lower part of his body wanted to find out, but his brain tried to focus. “You’re right. I thought this would give us a chance to get to know each other better.”

“Oh, yes, we’re going to be best friends.” Lexi rolled her eyes. “By the way, I know all about your type, too, Mr. Reyes. You like to throw your wealth around to intimidate people.” She shook her head.

A lock of her hair fell down her back, brushing against his arm. “You still want to bring up the dress?” he said, casting a glance back at Kimber. “Let’s talk about the dress.”

Lexi’s eyes flashed wide before falling across the table.

“Yeah, I thought not. I am willing to barter with you.”

That got her attention. She looked at him sharply. “Barter how?”

“Do you believe Philly has what it takes?”

She peered around his shoulder to look at the five-year-old. A sweet smile spread across her face. “I haven’t seen a natural like her in ten years.”

A certain sadness twinkled in her eyes, then disappeared. Stephen was here to make a deal with Lexi, not psychoanalyze her. If she was the best, she was what Philly deserved. “So you would be willing to let go of your grudge against me to help Philly?”

“My grudge?” She stared incredulously, and if she became any stiffer she would break in half. Lexi held her face back in shock as if she’d been slapped. “Do you think I would hurt that little girl’s chances to spite you? Quite the ego you have there, Mr. Reyes.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

The music ended and Lexi stopped moving. “I am not an arrogant ass like you.”

“Did you call me an ass?” he asked humorously. Before she could step away, the music started back up and Stephen pulled Lexi back into his arms. “Uh-uh,” he taunted her, “the music hasn’t stopped, and you don’t want to make a scene by leaving me on the dance floor.”

“You’re such a miserable bastard. Must you make everyone else around you the same?”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” Stephen twirled her around and dipped her backward. “Get used to seeing more of me, Lexi Pendergrass.”

[Chapter 4](#)

Sunday morning, the streets of Southwood appeared to come to a halt. Cars filled the parking lots. As they passed along the bread-box churches with steeples, Stephen searched for one long gold Cadillac, finding it parked in front of her store. His dance with the beauty queen had left him unsatisfied.

For the second morning straight, he had woken up in his pullout bed in his office-slash-bedroom, forgetting he was not a preteen boy with uncontrollable, erection-producing dreams. He needed to get over this odd obsession with Lexi. She hadn’t squirmed enough in his arms Friday night, at least not until he suggested she get used to seeing more of him. Now he couldn’t wait to

watch her squirm when he walked through the door. As soon as Nate pulled up beside Lexi's car, Stephen's blood began to quicken.

Nate cut off the motor, and before the engine had time to cool down, the girls were out of the car and running toward Grits and Glam Gowns, pressing their faces against the window to peer inside. The leather of the driver's side seat squeaked, and Nate turned toward him, his left arm cocked on the black leather steering wheel.

"I've got this under control," said Nate. "Find something else to do."

Silence filled the front seat of the car. A church bell went off somewhere in the distance. Stephen recalled Nate's eagerness to attend the fair a second night in a row. His brother claimed he wanted to chaperone Philly while she sat in the front of the parade car. Perhaps what Nate wanted to do was catch a glimpse of Lexi. How did Stephen know? Because that was his reason for going to the fair, too. "You're into Lexi?" Stephen hated to ask, fearing the answer. They never competed for a woman.

"What I am into is this small town. Lexi's had a hard time here."

"And you know this how?"

Nate tore his eyes from the glare he held with his brother and stared up ahead. "I repeat," he sighed, "this is a small town."

"We came from a small town—" Stephen shrugged, gesturing his hand between the two of them "—on an island, secluded from the world."

"Villa San Juan is not secluded." Nate tried not to laugh, pressing his lips together and avoiding eye contact.

"Unless you had a boat or caught the ferry," said Stephen, glad the tension between them had dissipated, "you were stuck if the bridge went out."

"Look, all I'm saying is Lexi's been through a lot, and a lot of people around here won't let her forget her troubles."

"Explain to me why we want someone troubled in Philly's life." Stephen's mind grasped the nugget of information. He needed something to shake the feel of her silky skin out of his mind or the scent of her sweet body out of his head.

"If you're going to act like this, go back to Atlanta."

"I'm here."

"What about your house in Berkeley Lake?"

"Just because I didn't sell my place immediately doesn't mean I'm not committed to the girls. I told you I've already found a place to set up shop here." He inclined his head toward the shop wedged between Grits and Glam Gowns, and the café.

Nate's gaze followed, then his mouth dropped open with horror. "What did you do?"

"I made an investment in our future, a future for the girls." Stephen grinned proudly before manually unlocking the passenger's side door to step outside into the late-morning heat. Already a cloud of humidity surrounded his frame. He loosened the knot of his yellow-and-gray paisley tie. Perhaps wearing a dark suit today was not the best choice. "You cannot honestly tell me you like working out of the house."

"Is this about Philly sticking the piece of bologna in the DVD player?"

Stephen chuckled. "No, I am not upset with her for trying to hide a lunch you made. How does anyone mess up a bologna sandwich?"

"We're not talking about my cooking."

"Why are you acting so surprised? We need the office space."

Nate scrambled out of his side and stood in front of Stephen, blocking him from stepping onto the curb. "Remember when I said you need to fix whatever you did wrong? We're not destitute. We don't need to continue working for a long while. We're here to raise our nieces."

Stephen decided to leave the arguing alone. He listened to the bells over the door until they stopped chiming. The traffic downtown seemed motionless. For a minute, he swore he heard the traffic signal changing colors. In a diner across the street, a few people sat in the window, peering disapprovingly at the newcomer. A few dozen sets of eyes peered out from the drugstore across the street.

He hated small towns. The main reason he'd left Villa San Juan was to get away from everyone always being in everybody's business. As part of the Torres family through his mother, they were all subject to gossip. A major perk to living in Berkeley Lake was that he barely saw his neighbors. In Villa San Juan, you couldn't turn a corner without hitting a Torres.

Stephen reached for the set of keys, delivered to him yesterday, in the front pocket of his dark gray slacks. Despite the stares, the town truly was picturesque and moved him to the memory of when he first got excited about scouting out locations. He'd been about eighteen at the time and visiting his grandparents in Puerto Rico when he met an ambitious producer by the name of Christopher Kelly. Christopher wanted to impress his TV studio executive mother with hidden vacation spots, and Stephen, knowing all the beautiful hideaways not on the maps, was the right man for the job. After the success of his travel show for Multi Ethnic Television, also known as MET, people sought out Stephen's services. Using his shoulder, Stephen pushed against the wood frame of the door still bearing the name Divinity Bakery etched into the glass. Mounds of old newspapers nearly tripped him; dust floating through the beams of sunlight triggered a sneezing attack. The first thing he needed to do was start cleaning. The black-and-white tiled floor needed to go. Stephen preferred hardwood floors and office privacy. The only closed area so far was through the double doors leading to what he presumed was the kitchen, if he didn't count the short hallway to the left of the closed-off kitchen. Though the electricity was out, making it hard to confirm, Stephen bet the two closed doors down the dark hallway were bathrooms marked with the universal symbols.

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