

A close-up photograph of a person's hands playing a red electric guitar. The person is wearing a blue denim jacket. The background is a warm, golden-yellow color.

# ROCK CON ROLL



*Sage Ardman*

# ROCK CON ROLL

(a free preview of the first fifteen chapters)

*Sage Ardman*

Fame series #1

R.L. Ranch Press



Portola Valley, California

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# Rock Con Roll

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This free preview consists of the first fifteen chapters (almost one half) of my book, *Rock Con Roll*, published in April, 2017 by R.L. Ranch Press, a division of RuLabinsky Enterprises.

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Chapters 16-38 are not part of this preview

# Rules for Con Artists



- Don't call attention to yourself.
- Before the con, study the mark.
- During the con, listen carefully and observe the mark.
- Never look bored, but don't appear too eager, either.
- Never let them see you sweat.
- Offer them something for nothing while actually giving them nothing for something.
- Never fall for the mark.

# Rock Con Roll



# One



Ugh, Los Angeles! The city held too many bad memories for me, and this police station threatened to become another disturbing experience. The police were not my friends when I was a kid, and I'd never completely gotten over that feeling. So even entering the building made me uncomfortable, and after wandering down narrow stairways and poorly lit hallways full of locked steel doors, I felt truly lost. Ironical, because I was looking for the lost-and-found department.

Most people wouldn't get so anxious about going to the lost and found. But I had a reason for being nervous: I was pretty sure I was about to commit a crime. Normally, there's no crime in making a claim. I should be able to go in there and ask for the big stuffed panda I lost in the park last week, without getting arrested. But since I'd just landed here in Los Angeles and hadn't been near that park in years, my claim was a lie.

But worse than the lie, I worried there was something unusual about that panda. This had to be more sinister than a missing plush toy, because the person who wanted me to make the claim was Bea Kirkland, my foster mother since age two, and an accomplished con artist. If Bea wanted me to do this, then it was no ordinary panda.

I hadn't returned to Los Angeles to see Bea. In fact, I'd left here seven years ago, because of her. When we were young, my brother, sister, and I were taught to cheat and steal. A fun thing to do, back then, but when the cruelty

and danger of such a life became apparent, I had to get out. So I ran away to New York City—rather abruptly—and hid from my foster mother.

In New York, I made an honest life for myself and didn't do any cons. I thought—no, I *hoped*—that I'd never see Bea again. But she called me yesterday in a panic because my Uncle Carl had been arrested. He needed my help to save him from a long prison term, so I had to come back.

Carl meant the world to me—he had taught me to paint, which was my livelihood now. Of course, a skilled painter can also be a skilled forger, so Carl and I had done quite a bit of that, too. With him in jail, I was his only hope. He'd been caught with explosives, and unless he could furnish a proper federal license for it, he'd be in trouble. Bea also pointed out that Carl had been in the middle of another con when he got busted. Something about a lost panda. Which is why I was here, looking for the lost and found.

I finally located the department in an abandoned corner of the station. The small room was decorated in Modern American dungeon, with flickering fluorescent lights that gave the scuffed, off-white walls a subterranean pallor. On the other side of the room was a small window where I could make my claim. And between the door and the window was a single piece of furniture: a tired-looking bench with a sign over it proclaiming, "Wait Here." But there was nobody in the room—evidently not peak hour at the lost and found.

As I started to walk to the claim window, I felt a full-body shudder ripple through me, forcing me to a halt. My old phobia again: the dread of bad cons. A deep fear of the repercussions that happen when everything falls apart, when the game blows up, or as Bea would say, when the con

curdles. I'd seen one go seriously bad when I was a kid, which filled me with dread and drove me to leave L.A. Now here it was again, reminding me that this was dangerous and just plain wrong. I shouldn't be here.

I needed a moment to process my fears, so I sat down on the bench, leaned back, and closed my eyes. To cover this awkward moment, I brought my phone up and pretended to be in a conversation. Then I let out my breath slowly and tried to relax.

In the dark silence, I noticed faint elevator music attempting to lighten the mood. It took a few seconds before I recognized an old Alejandro song. The juxtaposition of this upbeat, familiar rhythm with the austere little room almost made me laugh.

I shouldn't have been so surprised to hear Alejandro's music—the man was universally popular. His music topped charts all over the world, and he kept pumping out the hits, year after year. Besides writing songs, singing them, and playing guitar, he also happened to be the hottest man on the planet, with a stunning body and a face that melted my heart in every video of his I watched.

Yeah, I was a hard-core fan. I had all of his music and had been to as many of his concerts as I could. But I'd never heard this version of "My Year of Loving You." The song's pounding beat and jangling guitars had been re-recorded in a more mellow style, suitable for police use. I wondered if it was a Los Angeles thing.

After the song finished, I opened my eyes, ready to play my part in this little con game. Even small doses of Alejandro could cheer me up, so I walked to the claim window full of renewed enthusiasm. With any luck, I could get that panda just like a regular person would.

Although I hadn't done any trickery in years, I knew what to do. I'd pulled off plenty of more complicated cons. But I also reminded myself that anything could go wrong—I'd been taught that since I got out of diapers. So to make sure everything went smoothly, I made use of every trick I knew. I had dressed modestly, in skinny jeans, a cream knit top, and a gold blazer. I had pulled my baseball cap down low so the visor would hide my eyes from the surveillance cameras. The cap also covered my spiky bleached hair so I'd look more normal. I was ready to pretend.

On the other side of the window, a lonesome policeman sat at his desk. I went through the basic steps of preparing him to be my mark: making him smile and complimenting him so he'd feel superior. If he felt good about himself, he'd be less likely to challenge me.

I started with a sweet, shy smile—all girl-from-back-home innocence. The officer looked up at me and raised an appraising eyebrow. I'm decent looking, especially when I smile. My small nose and mouth aren't Hollywood quality, but I get no complaints. I caught the quick scan of his eyes as he took me in. His lip curled ever so slightly, and his eyes widened. Yes—his churning brain was telling him—I want to talk to her. A good start.

I then used a helpless-girl routine to make him more pliable. "Oh. Um. I'm looking for the lost and found. . ." An easy request, considering I was already there.

The officer was happy to assist. "You found it, babe. What'ja lose?" His crooked grin assured me that he was on my side and wouldn't be asking too many questions.

Next, I added a layer of sadness to my innocent and helpless act. Something to make it real and get me into the part. This might have been an excessive level of manipulation, but I needed to finish this job smoothly and

get out of here. So I dredged up some unhappy memories to make the emotion real.

I thought about a hungry little five-year-old girl. Her foster mother was off somewhere, working a con and hadn't been seen in days. The only food in the house was a partial bag of potato chips and a nearly empty box of cereal. When that was gone, the girl went outside and climbed through a few garbage bins, returning with a stale loaf of bread and a half-full jar of mayonnaise. But that didn't last, either, so her older brother broke into mother's precious chocolate bars and handed them out. The little girl was worried. "Mother will be angry," she warned him, but he insisted it was okay. So she ate the chocolate, then hid under the covers of her bed, less hungry but more afraid of what would happen when mother returned.

Stop, stop! I had my sadness. Now I could tie it in with the role Bea wanted me to play. The missing panda had been my most treasured possession for years. I loved it and had been a wreck since I lost it. If I didn't find it here in the city's lost and found, I'd be devastated.

Interestingly, the lost panda story also made me sad, even though it was a lie. One quick dig of my nails into my palm, and the tears started to flow. I gave the officer a little sniffle and began my sorrowful tale.

"My panda! I lost it last week. Do you have it?" I curved my arms wide as if hugging a tree trunk. "It's big."

Now some people might ask why a full-grown woman was pining for a stuffed animal. But I figured I could still have a lovey, even at age 24. So what if it was a little immature? And if Officer Lost-And-Found asked about it, I had a story all worked out.

But he didn't care. "Yeah, we have it." He flashed a smile and started to type into his computer.

I knew he had the panda. It had been there for a week, ever since Carl and his grandson had brought in. But the officer's quick recollection of the panda made me pause. Either he knew about it because big stuffed pandas are hard to ignore—which would be good—or they'd discovered something unusual about it and were waiting for it to be claimed. And that would be bad, possibly prison-time bad.

I started to sweat from the con tension. Funny how this never happened to me when I was young. But there it was again, wrapped around my spine like a serpent. I remembered how the fear was worse when guns were involved, when the people I was conning were dangerous or powerful. When, for example, I was pulling a con in a building full of armed police.

I had to step carefully. If the officer gave any indication that he thought this was an unusual claim, I needed to leave. But for now, I continued to play my part. "That's wonderful!" I clasped my hands together with a relieved sigh. "But are you sure it's *my* panda?" If I got any bad signs about this, I'd simply say it wasn't mine.

"We have *someone's* panda. Could be yours. Let's see. . ."

He consulted the screen. "When did you see it last?"

"Tuesday, in the park." I gave him the long story so I could watch him more closely and sense for trouble. "I know I shouldn't take it outside like that, but I'd just broken up with my boyfriend, so my sister suggested that we celebrate." I gave him a light laugh. "She never liked him."

I was cooking now, and the officer was following attentively, so I finished the story. "Anyway, she knows how much I love my panda, so she suggested that I bring it. We had a picnic lunch and took a walk. But when I got back, it was gone!" I rubbed my eye to wipe away another tear.

The officer let his gaze linger on me for a few seconds, then he turned to his screen and read the report. “Yeah, some kid and his grandpa brought it in. The kid took it, but gramps busted him and made him bring it here. I’ll go get it.”

That was a relief. My story fit with his, and he didn’t ask any difficult questions. This meant that I’d soon have the panda and be on my way. I could relax.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t over yet, and waiting gave me more time to worry. My palms got clammy, my breath grew short, and I had to swallow an involuntary cry that bubbled up from somewhere deep. I plainly wasn’t suited to this kind of work anymore. Who ever heard of a con artist who was afraid to con?

Two minutes later, the officer came back with a big stuffed panda in his arms and set it on his desk. I waited a little longer, still gauging whether or not he knew that it was more than a toy. But all he did was mutter, “Recovered,” click his computer, and hand me a form to fill out. I exhaled slowly and let my worries fade.

Naturally, when I filled out the form, I lied. I listed my name as “Daisy McTavish” and gave a fake address in Glendale. I even had a phony driver’s license that supported this lie, if he asked for it. One of five fake licenses I’d had back in the day, all of them now expired. Yeah, I’d done some bad things when I was a kid, and I still seemed to be doing them. Just last night, while packing to come out here, I’d touched-up Daisy’s license to make it current.

But my fake identity had one sliver of truth in it. One thing that was always true. My first name does start with the letter “D.” I’m Dee Kirkland. And believe it or not, I was intentionally named Dee, a name that sounds like a single letter, so I could play con games more easily.

My foster mother, whose real name is Beatrix, thought it up when she was young, and she used it herself, shortening her name to Bea. She reasoned that if her real name sounded like a single letter, then she could choose any fake name that started with that letter when doing a con. As Bea, she could call herself Betty, Bonnie, or Barbara. Then, if she accidentally ran into someone who called her “Bea,” she could explain it as a nickname, and the mark wouldn’t suspect a thing. This wasn’t a problem when we ran into other con artists, because we had signals we could give to tell them to stay away from our game. But Bea’s naming concept gave us extra protection from our school friends and from other acquaintances who didn’t know who we were.

So when we were brought into her care, Bea changed our names to sound like single letters. As Dee, I’d done cons as Darlene, Della, and Dominique. My younger sister, Elle, could do cons as Linda, Laurie, or LuAnn. And my older brother Jay could call himself John, Jason, or Jeff. No, we weren’t your typical family.

I handed in the form and was given the huge stuffed animal. Relief washed over me when I finally got it to my car and drove off to see Bea. One more illegal act of forgery and Carl would be safe. Then I could stop this conning and go back to New York.

As I drove, I took a peek at the panda. The doll was pretty nice—I wished I’d had something like that when I was a kid. Maybe when this was over, Bea would let me keep it. If there was anything left of it, that is. You never knew with her.

## Two



The mere sight of Bea's home sent a mix of emotions through me. This was the woman I'd lived with until I was seventeen, so I felt a brief sentimental twinge. But she was also the woman who'd raised me to be a thief and a con artist—to pick pockets and locks, plan elaborate stings, and forge everything from documents to famous paintings. So I felt shame, too. She always used us for her own gain, never seeming to care about anything else, so I felt anger as well. Missing panda, indeed! I couldn't wait to see what that was about.

The small house looked like all the others on this suburban street, east of Los Angeles. Bea made sure it was as good as the rest of them, never shabby but never too fancy, either. Her intention was to make sure the house didn't stand out in any way. "Hiding in plain sight," she liked to call it. The taupe and white trim matched the house next door and three others on the block. I remember once coming back home after a con and trying to enter a neighbor's house instead. That's how forgettable our home always was.

But I didn't forget anything today. I parked and quickly walked to the house, carrying a big black plastic bag with the panda inside. Whatever it was about that thing, Bea didn't want to draw any attention to it, so she insisted that I bag it once I'd claimed it. I walked around the side of the house and grabbed the key from its hiding place. Then I went to the back door and let myself in.

Bea and I didn't part on the best of terms, so I was on delicate footing here. I'm told she was incredibly angry when I left, which is why I hid from her. But she wasn't at all angry with me when she called yesterday, so perhaps seven years had wiped that slate clean. I hoped so, anyway.

If I could return to New York without having to hide anymore, life would certainly be better. All I needed to do was make peace with Bea. I didn't expect to become friends with her—that would be pushing things. But since I was here, I could try to understand her better and get a new perspective on my childhood. Was she really always on the lookout for a scam? Did she care about anyone but herself? I wanted to know whether these images I had of her were true. How bad was it, really? Because the scared girl who ran away from this home thought it was incredibly bad.

On the positive side, Bea seemed very concerned about Uncle Carl. And she obviously knew where I was in New York, but had left me alone until now. So perhaps she *had* changed. Or perhaps she was such a good con artist that she could even con me into doing something for her. I was about to find out.

The house was just as I remembered it, and the rush of nostalgia temporarily immobilized me. After a few seconds, I made my way to the kitchen to find Bea. Seeing her sitting at the table in the exact same place and posture as all those years ago sent an even stronger burst of nostalgia through me. It felt like I'd gone back in time.

Bea looked very much the way I remembered, her pinched face long and weathered. Her short blonde hair had more streaks of gray now, and I noticed a few more lines etched around her mouth. Other than that, she looked just the same.

I was amused to see her surrounded by bags of her favorite chocolate bars. Although the candy company currently made over a dozen different varieties, she used to buy only two of them, and a quick look at the bags on the table told me that she still did. Her favorite chocolate bar, Nuts to You, was loaded with almonds and covered with dark chocolate. But when she needed a change, perhaps something sweeter, she'd reach for a Low-Hanging Fruit bar. Personally, I hated them both because they reminded me of my life with her. A life where these treasured candies were given to us only when we pulled successful cons. When we picked a pocket or tricked someone. When we came home with cash.

Bea regarded the lawn bag with a half grin, then smacked her hand on the table. "About time you got here." She jumped to her feet and headed to the stairs. "Bring that along, and let's have a look."

Yep, that's about as warm as she ever got—no hug, no kiss, no mention of how I'd changed over the past seven years. I'd have gotten more love if I spent the night at the police station.

I chuckled sadly to myself over Bea's lack of warmth. Perhaps she truly was a harsh, conniving woman. At least she didn't offer me a candy bar for having scored the panda. I'm not sure I'd have been able to control my anger over that.

I stopped her halfway up the stairs and broke the silence. "Nice to see you again, *Beatrix*." I emphasized her real name to prod her, to get some sort of a conversation going beyond her joy over the panda. When we were kids, she'd get pretty annoyed if we ever used her full name, often smacking us in the mouth. As we got older and could defend ourselves, we used it when we were feeling brave and

defiant. Right now, I was merely trying to tell her that I wasn't interested in picking up where we left off. I was here to help Uncle Carl, not her.

She turned to give me her most withering glower. "Don't you dare start with that again!"

"Whatever." I followed the rest of the way quietly. She clearly cared only for the panda, and by this point, I did, too. Forget about understanding her; just get me out of here.

The upstairs room had all the windows covered to keep out prying eyes, so she turned on the lights and closed the door. I handed her the lawn bag and she practically dove into it to retrieve the panda. With a big grin, she hugged it to her chest, squeezing it all over. "All right! Good work."

"What's the deal with this thing?"

She gave me her first real smile, and I could tell that it was more for the panda than for me. Nice to know where I stood here. She pulled out a chair and sat down, so I did the same.

"This. . ." She gestured to the panda. "Is one of my cleverest cons. I met a guy at a bar a few weeks ago, and he turned out to be a cop. Works inside the evidence room. We had a good time, and he told me all about his job. Even invited me to see his workplace. And guess what?" She paused, proudly building up to a big finish. "The lost-and-found department keeps their stuff in the evidence room!" She chuckled and gave me a wink, so very impressed with her cleverness.

"Wait a minute. I thought I was helping Uncle Carl. But now you're telling me that this is just another one of your cons."

"It is my con, but Carl is involved. I needed you to finish this up to keep things from getting any worse for him."

I was growing more and more suspicious over this. She could have asked anyone to claim the panda. Why me? I pushed away my annoyance and motioned with my hand for her to continue.

Bea nodded and let a huge grin spread across her face. "You see, nobody gets in or out of the evidence room with anything of value. Even my cop buddy and I had to be searched when we left. But I figured a way around that. Well. . ." She offered a modest grin. "I saw them do this on an episode of *Hustle*, but it's still a great idea." She stood up straight and pointed to the panda. "I carved a pouch inside it and had Carl and his grandson take it to the lost and found. Then, a few nights ago, I invited myself back to the guy's workplace. While we were sitting there in the evidence room, I slipped Ipecac into his coffee to make his gut churn. That sent him to the bathroom, which gave me a chance to wander the place and stuff the panda with juicy evidence." Her eyes sparkled as she concluded the con. "Then I had you claim it, and here it is." She waved her arms over the panda, like a magician conjuring the impossible.

Bea then proceeded to pull out a huge knife and run it up the panda's back, splitting it wide open. She held up the knife with a grin. "I've always wanted to do that." Yeah, I knew I wouldn't be able to keep that cuddly panda.

Still not finished with her carnage, she ripped the panda apart, flinging its contents across the table. I watched as sealed bags of cash tumbled onto the floor, along with two bags filled with something white. The woman was incorrigible. I reached down to retrieve the two white bags, and sure enough they were filled with powder. "Drugs? Are you serious? You never cared about that stuff."

"It's cocaine. I'm not snorting it, but you never know when shit like that will be useful. And check this out. . ."

She cut open the evidence bags and thumbed through the cash. "Looks like two hundred grand, at least." She tossed a bundle to me, probably ten thousand dollars. "That's your cut."

Furious rage swirled around in my head. She'd tricked me into playing a con game for her, and I began to doubt this had anything to do with Uncle Carl or my forging skills. At least I'd progressed to the point where I earned a cut of the take instead of a chocolate bar. That was good. But now I was back to being her con artist partner, and that was definitely bad. I had the sudden urge to slap some sense into her, which would take an awful lot of slapping.

"Is that all we are, after so many years? Partners in crime? I didn't fly across the country for a cut of this deal, and I don't happen to need any money right now." I tossed the cash back to her.

"I came to help Uncle Carl, Bea. But I figured that since I was here, we'd catch up, reconnect. Maybe even repair our old wounds. But you're acting like you don't even care." I blew out a breath. "Talk to me. What's been going on since I left? And what happened to Carl?"

Bea gave me a sheepish grin. "Nothing. He's fine."

I could feel my brow twisting into an angry knot. "He's not in jail?" I suspected I'd been dragged across the country on a lie, but I still couldn't believe it was all for this stupid panda. Something bigger was going on. "Why am I even here?"

She shrugged. "I also wanted to see you again. Reconnect, as you say. You left L.A. in an awful hurry."

"I was running away from you and from conning. So I'm certainly not here to start up again. I only did this panda swindle to help Uncle Carl."

"I understand, Dee." She gave me a sympathetic smile, but I knew all her facial expressions, so I didn't buy it. "I'm sorry about tricking you. And I *do* want to talk, just not today. I've got to get rid of this stuff and take it to my locker. Can you come by tomorrow evening? We can catch up then."

Something was definitely going on beneath the surface here. But I was willing to come back tomorrow and find out. Why not? I was already here, and Bea didn't seem too mad with me. Tomorrow we'd be able to talk and—hopefully—I'd get to know her better. Also, I had a small twinge of nostalgia for my old friends and my former haunts, so I didn't mind a day out here to wander around.

"Okay, see you tomorrow." Before leaving, I checked my watch and the contents of my purse to be sure she hadn't stolen anything. Some mother!

# Three



Since I was back in Los Angeles, I decided to drive around my old neighborhood. Could any of my friends still be there? Would they be at the same places? I went out to find the remnants of my childhood.

I got into my rented brown sedan and cruised the streets. The car was painfully ugly, but it looked like every other car out there, so it accomplished Bea's cardinal rule of not drawing attention. As I drove, I called Elle. Unlike my manipulative foster mother who I'd avoided for years, I did keep in touch with my sister, the only remaining member of my family after Jay had died. She was still a con artist, running a crew of grifters up in Oregon. Of course, Elle never told Bea we were in touch—she knew I wanted to keep my whereabouts a secret.

Elle had left town a few years after I did, but unlike my departure, hers was an amicable separation. After the splash I'd made on my way out, Bea didn't want any more trouble, so she let Elle go without a fight. They even kept in touch with occasional phone calls.

I should have called my sister last night before I left, but everything had happened so quickly that I didn't think to do it. Now I regretted that oversight. Elle knew Bea much better than I did, and I needed some of her wisdom if I expected to make it through this visit. My foster mother certainly had something brewing.

Elle picked up quickly. "Hey, sis. What's up?"

"You're not going to believe this, but I'm back in L.A. Just saw Bea."

"What! Do you have a death wish? That woman still hates you for running off. God! No wonder we called you 'Dummy' when we were kids."

"Hey, Loser. . ." I threw back her childhood nickname, just for fun. Then I let out a long breath. "Actually, you may be right. She called me last night with some lie about Uncle Carl being in trouble, so I came out today. Even did a small job for her which I thought would help him. Anyway, I'm here now, and she's not screaming at me like I thought she would. In fact, she seems happy to see me."

Bea was happy to see me? As soon as I said that, I knew it was wrong. Even Elle laughed at my preposterous statement. Bea's happiness wasn't about me, it was about the panda. The only thing that ever made her happy was a successful con job. But it never lasted because the next job was always waiting.

Elle finished her laugh with a snort. "You did a job for her? I thought you got out of the game."

"I did, but she tricked me, told me it was for Uncle Carl. Anyway, that's over. I don't have to do any more cons. Now I'm just curious to reconnect after being gone for so long."

"Look, if it's family you want, forget her. Go find your birth parents."

Not that again! Elle found her birth parents years ago, when she left Los Angeles. I had yet to even feel the yearning. The way I saw it, they abandoned me, so I didn't have to parade myself in front of them for hugs and kisses. Elle and I even had a fight over this at one point, after which the subject of my birth parents was declared off-limits. "Hey," I protested. "I thought you agreed to stop bothering me about that."

"Yeah, but you're the one who's waxing nostalgic down there in L.A. I figured maybe you're ready again."

"Not even close. I don't care about my birth parents any more than they cared about me."

"You'd be surprised. All parents care about their children. My birth parents were too young and poor to raise me, but they were delighted when I found them. Let me tell you, it was amazing—gave me new perspective on the F.M."

I chuckled at her reference to our foster mother. "Hey, I'd love to get a new perspective on the F.M. To talk to her and ask her some questions. Try to understand her. The last thing I need is *three* parents to figure out."

"That's ridiculous. I'm sure your parents are interesting. They made you. Hell, *I'd* like to meet them." She sucked in a quick breath. "You know what? I'll make you a deal. You let me find them for you, and I'll never bother you about them again. I promise I won't even ask if you contacted them. But you *have* to let me find them for you. I'll get the hacker on my crew to do it. Okay?"

Silence filled the phone line for a few seconds. She was right about the nostalgia. Even though I should be getting on a plane and leaving here, I remained in town, looking for answers. Maybe I did need to meet my birth parents—one of these days. In a rare moment, I caved. "Okay."

"Excellent!" Elle whooped. "You'll thank me for it. And please get your ass out of L.A. as fast as possible. You and Bea in the same city? That worries me."

I laughed. "Don't worry. I'm nearly done with her. I'll go over again tomorrow, then that'll be enough. By the weekend, I'll be home. I'm curious to get to know her better, and she isn't screaming or yelling at me, so that's a good start."

Elle blew out a long groan. “Girl, you’ve been conned. That woman will never make peace with you. Trust me, she wants payback. Don’t forget who Bea is.”

“I know! But she sounded so desperate when she called me that I couldn’t refuse. And now that I’m here and done with her tricks, I figure I can get to know her better. Get some closure.”

“You want closure? Go meet your birth parents. And in the meantime, please watch your ass around the F.M.” We said our goodbyes and I resolved to be careful when I went back to see Bea tomorrow. Then I got back on the road to continue the tour of my former neighborhood.



I rounded a corner and realized I was at the old pizza place. When we were teenagers, we spent many hours there. At the time, there were six of us in the crew: Bea’s three foster kids, plus Hale, Scott, and Yuki, friends from school who also did con games. The old pizza place was our hangout.

The first time we went there was after a good day playing card tricks. Back then, Bea would search us when we got back from swindling, so whatever we had on us got confiscated. But since we’d scored some money that day, and Bea didn’t know exactly how much, we could spend it before we got home, and she wouldn’t notice. We couldn’t buy things for ourselves because then she’d see the new items. But pizza worked perfectly. Soon we were meeting there all the time.

The old pizza place was a significant landmark on my tour of Los Angeles, so I parked and got out of my car. Still there and open for business, it looked smaller than I remembered it.

Years ago, we always sat at the booth in the back corner. The middle seat was the power seat because you had the best view of the table and anyone coming our way. Hale sat there because he was the oldest, although my brother Jay was only a month younger.

I always liked Hale. He and his friends were poor kids who went to school with us. We took it upon ourselves to teach them the tricks we'd learned at home, which they picked up quickly. Although they started as helpers in our cons, they soon ran their own games.

As much as my old grifting life made me sad, I still longed for the days when we would sit around and eat pizza. Those were good times, proud moments when a band of teenagers owned the world. I wondered if Hale or Scott or Yuki could still be there, if any of them would be around after so many years.

I stared at the pizza place for a while, then I walked up and down the street, taking in the area. Most of the buildings were the same, but I noticed that the gas station at the corner was boarded up. Business wasn't exactly booming.

The door to the pizza place opened, and a man stepped out who reminded me of Hale. He had the same gait that Hale used to have, but he had a more solid body, muscular and perhaps a bit taller. Could it be Hale Drummond, all grown up? If it was, then he looked pretty good.

As the man approached, I watched carefully, trying not to stare too hard. When he got closer, I could tell it was him—I saw that familiar face, aged seven years, with a hint of mature ruggedness. Good old Hale! I was amazed to see him still hanging out at the pizza place, and I wondered if he'd recognize me. I was older, too, and my hair, which used to be dyed brown and shoulder length, was now shorter,

spikier, and bleached white, falling about my head unpredictably. He was going to have something to say about that.

Hale stopped at the sidewalk and paused to talk on his phone. I wanted to run up to him and say hello, but he seemed busy, so I waited. When he hung up and turned to walk my way, I smiled and started to speak.

Then I spotted it. Something was wrong—he wasn't looking at me.

In a flash, I understood what was going on: Hale hadn't recognized me. And worse, he was about to rob me—I knew it. The way he'd paused on the street with his back to me, pretending to be on the phone, was an obvious ploy that all of us had used. And the way I'd walked aimlessly up and down the street when I first got here loudly proclaimed that I was lost and confused. An easy mark. I found it strangely amusing that after seven years of clean living, my former friends were now targeting me.

I played along, looking away as he came closer. Then, as expected, he tripped when he came near me and fell against my side. One hand went to my shoulder, ostensibly to steady himself, but in reality to distract me from his other hand, which was now in my purse. I kept my eye on the correct hand and watched him remove my wallet. Now more steady, he pushed away from my shoulder and offered a mumbled apology for his clumsiness.

"It's quite all right," I assured him. Then I clamped my hands around his wrist and brought it up behind his back. He twisted away from me, his hand still holding my wallet. "Smooth move, Hale," I whispered in his ear.

He froze for a beat when I spoke his name, then continued his struggle to get free. But I held him tight while I retrieved my wallet and dropped it back in my purse. I also

took the opportunity to relieve him of his wallet and wristwatch, just for old time's sake. Then I let him go, and he stumbled away.

Hale looked up at me, obviously trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. Was I an undercover cop or just a savvy target who'd gotten the best of him? "Sorry, lady. I meant no harm."

I laughed. "Don't you remember me, Hale?" I stood there with a smile on my face, waiting for him to figure it out.

At the sound of my voice, his mask of fear and confusion slipped away, and a huge smile spread across his face. "Dee! I didn't recognize you. God, how you've changed!" He laughed and gave me a hug. "It's really great to see you. Come on in, let's talk."

The pizza shop was nearly deserted, even though it was dinner time. Other than Hale, there was just an older couple up front. We went to our booth, and he gave *me* the honor of sitting in the power seat. I dropped into it with a flourish.

He slid in next to me. "So, what brings you home?"

"I just came to see the old gang, especially Bea. But I've stopped grifting."

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned. "Then how come you took my watch?"

I laughed and gave it back to him. "I took more than that." I gave him his wallet, too.

He shook his head with an admiring smile. "You still have the touch, Dee. You were the best pickpocket of us all, and such a good artist that everyone came to you when they needed something forged. Hell," he chuckled. "You could copy an old masterpiece, down to the brushstrokes. Too bad you're out of the game."

“So where are the others? Scott, Yuki?”

“Believe it or not, they got hitched. Moved to Reno where they claim to be doing fabulously well, ripping off out-of-town rubes.”

“And they left you all alone to pick pockets by yourself.”

“Hey, I’m much more than that. After you blew out of town, I decided to go to school. Studied business so I could learn how to rip off the fat cats. Minored in computers, too, because you can’t get far without that these days. Then, three years ago, I joined a long-con team. The short cons were getting boring—I was tired of proposition bets in bars and card tricks on the sidewalk. The long cons are much more elaborate and exciting. I’m the team’s electronics guy—spy cameras, tracking devices, network hacks.” He let a shy grin slide onto his face. “I only pick pockets when a mark begs for it, like you did, standing there on the street looking so confused.”

He suddenly got excited and pulled out his phone. “Hey, never mind the con chat. Have you seen Alejandro’s latest video?” He started to play it for me.

I’d seen that video, at least ten times already, even though it had just come out. Hale and I always kept up with Alejandro, years ago, playing his music on the jukebox at the pizza place and dancing with abandon. I was happy to see that he was still just as devoted.

Alejandro was irresistible. His muscular build made my heart pound, often long into the night. His black wavy hair framed piercing, slate-gray eyes, a dark shadow of a beard, and incredible lips with a little bow on top that I longed to kiss. And talk about talented! Where others had good and bad years, Alejandro’s career continued to top music charts all the time—he was prolific. *No Moss* magazine had dubbed him “The Lord of Rock and Roll,” and he still ruled.

Even my New York friends were huge fans. Wanda, my neighbor and business partner, bonded with me over his music as soon as we met. We went to every concert he gave, and we spent way too much time watching his videos.

Even my so-called boyfriend, Roman, had liked Alejandro at one point, although he never really loved the music, and now he claimed to hate it. In fact, Roman rarely loved anything or anyone, including me. A hipster, who worked in a coffee shop when he felt like it and refused to commit to anything, he shunned labels like “boyfriend.” But since he didn’t ask too many questions, he was perfect for a woman trying to hide from her foster mother in the thick of New York City.

I’d had other boyfriends who cared more. After I fled to New York, I dated a few others. They were decent lovers, but they kept getting serious about me, asking questions about my family and my life. I told one or two of them the truth, but that made them uncomfortable around me, as if they were afraid I’d steal their wallets. I tried the silent treatment with a few guys, refusing to talk about my past. Unfortunately, it made them feel shut out and hurt. I even tried lying to one man, making up a fictitious childhood, with aunts and uncles and cousins and such. But it was too much trouble to maintain a lie that big, with so many details. One evening, I slipped up on something, and he caught it. The lie was quickly exposed, and the relationship didn’t last much longer.

So Roman’s disinterest in my life made him perfect—he never asked me questions. And for the past five years, we made it work. He spent his time being critical of the world and suspicious of everything in it. The only things he cared about were his reefer, his unstylish hats, and his ever-

changing facial hair. Way too cool for someone as popular as Alejandro, who he accused of selling out.

But I didn't care if Alejandro was popular. His lyrics were edgy, and his rocking techno beats were wonderfully danceable. I also loved that he played guitar and sang his songs with a smooth and seductive voice. In his shows, he'd expand each song and make it into an elaborate spectacle. The stage would be filled with backup musicians and dancers, lights and videos, but Alejandro always stood out, the center of attention. Whenever he came to New York City, I found a way to see him. And when we were kids, Elle, Jay, and the rest of us would sneak into every show we could.

His latest video was one of my favorites because the music was so exotic. In the video, a shirtless Alejandro danced on the streets of Los Angeles. The song was a delight to hear, and even more of a delight to watch. Ridiculously handsome, he was one of my guilty pleasures, so I indulged myself and let the video play to the end.

Hale stared at me for a few seconds after the video was over. "You've seen this already, haven't you?"

I nodded. "Lots of times."

"Don't tell me you still have a crush on him. Seriously, Dee, you need a man."

I laughed. "Got one. But he's no Alejandro." I smirked. "What about you?"

"Nah. Nothing at the moment." Hale's eyes suddenly zeroed in on me. "So what happened to you? One day we were eating pizza, and the next day you'd left town. Heard you live in New York now."

"I had to get out. After Jay got killed, I was numb, totally whacked. I didn't want to cheat anymore, and the fear made it hard to con. So I held it together for a while, then I had to

split. Sorry I never got a chance to say goodbye, but you know how it is in this business.”

“So you *are* still in the business.”

“No. I told you. I’m straight now.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” He squinted at me for a second, then shrugged it off. “Anyway, how long are you around?”

“Not long.” I shook my head. “Bea tricked me into coming back here, so I figured it was just her way of trying to reconnect. Unfortunately, I can already tell we’re not going to be friends—hell, we never were. So I probably won’t stay much past the weekend. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad I got to see you again. Glad, too, that you’ve still got the touch.”

We talked for a few more hours, then I drove off. Thank goodness I had a friend here in Los Angeles.

## Four



I got a room in a local motel, because I didn't have anywhere else to go, and I'd rather chew broken glass than stay at Bea's place. Frankly, I just didn't trust her not to rob me in the middle of the night.

Interestingly, the motel I chose was the same one we'd used as a safe place, years ago. Bea and her fellow grifters had an arrangement with the owner to set one room aside, for emergencies. The motel was perfect because it was right in the middle of the neighborhood, walking distance from most of our homes and businesses. In Los Angeles, that was significant. Every one of us carried keys to the motel safe room back then. So it seemed like the perfect place for me to stay.

I woke up late and decided to visit another of my favorite places, the library. It brought back memories from long ago. The library was my second home, a place I could go to when I didn't want to go home or couldn't. I had my own little corner, way in the back, where I liked to read. The great thing about my corner was that it had a loose panel near the floor, which opened up to a small space under an adjoining stack. The space was dusty and dark, but safe. And when I brought in an inflatable mattress, a flashlight, and some blankets, I had a secret home away from home that was even secure against the library guards. So secure, in fact, that all of my items were still there, seven years later.

After visiting the library, I played tourist and did some things I'd never done in Los Angeles. Museums and coffee

shops and just walking down streets—I found it all nicely relaxing. Not pressed for time, I had all day to fill before I’d see Bea again.

She was in a much better mood that second evening. I brought takeout Thai food, and we ate at the dining room table like some sort of normal family. But it wasn’t until we were done with dinner and she unwrapped a Nuts to You bar that we really started to talk.

She exhaled slowly after the first bite. Chocolate truly was her drug of choice. Then she looked up at me and shook her head. “I was pretty pissed off when you ran away.”

Good, we were talking. This was what I’d hoped to accomplish yesterday. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help it. I had to get away. I was scared, and I couldn’t do cons anymore—the tension was making me a wreck. Don’t forget I saw Jay get killed. That changed everything.”

“What?” She darkened. “You never got over that? Get real! People die all the time, especially in this business. Jay was unlucky. But you survived, which proves *you’re* lucky. And it made you a better grifter.”

As if I wanted to be a better grifter. She never understood that I’d grown to hate that life. Sure, when we were young, energetic, and misinformed, we stole with glee. It had been fun back then, especially when the cons went well. But once Jay was gone, none of it was fun anymore. Our lifestyle, combined with a terrible mistake on my part, killed my brother. I never really got over it.

“I learned to be more careful, but I also learned that I wanted to get out.”

“So you robbed me? Ran off with all the money from that last con? That was pretty low—didn’t I teach you anything?”

"Oh, you mean honor among thieves?" I laughed. "I thought there wasn't any."

"Damn straight!" She grinned. "We take what we can get in this business. And you. . ." She regarded me with what seemed like pride. "You actually swindled me. I was impressed."

A compliment! From my own foster mother. She was smiling at me as if I'd just earned an entire bag of chocolate bars. Perhaps she was having a bad day yesterday, but my presence and the panda's bounty had somehow mellowed her out. In any case, this was turning out to be a pretty good visit, after all. I basked in the warmth of my foster mother's pride.

Until I felt the burn. Her smile hardened, and the shine disappeared from her eyes. "So, you're helping me with my next con." I guess this shouldn't have surprised me. My memories *were* correct: she never took any breaks between jobs. Here she was, ready to launch into the next one.

"Now look, *Beatrix*. . ." She flinched at the name, then glared harder. "I agreed to come here because I wanted to help Uncle Carl. Maybe even get to know you better. I didn't do it to help you with your panda swindle. And there's no way that I'm going to start conning again. I've got a legitimate business in New York, and I'm doing fine."

"Legitimate?" She coughed up a laugh. "You've got to be kidding. Your business is the biggest con ever. Painting cheap hunks of pottery and pretending they're art." She blew out another laugh from a twisted mouth. "I've been watching you, little girl, and it seems to me that you've become a bigger grifter than ever. So don't give me any crap about being too good to work with me. That's all about to change."

So she did know about me—I'd wondered about that. Bea wasn't easy to fool. And she didn't care at all about reconnecting with me. All that mattered was the con. Nothing had changed.

When Jay died, she told me that I had to get back in the game and prove that I could still do it. It was the only way I'd ever get over my fears. But without him around, everything was different. I did my part and gritted my teeth through the cons, but I kept my eye on a different goal: getting out.

Then, four years later, I saw my opportunity. Bea, Elle, and I did a con that netted a big pile of money. As usual, Bea was going to stash it all in her locker, but I beat her to it. I took it all and ran, sending some of it to Elle. I was done with Bea, done with my cheating life, and done with all the lies.

Flush with cash from that con, I moved to New York City and found a place in Chelsea where I hid out for months, waiting to be found. But nobody came looking, because I knew how to stay off the radar. The first thing I'd done when I got to New York was change my hair to make it short and white, a total reaction to the years spent hiding my looks to please Bea. Then I forged new documents for myself, and Dee Kirkland ceased to exist. Now I was Dee Frank, just another jobless kid on the streets of New York.

I became friends with the woman living across the hall from me: Wanda Petrillo, the hat-lady of Manhattan. Wanda had so many hats that she could have kept every New York City milliner in business.

So with Wanda and a few other friends, I made a new life for myself. We floated through the New York scene without ever looking forward or back. The present moment was all we cared about. My new family might not have been

as together as some, but we were way better than a family of con artists.

Everything was going well until Wanda discovered I could paint. We went to one of those pottery places where you do your own painting, and I decided to do something fancy. Everyone else just got drunk and slopped on the paint. But I hadn't done any art in a while, so I had some fun and really put in the effort.

Wanda went nuts over it—she wouldn't stop telling me how impressed she was. She kept it up until I finally quieted her down by giving her the pot. Then, much to my dismay, she showed it around and got people to order more of my work, offering me an embarrassing amount of money for each one. And that was the beginning of my strange ride. Wanda made me into a New York art sensation before I could stop her.

So although I'd never thought of it that way, perhaps Bea was right: I had accidentally perpetrated my biggest con yet. I had managed to convince people to like my art, and I'd become moderately popular. Did that mean I was still a con artist? I hoped not.

In any case, I wasn't about to admit that Bea had a valid point. "You're just jealous because I found a legitimate way to support myself." The idea of earning an honest living was always a big joke when I was little. None of Bea's friends thought much of the idea. So I had to force myself not to smile—she needed to know I was serious.

As expected, she laughed at my way of life. "I'm not jealous of your stupid legitimacy. I'm jealous of your grifting skills. You've got to help me. Besides, you owe me for that last con."

"How about I pay you back and call it even?"

"That's no fun! I've got a great con planned, and you're going to help me do it."

I folded my arms. "No."

"No? Are you sure?" She stood up and leaned close to me, beady eyes drilling deep. "I heard that two bags of cocaine got taken from the police evidence room recently, and someone's fingerprints are all over them. If they suddenly turned up in your car or hotel room, what do you think the police would say?" A shadow of a smile crossed her face.

Her tiny smile punched a hole straight through me. I had picked up those bags of drugs from the floor yesterday and put them on the table. I'd wondered why she threw the contents of the panda so haphazardly all over the room, and now I understood. She was tricking me into touching the bags so she could blackmail me into the game again.

Stupid me—I *had* been conned, just as Elle said. I needed to be more careful. And that started right now. I'd come here to make peace, but Bea wanted war. So war it was. I returned her little smile. "I'm listening. . ."

Bea sat back in her chair. "We're going to con Alejandro. The man collects guitars like a fiend, and he's made of money. I've got a plan to get some of it."

She had to be kidding. She wanted me to con the most famous, talented, and sexy musician ever? A man whose love songs helped conceive an entire generation? Wrong! I would never con him. Besides, even if I tried, I couldn't pull it off. I doubted I could even be in the same room with Alejandro without becoming incoherent.

I shook my head. "Oh no, no, no." Just thinking about the mega hot rocker made me weak. How would I react when faced with his long black hair and luminous gray eyes? What if he took off his shirt, like in his videos where

his chest gleams with sweat as he makes love to the camera? Oh my God, the mere mention of his name was getting me excited. There was no way I could possibly con this man.

But Bea disagreed. "Oh yes, yes, yes. You don't have any choice, my dear."

"But," I stammered. "Why me? You could play this game with anyone else! Why pick someone who's a huge fan of his music, hasn't conned anyone in years, and hates doing it?"

She drew in a long hissing breath. "Because even though you hate it, you're good at it. And you owe me. So suck it up and do what I tell you."

Damn. I should have known I'd never fully escape my former life. Now I was being forced to swindle Alejandro, no doubt a mortal sin. I knew I'd never be able to forgive myself for what I was about to do.

I took a deep breath and settled back, waiting for Bea to unveil her plan. In the meantime, my brain quietly churned at top speed, hoping to find a way out of this mess.

Bea got comfortable and started to explain. "Since Alejandro collects rare guitars, we're going to sell him one. I understand he owns over fifty already."

I groaned. "So that's where Uncle Carl fits into this." Carl and his wife, Franny, were old grifting friends of Bea's. They owned a music shop where other con artists liked to gather. When I was young, Elle, Jay, and I spent hours in the shop while Carl and Franny planned cons with Bea and all of the other grifters.

Carl spent much of his time in the music shop's back room, where he did instrument repairs and built custom guitars. Known for his beautiful work and detailed craftsmanship, the man could talk endlessly about musical instruments. He lived for his guitars, his art, and his con

games. So I knew that the con would involve selling one of Carl's fake guitars to Alejandro.

Bea grinned at me. "See? We make a good team. You already know my plan. Yes, Carl's going to make a guitar for us. And I've got our stories, too. I'm your old mother, moving to a nursing home. You're my daughter, selling my house and getting rid of all my stuff. I had an old friend who was a roadie for some famous bands, and he stashed stuff in my attic before he died. Now that I'm moving, we've discovered all sorts of rare gems up there. We can sell him dozens of fakes."

"But surely you don't think he buys guitars without checking them out. I bet he has a team of experts. What makes you think you can fool them?"

"Poor confused girl," she condescended. "Carl's the best. He can do this in his sleep."

Her plan still seemed incomplete, so I probed further. "And how do we cool out the mark?" The cool out phase was an important part of a con that would make sure the mark didn't come after us if he figured out he'd been swindled. "Alejandro has enough money to find us, you know."

Bea waved her hand dismissively. "He wouldn't even think about doing that. He's bought dozens of rare guitars over the years, and I've never seen a story about him being cheated." She squinted at me as if I'd just landed here from outer space. "Don't you get it? I'm sure Alejandro's been swindled, but he'll never admit it. That's our cool out—coming after us would be bad publicity for him. And that's why we're going for someone so famous. A less well-known person might be willing to fight back. So don't worry."

She leaned close to me and tugged on my hair. "But I'll only tell you this once. Get that wild mop of hair under control. Dye it, or cover it. We don't make spectacles of

ourselves when we're conning people—we act normally. And for this con, you have to be a conservative woman, not some fucking New York weirdo.”

I felt ill. A familiar sensation washed over me, like I'd been kicked in the stomach. Con tension started to rise up again, just from thinking about all the deception. It washed over me, leaving me fatigued and afraid. I was fifteen again, setting up a con and feeling it in my gut. I didn't want to do it then, and I certainly didn't want to be doing it now. And worse, the mark was Alejandro, which made my chance of success impossibly low.

But I was stuck, so I had to follow orders, at least for now. I nodded toward the nearly-empty bag of Low-Hanging Fruit bars. “Can I have one of those?” My body could tell I was conning again, and it traitorously wanted me to eat one of those vile snacks.

Bea smiled and tossed the last bar across the table. That never would have happened when we were kids—she would have withheld the candy until the con was over. Some things had definitely changed.

I hadn't had one of these chocolate bars in years, so I was surprised at how much I loathed it. But I'd asked for it, so I choked it down quickly, just like I used to. Back then, I was hungry. Now I just needed something in my gut besides the feeling of doom. When I finished the bar, I continued to play the child and dutifully fetched a garbage can to clean up the wrappers and empty bags.

I had reverted to Bea's little girl again, eating candy, planning scams, and cleaning up after a mother whose notions about parenting lacked many basic concepts.

# The Setup



## Five



I plunged into the deep end of the nostalgia pool by going with Bea to the music shop. This was where I had spent so much time as a kid, kicking around, listening to customers play instruments, and waiting for Bea to take us home. Now we were here again, preparing for another big con.

We passed by Aunt Franny, who was sitting up front by the register, reading a magazine. Her swept-back white hair, thin face, and bright red lips gave her a fabulously edgy look, as always. Today she wore jeans and a denim blouse that she accessorized with turquoise rings, a turquoise necklace, and big, round, turquoise glasses. The woman had a style all her own.

Next to the register was one of my favorite parts of the shop: the pick bowl. The big glass bowl held a huge collection of guitar picks, with a sign that read, "Take a pick, leave a pick." Customers could have one if they needed one, and others could contribute to the supply. Those who contributed usually had very nice-looking picks: often brightly colored and decorated with ads for some music service or another. Endlessly entertaining, I used to spend hours rummaging through the pick bowl when I was a kid.

But today I didn't have time to admire picks. Before Franny and I could have even the briefest welcome conversation, Bea whisked me down the narrow back corridor to our destination: the workshop of the old guitar forger, Uncle Carl.

Carl and Franny Geiger weren't really my uncle and aunt. They weren't even related to Bea—just fellow grifters. But I spent so much time with them when I was young that they became the best aunt and uncle anyone could have. Certainly better relatives than my so-called mother. Franny taught me the finer aspects of conning as they pertained to the human body, including self-defense, the light touch needed to pick a pocket, and how to cold-read people from their facial expressions and body language. But an even better skill was taught to me by Carl, my dear sweet uncle. In addition to being a master woodworker who repaired broken guitars and built copies of rare ones, he also taught me to paint and to forge.

Little had changed in Carl's workshop. Every wall—floor to ceiling—was still covered with guitars. Instruments were piled everywhere along with scraps of wood, metal, and other materials. The dusty old display case on the side was so covered with grime that the glass was nearly opaque. I remembered when it was cleaner, and I could still make out the jumble of strings, frets, capos, and musical detritus, piled everywhere and impossible to properly appreciate. When I was young, I spent plenty of time trying to figure out everything in that display case. Almost as much time as I spent staring at the pick bowl.

In the middle of this messy workshop, hunched over a table cluttered with guitar pieces, was Uncle Carl. With a pink shirt, dark tie, and maroon suspenders, his white hair gave him an air of authority. No wonder he dressed as Santa each year when I was a kid. All he needed was a herd of reindeer.

Carl never budged from his worktable when I was young, so it was comforting to see him still there. I started

to say something, but Bea called out first. "Carl! Look who's here."

"Hold on a minute," he barked. "Be right with you." He didn't even look up from his work.

But Bea wouldn't give him, or anyone else, a minute. She pushed her way through the clutter and made it to the table. "Oh, for God sakes," Carl muttered as he set down his screwdriver. "I said I'd only. . ."

When his eyes landed on me, he immediately halted. Slowly, he pulled off his wire-rimmed glasses and blinked a few times. "My God, it's you, Dee!"

"Hi, Uncle Carl." I ran around the table to give him a big hug. "Good to see you."

"What brought you out of hiding? Wait, let me guess. . ." He pulled away and stared at us for a few seconds. "You're helping Bea with her guitar swindle." He leaned back in his chair with the barest of smiles. "Looks like we'll get to work together. So what can I do for you ladies? You said you needed a guitar, but you didn't say anything else. Who are you selling it to?"

Bea stood straight, proud of her cleverness. "Alejandro."

Carl whistled as he slowly shook his head. "Big collector. And he's hard to fool. Uses one of the best authentication specialists."

Bea waved away his concerns. "How much and how quick?"

Carl shrugged. "That depends on what you want. Alejandro tends to favor guitars that were owned by famous rockers. They say that his manager, George Rawson, collects stolen guitars, but I don't know if I believe it. Rawson's collection's never been seen."

"Screw Rawson." Bea got right to the point. "We're targeting Alejandro. What do you recommend?"

Carl leaned back and stroked his chin. "Stevie Ray Vaughan had an old '65 Fender Stratocaster that nobody's seen since he died in the 90s. I've studied that guitar quite a bit, and I even made one a few years back, just for kicks." He got up and rummaged through a pile in the corner, finally pulling out a guitar case and setting it on the table. Inside was a dark wood electric guitar with the letters "SRV" on it, big and sparkling. "I've heard people offering six hundred grand for this particular guitar." He paused and laughed. "Well, for the real one, that is. Anyway, you should be able to get a half million for this, once you get it past his expert. Just don't let him take it away for more advanced tests, because then he'll notice the flaws."

That seemed like a problem. "How do we get him to accept the initial examination and not take it for further tests?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. Alejandro's authenticator is a smarmy son-of-a-bitch who thinks he can spot fakes instantly. He would never take it for further tests because then he'd have to admit he couldn't do the job by himself. No. . ." He shook his head. "This will fool that guy. Just give me a day to clean it up and get it ready."

Bea leaned closer. "How much do you want for it?"

Carl laughed. "You don't mess around much, Bea. No small talk about how you suddenly found your lost daughter?"

"Life's short, Carl."

He sighed. "Okay. I'll take ten percent. Fifty grand and it's yours."

Bea grunted. "I'll give you ten grand. Take it, or else."

Or else? Was Bea blackmailing Carl, too? I wouldn't put it past her.

Carl rolled his eyes and grimaced. "Fine."

Bea pulled a wad of cash from her purse. She counted out a fat handful and dropped it on the table. "Here's half." She stared at me but kept talking to Carl. "Dee will come to pick it up tomorrow, and she'll pay you the other half." My nod was both an acceptance of Bea's demand and an assurance to Carl. We had a deal.

Bea and I slipped out the back door of the music shop and returned to her house. She wanted to talk about the next step, but I needed air. I was suffocating, pulled in by the quicksand world of grifting. The game-playing, the tension, and the gut-wrenching fear of bad outcomes had me spinning out of control. I desperately needed to recover that blackmail evidence.

Back at her home, Bea seemed to be wound tighter than a rubber-band airplane. I felt the pressure of the con oozing from her, the excitement she got from tricking people. Aunt Franny called this "con energy," and she could always spot it in people. I could certainly see it in Bea—it practically radiated from her. She lectured me about my role, the backup strategies, and whatever else she could think of. This went on for hours, only stopping when my attention started to fade and I pleaded exhaustion.

One difference of opinion we had was how we would handle Alejandro. Could we admit to knowing who he was, or would we have to pretend to be mostly ignorant? I argued that ignorance would be foolish, because everybody knew Alejandro. Bea insisted that we play it cooler, allowing ourselves to be aware of him but pretending to be indifferent. She argued that if we came across as rabid fans, it would be harder for him to take us seriously. My problem was that I was already a rabid fan, so I couldn't imagine pretending otherwise.

I felt like an idiot, getting stuck in Los Angeles. Who knew how long it would take to rope-in Alejandro and con him out of his money? My brief visit was about to be greatly extended.

I left Bea's place and stumbled back to the motel, falling onto my bed in a stupor. To try to distract myself, I turned on the television—some mindless entertainment to make me forget my problems. Ironically, the first thing I saw was a puff-piece about Alejandro. The smitten female reporter talked about his latest album and rehashed news about him from the past few years. They showed him with Quinn Freeling, the Hollywood starlet who dated him briefly. Other pictures showed him at nightclubs, out on the street, or in the middle of interviews. In each, he was surrounded by beautiful smiling women, all of them staring at him with the same longing that I always felt. These women wanted his body. What kind of a fool was I to think I could take his money?

After the segment ended, I turned off the television. Then I called Wanda. I needed to talk to someone normal, someone without criminal intent. Wanda had lectured me about finishing this visit quickly and getting back to New York. She was wary of Bea, even though the two of them had never met. Unfortunately, Wanda was right—she had an intuition about these things. She was certainly more of a mother than Bea had ever been.

"Dee! How's it going?" I smiled just from hearing her voice. Typical of Wanda, she didn't give me a chance to answer and went on at double speed. "The shop is selling your pottery like gangbusters. We've sold six pieces since you've left. I ordered another palette for you yesterday. And on Sunday. . ."

Wanda loved to talk more than anyone I knew. Under normal circumstances, I'd be happy to let her go on for a while. But today, I had to deliver some bad news. "Hold on, Wanda. Things aren't going so well out here. It looks like I'll be staying for a few weeks."

She groaned. "And just what do you mean by 'a few,' my dear? You realize that you're the lynchpin of this business. At the rate things are going, we'll be completely out of stock in three weeks, so you need to get back here sooner."

"It's okay, Wanda."

"Okay? You told me when you left that you'd only be gone for a few days. But now it's a month." She grumbled. "This is Bea, right? Do I have to fly out there to fix things? Because I will. I'll give her a piece of my mind that she'll never forget."

"Whoa, Wanda. Chill. It's complicated, but I've got it under control."

I had to force myself not to laugh out loud at that statement. *I've got it under control*, indeed. I didn't have *anything* under control. But Wanda needed assurances, and this was the best I could do.

"Are you sure, Dee? We need you. Let me tell you a little something that happened this morning. . ." I settled in for what I knew would be more than a *little* something. "Some guy came in and asked if you did commissions. He's building a fancy home and wants you to make two huge urns to flank the entranceway. It would be so cool to do work on that scale, and I know you're intrigued by the idea. I mean, how amazing would it be to paint monster urns that filled your studio? They'd probably need a crane to deliver them through the skylights." She let out a short giggle, clearly taken by the thrill of it all. "Anyway, I got his card and promised you'd get back to him, but if you aren't

going to be able to do this, you have to tell me so he can make other arrangements.” She stopped and took a breath. “Tell the truth. Do you really have it under control?”

Oops, busted. I gave her an appreciative chuckle. Wanda could wear anyone down with talk; it was one of her skills. I’d even seen her make things up on the fly, spinning tall tales like a true con artist. That might be the reason we’d become such close friends—fellow tricksters.

“Yes, Wanda. It’s all under control. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Sorry, girl. At least Roman won’t be upset.”

“Roman won’t even notice you’re gone.” She shot out a brief laugh, then fell into a long, exaggerated breath. “But I do. Looks like I’m in mourning now. I’m going to have to wear a dark veil tomorrow.” Wanda liked to express herself with hats, so tomorrow’s veil would be her secret way of telling everyone that I was temporarily lost to her. She always posted her hat of the day online, and I couldn’t wait to see this one.

“Thanks, Wanda. You’re the best.” She really was. And Bea was the worst, without a doubt.

# Six



Wanda's call energized me—few could resist her upbeat attitude. So I decided to go see Hale at the pizza place. He might be able to help me track down that cocaine. I also needed to get some cash so I could pay Uncle Carl for his guitar.

As I walked through the motel parking lot to get to my car, my eyes were drawn to another vehicle, a few spaces down from mine. The first unusual thing about it was that it was parked backwards, facing out. Also, there was someone sitting in it. But the thing that really caught my eye was the fact that this person was reading a newspaper, holding it up so high that the paper filled the front and side windows of the car, blocking all view.

I walked past the car a bit more slowly and kept it in the corner of my eye. Everything about the car screamed surveillance—bad surveillance. Whoever was behind that newspaper was watching, prepared to move quickly. But this person was being too obvious—no one could fail to notice.

So imagine my surprise when I got in my car, pulled out onto the road, then saw *that car* pull out behind me. *I* was the one being followed! The driver was disguised with a hat pulled down to his eyes and big wrap-around sunglasses.

Who had hired him? The only person I could think of was Bea, but I doubted she'd hire someone so incompetent. Unless she *wanted* me to know I was being followed. That would be like her.

I also wondered if this was mere coincidence. Had I left the motel just as this person's real target was departing? I decided to experiment, making random turns as I drove. I even did a full circle of four right turns around a block. Unfortunately, the car followed me everywhere I went.

I had intended to go visit Hale, but I definitely didn't need to bring this tailer with me, so I called him up. "Hale, I need your advice. I'm on the road now, and someone's following me."

"Can you get me a license plate? I've got access to the DMV." That was easy. Mr. Bad Surveillance was keeping way too close, affording me a perfect view. A few minutes later, Hale started to laugh.

"What's so funny? Am I being tailed by a circus clown?"

"Just about. It's that idiot, Victory Vance." He laughed some more.

I groaned. Vance was Carl and Franny's son, who used to sit around playing video games at his parent's music shop. I heard from Elle that he was married now and had a kid, Roger, who was an aspiring grifter. It was Roger who, along with his grandpa Carl, had brought that panda into the lost-and-found department.

Vance had been a skinny kid, and I could see he hadn't grown much. Five years older than me, he never socialized with any of us when we were young. All he did was camp out in his corner and play games, offering a sneering frown to anyone who bothered him. We used to call him "Victory Vance" because whenever he won a game, he'd throw his arms in the air and yell, "Victory!"

Naturally, Vance did some cons too, but stories of his screw-ups were legendary. Back when I lived in L.A., Carl and Franny used to give him simple tasks: drive a car, get supplies, load gear. Occasionally, they'd let him appear in a

con when they needed someone who looked tough. Vance might have been skinny, but he knew how to scowl.

Everyone liked to tease Vance back then, but I always had a soft spot for him. Underneath that nasty exterior was a sweet kid who just wanted approval. Way, way back, when I was seven years old and Vance was twelve, we played video games together a few times. And although nobody else knew this, Vance was my first kiss. Nothing ever came of it, but I was never afraid of him after that, no matter how mean he pretended to be.

So why was Vance following me? I doubted his parents had sent him out to do it. And Bea used to complain about him all the time, refusing to work with him at all. That made me doubt she had hired him. But I couldn't deny that many things had changed in the last seven years. Maybe, now that she didn't have any foster children under her influence, she'd taken on Vance.

When I got to the bank, I waited for Vance to park his car. Then I walked over to him before he could get his newspaper shield up in place. Yep, even with the dark glasses and seven more years of age, this was Vance.

I knocked on the glass, and he gave me his usual scowl. Then he rolled down the window. "What do you want?"

"Hi, Vance. Nice to see you. I was just wondering why you're following me."

"I'm . . . not. . ." Vance sputtered his reply, but finally slumped in his seat with a big exhale. "How you doing, Dee?" He reached out a hand, and we shook.

"I'm good. Who wants me followed?"

He folded his arms. "Can't say." Yeah, probably Bea.

"That's okay." I patted his shoulder. "See you around." I got the money I needed, then I drove back to the motel. Vance followed dutifully.

I still wanted to talk to Hale so I could enlist him in the search for Bea's locker and those fingerprinted drugs. But the last thing I needed was Vance reporting all of this to her, so I had to lose him. Good thing Vance wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box.

One of the features of this motel that made it a useful hideout was that it had a back exit. The bathrooms had windows large enough to climb through, leading to a fire escape. That led to a strip mall around the corner and from there, to freedom.

Because Vance was parked outside the door to my room, I climbed out of the bathroom window, hailed a cab at the strip mall, and rented a different car. My plain, brown sedan was easy to ignore, but I needed something completely different. I needed a car that could hide me both physically and conceptually. It had to be so outlandish that nobody would suspect I was driving it. I chose a big, black SUV with tinted windows. The car screamed for attention while remaining anonymous—just what I needed. Now I could sneak around town in relative safety.

For the duration of this con, whenever I went to see Bea or someone related to the swindle, I'd drive the brown sedan. But when I was visiting Hale or someone unrelated, I'd turn on the television and sneak out the bathroom window to my SUV parked at the strip mall, returning the same way.

Safely in my SUV, I drove to the pizza place to see Hale. Since he'd been able to hack into the license plate database, I asked him to invade Bea's finances for me, too. If I could find a payment for the rental of a storage locker, I'd know where it was and could get my incriminating evidence back. Hale agreed to look.

Next, to make Bea happier about my wild, white hair, I bought some hats. They made me feel like I was channeling my inner Wanda. Now I was no longer calling attention to myself, at least not with my white hair. I also bought a few proper outfits so that when we ran the con, I'd look like an appropriately serious daughter.

Finally, I parked the SUV in the strip mall and returned to my room. When I got back, I peeked through the front curtains to check on Vance. Still there—he hadn't noticed I'd left. Good. Mission accomplished.

The next day, I went to the music shop to pick up the guitar, sneaking in the back door so I wouldn't have to deal with any of the shop's customers. Carl was proud of his work, and wished me luck.

Now we had the guitar—that was the easy part. But next came the hard part: selling this fake instrument to the most famous rocker on the planet. And doing it without trying to kiss him madly. Good luck!

# Seven



That night, Bea and I sat in an upscale restaurant, pretending to finish our dinner. She was dressed in conservative clothes, a brown wool pantsuit over a black turtleneck sweater. Demure and elderly, she even wore a gray wig so she'd look older.

I was playing the part of her daughter, which wasn't a complete lie. But today, I was a dutiful, doting daughter, looking after the welfare of her helpless mother. That was definitely a stretch.

To appear more proper, I wore a vintage black fitted suit over a sky blue scoop-neck blouse, with dark stockings and black pumps. The modest pencil skirt went below my knees. I even added a stylish blue hat, to cover my wild mop of hair.

One of Bea's rules for a con was to know the mark—to study the person ahead of time. But I didn't need to study Alejandro at all: I'd been doing that for ten years. Of course, Bea was not a fan, so she'd had to do her homework. And her research told her that George Rawson, Alejandro's manager, would be the man to approach. He arranged all of Alejandro's rare guitar purchases, and he knew quite a bit about the instruments. If Uncle Carl's rumors were true, he even had his own collection of guitars, separate from Alejandro's. Bea's sources also told her that Rawson would be dining at this restaurant today, so he'd be our point of entry. That was good—I could more easily deal with him than his famous rocker boss.

Bea faced the door, one eye on the restaurant entrance. I just picked at the remains of my meal, moving food around and occasionally taking a bite. It might have tasted like something, but I was on stage, about to do a con, so flavor was irrelevant. I just chewed and swallowed, then I continued to play with my food.

I was about to fork up another mouthful when Bea nodded at me. Rawson was in the restaurant. According to her research, he always sat at the same table. The unoccupied table next to ours. He'd be sitting there soon.

We started to focus more on our meal, and our conversation became more animated. We spoke about the good old days and those crazy aunts and uncles who mooched off of us. My fictitious mother didn't want to sell her house, but it was getting to be too much work. So she would soon be moving to a residential care facility, with easy access to a dining room and people to keep her life running smoothly.

Staying in character, I didn't even glance at Rawson as he walked past me and sat down. Instead, I kept up the charade. Bea and I had whole stories made up, which we delivered effortlessly, with smiles and sighs and soothing pats. We did a pretty good imitation of a mother and daughter who loved each other—surely the most easy-going conversation we'd ever had. Proof that I truly *was* a con artist.

Finally, Rawson placed his dinner order, which meant it was time to cast our line into the waters and try to land this big fish. Bea dropped her fork on the floor, with a loud, clattering sound. "Oh, dear me."

I got up to retrieve the utensil and managed to brush against Rawson, just in case he wasn't paying attention. I

even apologized to him for the intrusion and smiled briefly. This gave me my first real look at our mark.

George Rawson was well dressed, with a black suit and a white dress shirt casually unbuttoned at the top. Clean-shaven, but with a heavy beard shadow already present, his short dark hair was lightly graying on the sides. He seemed like a serious man, someone who wouldn't tolerate fluff. To make this work, I would need to appeal to his skeptical side.

I returned Bea's fork, and we started our routine. "You see, Mom. This is why you need to move to the new place. You'll have people there to help you. And you won't have to climb stairs anymore."

Bea sighed like the helpless older woman she was pretending to be. "Don't be silly, dear. I can still walk up a flight of stairs. Why just yesterday I was in the attic, looking over everything your Uncle Norman left behind. You could set a stage with all that stuff: lights and speakers and musical instruments. Did I ever tell you he was a roadie for some famous bands?" Neither of us turned to see whether our fish was sniffing at the bait. Besides, we were just getting started.

I let out an annoyed laugh at this tale of my stupid but non-existent uncle. Then I leaned closer to Bea. "Screw Uncle Norman. All he ever did was mooch off you for months at a time, then leave his crap in your attic and disappear." I couldn't tell whether Rawson was listening, but I didn't hear anything coming from his direction, which was a good sign.

Bea twisted her mouth. "Well, he's been dead for years, so he won't be mooching anymore. Anyway, I thought I'd take a last look at his pile. Some real pretty guitars. One of them has a note in it—says it's a gift from some famous musician. I've heard of his name. Steven. . ." She wiggled

her fingers and pretended to be concentrating. “No, *Stevie*. *Stevie Ray*. . .” She continued to struggle, then gave a shrug of surrender. “*Stevie Ray* something-or-another. I can’t remember.”

“*Stevie Ray Vaughan*?”

“That’s it. Fancy guitar.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mom. Why would someone that famous give Uncle Norman his guitar? Maybe Norman stole it—that would be more like him.” Since Rawson supposedly collected stolen guitars, I threw in this line to make sure he was listening. Then I collapsed slightly and shook my head with frustration. “Norman was a drunk who couldn’t even support himself. Anything he left in your attic is garbage, Mom. And when we sell the place, I’m getting rid of it all.”

“But I know this one is special. It even has the man’s initials on it in big sparkling letters.” Bea and I made brief eye contact when we noticed a rustling from the next table, but we kept up the act.

I leaned closer to her. “Look, I don’t want to hear. . .” But that was as far as I needed to go—the hook was set, and the fish was tugging on the line.

“Excuse me,” Rawson interrupted us, leaning closer from his table. “I couldn’t help but overhear that you found a rare guitar. I happen to collect guitars, and I might be interested in taking this one off your hands.”

I kept up the routine. “You see, Mom? Now you’ve got everyone thinking that the crap in your attic is valuable.” I turned to Rawson. “I’m sorry to bother you—I’m sure it’s nothing. My mother is always finding things that she thinks are gems. And my uncle was a complete loser, so whatever he left up there is worthless, believe me.”

Bea got excited. "No it's not. I even took a picture of it." She fumbled in her purse and pulled out her phone. "Norman told me once that he had treasure up there."

She worked her phone in a fumbly old-lady fashion while I turned to Rawson with a sympathetic smile. "Uncle Norman wouldn't have known treasure if it fell on him."

Bea continued to stretch out the moment, pretending to have difficulty with modern technology. When Rawson started to fidget, she nodded. "Aha, here it is." She held out her phone with a grin.

Rawson's eyes widened slightly, and he let out a barely audible gasp. I could tell he was trying to stay calm over this rare guitar, but he was doing a poor job of it.

I helped him hide his enthusiasm. "See, I told you. Just another piece of junk from my mother's attic. Sorry."

Rawson rose to Bea's defense. "Actually, this guitar could be more valuable than you think. I'd have to have it checked out, of course. Do you suppose I could see it?" He paused and straightened in his chair. "And by the way, my name is George Rawson. You ladies may call me George."

I shook my new friend's hand. It was nice to be on a first-name basis with the mark. "Deborah Gleason. And you may call me Deborah." I smiled, then gestured at Bea. "This is my mother, Bonnie Gleason."

Rawson pulled his chair over to our table and continued his pitch. "I'll have you know that I'm very knowledgeable about guitars. As a matter of fact. . ." He puffed out his chest and smiled proudly. "I'm the manager of the 'Lord of Rock and Roll.'" Keeping in character, we stared at him with blank faces, forcing him to explain who that was. After a few seconds, he clarified his boss's name, speaking quietly as if saying it out loud was somehow sacrilegious. "Alejandro." He reached into his wallet and handed us a card.

I took the card and shrugged, pretending to be unfamiliar with the Lord of Rock and Roll. When I handed the card to Bea, she studied it and tucked it in her purse. George beamed at my pretend mother. "Mrs. Gleason, could I convince you to let me see that guitar? I'd like to take a closer look."

"Wait a minute." I gave him the stink eye of a protective daughter. "What would this guitar be worth, if it really *was* Stevie Ray Vaughan's?"

"Oh, I don't know." He fidgeted, obviously trying to avoid showing too much interest. "A few thousand, perhaps. You certainly don't want to throw it out."

A few thousand! Classic. He was low-balling us with that figure, which he assumed would be enough to interest us, but not enough to force him to pay what it was worth. Now was the time to get serious.

"Well, if anyone's going to bring that guitar to you, it'll be me. I don't want Mom dealing with these sorts of things."

George smiled, apparently happy to be dealing with me. But he wanted to confirm this with Bea. "You don't mind?"

She flipped her hand. "Debby takes care of business for me. If you want to buy it, talk to her." Then she pointed her finger at me. "See? I told you it was worth a lot. Just don't let him cheat you."

George slapped a hand to his chest. "I promise I wouldn't do such a thing. Call me up, Deborah." He smiled and leaned closer. "Bring the guitar. I bet Alejandro will be interested in it, too. And I'm sure you'd like to meet him." He winked.

I gave him a quizzical look, still feigning ignorance of Alejandro. But on the inside, my heart was beating just a little faster at the thought of meeting the man. This con was going to be ridiculously hard to pull off.

# Eight



Alejandro's mansion sat high in the Hollywood hills, up a winding road only occasionally interrupted by the gated entrance to some other rich person's estate. I pulled up to his imposing stone pillars, and a woman's voice interrogated me at length before letting me in. After that, I approached the house slowly, taking in every detail so I'd be prepared for a quick escape. Just in case. You never know.

I rounded a curve and the house appeared before me. Low and wide, I barely noticed it at first. It blended in with its surroundings as it spread across the hillside. Modest, in a way. But as I got closer, more of it came into view, and by the time I'd pulled up to the front, I knew that there was no way this house could ever be called modest. The only difference between it and the houses I grew up in was, well, everything.

I'd been in fancy homes when I was young but always for one reason: to swindle people. When I was eight, Bea and I visited a home like this, pretending to be new neighbors. She settled me in a small room so I could watch television while she chatted with the grown-ups. But I didn't watch for long. My job was to sneak into the master bedroom so that I could swap an oversized diamond ring with an imitation that Bea had made. They never found out. In fact, a few years later, Bea showed me a picture of the woman at a gala ball, still proudly flashing her fake diamond.

Now here I was again, preparing to swindle another rich person. Only this time, it was Alejandro, someone I admired for his music and his incredible good looks. Everything about this was wrong.

Wearing a blue floral-patterned maxi dress, a khaki cloth hat and tan heeled sandals, I felt demure yet edgy, just enough for rock and roll. I quickly rang the bell while I still felt confident. The door was opened by a short, attractive woman with long dark hair. She wore a blue tailored business suit with black edging that matched her blouse. At least my choice of clothing was more-or-less correct, but my dress went almost to the floor, whereas this woman's skirt barely covered her thighs. Undoubtedly short enough to satisfy a rocker like Alejandro.

As her eyes scanned me, a small smile crept onto her face. "Ms. Gleason. Right this way. I'm Karen Summersby, Alejandro's personal assistant." I noticed that she emphasized the word "personal," and she walked with a sway to her hips, daring me to be as appealing. Either her famous boss demanded that his employees dress revealingly, or this woman routinely competed with every female who came to the house.

She led me through an expansive home that boasted open rooms, high ceilings, and picture windows that framed Los Angeles like a postcard. Along the way, I noticed a big man in black—serious black, including his suit, shirt, and tie, with some really dark sunglasses. Alejandro's bodyguard, no doubt. Arms folded tightly, he watched me from down the hallway. I forced myself not to think about what would happen if he found out who I was.

Karen opened a door and waved me into an empty room. "Alejandro is just finishing an interview and photo

shoot with *No Moss*. You can wait here. He won't be long." She quickly left the room.

*No Moss* magazine was the premier destination for everything music-related. They had been one of the first media outlets to recognize Alejandro ten years ago, before anyone else had heard of him. So it amused me that he continued to be involved with them. Yes, even someone as well-known as Alejandro still needed to feed the fame machine.

As soon as Karen stepped into the hall, George Rawson walked by. She propped her hands on her hips and gave him a distinctly unpleasant look. "Your *dealer* is here." She said it like I was selling drugs. Then she walked away, heels tapping loudly on the tile floor. Good riddance to her—I didn't like her any more than she liked me.

But George was much more friendly and came right over to chat. "Deborah, hello again." We shook hands. "I'm sorry, but the *No Moss* shoot is running late. Ivory Doe is interviewing him for a ten-year retrospective, and she does love our boy. They've been at it for hours. Anyway, why don't you come to the pool and you can wait while they wrap up. I know he'll want to see this guitar." He led the way, and I nervously followed him onto the back deck.

This was getting to be very intense. First, I was meeting Alejandro, who made me all fluttery inside, and now I was also going to meet Ivory Doe. Ivory was a famous journalist who wrote in-depth stories about the world of rock and roll. Musicians knew they'd made it when she came to interview them. In Ivory's original coverage of Alejandro, she dubbed him "The Crown Prince of Rock and Roll." But by the time his fourth album came out, his popularity had grown so much that she upgraded him to be "The Lord of Rock and

Roll,” which became his unofficial title. When Ivory Doe laid down an epithet, it stuck.

The pool looked like the set of a movie. Camera tripods, photographer’s umbrellas, and lighting reflectors were everywhere. People ran around the deck with clipboards, makeup kits, and cameras. In the middle of it all, sprawled out on a recliner wearing only a tight bathing suit, was Alejandro. Sex personified, seeing him like this made my jaw hit the floor.

I took a moment to reflect. Arguably the most famous performer in the entire world was in front of me, wearing a striped bathing suit so brief and body-hugging that it was easy to imagine the rest. But I didn’t do that, because I was a professional, here to con this man. I barely noticed that his wavy black hair had a wild and wet look that caught the sunlight just right. And I didn’t pay any attention to his incredibly handsome face, chiseled and sharp, with full lips that screamed to be kissed. I also didn’t spend any time staring at his spectacular build, and I paid no attention to his muscular arms and legs, his breathtaking torso, or the trail of hair diving suggestively below the waistband of his swim trunks. Yes, I was as calm as a fan girl could be, sitting in the front row of an Alejandro concert. At least I wasn’t screaming his name.

And just to add even more hotness to this scene, the iconic Ivory Doe was sitting in a nearby chair, chatting away. Her little black dress gave new meaning to the notion of “little,” showing off every inch of her long legs and challenging her ample bust to remain covered. I felt like I was on the set of a porn movie.

Ivory owned the action here by the pool. She directed everyone, from Alejandro to the lighting people, posing

Alejandro while consulting her notes. From her perch near the Lord of Rock and Roll, she was a blur of motion.

Alejandro, by contrast, was barely moving. He sprawled on his back with his eyes closed, seeming to be asleep. But he occasionally spoke to Ivory in response to something she said, which proved he was less inert than he appeared. I even saw him reach for his phone at one point, and after that, he took a sip from a drink on the table. But he always laid back down when he was done. The man seemed tired.

George and I watched this scene for a few minutes, then George broke in. "Ivory, are you done yet? Alejandro has an appointment now."

She ignored George and turned to Alejandro for an answer. "Are we done, baby? I've got enough for a smashing article."

Alejandro chuckled. "We're *well* done." He took another sip from his drink and sank back down into the lounge.

"Strike it!" she barked, causing everyone around her to change direction. Then she ran a hand up Alejandro's arm. "Got to run now, doll—meeting my editor for tea. But don't worry. . ." She smiled and gave him an exaggerated wink. "I'll be back at midnight." She stood up, straightened her skirt, and walked away. Behind her, wires got coiled up, umbrellas came down, and everything got hauled off.

In the wake of Ivory's departure, Alejandro remained on the lounge chair with his eyes closed. A photographer was snapping his last few shots on the way out, his camera clicking continuously as he took a final pass by the lounge. Suddenly, he swung around and took a picture of me, catching me with an embarrassed look of surprise.

This was bad. I was trying to be anonymous here, but now he had my picture. I quickly turned away, but the photographer was curious. "Who are you, honey?" He

looked at me hard, trying to figure out if I was worth another shot.

I needed to become uninteresting, so I stooped over and snorted, then I worked my jaw for a few seconds and sniffled. "I'm with the guitar shop," I snorted again. "Just delivering this to Alejandro." I nodded to the guitar, then turned away to chew on a fingernail in as unappealing a way as possible. With any luck, he'd deem both me and my picture mundane enough to ignore. The photographer frowned for a few seconds, then shrugged and walked away.

When the last of them had gone, George walked up to Alejandro and kicked his lounge. "Get up, idiot. Interview's over and your next appointment is here."

Alejandro raised a hand in the universal fuck-you signal. "Go away, dammit. I've done enough performing today." He let his hand collapse against his side, and he rolled away from us.

George kicked the lounge again, stirring Alejandro. "What the hell, George?" He rolled back to us and squinted, one hand shading his eyes.

"That guitar I told you about—the Stratocaster—it's here. Check it out. And try to act your age for once." With a shake of his head, he muttered, "Jerk."

Alejandro slowly sat up and turned to look at me. When he initially spotted me, his half-closed eyes and lethargic movements made him seem exhausted. But as soon as his eyes found me, they widened, and he sat up straighter. He stared at me for a second, his mouth open as if he was about to say something. Suddenly, he dropped his gaze over to his phone. "Hang on a sec."

He snatched the phone from the table and spoke into it. "What, Karen?" As he listened to his personal assistant, he stood up and started to pace, his eyes darting back to me

occasionally. I even caught him doing a full-body sweep, after which his gaze intensified and he stared even more. I watched him too, trying but failing to ignore his hungry leer.

Talk about hot! Alejandro's eyes were all over me, stripping me bare. I felt prickly heat run all over my body from his infrared intensity. No wonder people called him seductive. I'd worried that he'd be hard to resist, but I never imagined he'd be this provocative. Did he do this to all women? Not that I minded—I was enjoying the view myself. Who could resist that dark, sculpted face, those luscious lips, that spectacular physique?

As his hard gray eyes bored into me, I felt something strange—a disturbance, a jolt, a shift. It was like when you step off a treadmill and your whole body wants to keep moving, but the floor doesn't do that anymore, so you're forced to slow down. Whatever this sensation was, it threw me, and I stood helplessly enthralled in Alejandro's captivating eyes.

As I'd suspected, conning this stunning man would be impossible.

# Nine



Alejandro continued to talk on the phone while his eyes stayed glued to me, leaving me completely confused. It couldn't be that he lusted over every pretty woman. First of all, I wasn't that pretty. And second, he'd been laying down five minutes ago, practically comatose, while the sexy and scantily clad Ivory Doe fluttered about. Why would he ignore a woman who had promised herself, come midnight, then suddenly pay so much attention to me?

Alejandro's eyes dropped away as he continued the conversation. "Yes, I saw the samples. Wait. . ." He pulled the phone away and worked it for a while, his eyes still sneaking a look at me occasionally. "I like the blue one. Go for it." A busy man.

His pacing had taken him back to the lounge chair. He reached down to exchange his phone for his drink and upended the glass to finish it off. Finally, he stepped up to me with his arms folded and smile gone, silently staring.

Perhaps this was a test, a way to separate the drooling fans from the serious visitors. I needed to impress Alejandro, so I gave him a light smile. "You seem busy. Should I come back later?"

He shook his head with barely a smile. "No, it's fine. I remember now. You're here about Stevie Ray Vaughan's guitar. Ms. . ." He paused with his hand held out, waiting for me to fill in the rest.

"Deborah Gleason." I reached out to shake his hand, and the simple touch of his skin took my breath away. His

eyes continued to undress me while his smile now promised to do it for real. What was going on? I normally didn't tolerate men leering so obviously, but this wasn't some drunk I was talking to at a bar. This was Alejandro, a man who could have any woman he wanted, and he undoubtedly got them, too. Nothing made sense.

He let go of my hand to reach up and gently pull off my hat. My wild bleached hair must have flown out like a bunch of pickup sticks, because his eyes widened, and he smiled broadly. "Nice hair." Under his watchful gaze, I ran my fingers through it. Of course, any grooming attempts were pointless.

He chuckled at my failure to neaten up, then he reached out to try it himself. Sweeping one errant strand from my forehead, his strong yet gentle touch left my scalp tingling. I clamped my mouth shut to keep from sighing, although I think I failed. I even laced my fingers together to keep from throwing myself at this powerfully seductive man. His looks were hard to resist, but his unexpected tenderness disarmed me completely.

One thing was certain: now was a terrible time to try and swindle him. Regrettably, I had to do it. In an attempt to pretend that I was mostly ignorant of his fame, I made a lame attempt at conversation. "You must be George's employer."

Alejandro's eyes flashed, and he arched a mesmerizing eyebrow. "You don't know who I am?"

I squinted at him. "You must be Mr. Alejandro. I've heard of you."

He laughed, loud and hearty. "*Mister* Alejandro? Seriously?" He laughed a bit more, then propped his hands on his hips. "For your information, 'Alejandro' is a mononym, my first and only name. To everyone in the

world, I am simply, *Alejandro*.” He gave it his usual Spanish accent, overemphasizing the third syllable. Truthfully, I knew all about him, including his full name: Alejandro Muñoz-Perez.

But at the moment, I had to pretend that I knew very little, so I continued to make small talk. “You could simplify the name even more and call yourself Al.” Now I was being coy. It helped quash my nerves.

Alejandro gave me a throaty chuckle. “*You* can call me Al.” He hummed the Paul Simon song and danced around the pool deck for a few seconds. Then he closed the distance between us. “Tell me you don’t know my music.” Standing this close to me, I could feel heat rising from his scantily clad body.

The prim-and-proper Deborah I was pretending to be took a step back. She needed to get some distance from the burning cauldron of lust simmering in the body of this sultry rock god. Too bad I wasn’t Dee today, because she wouldn’t have to retreat from such a seductive and eye-popping man, especially one who was being this friendly. Not that I understood the reason for his friendliness.

I continued my banter. “I’ve heard of *you*, but I don’t know if I’ve heard your music.” I shrugged. “If you’re that popular, then perhaps I’d recognize some of your songs. But I prefer jazz.” I offered a shy smile. “Sorry.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “I’m not sure yet, but you may be one of the most interesting women I’ve ever met.” He waved his arm toward the chairs by the pool. “Sit.”

Excuse me? Was I hearing this right? Why was Alejandro offering me superlative praise? His undisguised desire was making me lightheaded. This must be some sort of trick he liked to pull.

George had been watching the two of us without saying a word, evidently used to this level of fervency from the renowned musician. It explained everything—Alejandro probably did this all the time. Stranger stories had been told about him. For most women, the standard response would be to dive right in. But I wasn't playing that game today, which was really a shame. It would certainly be more fun than conning him.

I sat down opposite Alejandro and George, a small table between us. George fidgeted like a kid awaiting Christmas and reached out to take the guitar from my side. He set it on the table and opened the case, staring with reverence. Then, slowly, he lifted the guitar out and blew off some dust. "Stunning." He held it out to Alejandro. "What do you think?"

Alejandro glanced at the guitar and nodded, then he grinned at me. "Yes, stunning."

Oh, please! Why wasn't he treating me like a normal person? Could it be that he did this to every woman he met? No wonder everybody loved him.

Then, I was even more surprised when he reached across the table and took my hands in his. "What would you like to drink?"

Wow, he was so intense—way too intense for me. His eyes were burning me up. It made me wonder who, exactly, was being conned here.

As much as I might have needed a glass of wine to steady my nerves, I did not need anything that would reduce me to a puddle on the deck of the pool. So I pulled my hands away from his and sat up straight. "Nothing for me, thanks."

George set the guitar back in its case. "You don't mind if we have this guitar authenticated, do you?"

I shook my head and tore my eyes away from Alejandro, relieved to be looking at George instead. Released from the gorgeous rocker's overpowering energy, I was able to focus again. I gave George a steely stare. "I'm not leaving it with you, but I'll bring it to your authenticator and wait while it's being examined." I put on my business face. "And by the way, I've done some research on this since we last spoke. Seems to me that it's worth much more than a few thousand dollars if it's real."

Alejandro curled up one corner of his mouth. "And just what do you think this guitar is worth?" He considered the guitar briefly, then returned his gaze to me.

"Well, let's see," I forced myself not to stammer. "George offered me a few thousand dollars, but I know it's worth much more. So I'll counter by asking for six hundred thousand." I let a partial smile sneak onto my face. "Your turn."

George's head snapped to attention, and he glared at me. In the ensuing silence, Alejandro just sat there, his grin even wider. After a few seconds, George grunted. "You *have* been doing your homework, haven't you? Okay, let's split the difference and say three hundred thousand. But I doubt we can go much higher."

Good. At least they were talking about real money. I got up and paced around the pool, letting the tension build. Then I fixed my gaze on Alejandro, purposely ignoring the man I was negotiating with. Another of my mother's rules for conning was to seem disinterested in the deal, never too eager. But today I didn't have to pretend. I had my eyes on something much more interesting than a fake guitar. And he seemed to agree.

I continued the bidding. "I'll drop to an even half million."

Alejandro approached me slowly, his gaze on me the whole time. His face hovered inches away from mine, and I could feel hot vodka breath teasing me. I steeled myself and stood my ground, pretending to be unintimidated. We faced off for a few seconds before he stepped back and took over the negotiation. "All right, Ms. Gleason. How about four hundred thousand?"

George quickly added, "That's the best you're going to get. We can't go a penny higher. And it will take me a week to get that much money together."

Four hundred thousand was a great price for a fake guitar, especially since I knew that the real one would go for six. Bea liked to tell us that in a con, you offer them something for nothing while actually giving them nothing for something. So giving it to him for much less than its book value meant he would think he was getting a steal. It would also make me seem less professional and less threatening. I pretended to consider his offer.

After a few more seconds, I conceded. "Well, I suppose that's acceptable. I could shop it around, but I have a lot of work to do with all the stuff in mother's house. So, fine—you have a deal. But I want cash or an online funds transfer. I'm not handing this over to you until I have the money."

Alejandro wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. Wow, did he ever feel good! Hard and muscular, I wanted to take a bite out of his ripped biceps. Instead, I struggled to maintain steady breathing while trying not to lose myself in his embrace.

Through the rush of emotions flying in my head, I heard him ask, "Don't you trust us?" Not surprisingly, when he acted so attentive toward me, a complete stranger, I trusted him less. But I couldn't deny that I *lusted* for him more.

I let a light laugh come out as I forced myself to push away from this most perfect man. “I don’t trust the media circus that hovers around you. The last thing I need is an article about me in *No Moss*.”

He let out an unamused laugh, then dropped his head. “You’re right. My life is a circus—I’m never alone. Wherever I go, a crowd follows and pictures show up on the Internet.” He shook his head, then pulled me back to his side. “Sorry, Deborah. Welcome to my life.” He flashed beautiful gray eyes at me, shattering my defenses.

I couldn’t understand what was happening. This super-famous man was practically making a pass at me, and we’d just met. The fierceness of his stare made my head spin, causing me to inhale sharply. Something was wrong here. I couldn’t imagine any world in which Alejandro wanted to be with me, and now I felt certain I was being conned. That seemed to be happening an awful lot lately.

But since con games were my specialty, I gave my face a mental slap and resolved to handle this man. Let him play me all he wanted; I’d simply play him back. “Oh, no you don’t,” I chuckled. “I’m not joining your circus. I want nothing to do with your ridiculous celebrity—you can keep it for yourself.”

He wrapped his other arm around me and pulled me into a hug. “Oh ho! A challenge.” He nodded his head. “Accepted. I want to get to know you.” He let go of me and stepped away, pointing his chin toward the guitar. “But for now, I want to know more about that guitar. Bring it back tomorrow, and we’ll authenticate it. Then, tomorrow night, come out with me.”

Wait, did I hear that right? Did Alejandro just ask me to go out on a date? He seemed to be attracted to me, which was the fantasy dream of millions of women. I couldn’t deny

that I liked where this was going, but I knew it meant trouble. It violated a cardinal rule of conning people.

Bea always told me when I was younger, "Never fall for the mark." She insisted this was a significant rule, even though when I first heard it, I couldn't imagine why. Boys were yucky back then, so there were no situations I could imagine where that rule would be relevant. As I got older, I understood better, and these days, I understood perfectly.

Never fall for the mark.

Unfortunately, I'd fallen for Alejandro years before we'd even met. So it was far too late for that particular lesson.

# Preparing For the Deal



# Ten



I was about to drive over to Alejandro's estate the next day to get the Stratocaster authenticated. But before I did that, I needed to talk to Vance, so I wandered over to his car and knocked on the window. He rolled it down with a sneer. "What?"

"Hey, Vance. I'm heading over to the mark's place now. Could you do me a favor? Since you can't come into the estate, would you please park a little farther than normal from the gate? They have cameras all over, and I don't want them to know I'm being followed."

Vance nodded with a big smile. "You're good, Dee. I like working with you."

What was his problem? "You're not working with me, Vance. You're working *against* me."

"Aw, don't be angry. We make a good team. Maybe some night we can get a drink together. Beats sitting in your room watching television, I figure."

Poor Vance. He still had a thing for me, even though the only intimacy we ever shared happened once, over fifteen years ago. After that first kiss, he started acting even more mean, which baffled me at the time. Unwilling to suffer his attitude, I got over him quickly. And Vance seemed to get over me, too, never giving me any indication to the contrary.

Suddenly, though, he liked me again. I could see how spending all day watching someone could affect a person's feelings, so I tried to let him down lightly. "Don't go falling

for me just because you're stalking me. You have to keep your emotions separate from the job." I figured he could use a little advice, even if it was the sort of advice I needed myself.

Vance laughed. "Following you around isn't making me like you, Dee. I've liked you for years. And by the way, love what you've done with your hair."

Of course. I understood men much better now than I had back then, and I realized that his mean act had merely been a way of covering his feelings. I'd thought we had a mutual dislike going on. Now it turned out he had a crush on me the entire time. How annoyingly typical. For some reason, I kept running into these damaged men, from Vance all the way to Roman.

"Sorry. Not happening, Vance. Besides, you're married now, and you've got a kid, right?"

He nodded.

"How is little Roger?"

"Smart as a whip." Vance laughed. "Sharper than his old man." Yeah, I believed that.

I drove to Alejandro's estate with Vance in tow. When I was a few blocks from the mansion, I got a call from Elle. I knew she was concerned about me, but this wasn't the best time to talk. Nevertheless, I always made time for my sister, so I pulled to the side of the road and took the call.

I started by bringing up something I'd forgotten to mention the other day. "Hey, happy birthday, sis. Big one coming up." Elle was turning twenty-one in just five days.

"Yeah, yeah." She was plainly disinterested in her new adult status. "Listen, I have big news for you on the parent front."

"Oh, no!" A nervous jolt shook me. Elle had promised to find my birth parents, and in a moment of weakness, I'd

let her. Now I was about to be confronted with their identity. A tiny part of me was curious, but the bulk of my being still didn't want to know. "You found them?"

"Yep. I could have gone through regular channels, but that would have taken months. So instead, I let the hacker on my crew handle it. She got into the adoption system and found your info. I'll send you the details. But get this! When she probed the agency, she noticed that someone else had pulled the same information a few hours earlier. Was that you?"

A tight knot welled up in my throat, and I had to swallow it down. I felt certain that Bea had done this. She already had Vance following me. Now she was gathering more dirt so that she could guarantee my obedience. More than ever, I needed to find those fingerprinted drugs.

"No," I whispered. "It wasn't me. Can you tell who made the inquiry? Could it be our dear, sweet F.M.?" A nervous laugh broke through my defenses. "She's been really controlling ever since I got here—even has Victory Vance following me. Maybe she's planning something."

"*Maybe she's planning something?* Are you nuts? She's *always* planning something. And by the way, I spoke to her yesterday. She told me that you two are in the middle of a big con."

I groaned in defeat and took a long hard breath. "Yeah, she talked me into one more con. We're close now, ready to set up a deal."

"And you think you can satisfy her by doing this?" That made me pause. I knew that doing this con would make Bea happy—cons were the only things that ever made her happy. But would this *satisfy* her? That was a different question. I'd come here to help Uncle Carl, but instead, I'd

gotten myself completely back in the game. Here I was, doing things I'd promised myself I would never do again.

I silently cursed Elle for seeing more than I did, for being wiser. She might be three years younger, but she'd spent more time with that woman, and I knew she was right. I was in trouble.

I pretended to know what I was doing and repeated the story I'd been telling myself for days. "Don't worry. This should go down fine, and then I'll return to New York."

"Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Bea thinks you're back on her crew for good. She told me that the two of you are starting up again, and that after this con, she's got lots more planned."

I felt a weight descend on me, and I sank down in my seat. I had assumed that Bea would only blackmail me once, but now I realized that was foolish. Unless I got that cocaine back, I would never be free of her.

"Damn. Thanks for the warning."

Elle growled. "Dee, do I have to come down there and help you?"

"I can manage. Besides, aren't you busy with your Robin Hood gang?"

Elle laughed at my reference. She had a crew of con artists who considered themselves to be ethical. They only attacked people who had too much money and abused their power. Dubbing themselves "The Adjusters," Elle's gang swindled rich crooks, teaching them lessons and redistributing wealth to their innocent victims. Elle was the mastermind of the crew but also their cat burglar. Always a good runner and gymnast, she could sneak in or out of any place without being seen.

The Adjusters got their start a few years back, when Elle went looking for her birth parents. She found them in

Oregon, barely holding on to their home because of a predatory lender who had tricked them into an expensive refinance. Elle assembled a crew and pulled a long con that took the finance company for millions of dollars. Then, she gave most of it to the people they had cheated.

After that, the crew was hooked. They soon built a reputation among disadvantaged people as a gang that could right the wrongs of the world. I was simultaneously proud of her and worried. One day, Elle was going to take a big fall. But right now, she was having a blast, still running strong. She often sent me encrypted messages detailing their scams.

“Robin Hood, huh? I like that. And from the sounds of it, someone needs to swoop down and save your poor ass. I’m coming there—don’t try to stop me. Besides, I owe you big time for all the things you did for me when we were kids.”

She was right about that: I had been watching over her all those years ago. When I was fifteen and she was twelve, she messed up a job we were pulling. It was a real-estate scam, where Uncle Carl pretended to be a crooked government employee who could manipulate deeds. He promised each mark that for a mere hundred thousand dollars, property worth millions could be theirs. We even had a convincer to make the mark happy: Bea. Using a classic “In-and-In” scheme, where you convince the mark to go in by having someone else also go in, Bea pretended to be another investor who would also contribute a hundred grand.

But Uncle Carl, known to the mark as the crooked government employee who was selling cheap property, didn’t want to deal with a bunch of investors. He insisted that only one person bring the money for all of them. Bea

then gave a big speech about how honest the mark was and how much she trusted him. To prove her trust, she offered to hand over her hundred thousand dollars and let him be the one to buy the deeds. She had brought her money in a special case that locked to her wrist, so she insisted that the mark use it, for added security. The trick was that the case also had a trap door on the side that would let us remove the money without him knowing.

They met in a secluded nook of a hotel bar where Bea handed over her hundred grand. Right after they combined their money and sent the mark off to see Carl, the rest of us were supposed to take it back. Hale and I would create a distraction, a loud and disruptive argument, during which Elle would sneak up to open the trap door and remove the cash. Hale and I did our part, getting into a huge fight in the hotel lobby. We crashed into everything and everyone, surrounding the mark with a noisy ruckus. He stood there and watched us, exactly as planned.

But sadly, Elle wasn't there at the moment. She'd gotten distracted, texting with her friends, and she missed her opportunity. By the time she was ready, the mark had left the building, tired of our squabbling. And Uncle Carl wasn't actually going to meet with the man—we were supposed to have the money by that point. In the end, we had to let the mark walk away with his money and ours. We were screwed.

This was a serious offense. Bea had expected to get her money back along with the mark's contribution. But now it was all gone. Elle would be in for a beating like we'd never seen. We got walloped when little things went wrong, so the loss of this much money was sure to elicit harsh punishment. Bea once locked Jay in the basement for a week because he lost a thousand dollars, which was nothing

compared to the hundred grand Elle had just blown. I needed to help her.

Jay had died two years before, and I was already planning my escape. I'd been skimming from jobs by that point, which was easy because I was often the "inside man" for our cons. That meant I was the one who negotiated prices with the mark. When we agreed on an amount, I would tell Bea it was for less and keep the difference. The trick was to stash the extra money somewhere before I got home, so Bea wouldn't find it. My secret nook in the library was perfect for that.

After two years, I'd squirreled away a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I didn't want to have to start all over again, but my money could well save Elle's life. I had to give it to her.

I stuffed my hundred and fifty grand into a paper bag, then padded some of the bundles with blank paper so it would appear that there was a full two hundred in there. When we brought it to Bea, she found the padding but convinced herself that the mark had done it behind her back. Then, since she still made fifty grand from the deal, she was content, and we all got our candy bars. Without a doubt, the most expensive chocolate I'd ever eaten.

After that incident, Elle shaped up and started to pay more attention to each con. She knew how much that money meant to me, and she promised it would never happen again. In fact, from that point on, she became an active participant in every con and even started to help Bea with the planning. She had blossomed into a full-fledged grifter.

So I suppose I'm the one responsible for turning her into the mastermind of The Adjusters. Her work as the head of that team demanded exacting focus, from planning their

elaborate stings to keeping her entire crew in motion. Elle had become quite the professional.

And now I had the mastermind of The Adjusters coming down to Los Angeles to help me out. This could be very helpful. I'd be happy to run my plans by her to see if I'd missed anything. In the meantime, I had something important that she could help me with: find those fingerprinted drugs. I intended to get them back, one way or another. Bea did not get to use those drugs against me for the rest of my life.

"Say, would you happen to know where Bea's storage locker is? I'd like to make a withdrawal." Hale had hacked into a number of Bea's accounts, but he hadn't found any payments to a storage locker yet. It wouldn't hurt to try other options.

Elle was no help. "Beats me. She never trusted anyone with that information. But if you do find it, let me know and I'll help you clean it out." My sister may have stayed in touch with the nefarious F.M., but I was glad to see she had no loyalty to her.

"You've got a deal. And thanks for coming down. I may just need your help."

"You *definitely* need my help."

## Eleven



I quickly got to Alejandro's place. Carl had assured us that the fake guitar would pass their authentication tests, but I still worried. At least if it failed, I could plead ignorance. After all, my mother had found the instrument in her attic and had no idea where it came from. Still, this was one of those moments that I hated about conning.

I buzzed at the gate, and Karen let me in. Thankfully, Vance had driven past the gate and parked out of range of the cameras. At the mansion, I gripped the fake Stratocaster a little too tightly as I stepped up to the front door. Today I wore a dark gray V-neck sweater over a knee-length pleated black skirt. I didn't need to cover my hair anymore: Alejandro had seen it yesterday, so he knew exactly what he was getting.

Karen answered the door in a little black dress with long sleeves, a high neck, and a very short skirt. Her heels looked uncomfortably high, too. With a brusque, "Come on in," she led the way.

My curiosity got the best of me, and I stopped her. "Does Alejandro make you dress like that?" The way he'd leered at me yesterday made it seem that the horny musician chased every woman he could find.

Karen turned to face me with a look of shock. "Don't be ridiculous. There are no dress codes here. But I know he enjoys looking at me—we hooked-up once, you know. And since I'm his personal assistant, I like to look the part."

This introduced a whole new possibility into her story. She wasn't being forced to dress this way by her employer, and she wasn't competing with everyone who came to visit. Instead, she was doing it all for Alejandro, vying for his attention and hoping to win him back. "Did you hook-up before or after you became his personal assistant?"

She sniffed, obviously annoyed by my question. "I've been his assistant for the past three years, but we got together nine years ago, when he first became famous. Didn't last long, but none of the others do, either." She eyed me carefully. "You wouldn't last two days."

I couldn't stop a laugh from bursting out. "You're right. I have no intention of lasting for even one day." I cocked my head. "Do you think that every woman who comes here wants to seduce him?"

She propped her hands on her hips. "I don't *think* it. I *know* it. In all the time I've been his assistant, I have never met a woman who didn't want to have sex with him." She squinted at me. "You do, too, so stop lying about it."

"Hey, I won't deny that he's gorgeous. But I'm just here to sell this guitar, then I'm gone." She stared at me for a second, then gave me a derisive snort and walked on.

When we gathered in Alejandro's living room, I was slightly disappointed to see that he was more fully dressed in jeans and a white Fiery Boys T-shirt. Truthfully, I'm a sucker for hot rockers, so the Fiery Boys were also on my short list of favorite bands. Their lead singer, Chuck, was nearly as absurdly good-looking as Alejandro. I heard that their recent tours had intersected in Seattle, and the bands dropped in on each other's shows. I would have liked to have seen that!

But today, I had to pretend that I didn't care about the Fiery Boys or Alejandro. I might not get distracted by his

scantily clad body, but his handsome face and piercing gray eyes were trouble enough. He didn't make it any easier on me when he gave me a huge smile and a big hug. That smile alone could melt steel, and when he hugged me, I felt all the air rush from my lungs. What was going on between the two of us? At least he pulled away after the hug, which gave me a moment to regroup and pretend I wasn't left buzzing from the contact.

George was there, as was the guitar authenticator, a man named Oscar Peters. Peters gave me his card, then he went to work on the fake Stratocaster. All business, he barely said a word before starting. Instead, he saved his breath for the exam, which he narrated in great detail. He measured and photographed every part of the guitar, examined the lacquer carefully, applied chemical tests, and shined black light everywhere. He spent nearly an hour, testing the guitar and explaining each test. An oppressive hour that felt like ten.

Karen left after a few minutes, but George watched the entire process with fascination. Alejandro seemed less interested. He checked his phone, gazed out the window, and even worked on a song, humming and writing down notes on a pad of paper.

I tried to act cool during the examination, but inside, I was as nervous as I'd ever been. This was another one of those con moments when things could go bad. I'd even parked my car close by so I could make a run for it, if necessary. In fact, moments like this were the reason I got out of the con game—the tension was so severe that I could barely hold myself together.

Finally, Peters smiled and pronounced the guitar authentic. Before I could censor myself, I cried out, "Really?" which elicited a laugh from everyone else. I

covered my gaffe by enthusing about how amazing it was to have found something this valuable among my mother's old junk. But in truth, I was surprised that Carl could make such a high-quality fake. I had new respect for my uncle.

George continued to focus on the guitar. He reminded me that they still needed six more days to arrange the funds. Payment would be in cash, because he preferred to make these deals with as little oversight as possible.

George asked that we do the exchange at his home in Bel Air. He gave me another card and wrote his home address on the back. The man was clearly relishing the moment, happy to be doing this deal.

I was also happy. The con was on and would be over in less than a week. I wouldn't have to deal with Alejandro anymore, which would make this so much easier. And Bea would be delighted with cash—she hated electronic funds transfers. An attaché case full of cash always caused a celebration when I was young. If I could find that blackmail evidence, I could even leave town safely.

I packed up the guitar and headed to the door. The sooner I got out of there, the better. Alejandro was also happy but for a different reason. "You're coming out with me tonight, Deborah."

Oh, right. I'd forgotten that he'd said that yesterday. Well, maybe I hadn't forgotten, but I'd tried to put it out of my mind because it didn't make any sense. I assumed that he'd forget all about it. But he hadn't.

It seemed like a thoroughly bad idea, so I tried to beg off. "Oh, come on. I know you were just teasing me yesterday. I've done some checking on you, and you're always with beautiful models and sexy movie stars, not someone like me. Wouldn't you prefer to be with your real fans?"

"My real fans bore me. You can help me forget them." He stepped closer to me and held my face with both hands, caressing my cheeks and sweeping strands of hair away from my forehead. "I'd rather spend time with you."

Whoa, he needed to stop this now! Even his gentle touch was exciting me. And the intensity of his eyes as they roamed over my face made it impossible for me to think straight. "No, I can't." I pulled away, just in time, avoiding his gaze. Any longer, and I would have thrown him to the floor and kissed him madly.

Alejandro shook his head with a smile. "Sure you can. Give me your phone." Unable to resist his request, I handed over my phone and watched as he programmed his number into it. "There. Now you have something valuable: my personal phone number. You *have* to go out with me." He grinned. "Give me your address, and I'll pick you up at seven. Perhaps you can give me a tour of your mother's attic. I bet your uncle left other valuable items there, too."

Bea and I had been worried about this. We wondered if they would want to see the secret attic where the guitar had been found. She had even prepared for this—a friend of hers lived in an old house that would be perfect. But it would be difficult to arrange an attic full of old musical instruments on such short notice, so I tried to deflect him.

"I'm not staying with my mother. Her place is a mess with all the packing up, so I got a motel room. Tell me where we're going, and I'll meet you there."

"No. It's a surprise. Tell me where you're staying."

Damn. Nothing stopped this man. I could have him meet me at the strip mall, but then I'd have to sneak out of the bathroom window all dressed up for a date. I decided that since I was already spending time with Alejandro, perhaps it would be okay to walk out my front door and let

Vance see us. I could always excuse the dalliance as a necessary coddling of the mark. Before I could find another reason not to do it, I gave him the address of my motel.

Alejandro wrinkled his nose. "I know that area. I used to live around there when I was little. Not the nicest neighborhood."

"Hey, it's cheap." I shrugged. "What should I wear?"

"This is a formal event tonight. I'll be wearing a tuxedo."

Alejandro in a tuxedo? My head grew light from the thought. I'd seen pictures of him at award ceremonies in tailored formal wear that hugged his body so well it made gossip columnists pant. If he showed up looking that glamorous, I'd probably self-destruct.

But the real problem with going out on a date with Alejandro was the paparazzi. I worried about too much exposure. Some people might recognize me as New York artist Dee Frank. I was building a reputation for my pottery, and although I tried to keep my picture out of the media, there were occasional photos of me on the web. But even worse, others might remember the young girl who had swindled them years ago. In either case, any recognition would spoil it all.

I swallowed and asked meekly, "Formal? Will there be many other people around?"

He grinned with a light laugh. "Wherever I go, there are always other people around. But tonight I want to keep you to myself, so I promise not to let you out of my sight." He pulled me into a hug.

Oh my God, he felt so good. And he smelled spicy, like hot, buttered sex. I wanted to lick it off his chest, inch by inch, then nibble on his kissable lips. No woman could ever get enough of this incredible man. How could I survive a date with him?

I started to say something, but he cut me off. "Please say yes. I'd love to spend more time with you."

"Oh, God, you're making this so hard."

"No, I'm not. It's not hard at all. Just say, 'Yes, I'll go out with you.' Easy!"

I laughed. "What was that first word, again?"

He wrapped me in his arms and brought his lips up to mine. "Yes," he reminded me, his lips hovering so close.

I looked up at this beautiful man and knew I was helpless to resist him. "Yes," I conceded.

Alejandro smiled broadly, then pulled away. "Good. I'll see you tonight."

Numb, I turned to leave. Now that I had accepted a date with Alejandro, things were officially messed up. I needed to get out of there before I did something even more stupid.

As I approached the front hall, Karen came up to me, all smiles. "Your guitar is real! I didn't think it would be. So many of them are fake, you know." She gave me a playful elbow in the ribs.

To my surprise, Karen was suddenly much more friendly. Maybe now she believed that I wasn't trying to bed her boss. Too bad I no longer believed that.

## Twelve



I groaned inwardly when I saw a limousine pull up to the motel office. The driver, a burly man dressed in black, was familiar. I'd noticed him at Alejandro's place, lurking in corners. He spotted me as soon as he came inside. "Zere you are, Ms. Gleason. I am Udo." He spoke with a German accent. "Follow me, please." He led me out and opened the limousine's back door.

Alejandro was sitting on the far side of the big bench seat in a tuxedo that fit him so well, I wondered if it had been painted on. He was tan and fit and mind-numbingly beautiful in his sharp clothes. I glanced at my strapless gray and white floral print dress with a flowing, layered skirt. I had bought it this afternoon, after agonizing for hours. It looked formal, but next to this hottie in a tuxedo, I felt inadequate.

Alejandro leaned away from me, against the opposite door. From across the car, he regarded me with an appraising smile. I sat on the other side of the bench, mimicking his posture and leaning against my door. Safe on the far side of the limousine, I returned his smile.

"Deborah, you look great." Yeah, right. Such a line. And the way he said it seemed to lack conviction. But then again, he lived in a world of artificial praise, so perhaps this was just his way of talking. Besides, I looked okay, but that was all.

I gave him a bashful smile. "You're the one who's dressed to kill." If anyone looked great, it was Alejandro. He always did, especially now.

"Good, because you're the one I was hoping to impress tonight." In a snap, he closed the distance between us. Before I knew it, he had scooted over next to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close. His solid body and powerful embrace made me shiver and left me momentarily disoriented. He even had that spicy outdoor scent I'd noticed before—too damn good. Why was this incredible man coming on to me so strongly?

"Alejandro, I . . ." Before I could say another word, he cut me off with a kiss, hard and greedy. No! Yes! My mind fought a losing battle against this onslaught. It was as if he had leapt from a video and landed next to me, dreamy and unreal.

How could this be? Alejandro was kissing me! I'd only imagined doing this for a decade. Now, the world-famous heartthrob was coming on to me in the back of his private limousine. There were no words for this. There were no thoughts, either. My brain fogged over as I lost all rational control. So I did the only thing left to do. I wrapped my arms around him, pulled him closer, and deepened the kiss.

And wow, did he ever feel good. His body was superbly hard and muscular, enveloping me in heated need. His mouth was soft, yet firm as his warm lips crushed onto mine. My tongue met his halfway in a gentle dance of exploration, playing like lost lovers starved for affection. I felt myself start to fall apart.

This couldn't possibly be happening. It certainly wasn't supposed to, anyway. I was trying to swindle this man, not seduce him. Besides, he notoriously threw himself at hundreds of women, so perhaps this kiss was nothing

special to him. But for me, it was pure fantasy gold. A dream I'd be able to replay for the rest of my life.

In the meantime, though, we had to stop. As soon as I could gather my wits, I'd end this. Any time now—perhaps after this kiss. Not that either of us was showing any sign of stopping.

After a dazzlingly long time in his arms, I opened my eyes and looked around, mentally applying the brakes. Then I pushed him away.

He resisted at first, then loosened his grip and let me go. "Too much?" He squinted one eye.

"No, it was good." I paused to take a breath. "But I can't do this. Sorry."

"It was *good*?" He grinned. "You can do better than that—I thought it was great. What are you hiding? Do you have a boyfriend?"

A boyfriend! That was a laugh. If Roman saw me kissing Alejandro, he probably wouldn't care at all. That's how much of a boyfriend he was. Pathetic hipster.

"I do have a boyfriend, but I don't think either of us feels very strongly about it. That's not why I stopped. And you're right—that kiss was much more than good." I held a hand to my chest and took a long breath to show him just how good it was. "But I'm trying to sell you a guitar, so I don't think this is the right thing to do."

He stared deeply for a few seconds, then relaxed into the limousine seat. "Okay, I understand. Perhaps when this business of ours is finished?"

"Maybe. I can't think about that right now." I fanned my face with my hand but failed to get any relief from the searing heat that still enveloped my body. "This is all so strange for me. Please don't be mad."

Alejandro shook his head and offered me a light smile. "I'm not even the slightest bit mad. I apologize for being too forward, but I just couldn't resist." He slid away from me on the seat while both of us straightened our clothes and hair, pretending that we hadn't just kissed madly. It was easy. All I had to do was convince myself was that I wasn't alone with one of the most famous, talented, and sexy men alive. How hard could that be?

After neatening himself up, Alejandro turned to face me. "So, Deborah, tell me about yourself. What do you do?"

And just like that, he was back to being civilized, and I was back in the con. I allowed the truth to make its way into my answer, even though I should have lied. "I'm a painter, living in New York City right now. I manage to sell enough of my art to pay the bills."

Alejandro nodded at me and let a tiny grin creep onto his face. "You won't have to worry about bills after I buy that guitar."

"You'd think that, wouldn't you? But Mom will keep the money—it's her guitar."

His eyes flared, and his mouth twisted into a frown. "You won't get any of it? Why not tell her that it sold for three hundred? Then you can pocket the extra hundred thousand."

"Do you think I'm a thief?" This conversation was verging into dangerous territory.

Alejandro burst into laughter, slapping his knee. After a few seconds, he got himself under control. "Sorry about that. It's just that everyone's a thief. Look at me—millions of poor kids love me so much that they pay money they can't afford for my music. It makes me feel like a swindler, a con artist." I struggled to control my breathing at his choice of words. Good thing he didn't stop to dwell on it. "And your

mother is getting way too much money for a simple guitar. Hell, even George takes my money.”

Now it was my turn to laugh but not nearly as hard. “Maybe you pay him too much.”

He quickly sobered up, no longer amused. Then he checked to make sure the glass separating us from the driver’s compartment was all the way up. Secure from eavesdropping, he took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “When I say that he takes my money, I’m not talking about what I pay him. George embezzles from me. I’ve known about it for a few months now, but apparently he’s been doing it for years.” He grumbled his displeasure.

I was shocked. “That’s terrible. What are you going to do?”

“Not sure, but I’ll figure something out.”

“Why don’t you fire him?”

“Can’t. He has too much power, and he’s ruthless. With access to all of my finances, he could ruin me before I could get control back.”

“Well that sucks. How did he get so much power?”

“George has been my manager since before I got famous. He promised me greatness back then, which he delivered. But he also insisted on complete control. It seemed like a good deal at the time, but in retrospect, he cheated me.”

I felt bad for Alejandro, and I wished I was conning George instead. Elle’s team would love to take that guy down. But I had a job to do, so I tried to focus.

“Should I worry about George when I sell my mother’s guitar to him? Will he cheat me?”

“No, he won’t cheat you if you do an honest deal. But if you ever tell anyone you sold a guitar to me, he’ll come after

you, and I promise it won't be pleasant. He hates it when people use my name to their advantage."

"How can that be? You're famous—people must use your name all the time."

"They do, but not without permission. Let me give you an example of George's handiwork." He shook his head with a downturned mouth. "Last year, George noticed a beauty salon that had my picture in their window. The photo was a popular one that showed me with Talia Dare." He looked at me to see if I'd respond to his name-dropping. I kept a straight face, so he explained. "She's a famous rocker."

"I know who Talia Dare is."

He widened his eyes. "You've heard of Talia Dare, but not me?"

That made me laugh. "I never said I hadn't heard of you. Just that I didn't know your music. I'm not sure I could recognize a Talia Dare song, either." Another lie—I had nearly all of her music.

"Right." He grinned. "Anyway, that photo made the rounds back when the two of us were on tour together. So it had been published everywhere. But the beauty salon had edited the photo. They'd removed Talia's face and replaced it with some other woman. That bothered George."

"He went in there and asked about the picture. They told him it was part of a 'digital makeover' system where customers could see how they'd look with various hairstyles, in this case, Talia's. And the picture was perfect because women love to imagine themselves with me." He winked and grinned, then his face fell. "Well, some do, anyway."

I flushed lightly, embarrassed to be one of the few women alive who didn't claim to want his body. "So I'm

guessing he sent them a cease-and-desist letter to force them to stop using your picture.”

“Yeah, *right*.” Alejandro shook his head. “That would have been the proper thing to do. But not George. He came at them with both guns blazing.”

I frowned. “What did he do?”

“He hired thugs to go in and intimidate the owner. They started by ripping up all of the posters, including the pictures of me, Talia, the Fiery Boys, and a few others. Then they trashed the shop and actually roughed up the owner.”

“George beats people up for something so minor?” Perhaps I shouldn’t be worried about Alejandro’s bodyguard. It was George I needed to avoid. Would he send thugs to attack me after this deal? Now I really wanted to get out of town.

Alejandro’s face fell as he sighed. “George does whatever it takes. He’s brutal. And after everyone heard that thugs busted up a beauty salon and beat up the owner, nobody wanted to go there anymore. It basically drove them out of business.”

“What an ass! I can see why you don’t want to mess with that guy.” *I* didn’t want to mess with George, either. This con might be much more difficult than I expected.

Suddenly, the intercom beeped next to Alejandro, and he picked up the handset. “What, Udo? . . . Really?” He squinted at me. “Udo says that someone’s been following the limousine since we picked you up.”

Stupid me! This date was a huge mistake. First I was fraternizing with the mark, and now I had to explain to him why Vance was following us.

I looked out the back window to be sure, then I grabbed the handset so I could talk to Udo. “Is it that skinny guy in the dark gray sedan?” Udo confirmed my suspicions, so I

spoke to both him and Alejandro. "It's my cousin, Vance. He gets a little overprotective of me sometimes. Sorry about him, but he's harmless."

Alejandro chuckled and hung up the intercom. "I hope he doesn't make a scene. I'd hate to have to sic Udo on him."

The limousine slowed down as it approached a huge building. I saw a large crowd of formally dressed people milling around. Too many, in my opinion. "Where are we?"

"It's a party being thrown by *No Moss*, the magazine that interviewed me yesterday. Lots of rich and famous people here tonight. You'll love it. Plus, you get to be my date." He grinned. "Make your friends jealous."

A streak of panic shot through me. He'd promised that he would keep me to himself tonight, but I should have known that could never happen. It was one thing to be with the incredible Alejandro but another thing entirely to be at a venue so full of famous people and no doubt plenty of paparazzi, too. They'd say, "Oh, are you dating Alejandro?" And I'd struggle to avoid saying, "No, I'm just stealing his money."

Sooner or later, someone was going to recognize me, for my pottery or for my youthful exploits. I had to get out.

"I'm sorry, Alejandro. I can't do this."

"Of course you can. It'll be fun. The *No Moss* people will love you. Wouldn't you like to be seen with me in their gossip pages?"

That was the last thing I wanted, and he needed to understand that. "Absolutely not. And keep me away from their skanky reporter."

Alejandro threw his head back and howled his laughter. "You think Ivory's a skank? Yeah, she does like to flaunt it, but believe me, underneath the skank skin is a hard-edged woman." He leaned closer and whispered. "You want to

know what I think? I think you're better looking than she is."

"Okay, now I *know* you're lying. Besides, I heard her say that she'd be back last night. Don't tell me you two played Scrabble."

Alejandro hitched one side of his mouth into a smile. "Good! You're jealous. That means you want me." He leaned over and stole a kiss. "Ivory means nothing to me. Come to the party, and I'll prove it to you."

The door opened, and he stepped out to camera flashes and cheering fans. He held out his hand to escort me, but I shrank back in the limousine. No way was I stepping out at this party holding hands with Alejandro. In addition to being seen by everyone here, pictures of the two of us would flood the media. I'd be yet another woman spotted on the arm of the rocking hottie. Now I understood why there were so many. But right now, in the middle of a con, I couldn't do this.

I looked around in a panic. After a few seconds, Alejandro's hand disappeared, and Udo ducked his head inside to escort me out. "Zey are vaiting for you, Ms. Gleason." I stared at the big man.

"Sorry, Udo. I'll get this back to you." I grabbed his hat, shoved it far down on my head, then escaped through the door on the other side. Some people tried to talk to me and take my picture, but I covered myself and quickly disappeared into the crowd. A few blocks over, on a quiet street, I found a cab and made my escape.

# **Five Days Until the Deal**



# Thirteen



I woke up the next morning feeling slightly numb. It couldn't be a hangover because I hadn't been drinking, so it must have been the fact that Alejandro had kissed me. Had that really happened? My memories of the limousine ride felt like a dream, something that couldn't have been real. But it *was* real, and my lips still burned from the heat of that kiss. Too bad I also remembered that Bea was forcing me to swindle this man. No wonder I felt numb.

I stumbled to the bathroom while I contemplated my bizarre life. The most desirable man I could think of wanted me, for no reason I could figure, and I had to push him away because I was being forced to cheat him. Reality had taken a vacation, leaving me neck-deep in surreal stew, and no amount of water splashed on my face was going to make things normal again.

So I called the most real person I knew: Wanda. She represented everything normal about my life. Only she could give me what I needed.

The blast of her voice warmed me like a hot shower. "Dee, love! Good to hear you're still with us. You're not going to believe this, babe, but you've become the hottest thing in New York City! Your pottery is *flying* off the shelves. Everyone, I mean *everyone* wants a piece of you. And that includes me, honey. You've got to come home."

"Oh, Wanda. It's good to hear your voice."

She paused. "What's wrong?"

“What’s right? I’m spiraling out of control here.” I stopped to take a breath. “Bea’s got me doing things I shouldn’t be doing. I just need you to tell me that it’s all gonna be okay.”

“I can do that.” She cleared her throat and spoke with authority. “It’ll. Be. Okay.” Then, back to being Wanda, she added, “Do you need me to say it three times?”

I smiled. “No, that did the trick. So what else is happening?”

Her answer surprised me. “We’ve had two unusual visitors at the shop. One good and one bad. The good is a *New York Times* reporter who came by looking for you. I told her all about the shop, but now she wants to meet you even more. Could be big.”

This was a good visit? Wanda understood that I liked my anonymity, even though I’d never told her I was in hiding. But she still courted fame for me, somehow managing to ignore the disconnect between these two things. I might not be hiding from Bea anymore, but I still couldn’t handle notoriety, especially in the middle of this con. I couldn’t allow a piece about me in the *New York Times* any more than I could appear with Alejandro at a *No Moss* party.

But on the positive side, if everything turned out well with this con and I found that blackmail evidence, I might be willing to reveal myself, for the first time in my life. If I could stop hiding from Bea and didn’t alienate Alejandro too severely, I might be able to return to New York and live openly. Imagine a world where I didn’t have to run from *New York Times* reporters and *No Moss* parties. It seemed like a dream.

In the meantime, such a world didn't exist. So given that Wanda's good visitor wasn't very good in my book, I asked her with trepidation, "Who was the *bad* visitor?"

"This strange guy came into the shop and asked all about you. Something about him set off my cop-alarm, so I clammed up. Told him I hardly know anything about you." She giggled. "He got the message and left."

A cop or just an investigator? Dee Frank hadn't done anything illegal, so it probably wasn't a policeman. Could the investigation of my birth parents have triggered some trouble? Or was this another of Bea's tricks, checking up on me so she could gather more dirt? Whatever was going on, it was annoying.

Wanda shifted to serious. "If you're doing something that you shouldn't, Dee, then maybe this is a good time to stop." She paused, trying to use the silence to draw me out. But I couldn't share my illegal exploits or my romantic ones, so I had nothing to say.

"Don't worry. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

"Come home soon. I miss you! We'll go dancing and drinking. Ooh! I know! Let's throw a huge party at the shop and invite everyone, even that *Times* reporter. Put you even more on the map. Just pick a date, and I'll set it up."

I loved this woman's energy, her enthusiasm, and her insistence on grabbing life with both hands and giving it a shake. Perhaps she was right. If things worked out well, a party would be exactly what I needed when I got back home. I knew Wanda would be able to cheer me up—I felt better already. "Yeah, that sounds like fun. And I'm coming home soon—hopefully less than a week. We'll do all those things and more, I promise. Thanks for being there for me."

"I got you covered, Dee. And I'm glad you're nearly done out there. See you soon." I hung up, feeling much better.

Then it all got ruined. Bea called and started screaming at me from the moment the call went through. I had to hold the phone down at my waist to prevent damage to my eardrums. Thanks to Vance, she knew about my date with Alejandro and had many choice words to describe the foolishness of it. I tried to get her to admit that she'd hired him to follow me, but she refused to concede anything.

I endured a few minutes of her angry con lessons, with extra emphasis on the perils of falling for the mark. I wanted to point out that I was just keeping the mark happy until the deal was complete, but all the voices in my head reminded me that she was right. "Never fall for the mark," they screamed in chorus with Bea. I really needed to take that advice more seriously, if possible. By the time I got off the phone, I was back to feeling like crap.

And then, just to keep my emotions yo-yoing some more, Alejandro called. I stared at his name on my phone and my mouth fell open. Why was he doing this? I didn't merit so much attention, especially after running away from him last night. If he were any other man, he'd stay clear of me after a stunt like that.

But not Alejandro. "What happened last night? Why did you run away?" The concern in his voice was sincere—I felt it in my gut. Suddenly, my head was spinning in a blurred daze, lost in his kiss, unable to hear the bells of alarm warning me against getting romantically involved.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't handle a media event that big."

"You're the first woman I've met since I became famous who didn't want to be seen with me. Are you secretly married? In witness protection?"

I laughed. "No and no."

"Can I meet you in private? I have to see you some more."

There it was again. A strange sensation that I'd somehow been dropped into a dream where the world's most handsome and popular musician wanted me. My whole body buzzed at the thought of meeting him in private. "Okay, sure." Oops! Why did I say that? I meant to tell him to leave me alone. What was wrong with me?

"Good. How about right now?" There was a knock on the door of my motel room, and I jumped so high that I nearly hit my head on the ceiling.

"Is that you at my door?" I ground out the words.

His answer came at me from both sides. "Open up, Deborah. Let me in."

I went to the door and looked through the peephole. Alejandro! Wearing a gray hoodie, jeans, and sunglasses. I quickly opened up and ushered him in. "What are you *doing* here?"

"Obviously, I'm here to see you. I didn't get enough last night."

He didn't get enough? Oh, please! Regrettably, he was right—neither of us got enough last night. I definitely didn't. But nobody ever promised me enough from life, so I was used to it by now.

Also, I was not here to give enough of anything to this man, except perhaps confidence. My job was to take, not give. But instead, he was the one who was taking. Already, he had taken much more than I'd ever expected. And all I wanted to do was give him more.

But one thing I didn't want to give him was my room number. I thought motels didn't release that information. "How did you know my room? Did the office tell you?"

"Your cousin told me after I gave him a signed photo."

How annoying! I was about to tell him that my cousin was doing a lousy job of protecting me, but before I could

say anything, Alejandro pulled me into his arms and planted a kiss. All of my defenses were instantly obliterated by his steel-gray eyes, his rugged beard shadow, and wisps of his jet black hair. Those irresistible lips drew me in, and I fell gladly. Oh yes, I remembered that kiss, one of the best I'd ever had.

After a nice long one, he pulled back, hovering inches away from me. His fingers ran through my hair a few times. Then suddenly, he stopped, staring at my head. "So you're a natural blonde. The hair under the bleached part looked dark to me, but now I can see that it's not."

I turned to stare at him. The world-famous musician, who women everywhere fawned over, was looking closely at me. I didn't expect to be treated with such consideration, such loving attention. I thought that he simply wanted to seduce me, but instead, Alejandro was acting like he cared. He was noticing things about me, learning what he could. And my confusion grew deeper with every encounter.

Interestingly, although I'd been with Roman for the past five years, he'd never noticed anything about my hair. One time, two years ago, I asked if he knew what color my hair was. He started by telling me it was white, but I pointed out that I bleached it and wanted to know if he could name my natural hair color. By this point in our relationship, he'd seen me naked plenty of times, so he must have seen my blonde pubic hair. And my roots were easily as grown out then as they were now, so Roman could simply have looked at me to find the answer. But he never really put much thought into my appearance, and he didn't bother to look that day, either. Instead, he told me that my natural hair color was black. I never bothered to correct him.

Alejandro, by comparison, instantly knew better. “Yeah,” I laughed. “I’m a dirty blonde. Next to the bleached hair, it seems darker than it is.”

He chuckled then stepped away. “I don’t have a lot of time right now. Certainly not enough to make love to you properly.” He sat on the sofa, patting the cushion next to him. “Sit. Talk to me.”

Did Alejandro just profess a desire to make love to me? The way he spoke with such conviction was overpowering. I had to curl my hands tightly to keep from grabbing his chiseled face and lunging for him. That still didn’t help, so I counted to five, slowly. Then I let a shuddering breath rumble from deep down. “Okay.” A little calmer, I sat down carefully, pasting a shy smile on my face. “How was the party?”

He leaned back to look at me. “Boring. The same old crap. You really should have been there—you’d have made it much more interesting.”

He had no idea how interesting it might have gotten if I’d gone to that party last night. And if I hadn’t been conning him, it would also have been fun. How I wanted to scream out my guilt and stop all this. Take me to jail—I don’t care. As long as I could have one night with this incredible man.

“I’m sorry, Alejandro. Part of me wants everything you’re offering, and more. But another part of me is scared senseless. Maybe we should finish this guitar business first.”

“I disagree. If you’re willing to explore this after I buy your mother’s guitar, why not do it now?”

Ugh! Did he have to be desirable *and* reasonable? Why couldn’t he just be a sexist egomaniac? Then I’d be happy to take his money, and I wouldn’t want to get naked with him. Both of which are important factors of any successful con.

"Look, I don't like the spotlight, and you're way too famous."

He grinned. "So you *do* know who I am."

"I've been doing some reading. Enough to realize how incredibly well known you are. I don't want any of that."

"Trust me, I understand. I'm not totally comfortable with my fame, either. Nobody treats me like a human being anymore. And it's depressing to have to hide all the time or need a bodyguard just to go out for a walk. My old friends rarely come by, and when they do, it's not the same as it used to be. Even my bandmates treat me with too much deference. Instead of seeing me as a friendly musician, I'm now their rich and famous boss." He let out a dark laugh. "The worst is my parents, who treat me like a hero—their famous son. Back in high school, they wanted me to be a lawyer. They thought music wasn't a respectable career. Now they tell everyone they meet that the 'great' Alejandro is their son."

"Did they dislike your music, or just careers in music?"

He nodded his head with a smirk. "You're right: it was a money thing with them. They were poor immigrants from Chile. My dad worked hard on a construction crew, and he wanted me to do better. But my mom loved music—she even gave lessons to make some money. There was a beat-up piano in the basement where we lived, so she occasionally took me down there to teach me."

I'd never seen him play a keyboard in the ten years I'd been following him, so I was curious to know more. "I thought you played guitar. Who taught you that?"

Alejandro's eyes glimmered as a smile grew on his face. "Mom. She had one that she'd brought from Chile. One day, I picked it up and started to strum it like she did. I'd been watching her play, and I'd learned a few chords. Before I

knew it, I could play the guitar, too. The piano didn't get much use after that."

He took a long breath. "Look, Deborah, I get that you don't want to go out in public, but I want to see you again, get to know you better. I've got to go now—I'm meeting some people about a tour later this year. But I want you to come to my place tonight for dinner. I promise I won't make you into the next tabloid sensation." He grinned. "It'll just be us. No fans, no reporters, no manager."

I arched an eyebrow. "No personal assistant?"

He laughed at my question. "Karen means well. But no, she won't be there tonight, either. I want you all to myself. I'll send Udo for you at six."

That sounded like a terrible idea. Going there for dinner would only heat things up between us. I could never resist his advances, and I knew he'd make them. Then it would be even harder to con him. This date was completely and utterly wrong.

"Alejandro," I took a deep breath. "We can't. . . I'm not ready."

"Don't worry. This doesn't have to be anything more than dinner. I like that you're not a desperate fan girl, and I enjoy spending time with you. That's enough for tonight. No sex. Although both of us want it, so I'm not sure why you're holding back." He grinned and pulled me into his arms. "Just come over for dinner, then Udo will take you home. I reserve the right to kiss you madly, though." He did that a few times, just to make sure I understood.

It really seemed like Alejandro wanted to see me. And refusing his advances could potentially be worse than accepting them. He was the mark, after all, and needed some attention. Attention that I wanted to give, as well. Also, I couldn't have him showing up randomly at my motel

room—he might see something he shouldn't. I wanted to conclude this deal as soon as possible, so I simply *had* to go there for dinner. There wasn't any choice.

Proud of my ability to take a really bad idea and convince myself it was brilliant, I gave him a hesitant smile. "Okay but tell him to meet me at the coffee shop in the strip mall around the corner. That way, I can sneak out without Vance seeing me."

He laughed. "Fine. And by the way, I'm sorry you and Karen started off badly. I actually think you two would like each other. She means well, and she's damn good at her job." He paused with a thoughtful smile. "She's got me totally organized."

I shrugged. "Sure, but she still thinks she has a chance with you."

"Yeah." He took a long, noisy breath. "We had a one-night stand when I first got famous, but it was just one night—we both knew that. Then she got the job as my assistant, and on her first day, she reminded me about our hook-up. I didn't even *remember* her, that's how bad I am. So I warned her that it wasn't going to happen again, and she understood."

"I don't think she still feels that way."

He grunted. "You're right. Things have changed recently. Last month, she asked me if I could ever imagine the two of us getting married. I reminded her that this was not going to happen, and she nearly burst into tears."

"If she's as good an assistant as you say, then she must devote her life to you. Does she deal with your fan mail and social networks, too?"

"Yeah, and my calendar, my shopping, my homes. . ."  
His head spun around in a little circle, showing how

overwhelmed he was by her efforts. He concluded the list with, "My life."

"See? That's a lot of work. No wonder she expects something in return."

"She gets my admiration and my money, but she doesn't get my love. Sorry."

"Hey! Don't apologize to me—this is between you and her. I understand that you can't give her more love, but you do owe her, if she's as good as you say. So maybe you should give her more money. It might help her let go of the need for love."

Alejandro hummed for a second, apparently considering my suggestion. "Good idea. I'll work on it." He stood up. "Anyway, I have to go." He grabbed me and stole one last kiss. Then he put on his sunglasses, flipped up his hoodie, and left.

I watched him walk out to his car. When he got there, a woman who had been standing next to Vance's car shrieked and ran up to him. Leave it to Vance to blow the rocker's cover. The woman jumped a little and pulled out some paper and a pen.

Alejandro signed his name and briefly chatted with her. Ever the generous performer, he managed to make time for all of his fans. Udo waved his hands and said something, probably trying to keep Alejandro on schedule. He nodded to the bodyguard and turned to the woman again. That's when she made her move.

She threw her arms around him and tried to kiss him. He was so surprised that he nearly fell over. I watched as he regained his balance, pulled her arms from him, and held her at a distance. Udo quickly came over and took her away while Alejandro got in the car. Then they drove off.

I was right about him being too famous. Even when disguised, people found him and attacked him on the street. The poor guy had no private life.

## Fourteen



The limousine picked me up at the strip mall's coffee shop promptly at six. Alejandro wasn't in back, so I chatted with Udo. "You're more than just a driver, aren't you?"

"You are right, I am his bodyguard. But I also drive him around, since he got famous."

So this was the guy who watched the parade of women. I was sure he'd seen it all. "Is it true he's with a different woman every night?"

Udo frowned. "It is true zat most vomen only spend one night. But zere are far fewer than you zink."

"Oh come on! I see him with a different woman every day."

Udo laughed. "Zat is how zee media sees him, but it is not so."

"Yeah, I guess the media could make up stories about me, too. That's why I ran from the event yesterday." I pulled his hat from my purse and handed it back to him. "Thanks for the loan."

"If you do not vant zee media to make up stories about you, zen you should not be vith him. Zey are going to find you eventually, you know. Zey even follow me. My vife calls me each time she sees me in a picture vith him."

"Your wife *calls* you? Where is she?"

Udo slumped his shoulders. "She does not live vith me right now. It is a long story."

I understood that he didn't want to discuss his marital problems, so I let it drop. "Well, the media may be lying about some things, but I know he and Karen got it on."

Udo flipped a hand out to the side. "Yes, yes. She tells anyone who asks. But it is over between zem." He regarded me in the rearview mirror. "If you do not mind my saying, Ms. Gleason, I zink he is quite taken vith you. I have not been sent to fetch many vomen, and never one who had run away from him zee day before."

Oh God! I did not need to hear this. Not only was I swindling this beautiful and talented man, but I was stealing his heart, too. Not that I understood how such a thing was possible. Still, I hated myself even more for conning him.

I slumped back in my seat. "I guess I should be honored." But honor was the furthest emotion from my mind and certainly the last thing I deserved. I rode quietly the rest of the way to Alejandro's mansion.

When we arrived, he greeted me at the door with a modest hug. His spicy outdoor scent reminded me of his kiss. And his kiss reminded me that I shouldn't be there. But then he wrapped an arm around me, solid and cozy and impossible to resist. So I gave up trying.

Alejandro stepped back and smiled. "How about a tour? You've been here twice, but you haven't really seen the place. Let me show you around." He escorted me down the hall.

It turned out that Alejandro collected much more than rare guitars. His house was full of interesting artifacts, including paintings, sculptures, weavings, and rare books. Some people place their collections on pedestals, behind glass, or in locked rooms. Not Alejandro. He believed that his possessions should be touched, even used. He

encouraged me to feel the texture of an oil painting, we walked over fine silk rugs, and he handed me a rare first-edition book of Pablo Neruda's poems, pointing out his favorites.

We entered his study, a beautiful dark-wood room with shelving all around. I saw books, vinyls, and CDs. A few awards decorated another shelf—he had gold and platinum records, some Grammys, an MTV award, and more. One corner of the room was piled with band equipment: guitars, microphones, and speakers. Over by the side of the room was a small collection of drinks and snacks. And on the left, a solid wood desk faced the window. I'd been taking in all the fascinating things on his shelves, so I hadn't noticed the desk. But as soon as I did, I nearly fainted.

Oh. My. God! How could this be? Right in the middle of his desk, close to where he sat, was. . . trouble. I hoped I was wrong, but the more I stared at it, the more I knew I was right. He had one of my pieces of pottery—a small vase that was being used to hold pens. I started to back up to the door.

Did he know who I was? Had he found the one or two obscure pictures of me that my friends had posted to the Internet? Suddenly, I worried that he was about to expose me.

Alejandro waved toward the desk and I sucked in my breath. I knew what was coming next: some comment about the vase, revealing my true identity. I could feel a cold sweat crawl across my body. Damn these con games—I was so done with them.

Alejandro smiled and sat down at the desk. "This is where I write my music." He looked at me, then straightened with a frown on his face. "Are you all right?

You seem pale.” He stood up and came over to take my hand.

I fanned myself. “I’m fine, thanks. Just a bit nervous.” I didn’t even have to fake a nervous laugh. Much to my relief, he didn’t seem to know who I was. But my tension over being exposed nearly gave everything away. I exhaled slowly, letting my nerves relax.

I needed to change the subject, so I walked across the room to the wall of awards. “Are these Grammys?” I liked how they were shaped like old-fashioned gramophones.

He smiled, then came over to take down the one in the middle and offer it to me. “This is the first Grammy I ever won.” I hefted it in my hand, surprised by how solid it felt.

“You have an awful lot of stuff here.”

He laughed. “That’s a good way of putting it: stuff. Sometimes I feel trapped by it all. Good thing Karen keeps it all organized. I’ve got an entire room full of things that I don’t know what to do with. The original lyrics for many of my songs, less-important awards, the first guitar I ever bought. . .” He smiled, his dark features lighting up my deepest recesses. “Stuff.”

With a nod, he turned and started to leave the room. “Speaking of guitars, let me show you my collection. Your mother’s will soon be there.” He led me to a large room that was full of guitars. Like everything else he collected, these weren’t secured in any way. Instead, each one hung on hooks that made it easy to remove. He even took down an acoustic guitar and strummed it a few times. “This belonged to Eric Clapton.” He hung it back up.

Each electric guitar had a cord attached to it, connecting it to the wall. He picked one of them up, slung it around his neck, then flipped a switch on the wall. When he strummed it, the chord reverberated through the room

from hidden speakers. Then he started to play an old song from his first album.

My mind reeled, struggling to accept what was happening. A personal performance by Alejandro—nobody would ever believe it. I had to force myself to stand still and not move to the beat. After a few bars, he stopped. “Do you know this song?”

I pretended ignorance. “Is it one of yours? I think I’ve heard it. It’s nice.”

He burst out laughing. “Nice, eh? Of all of the songs I have written, this one is my personal favorite. And I just played it on a guitar that Jimi Hendrix once owned.”

I hung my head, glad for any excuse to look away from the great rocker. “I must be a disappointment to you.”

He put the guitar back on the wall, then he lifted my chin to look at me. Warmth radiated through my body, and I allowed myself to return a smaller smile. This was so messed up! All I wanted to do was throw myself at him and kiss him again. Instead, I had to kick myself on the inside to keep myself focused.

Alejandro shook his head slowly. “No, Deborah. You’ve yet to disappoint me.” He let go of my chin and walked over to a big metal door by the side of the room. “Are you ready for the special guitar collection?”

“You have even more?” I looked around the room, which had over fifty guitars in it. “How many guitars can one man own?”

“The ones out here are mine. But George has his own collection that he keeps at my place. Let me show you.”

So the rumors were true. I was about to see George’s fabled collection of stolen guitars. Alejandro turned to a keypad next to the door. Although he covered it with his other hand while he entered the code, I could see the

movement of his button-pushing hand, which was enough. Aunt Franny, a keen observer of the human body, had taught me when I was little to read the muscles and bones in a hand pressing a numeric keypad. What can I say? Old habits are hard to lose.

The room with George's collection was more like a vault: austere, windowless, and protected by a door that belonged on a bank safe. A dozen guitars hung on the walls of this room, and a thirteenth was displayed on a pedestal in the center. In stark contrast to Alejandro's guitars, these were much more securely protected in glass cases. I noticed alarm wires on each case and quickly spotted cameras, laser beam emitters, and a few other high-tech security features. George clearly had a different approach to the care of his valuables.

I gave Alejandro a grin. "Nobody gets near George's collection."

"No. He doesn't even like it when I show it to people. Don't tell him I let you in here."

"If he's so sensitive about it, why does he keep it here?"

"Because I've got space for it and better security. And because he can come here whenever he wants."

Alejandro pointed to one guitar on the wall. "This one was stolen from Paul McCartney."

"George stole it?"

Alejandro blurted out a laugh. "No, he wouldn't do that. But he bought it on the black market." He waved his arm across the room. "Every guitar here was stolen. I like rare guitars, but George has a thing for 'missing' ones."

"Isn't he worried about buying them and getting busted?"

Alejandro rolled his eyes. "George has balls the size of Jupiter. He once boasted to me that he could buy a stolen

guitar while cops watched him do it. Claims that as my manager, he can get away with anything. And he thinks the police are stupid.” He nodded toward the guitars all around us. “So far, he may be right.”

I walked to the display case in the middle of the room. The guitar sitting there looked very simple, just a plain old acoustic guitar. “This doesn’t seem so special.”

Alejandro nodded. “You’re right. It’s not that special. It’s just a basic Martin guitar—a Dreadnought, or ‘dread,’ as they’re called. But George had one of them when he was a kid, so he’s got a soft spot for them. This one here is a rare prototype of an original D-1 model—stolen, of course.”

“So George plays guitar?”

Alejandro groaned. “Not very well, but he likes to pretend. Still has his original dread at home. And he’s so sentimentally attached to it that he paid seven hundred thousand dollars for this prototype. They only made eight of them, and four were destroyed in a fire. The others mysteriously disappeared thirty years ago.” He pointed into the guitar’s sound chamber. “See how it’s stamped ‘D-1’ in there? They’ve been making dreads for a long time, and each model gets a new number. The D-27, the D-45, and so forth. But a D-1 is a rarity, and the prototypes are even more valuable. Notice how underneath the D-1, instead of a serial number, it says ‘Prototype 6.’ That’s a true collector’s item.”

“And stolen, too. Aren’t you worried about getting in trouble?”

Alejandro just shrugged. “Not really. Besides, there’s nothing I can do about it. If George wants them here, it’s his business. Also, these are incredible instruments, so I don’t mind too much. I guess my morals are somewhat imperfect. Besides, I appreciate beauty.” He turned to face me with a lusty grin.

I'd seen that look before, on countless Alejandro videos, a come-hither smile that nobody could resist. Damn, he was hot—it burned deep into me. The long black hair, the irresistibly alluring grin, those intense gray eyes. I stood there transfixed.

I began to wonder how much he knew. Was it possible that when he talked about imperfect morals, he knew how it applied to me? Or was he referring to only himself and George? Perhaps he simply had the hots for me and wanted my body. Not that I had any problem with that, but I still didn't understand how it could be possible.

# **Four Days Until the Deal**



# Fifteen



Alejandro called me the next day, first thing in the morning. We'd had a lovely dinner at his place, after which Udo had brought me back, early in the evening. But dinner with this man was difficult enough, and the intensity of his parting kiss had left me shaken. So I hadn't slept much last night.

I managed to grab my phone and squinted at his name. Was I the only person in the world who was unhappy to be awakened by the Lord of Rock and Roll? I scooted farther under the covers to take the call.

"Deborah!" He enthused a little too much, which made me wonder what was going on. A man so famous and desirable couldn't possibly want me this badly. Sure, in my fantasies, we fell instantly in love. But in real life, it didn't happen. So I couldn't figure it out.

I mumbled my response through a pre-caffeinated fog. "You seem happy." Some people are more chipper in the morning than others, and Mr. Sunshine seemed like one of those early risers. His gentle laugh warmed me and brought me fully awake. Okay, perhaps it really wasn't so bad to get a personal wakeup call from a world-famous rocker. So what if his desire was mysterious? Just thinking about his hot mouth made me start to liquefy. I had to take a moment to make sure I wasn't still dreaming.

But what he said next assured me that this was no dream. "I got the money early, and I'm ready to buy the guitar today. When can you bring it over?"

Whoa, what? He was rearranging the deal? Not good. Now I understood why he seemed so excited—he was playing games, being the important person and commanding others. I needed to be careful here.

He seemed to be cutting out his business manager, doing the deal himself and at his place. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, so I probed politely. "I thought we were doing the deal at George's."

"I'm relieving him of his duties for this deal. I don't trust him anymore, so I got the money myself. When can you bring over the guitar? To my place, by the way."

So George was out. For the most part, I was relieved by this change. First of all, I'd get to finish the deal four days early, which would get me home sooner. And secondly, I wouldn't have to deal with George. The stories of his thugs and their aggressive tactics fed directly into my fear of bad con repercussions and disturbed me more than I wanted to admit. All in all, I was glad to be done with Alejandro's ruthless business manager.

But now I was swindling the rock god directly, and that raised other concerns. Like my ability to pull it off at all. Also, I suspected he was cheating George with this deal, so I needed to watch my step or else I might get caught between the two of them.

Predictably, even the barest hint that the deal was going to go down today caused my con fears to start up. "You'll get caught," they warned. And even if I didn't get caught, I'd have to face my guilt about robbing this wonderful man. How could I take his money when flashes of lust sparkled in the air all around us? This deal was so incredibly wrong.

I was also unsettled by his change of plans. Things were supposed to happen in order, not get rearranged at the last minute. But con artists have to keep their balance while

floating on the currents. I would simply have to adapt—we'd do the deal sooner. This also meant I wouldn't see Alejandro after today. One last visit, one last kiss, and then I'd run back to New York where I'd be safe. Certainly safer than here in Los Angeles.

I looked at my watch and calculated how quickly I could make it to Alejandro's place. Then my training kicked in and told me to stretch it—make him wait. Alejandro's mother may have taught him to appreciate music, but mine taught me how to work a mark. Don't appear bored, but don't appear too eager, either. Let them be the ones who are desperate to do the deal.

Deborah Gleason was a busy woman. She wouldn't drop everything and run at the chance to sell this guitar. She'd take care of her personal business during her lunch hour. So if I wanted to be professional about it, I'd delay my visit until then.

I nearly started to laugh out loud at myself. Yeah, I was being *such* a professional in the way I handled Alejandro. I kept my focus all the time. I didn't grope him, throw him to the floor, or lose myself in his intoxicating kisses. Much. At least I hadn't ripped his clothes off and had wild sex with him. Although it *did* happen in my daydreams.

Without a doubt, I was losing it. I was doing so many ill-advised things that even Bea had to keep her eye on me. But interestingly, thinking about the nefarious F.M. had a positive effect. It woke me up, as thoughts of her usually did. And it helped me get back to the deal.

"I'm busy right now. But I can be there at noon. Is that okay?" It was.

I debated telling Bea about this change. She'd be upset about it, which could start all sorts of trouble. She'd insist things go back to the way they were, with the deal

concluding in four days. But I liked the idea of finishing this now, so I convinced myself to leave Bea out of it. I had the guitar—why not just go to Alejandro's and get the cash?

Also, I knew Bea would be thrilled to see the money sooner. Maybe even thrilled enough to offer me a deal that would stop her blackmail. Then I could go back to my simple life in New York, free of grifters and con games, free of people following me, and free of overexcited musicians who called me too early in the morning.

Four hours later, I arrived at Alejandro's estate, dressed nicely, as befits a woman about to make a huge sale. No longer hiding my hair, I dressed to complement it by wearing a black knit pantsuit over a crisp white blouse. Light gold trim on the collar framed my neck.

I didn't want Vance to know about this change of plans, so I'd sneaked out the bathroom window with the guitar, and driven to Alejandro's in my black SUV. He was waiting for me at the front door, all smiles. "Good to see you, Deborah. Come in." We exchanged a hug and a brief kiss, then I followed him in. My feet bounced a little as I carried the guitar, watching his muscles flex under his thin T-shirt as he moved through the house. I tried to remind myself that I was a con artist, not a groupie, but whenever I was around him, the two seemed to get confused.

On the way to the study, I saw Udo, watching from a corner. That helped sober me up. With a jolt, I remembered where I was, what I was doing, and why I shouldn't feel so damned happy. Did Udo carry a gun? Could he run as fast as I could? Did he know how much money his employer was about to spend?

Alejandro led me to his study where an attaché case sat on his desk, next to my pen-holding vase. I set the guitar

down next to his case, and we turned to face each other. Despite my fears, this was going very well so far.

Alejandro's look completely captivated me and put me at ease. He warmed me with a spectacularly intense smile, twinkling gray eyes, and a pounding heart. No wait, that was *my* heart doing all the pounding. I was definitely having trouble staying focused.

Since this would be the last time I saw Alejandro, I let myself get lost in his eyes once more. The deal could wait—he obviously didn't seem too anxious. We gazed for a few minutes.

Suddenly, my guilt overcame me, and I felt awful about the whole deal. I wanted to scream out the truth, admit my lies, refuse his money, and tell him about my childhood as a con artist. I didn't care about the money. I wanted him. I wanted to sweep that fake guitar off the desk and kiss him right there.

But those thoughts made my con fears get worse, and the threat of being busted by my mother held me in place. I had to finish this deal. It would be the easiest path forward—the money was sitting right there. Besides, whatever emotional entanglements Alejandro and I had built were destined to go nowhere, so I might as well take that pile of cash.

I sighed, and he broke away from our stare. Then he slid the attaché case across his desk toward me. "Four hundred thousand dollars." I pulled the case closer and opened it up.

The sight took my breath away. It was filled to the top with neat piles of fifty-dollar bills. That meant I was looking at 8,000 bills. From my experience with cash, it looked about right. I nodded my head and smiled, our gazes once again locked.

His smile managed to kick my con fears away, even if only for a moment. It made me happy, and all I could think about was his mouth on mine, his arms holding me tight, his hot body pressed close. Those incredible gray eyes seemed to be looking deep into me, to the core of my being. It was as if he saw things that nobody else had ever seen.

Stop! What was wrong with me? I should be checking his money, not standing there, thinking about his kiss. Why couldn't I concentrate on this deal?

I knew the answer, and it was only partly about this man. My con-game fears were scaring me, pushing me to avoid the deal. Anything could happen at this point, and my brain kept churning through the possibilities. I tried to stop the images bubbling up from the past, but they fought with each other to play in my head. I saw a mark get scared and run away when he looked at his own money and realized how much of it he was about to spend. I saw a deal that ended with police lights flashing behind me as I ran down the street and into an alley. I saw my brother, dead on the ground with blood running from his forehead. Please—my mind screamed—don't make me con anymore.

There was no way out—the deal was nearly done. I had to calm down, this was crucial. So I took a few seconds to breathe, then I pasted an easy smile on my face. Casually—like I did this every day—I reached for one of the piles of cash and thumbed through it. Just a spot check.

The blur of the bills going by looked good, so I stopped at one of them to examine it more closely. And that's when all the air rushed from my lungs, snapping me to full attention. Something was seriously wrong. At first I couldn't believe what I was seeing, but realization pierced through my denial and forced me to accept the truth.

I was staring at a three-dollar bill.

I felt my blood chill hard, like flash-frozen vegetables. The deal was definitely dead, and I might be, too. I needed to run now—I had to take action. But I couldn't seem to move my body. I was physically immobilized with fear. Caught! Again! Damn if I wasn't the world's worst con artist.

How had this happened? Did he know the guitar was a fake? What else did he know about this con? About me?

My best guess was that the authenticator had changed his mind. Carl said that the guitar wouldn't pass all tests, but that it would pass the initial examination. Perhaps Peters took a sample and had it more thoroughly tested later. Whatever the reason, Alejandro had learned the truth. I'd been swindling him.

Standing there unsteadily, I felt all my walls start to collapse. The lies and the con began to fade, and I could barely remember what name I had used. All I could see was the end of my life, dying in a prison cell.

Then, with a mental slap to the face, I confronted my reality. The first order of business was escape, so I dropped the pile of cash and turned to the door. Good thing I'd parked my car close.

But Alejandro had beaten me to the door and stood there with his arms folded. "Is there a problem?" His smile was gone, replaced with an emotionless mask, hard and opaque.

Bea always told me, "Never let them see you sweat." But it was far too late for that. I gathered as much of myself as I could and folded my arms, too. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He blew out a harsh laugh. "You're right, there's nothing wrong here. Fake money in exchange for a fake guitar." He leaned closer and squinted. "You tried to cheat me, didn't you, Ms. Dee Frank."

His words were like a kick to the gut. He knew my New York name, so he must have known that I'd painted the vase. This explained why it sat in such a prominent position on his desk—he was sending me a signal.

How did he discover who I was? I never did any social networking, so he couldn't have looked me up online. Granted, there were one or two photos of me on other people's social media accounts. One of my friends posted my photo from a party last year, with the caption, "Dee Frank, New York Artist," but it wasn't that easy to find. I doubted someone as famous as Alejandro would spend the time to locate it.

The other explanation was that *he* hired the New York investigator. Perhaps all those people checking on me were his, not Bea's. The famous man had a bodyguard, so he probably had a security team handy, too. Either way, Alejandro knew much more than he let on. He might even know my childhood name and how much of a con artist I once was.

What would happen next? Was Udo standing on the other side of the door with his gun drawn? Were the police on their way? I hadn't done anything illegal yet. Nothing had been sold. So perhaps there was hope. One thing was certain: I really hated this con game!

Alejandro and I stared at each other for a few seconds, this time without the longing. Instead, there was amusement in his eyes, an almost gleeful pride, like a hunter who had just bagged some big game.

I broke the stare and dropped my head. "How long have you known?" I did my best to appear only mildly curious.

"I knew who you were the moment I met you." He picked up my vase from his desk and held it out. "I was in your gallery in New York a few weeks ago, and I bought this.

I'm sure you noticed it yesterday. You weren't in your shop that day, but I looked you up afterward and found a picture of you." He shook his head with a grin. "Not an easy picture to find—you keep yourself pretty well hidden." He set down the vase. "So when a beautiful and reclusive New York artist showed up at my home with a different name and a supposedly rare guitar, I had to wonder." He shrugged. "I told Peters to declare the guitar real and tell me the truth later. And the truth is, the guitar is fake."

"If you knew I was cheating you all along, why the loving attention? Why the kisses? You should despise me for trying to swindle you. Or were you just trying to throw me off?"

"I was curious to watch you con me, and honestly, it was fun unsettling you. I knew you'd hate going to that *No Moss* party, though you really surprised me when you ran from it. And I thought you'd pass out when you saw your vase on my desk. But make no mistake, I'm very much attracted to you—it wasn't all a ruse."

So his interest in me had been real. I wondered if it would be helpful. "Well, I'm very much attracted to you, that's for sure." I raised my chin proudly. "What happens now?"

"I'd say the possibilities are vast. I could call the police, I could have Udo kick your ass, or I could take you to bed." He let a sly grin creep across his face. "Why don't we sit and talk about it, Ms. Frank." He motioned to the sofa, and we sat down, not too close.

I was in a precarious position. I could weave a new web of lies, or I could just kick the whole mess to the side and tell the truth. Under Alejandro's guarded but still-somewhat-warm gaze, I opted for the truth. I doubted I could manage much else.

“My name isn’t really Dee Frank—that’s just what people call me in New York. My real name is Dee Kirkland. I grew up here in Los Angeles and spent my youth as a thief, con artist, and forger. I’m really sorry I tried to swindle you. Believe me, I didn’t want to do it. But I. . .”

He held up a hand to stop me. “Thank you for telling me the truth. It’s a rare thing when people do that.” He picked up a folder of papers from the coffee table by the sofa and handed it to me. “My private investigator already told me this. He also told me that the woman calling herself Bonnie Gleason really *is* your mother, Beatrix Kirkland. And your so-called cousin, Vance Geiger, is a small-time grifter you’ve known for years. So I imagine you hired him to protect you.”

As he laid out the facts of my life, my mouth fell farther and farther open. Alejandro must certainly have hired the man who’d visited my New York shop, and he may have hired the people who pulled the record of my birth parents just before Elle did. But he clearly hadn’t hired Vance, because he thought I had done it. That meant that Vance wasn’t part of the investigation.

“Not exactly,” I whispered, barely able to speak. “I didn’t ask Vance to watch me. My best guess is that Bea hired him to keep me in line. She probably thought I’d run away or screw it up.” I let out a short, sad laugh. “Turns out, she was right.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. The woman’s got a long record, with many entertaining tales, including some scams where you figure prominently. I was most impressed with your forgeries—my favorite was the Monet.”

Shocked, my mouth fell open even more. He actually knew about the theft of that Monet, which was pretty impressive, given that it had taken the museum a year to

figure it out, and then they'd made a concerted effort to keep it quiet. Good thing I'd opted for the truth.

I looked up at him with a grin. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He was giving me that look again that I'd seen so often since we met. Those bedroom eyes, that incredible smile.

He knew so much about me, I figured he ought to get the full story. So I took a deep breath and let it out. "And by the way, Beatrix Kirkland isn't my mother—I've never met my real parents. Bea is my *foster* mother, so she's the closest I've ever had to a mother, even though she's never acted like much of one."

"Yes, I know about Bea. I'm surprised you've never met your birth parents." He pointed to the folder in my hands, which I still hadn't opened up. "I investigated that, too. Your birth mother's name and address is in there somewhere. I think she lives in Ohio."

As I suspected, Alejandro *was* the other person who had pulled the record of my birth parents. It seemed as if everyone but me knew about them, but I still wasn't ready. Right now, I had more pressing things to think about. Like getting free of here. Like not going to prison. Like having sex with Alejandro, if I could believe that was an option. These things were more important than the parents who left me behind twenty-four years ago.

Suddenly, there was a clatter on the other side of the room. We turned to look as Karen burst out of a closet, unsteady as a drunk getting up from a barstool. She wore her usual skimpy outfit: an ultra-mini aqua skirt with black tights and a black blazer.

Alejandro reached her quickly and helped her steady herself. "What are you doing here, Karen?" He evidently did not expect to see his personal assistant.

She waved her phone in the air. "Don't worry, I've called the police. They're on their way." She straightened her skirt and glared at me.

Great. Now I desperately needed to leave. I jumped to my feet and faced Alejandro with a silent plea for mercy. He shook his head and returned to the study door, making a big show of locking it, pocketing the key, then tapping his pocket to be sure it was safe. He faced me and pointed to a chair by his desk. "Sit down."

With Karen ready to lunge, Udo on the other side of the door, police on the way, and Alejandro blocking the locked exit, I decided to do what he said.

# End of Free Preview



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# About the Author



After completing my *Westerley* trilogy, I didn't have to think very hard about what to write about next: rock and roll! It was an obvious choice, because I was once the lead singer of a California garage band. Of course, the things that happen in my books never happened to me, but it was fun to pretend.

After a lifetime of reading general fiction, I discovered romance at age 59 and fell in love with it. Now I fill my time reading and writing romance novels.

Life in Northern California is full of surprises, including my novels. I have been happily married for over thirty years, and we have raised two wonderful children. I honestly wouldn't trade places with anyone else, living or dead, real or imagined.

—Sage