

## **Prologue**

*What have I done? I dropped the test between my feet on the bath mat.*

*It had been a whirlwind romance like you read about. Sex, charm, nights that we spent together, learning each other's bodies, hanging our dreams between the stars. He made me feel special. He made me feel like I was worth it, convincing me that I was beautiful.*

*I had moved to Sin City after school. I was on my own, and no one was able to tell me that I should stop seeing him, that I should be careful. I knew everything.*

*I learned that I didn't know everything, after all. The hard way.*

*In movies, they didn't fall pregnant and lose their dreams.*

*What was I supposed to do now? I'd only been in Vegas for a short while – a couple of weeks, maybe? I had moved here to become a showgirl, one of those girls who could bring the stage to life with nothing more than the way they smiled. I'd always dreamed about being in the spotlight, about glittering costumes and the applaud of the crowds.*

*No matter what anyone had told me about aiming higher, becoming more. I had never considered that I could become less.*

*I never wanted to be pregnant. Not now. I was barely nineteen. One day, sure. I wanted kids. But I couldn't do it now. How would I support the baby? Work at a fast food restaurant? Wait on tables?*

*I couldn't imagine burying my dreams like that, snuffing out the little light I had only just managed to light.*

*I flushed the toilet and walked to the living room. Three pregnancy tests, all positive. A missed period. Which was what had tipped me off. And the sinking feeling in my gut when that little plus appeared in the control window. And then another. And another.*

*I couldn't do this. I couldn't be a mother at this age. I couldn't be responsible for any other lives than my own.*

*What about the father? What would he think? What would he say? I hadn't even told him. I wasn't sure I wanted to. He had a right to know, of course. It was his child, too.*

*But it was my body and my choice. And if this was my life, then I could call the shots.*

*It didn't matter what anyone wanted. What mattered was what I wanted.*

*And I wanted a life free of the tethers of responsibility. Having a baby seemed like a very harsh punishment for learning how to be an adult, for dipping my toes in the water of romance.*

*My window looked out over the shitty part of Vegas. It had been the cheapest apartment I could find, and I would work my way up. That had always been the plan.*

*If I had this baby, my life would go nowhere. I would be down here in the dust forever.*

*I was only a couple of weeks along. It wasn't too late to end this. I could still have my life if it were what I wanted.*

*My mind spun. A life grew inside of me, a child that hadn't chosen this. It was all on me. But I hadn't chosen this, either. How was it any different?*

*I knew that I couldn't rationalize an abortion this way. But I wasn't ready to give up my life, yet. I wasn't ready to stand up and do "the right thing." I would get so angry when people told me I was just a child.*

*But now, I agreed with them.*

*All I could think of was all the dreams I would have to sacrifice before I even realized them. And there was no way I was giving up life before I was even allowed to live it.*

*This baby had to go.*

Las Vegas was the city to be. It never slept. There was always another show, another win, another site to see. They called it Sin City. And I guess it could be. The tourists all came here to forget who they were for a night, to leave their lives behind. To walk on the wild side for a brief time. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. That's what they say.

But to me, Vegas was home.

I left my apartment early to beat the rush hour traffic. I wasn't an early riser – as a showgirl who had always danced until the night was over, the early mornings had usually been reserved for sleep.

But now that I wasn't a showgirl anymore, I'd had to get used to a normal routine. Where nighttime was for sleeping and daytime was for productivity.

Before heading to work, I stopped by at the post office and dropped off a package that needed to be couriered directly to the lab. The post office only opened at eight and today I would just have to be a few minutes late.

After stopping at the post office, I carried on to the Las Vegas Strip, the most popular place, possibly in the world.

The bus stopped a few blocks away from House of Stars, the newest nightclub on The Strip. It hadn't opened its doors yet – that would happen in two weeks. But I was a part of the team that would make the launch happen.

When I reached House of Stars, I walked around the side and found the key Cullen had given me. It unlocked the service door that led backstage.

I was the first to arrive, and I flicked on the lights, watching the dressing rooms come to life. Everything smelled like fresh paint and unrealized dreams loaded with potential.

Not long after I arrived, Helen walked in with a couple of dry-cleaning bags slung over her arm. Her bobbed haircut was neat as a pin, and she had enough makeup on to cover every single one of her freckles. It was a shame, you didn't erase the constellations out of the sky.

"I can't do these early mornings, Zinzy. Seriously, they're driving me crazy."

"I hear you, and I just got back from vacation." I said and stood to hug her. "We're getting old."

"Speak for yourself," Helen said. "I just hate the routine."

Out with the old and in with the new, I guess – after retiring from dancing, I started teaching and choreographing the younger girls.

Years ago, Helen Brock and I had danced together. I had met her just after I had landed a job at The Flamingo, the oldest hotel and casino in Vegas.

Now, Helen was sewing; creating the outfits for the dancers.

There was a lot less to sew these days, than there were when we danced, with the outfits being so skimpy. But Helen made good money, and we got to work together again.

"Morning," Gemma said, the first dancer to arrive. She smiled at me and sat down at her dressing table. Gemma was Cullen's girlfriend. She was a lot younger than him and the star dancer in the show. Not only because she was sleeping with the owner of the nightclub but because she really was a very good dancer.

“Two more weeks, ladies,” Gemma said, glancing at us in her mirror before picking up a hairbrush.

I nodded. The launch of House of Stars had been advertised for months, and I had been working with the dancers since Cullen had announced it in the paper. We were going to put on a show such as Vegas hadn’t seen in years. My years of experience, combined with what was up and coming these days, made for the perfect show. Cullen had done the right thing to hire me for the job.

Not that I was one to brag or anything.

The dancers arrived in a string until finally, they were all present.

“Let’s warm up,” I said, clapping my hands. “Gemma, take them through it, will you?”

Gemma nodded, and the girls rolled their eyes. She wasn’t exactly a favorite. The only person who didn’t seem to complain was Meghan Carter, the newest dancer on the team. She still had to get her bearings. It took a level of comfort to breed an attitude. And the girls weren’t exactly forthcoming about her joining so late in the game, either.

The downside of working with showgirls was that there was a hell of a lot of drama going around.

Occupational hazard.

“Where’s Sophia?” I asked, noticing one the of the girls were missing from the group that had fanned out in a circle to do their stretches.

“Here,” Sophia said, skipping past me. “Sorry, Billy came with me.”

She glanced over her shoulder at a tall, lanky man that hung close to the service door, as if he wanted to escape.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked, already irritated.

Helen glanced at me over the rim of her glasses. They were perched on her nose as she sewed.

“He just came to watch our rehearsal,” Sophia said. “He’s not going to get in the way.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Because he won’t be here.”

“Please, Zinzy, he just wants to see what I’m doing.”

“Then he can buy a ticket for Opening Night like everyone else,” I snapped.

Sophia tried to argue, but I shook my head and pointed to the door. He had to leave. I didn’t need young men distracting my girls while we prepared for the biggest show Las Vegas had ever seen.

God, I knew from experience how that turned out.

I watched Gemma lead the girls through their stretches. A group of women as athletic as my dancers were, was a sight to behold. It made me yearn for the good old days. Sometimes, I wanted to join them. But I was far from the dancer I once was. It wasn’t that I wasn’t in shape – I jogged in the evenings, and I trained three times a week – but I hadn’t trained as hard as they trained in a while.

“They’re looking good,” Helen said, coming to stand next to me. She folded her arms over her chest.

I nodded. “If they keep at it, dancing the way I know they can, opening night is going to be a success.”

“With the way you’re pushing them, it can’t be anything else.”

I bit my cheek. I was irritated that Helen suggested I pushed them. I wasn’t a slave driver. I just wanted their best. If they didn’t give their all, it wouldn’t be worth it.

“What’s wrong?” Helen asked.

I glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, don’t be coy. Everyone can see that you’re in a shitty mood.”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. The pressure is on to make this work, that’s all. Opening night is around the corner.”

Helen nodded. She looked like she bought it. I was relieved she wouldn’t keep pushing. Helen was like a Pitbull – once she got a hold of something, her jaw locked.

And I didn’t want her to keep pushing. Because it had nothing to do with the opening night pressure. I thrived under pressure. Years upon years on stage had taught me how to act reflexively.

No, this was something else entirely. I was pissed off about Sophia’s boyfriend. Not because she had brought someone, but because she *had* someone.

I was hitting forty, and I still had no one. Lately, it had been on my mind a lot. My entire adult life had been dedicated to my career. Now that it was over, what did I have?

Which only led me to think about the baby I had had growing inside me a lifetime ago. What would have happened if I had chosen differently?

Thinking about the little sliver of a family I’d had back then irritated me. Not only because I had nothing like that now, but because I hated living in the past.

I had made my decisions, and that was the end of it. There was no use looking back. The past would never change.

The dancers took their places on the stage when they were ready, and I walked to the back of the room, watching them from a distance. From back here, I could get the full effect of what they were building on stage.

House of Stars was a classy place. The main auditorium was large, with small tables littered across the floor with normal seating around the edges and boxes hanging from the walls like swallows’ nests. The patrons could either book a table that would come with a set menu for the evening, or they could buy tickets for the seats that only served drinks.

The marble floors were shiny, bouncing the sound of the music across to the seats, and the walls were draped with curtains that were there to cushion the sharp sounds of the music.

When the music started, the girls waited for the beat, and the routine started. I watched them from my vantage point, scrutinizing their every move. The girls had to move perfectly in sync, as one. No one could be a fraction of a second off, or it would ruin the effect. This wasn’t some high school production. This was Vegas. The expectation was high across the board, and House of Stars had to make a stunning first impression if it wanted to make it at all on the Strip.

It was do or die in this town.

Gemma was front and center, as always. It was where she could be seen from all angles. She was the star of the show.

But she wasn't the one that stood out to me, today. It was Meghan, the new girl, that drew my attention.

She was a row back and to the right. I watched her as she moved and I couldn't put my finger on what was so different about her. She just drew my eye. She was nothing special to look at. Not like Gemma, who wore self-confidence like a second skin and smiled at people like she was doing them a favor. Meghan's blonde hair was piled on her head in a messy bun, and she wore a leotard and a sports bra like most of the other girls.

But she moved like the music flowed through her. When I watched her, I remembered what it was like to dance like that. I could feel the music again, I could taste the thrill of being in front of a crowd, and I could almost hear the applause.

She had a lot of talent. I had taken a gamble, letting her join the show so close to opening night.

One of my dancers – Michelle – had twisted her ankle when she had come down wrong on it. Shit like that happened. Meghan was Michelle's friend, and she had pleaded for me to let her join. When I had refused, she had started dancing. Right there, in the dressing room.

And she had known every single step. Apparently, she had been watching Michelle whenever she had trained away from the venue.

I wasn't sure what impressed me more – that she could convince me to let her join two weeks before the show, or that she had known every step as if she had attended rehearsals for six months.

But I had given her the spot she'd begged for and so far, I didn't regret it at all.

We trained for two hours before I allowed the girls their first break. I was nice. Helen and I had had a much harder schedule. I stood in front of the stage again, discussing the outfits with Helen when I heard a soft cough from one of the seats to my left.

I spun around and narrowed my eyes, trying to see into the darkness after I had stared into the light.

Someone sat in one of the chairs, watching the rehearsal.

And I was pissed off immediately.

"Did I not ask you to leave?" I snapped toward the spectator. "Sophia! Do you think this is a game?"

"It's not Billy," Sophia said.

"I'm sorry," Meghan spoke up. "He's with me. It's my dad." Before I could answer, she added, "he wanted to see what it was I was getting myself into."

I couldn't reprimand a father the way I had done to somebody named Billy, kicking him out. But I was irritated all the same.

"I'm very sorry, sir," I said, looking at the man who was still just a silhouette in the darkness. "But I don't allow spectators while the girls work."

"Very well," he said and stood, moving down the short aisle between the chairs. When he stepped closer to the light, I could finally see his features.

My stomach dropped. Sandy hair, piercing eyes. The chiseled jaw that made him look like his face had been sculpted by angels. And the upright attitude that hadn't changed in twenty years.

It wasn't just any dad. It was Mike Baxter. Of all the men I had been with during the time I'd lived in Vegas, why did it have to be him? Once upon a time, we had thought we would conquer the world together.

I suddenly wondered what I would say to him. How would I even start? But I didn't have to worry about it.

He walked away, and Meghan skipped toward the exit to see him off. I watched her talk to him, hug him.

When Meghan returned, looking apologetic, I felt like I was going to throw up.

Had he recognized me? Did he know who I was? Probably not. When he'd walked away from me, it had been because I had shattered his world. Chances were he didn't even remember my name anymore.

He has a daughter now? The thought made me feel unstable on my feet.

My mind spun with questions, and my head throbbed violently, adrenaline pumping through my system as I tried to make sense of the past that had just come crashing down on me.

"Zinz?" Helen said. "Zinzy!"

I looked at her. "What?"

"What is up with you today?"

As if the past hadn't been distracting enough, before.

"Nothing," I snapped. "What were you saying?"

Helen hesitated a moment, looking at me with eyes that suggested she didn't believe a word I said when I told her I was fine.

Whatever. I didn't need her to believe me. I only had to convince myself.

