

Chapter One

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MAY 20 / 7:03 AM

THE COOL SPRING mornings were now gone. I missed those. Sitting outside with my coffee enjoying the sounds of the day was so peaceful. Now, the heat was back and nothing about sitting outside with early morning mosquitos and humidity was fun. Frowning, I stood at the large windows of the flat I lived in over the dance studio owned by my best friend, Lila Kate Kerrington. The parking lot was empty now, but in a couple of hours, it would be a busy Monday. The silence of living alone would have been hard to adjust to after Lila Kate had married and officially moved out six months ago, but the truth was she'd been sleeping at the house Cruz Kerrington had bought them for the most part anyway.

I didn't mind the solitude. I was thankful Lila Kate had agreed to let me lease the place on my own. I loved the location and I still had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I hadn't gone back to college after my break. The fact I was turning twenty-two in a few months made that a little stressful if I thought about it too much. Instead I pretended like working at the dance studio was exactly what I wanted to do. I liked my job well enough. I got to work for Lila Kate and that was always fun. Maybe answering the phones, updating the website, stocking the dance store, and handling the class schedules wasn't an ideal forever career for me but it worked for now. Besides, it wasn't like I had a dream to chase. Even as I thought it, the corners of my mouth sank. Why did that bother me so badly? Not having a dream. I should be glad I wasn't chasing something. Fighting daily to achieve some out of reach goal. I was content.

I drank down the last of my coffee in one big gulp and ignored the knot in my chest that didn't agree with me. It was an annoying little knot. Always creeping up when I didn't want it around. Life was good here. No need for me to get restless. My phone rang and for once I was thankful for the distraction of a call. Normally I stared at it in horror until it ended. My voice mail message would tell them to text me. Which was my preferred communication. I had to answer the calls in the studio all day. I didn't want to do it in my personal life too.

My sister-in-law's name appeared on the screen. Bliss was one of the few people who rarely attempted to call me. She knew I liked to text and always did that instead of calling. Not to mention it was early. Snatching the phone up immediately concerned, I quickly said, "Bliss, hey, everything okay?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded amused. I instantly relaxed. "I didn't mean to scare you. Sorry. I'm just driving and couldn't text. I knew you'd be awake getting ready for work, so I figured calling was safe," she explained.

"Of course. What's up?" I replied.

"I wanted to see if you were busy this weekend. The house is finally finished with the renovations and the new and improved pool is complete. Anyway, we were going to have a party to celebrate originally, but the Hardys received some bad news last week. Eli's grandmother is undergoing surgery this weekend and we decided to have everyone over Friday night as more of a support of friends. Everyone needs something to get their mind off of it all. We would love to have you here, to see the house and us."

Sea Breeze, Alabama was only a two-hour drive away, but I hadn't been to visit my brother and his wife there in months. They'd been here to visit several times and I'd not found a reason to go back. I had been back only once since their wedding last summer. It was time to visit and getting out of my routine here would do me some good. Maybe the restlessness I had begun to battle lately would ease if I took a little short trip.

I told her, "I'll be there."

"Wonderful! I can't wait to see you. Come whenever you can get away. I'll have the guestroom overlooking the gulf ready for you."

"I'll talk to Lila Kate. We normally don't have late Friday classes. She does some private classes, but I'm not needed in the afternoon for long. I should be able to leave here by three Friday at the latest," I told her.

"I can't wait to see you. If you hear from Phoenix, tell her I'm trying to get in touch with her too. But her phone number is saying it's not working . . ." Bliss trailed off as if she wasn't sure if she'd said the right thing or not. My younger sister was a hellion and

getting worse with each year. I hadn't heard from her in three weeks since she showed up here drunk and needed to sleep it off before going to see our parents the next day. How she hadn't flunked out of college yet, I had no idea. But the phone thing was odd.

"How long has it been giving you that message?" I asked, knowing Mom called to check on Phoenix daily. She needed the reassurance her baby was still alive. My poor momma.

"I called her three times before calling you. I was trying to catch her before she was in class."

I held back a laugh. Phoenix had no early morning classes. The girl couldn't get up before mid-morning at the earliest. "I'll tell her. See you Friday," I told Bliss before ending the call. I quickly found my sister's name and hit call. Waited . . . and sure enough, the not a working number message played in my ear. Frowning, I looked at my phone and tried to think of every possible scenario. My parents paid her phone bill. She was a college student. They covered those things while we went to college. When I had decided to take a "break" from college, they'd agreed and would have kept paying my bills if I hadn't asked for them to be handed over.

Knowing there had to be a reasonable explanation, I started to call my mother and stopped. Just in case there was something going on that would upset her, I decided calling Dad was a better idea. Mom was tough, but when it came to her baby girl, she got very worked up. It wasn't that she loved Phoenix more, it was that she feared for Phoenix more. My sister was crazy as hell. With a mean streak a mile wide.

"Morning, beautiful," my dad's voice said over the line after the first ring.

"Good morning, Daddy," I replied.

"I rarely ever get calls from you. Is it just my lucky day?" he was teasing. I visited my parents regularly. I also texted both of them. I did call my mom more though. The older I got, the worse that got. Needing to talk to her about things.

"I was wondering if you had heard from Phoenix?" I asked, getting to the point before my imagination got the best of me.

“Yes, I spoke with her yesterday. Why? Did she call you?”

Yesterday? That’s weird. “So yesterday her phone number was working?”

He paused. “It was . . . but as of today, it won’t be.” He knew about this, which meant she was okay.

“I tried calling her.” I stopped and waited for him to explain.

There was a heavy sigh then he cleared his throat. “Phoenix has decided she’s in love with a guy she met on her recent trip to London. She’s not taking her exams and finishing up this semester of college even though the tests are this week. Tossing it away because she doesn’t want to leave him. It’s her choice, but after speaking with your mother, we decided that if she can so easily toss away the money we have spent this semester on her college education with no regard to her future, it’s time we take a more firm hand. She wants to be grown and make her own decisions then she can. Starting with paying her own bills.”

Oh.

Shit.

I sat there with the phone in my hand unable to find words.

Phoenix was in London with some man and our parents had cut her off financially. I was torn between being furious with her stupidity and panicking over her safety. She couldn’t survive out there. My little sister made the worst choices on a good day. Sure, not too long ago I’d been wild. Made some bad decisions. Was a little rebellious but it was a phase. I did “take a break” from college and not return but otherwise, I was doing good now. I’d never have run off to freaking London no matter how bad I got.

“How’s Mom?” I asked finally.

“Worried but like me, she knows we can’t keep funding Phoenix’s bad decisions. She has to grow up. Or at least step up and learn how to handle life on her own.”

They were right, but she wasn't ready. The idea of getting on a plane and going to find her and slap sense into her was tempting.

But so was finding her and holding her tight so she couldn't do anything stupid that could hurt her.

"You haven't told Nate," I said, already knowing the answer since it was Bliss who called me about the number.

"No. I was putting it off. He's finished the renovations on the house and they're enjoying things being done there. No need to put a damper on things for him." Nate would freak the hell out when he heard this. Damper was a very tame way to describe his reaction. Dad knew that too. "Bliss called Phoenix this morning. She's who called me to ask about the not a working number message."

Another sigh. "She's supposed to call with her new London number by noon. I'll make sure you get it then I'll call and deal with your brother."

"Okay," I said, wanting to ask him more questions. Like did he have an address for her and had he done a background check on the guy or call some connection in London to find out more. But I didn't.

Instead, I ended the call with our usual "bye love you" and hung up.

Sinking into the kitchen chair, I stared out the window no longer enjoying the view.