

## ONE

### *Tess*

If he wasn't already dancing with Jesus, I'd kill Sean O'Shay myself. His betrayal is a vice, squeezing my chest. Breathing's impossible, which is just as well. I'd only humiliate the O'Shay name if the words formulating in my brain spewed from my mouth. Instead I grip the chair arms, my fingernails sinking into the smooth, burgundy leather and I lock eyes onto the wood paneled walls and floor-to-ceiling bookcases. *Rules of Civil Procedure, Tort Law and Practice*. Volume upon volume of thick tomes to distract me.

"Miss O'Shay?" Byron Reynolds rises from behind his desk, rheumy eyes widening. It wouldn't do for the daughter of Sean O'Shay to expire right here in his office. He turns to the door and screeches, "Candace come in here," his voice cracking like a thirteen-year-old boy's.

I press one hand against my chest and wave him down with the other. Heart pounding, head pounding, chest constriction and shortness of breath. Nothing new here, which gives some comfort. Dad's heart issues aren't hereditary. Breathe in, one, two three...breathe out, one two three.

The thick office door swings open, and Candace, legal secretary extraordinaire, appears. "What is it?" She spots me gasping for air like a drowning goldfish and rushes to my side.

"Tess? You okay?"

"Of course she's not okay." A vein in Byron's temple threatens to burst. "Call 911."

"No," I manage. Drama queen mode is Katie's forte, not mine. "Fine. I'm...fine. Just...give me," deep breath, "a sec." The vice loosens and the pain in my chest subsides. Thank God. Sweet air fills my lungs once again. Too bad Byron's hideous announcement isn't so easily dismissed.

“Maybe I should drive you to the hospital.” Candace drops to her knees in front of me, thick, mascara-ed eyes catching mine.

“Panic attack. I’m okay, really.” If they only knew.

She pats my hand then shoots a glare at Byron. “At least let me call Katie so she can drive you home.”

Despite the shaky aftershock, I blurt out a laugh. “Are you trying to kill me? Besides, she’s at school and can’t afford to take anymore time off. If I could just have some water.”

Candace leaves to do my bidding while I focus my on breathing exercises. Like riding a bike.

“We’ll postpone the rest of our meeting,” Byron says. “Maybe a week or two—”

“Is that going to change anything?”

“I understand you’re upset, Miss O’Shay.” Byron takes his seat once again, lips pursed. What was it Dad used to call him? An old lady? No, an old prude. “But I have to abide by your father’s wishes, even if I advised he not go this route.”

Candace raps on the open door before re-entering with a bottle of water. “Here you go, Tess. Is there anything else..?”

I shake my head and she makes her escape.

The cool water does little to alleviate the tightness in my throat. Dad couldn’t persuade me to his way of thinking in life, what made him think he’d have more control in death?

“Your father had your best interests in mind,” Byron says, as if reading my mind. “Even if his methods are questionable.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Your father?”

“No, Jake Holland. I mean, if Dad was willing to hand everything over to him...”

Including my baby sister. What was he thinking?

“I doubt Sean thought it would come to that.” Byron taps a pen on the desk blotter, eying me beneath gray caterpillar brows. “He assumed you’d agree to his terms.”

Of course he did.

“You *will* agree, won’t you?”

I press clammy fingers to my chin. “This can’t be legal. There must be a...a loop hole or something.”

“I assure you, it’s legal.”

“To hand my sister over to stranger?”

“Miss O’Shay.” His tone suggests a slight reprimand. “We both know Mr. Holland isn’t a stranger. He’s been in your father’s employ for over a year now. And I understand you’ve worked side by side with him.”

Jake’s smug features flit into my head. “He could be a pedophile for all I know. Or a con man. He appeared out of nowhere and wormed his way into Dad’s good graces.”

“A con man or pedophile?” Byron shakes his head and all but rolls his eyes. “Really, Miss O’Shay. Upon your father’s directive, I appropriated a background check. There is nothing in Mr. Holland’s history that should concern you.”

“Background check? You had him *investigated*?”

“I did.”

“I’d like to see his file.”

He scratches his balding head. “I’m afraid that is not possible. Confidentiality and all.”

“Dad paid for it, didn’t he?”

“After Mr. Holland agreed to it.”

“If Jake agreed to it, then I’m sure he won’t have a problem with me seeing it.”

“Get his permission, and I will be happy to oblige.”

A scream wriggles its way to the base of my throat. “Ridiculous.” I all but screech. “You can’t force me to do Dad’s bidding. This is the twenty-first century, for crying out loud. I’m not some medieval maiden that can be controlled like a chess piece.”

“You are right. But I urge you to consider all you have to lose if you choose to rebel against his wishes. More than that, think about what young Katherine has to lose.”

It’s blackmail, pure and simple. And short of kidnapping my sixteen-year-old sister, there’s nothing I can do about it.

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