

HOTEL LIAISON

by

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CHAPTER ONE

G*et out!*” Those words, followed by a loud crash, sent Denny Phelps and her mother, Sika, scrambling toward Stefanie’s office. They arrived just as the door was flung open and a large thirtysomething man stumbled out and rushed past them, not looking back.

Stefanie Beresford, red-faced with fury, appeared in the doorway, shouting, “And *stay* out!”

Her chest was still heaving when she finally noticed Denny and Sika standing frozen in place. Denny shot a pleading glance to her mother and Sika reached out and placed a hand gently on Stef’s arm.

“What happened, dear? Did Kevin hurt you?”

Stef felt herself deflate, the anger being replaced by dejection. “No, not physically.” She motioned her business partners, also dear friends, into the room. “Might as well have a seat. This involves all of us.”

Having a seat necessitated Denny’s putting chairs upright for herself and her mother. She chose to ignore the remnants of a broken vase that were scattered on the floor.

Once they were settled, Stef leaned her elbows heavily on her desk and said, “Our construction budget is gone.”

“What?” Denny blurted out. “That’s impossible. We had everything figured out to the penny. Even for overages.”

Sika quietly said, “Let Stef tell us, Denny. Be patient.”

Denny never ignored her mother’s requests.

Sighing, Stef said, “Seems Kevin has a drug problem. Our money has been steadily disappearing up his nose.”

She resisted sweeping everything off her desk to land with a satisfying crash on the age-darkened wood floor. She’d hired that Irish blowhard on her brother George’s recommendation. Kevin was supposedly a font of knowledge about commercial construction. This and his claimed connections with smaller contractors in the Bay Area and San Francisco building inspectors had swayed her. She’d been a naïve fool.

“What about the subcontractors?” Denny’s almond-shaped deep brown eyes were glazed with concern. “Did he pay them?”

“Not recently, and our suppliers will probably be next to knock on our door, asking for their money. Shit. Sorry, Mamaka.” Sika didn’t curse, and Stef always felt bad when she did so around her.

Mother and daughter sat back heavily in their chairs. Although Denny was a few inches taller than Sika and her skin was a lighter color, they shared the same high cheekbones and regal bone structure, the legacy of Sika’s West African heritage.

“Don’t apologize,” Sika said, “I feel like swearing myself. Is *all* the money gone?”

Stef calculated. “No. Luckily, one of the subcontractors called me directly and complained about not being paid. I did a quick inventory and stopped Kevin’s access to that account. We have enough to get us about halfway finished. That’s if we cut back where we can and immediately find a new contractor who won’t rob us blind.”

She was heartsick, and struggled to not just get up and lay her head in Sika’s lap and cry. Her mind was blank. Not exactly dynamic CEO material.

In a move that usually signaled deep thought, Denny unconsciously patted her black, closely cropped hair. Suddenly brightening, she said, “Hey, remember Jock Reynolds from my basketball team?”

Stef stared dully at her best friend, trying to understand why she would bring up Jocelyn Reynolds. *Speaking of blowhards.* Cautiously, she said, “Yeah, I remember her.”

“Well, she’s a general contractor now, has her own business right here in San Francisco.” The look on Denny’s face told Stef that she thought she’d come up with a solution. Denny always had a glass-half-full take on life.

Stef still wanted to weep. Instead, she tried to suck it up. “Denny, Jock Reynolds did nothing but tease me about being ‘vertically challenged’ when we were in college. She slept with any woman she could charm into her bed and barely made her grades to continue playing and graduate. What makes you think she’d be any more reliable than that worthless idiot I just threw out of here?”

Sika arrested Denny’s response with a small hand gesture. “I’ve read about several of her projects in the city. They speak well of her company. It’s mostly female workers and she doesn’t try to hide the fact that she’s a lesbian. I think we could at least get a bid. Perhaps she’s grown up since those days, Stef. People change.”

Denny gave her mother a grateful smile. When Sika spoke, debate often ended swiftly. If she wanted something to happen, it was usually a done deal. Stef worshipped her, having been taken under her wing when she and Denny were college roommates. The Beresfords had tossed Stef out of the house when she came out to them, so she’d stayed with Denny and Sika during all holidays and breaks. She was used to being outflanked and outnumbered by the Phelps women.

Resigning herself to the inevitable, she said, “Okay, but we get two other bids as well. And we check references and talk to one of the building inspectors we trust, *not* the ones that vouched for Kevin. Denny, please get on it right away. We need to have someone in place and working by next week.”

“You got it.”

“I’ll start calling the subcontractors and trying to put them off or negotiate payments or come up with something that works,” Stef continued. “And I’ll try to scare up more cash. Looks like I’ll be living in the hotel during the construction. Oh well, what’s a little dust?” She tried to sound positive but couldn’t stop beating herself up for being such a bad judge of character.

“Why not move in with us?” Sika offered.

“You and Denny only have a one-bedroom apartment as it is, thanks to this project. We have a whole hotel that was residential in its most recent, seedy incarnation. Maybe I’ll move next door to Mrs. Castic on the third floor. She seems to be tolerating the renovations well enough.”

“I worry about her.” Sika frowned. “She’s got to be in her seventies. It can’t be healthy for her to be around the noise and dust. It will be bad enough for you.”

Denny said, “She’s a tough old bird. She gets herself up and out almost every day, walker and all. Even in the rain. Told me she likes to go sit in Union Square and watch tourists dodge pigeons.”

They all took a moment to appreciate that.

“You know, I think she comes from royalty or something, back in her home country.” Stef couldn’t recall all the details. They’d chatted recently when she stopped by to fix a light switch. “Somewhere in Eastern Europe, I think. One of those countries that’s been renamed a lot. The Nazis ran her whole family out, and her father died in a concentration camp. She’s been through a lot.”

“How long has she lived in the hotel?” Denny asked. She was playing with her phone, probably trying to find Jock’s number.

“I’ll have to ask her.” Now that they would be neighbors, it wouldn’t take long to hear the woman’s life story, no doubt. “Well, we’d better get back to work. Mamaka, your gourmet commercial kitchen might have to be scaled back a bit. But one day, we’ll put your Cordon Bleu training to work, I promise.”

Sika smiled. “Don’t worry about that. Maybe we’ll just have a light fare for our guests until we’re more established. Concentrate on getting the main part of the hotel open and I’ll get the old kitchen cleaned up and running with a minimum of fuss and a lot of bleach.”

As Denny and Sika left her office, Stef stared after them with a mixture of gratitude and trepidation. She was thankful every day to have such good friends, but she’d gotten them all into this venture and she had to figure a way to get them out and make it a success. She *had* to.

Her family would get a good laugh to find out about her bad

judgment. Being banished for being a lesbian had lasted two years, and they had never cut off funding for her college tuition, room and board. Denny had gotten her a job. They both worked as part-time housepainters. Stef was proud of that.

When she graduated, her stepmother and father actually attended the ceremony and took her, Denny, and Sika out to a sumptuous feast to celebrate. Stef had often wondered if Sika had something to do with that, but she never asked. Perhaps she didn't want to know.

Things were still far from smooth with her family, eight years later. When she said she wanted to work in the family business, her father's response was tepid at best. He wanted her two brothers to take over the company when he retired. He never talked about her being a lesbian, but made his disappointment in her clear. She was expected to marry a man who could work for the family, and have children who would form part of a new generation who would keep the Beresford hotel empire expanding.

Stef bit the bullet and worked in the administrative offices of Beresford Hoteliers in the acquisition section, thinking she could prove her worth. Her younger brother Jason worked in all of the divisions, ostensibly to move up in management and become a senior executive. He was a good guy and had been her closest ally since childhood. But he wanted their father's approval so much, he had developed little self-confidence and always seemed to mess things up. Their older brother, George, put up with Jason's failings and even tried to cover his ass, probably because he saw no threat to his own position as heir apparent. But he was more than willing to see Stef fail and was also the first to take credit for her hard work.

After only a few months, she'd realized that no matter what she accomplished, she would never be the boss and her father would never acknowledge her value. She would be treated as an unwelcome interloper by both him and George, regardless.

While Stef was discovering just how irrational and sexist her male family members could be, Denny had graduated in hotel and restaurant management and started a career in another large chain of hotels.

One night after work, when Stef was having dinner with Sika

and Denny, she admitted how disenchanting she felt. She'd reached the conclusion that she would have to run a business of her own if she ever hoped for any satisfaction in her work. She was fed up and had hatched a plan to buy and rehab an old hotel. To her surprise, Denny and Sika hadn't just supported the idea, they'd offered to partner with her in the business if she went ahead.

Their vote of confidence was a real boost. For the first time since she'd graduated, Stef felt truly in charge of her future. They developed a plan to create a boutique hotel primarily for women travelers; something safe, high tech, and customized for their needs. They searched for over a year until they located the right property, one of many decaying hotels that were rushed to completion after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and before the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The property had eighty-five rooms and, reportedly, a ghost. Its structure and layout were well done, with a good architect and solid construction. Puzzlingly, though, in the seventies, the owners had hastily and cheaply converted it to residential accommodations, and then seemed to forget it. Now it was run down, mostly unoccupied, and barely worth the land it sat on. Perfect, in other words.

The hotel was held in a family estate trust controlled by a Mrs. Seraphina Drake Holloway, who seemed completely taken with their idea and relieved to be able to unload the hotel to them rather than one of the developers who'd already made bids well below market price. None of them had been willing to agree to her sole caveat, that one of the longtime residents, Mrs. Irina Castic, could not be evicted, ever. Stef had readily agreed, figuring they could work around a solitary resident. And, besides, it wasn't an option to toss an old lady in the street anyway. Mrs. Castic had turned out to be a charming and quiet, uncomplaining tenant.

Most of the money for the down payment came from Stef, through inheritance and savings. She was the chief executive officer, in charge of securing funding and executing the overall plan of the rehabilitation. Denny would be the hotel manager and Sika the chef and manager at the restaurant when it opened. Their half ownership would mostly take the form of sweat equity, but they had sunk their

life savings into the project, too. Stef usually drew the line at using her family name to get a break, but she had no such qualms when it came to financing the balance they needed. Banks were more than willing to throw money at her and didn't seem concerned by her novice credentials. Everything had worked out nicely, until Kevin-the-Cokehead.

Stef studied the project calendar grimly. Margins were already razor thin; there was no time for stopping and starting, and no extra money to compensate for her first big management mistake. Fuck, what else could go wrong?