



Flirting with my Billionaire Boss

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: What my hot new boss doesn't know won't hurt him, right?

When I escape to the charming town of Blue Mountain to hide, I'm immediately hired as a personal assistant by the oldest son of the billionaire family in town. My new boss, Weston Keith, is irresistible and completely off-limits. I can keep things professional between us, I swear. When his housekeeper twists her ankle after tripping over the dog, I take over her responsibilities. Only, I have no idea how to cook and clean. Let's just say the situation gets real interesting, real fast. On top of that, I have a teensy-weensy secret he knows nothing about. I'm pregnant and hiding from my ex husband. That wouldn't matter so much if sparks weren't flying between us. When Weston finds out the truth, will it destroy everything?

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CALLIE

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say under my breath. I can’t stop staring at the stick I just peed on.

Positive.

My life is over. How am I supposed to explain this to Markus? My mind is reeling, and I need to stop freaking out so I can think.

But my heart is pounding in my ears, and the bathroom stall is getting a little spinny. I brace against the sides to steady myself, and the test falls into the open toilet.

I stare at it with my mouth hanging open and cringe as I pull it out. The Atlanta airport bathroom doesn’t seem like the cleanest place in the world. I shake off the toilet water and wipe it down with toilet paper. I don’t think I can ever get my hands fully clean again. I toss the paper in and flush the toilet before opening the stall.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Okay. I can do this. Think, Callie. Just think.

The only solution is to run. You think I’m kidding. I’m not. This is no joking matter!

Markus doesn’t want kids. He’s told me that a million times. I’ve been carrying this stupid test around with me for the past week, and I decide that the best place to pee on it is here?

I guess I can just hide it from him. But he'll figure something is wrong, and then he'll find a way to get the truth out of me. He always does.

Why can't I slow down my heart? It keeps pounding. I need to take some deep breaths. I've had a feeling that I could be pregnant. It would explain why I was feeling queasy on the plane. I don't usually get airsick. We're flying back from another trip to Hawaii, and this is our layover.

If Markus finds out I'm pregnant, he'll want me to get an abortion. But I don't want that. I stare down at the double lines on the test. I want to give this baby a life.

There's no arguing with him. He thinks he's always right. There would be nothing I could do or say to get him to change his mind about this baby. I've been married to the guy for three years. And we dated for five years before that. So I would know. He's said from the beginning that he doesn't want kids.

So, my only choice is to run. Because I'm having this baby, whether he likes it or not. That's when I start to cry like a big, giant wuss.

I leave the stall, toss the pregnancy test into the trash, and go to wash my hands. I'm sure I look like a disaster because a janitor comes in and gives me a strange look before she starts to empty the trash. She's short and round with dark skin with long blonde hair. She takes one look at my test and looks at me with her eyes bugging out.

"Is this test yours?"

"Yes."

"You're crying. Are you in trouble?"

I nod miserably. Then I spill the long, ugly truth to her. "And that's why I have to get

out of here,” I say. “But I don’t know how I’m going to do that without me seeing him.”

She starts to untie her smock. “Wear this. And hold the mop in front of your face.” She hands me the smock. “Push my cart. He won’t think to look at a janitor. One more thing.” She takes off her wig and hands it to me. “Put this on.”

“Okay.” I twist my dark hair up and put on the wig. Then I tie the smock around me. It’s huge and doesn’t smell great, but I don’t mind. I’m just happy to have someone willing to help me.

“What about my carry-on luggage?”

“You can hide it on my cart. Just take my cart to the bathrooms at gate B22 and leave the smock there. I’ll come along behind you and get it.”

“Why are you helping me?” I ask.

“Because I’ve been in your shoes before. I have a few babies of my own.”

I peek around the corner, and Markus isn’t in his seat anymore. Where did he go? I don’t have time to look for him. I squeeze the dirty water from the mop and hold it so it obscures my face. It drips a little onto my shoulder. Here goes nothing. I push the janitor’s cart through the Atlanta airport with my suitcase hidden next to the trashcan. The real janitor trails behind me, and I head toward the other bathroom.

A familiar voice makes me stop in my tracks. It’s Markus. He’s right ahead of me, talking on the phone.

“She’s in the bathroom. She can’t hear what I’m saying. I love you, too, darling. I’ll see you when I get back home and I’ve dropped Callie off at the house.”

The janitor looks at me with a questioning expression. She's probably wondering why I've stopped. I can't believe Markus has been cheating on me. That scum! But it doesn't matter now because I'm leaving and I'm not looking back, even though I want to give him a piece of my mind.

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I walk away from my dirtbag of a husband and head to the bathrooms where I meet up with the janitor.

“I heard my ex back there on the phone,” I tell her once we’re inside the bathroom. “He was talking to another woman. He called her darling and said he wanted to meet up with her after he drops me off at the house.”

“Cheating sack of garbage,” the janitor says. “It’s a good thing you’re running. You’re better off without him.”

“I know you’re right, but it still hurts to think he’s been cheating on me. What’s wrong with me? Am I not enough for him?”

“It’s not you. It’s him. He’s a loser, and you shouldn’t waste a single tear on him.”

It never feels great to be lied to and cheated on. That’s why I need to get out of here and start a new life. Somewhere where Markus won’t find me.

I take off the smock and wig and hand it to my new friend. “Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry you’re not having a better day. You deserve better. No one should have to put up with what you’ve been going through.”

I give her a hug. She smells like cleaner and something else I’d rather not imagine. But I don’t care because she took the time to help a stranger.

“You take care,” she calls out to me.

“Thank you.” I turn to leave the bathroom and weave through the crowd, dragging my suitcase behind me. Walking until I get to the escalator that takes me down to the train that connects the gates, I pause and look over my shoulder. People push past me in a hurry to make their connecting flights or collect their baggage.

Can I leave without knowing where to go? Credit cards are traceable, so those are out of the question. I only have five hundred dollars on me, the last of the money Markus gave me for my spending cash in Hawaii. That should be enough to get me transportation and a place to stay until I can figure out what I’m going to do next, but more would always be better and can get me further. I ask directions to the nearest ATM and take out as much as it will let me.

After taking the escalator down to the lowest level, I ride the train all the way to the part of the airport that has the baggage claim and the ground transportation. Just before I head outside, my phone rings. It’s Markus. I ignore it and step through the doors that lead outside.

I’m done with wealthy, entitled men. All Markus cares about is his money and how he can either earn more or spend more. Family and friends mean very little to him. I don’t want this baby to be raised to be anything like him. I’m sick of Markus’s money and him trying to use it to threaten and manipulate me.

A text message buzzes on my phone, and I glance down at it.

Markus: Where are you? I’ve been waiting forever for you to get out of the bathroom.

I don’t respond. Instead, I hail a taxi. After I put my luggage in the trunk, I’m greeted by the warm smile of my driver. He’s a bigger guy in his mid-twenties with thick black glasses, messy hair, and a day’s worth of beard.

“Where to?” he asks.

My head spins as I climb inside. “Somewhere far from here.”

My phone vibrates again.

Markus: Hello? I’m about to send someone to the bathroom to go look for you. You need to respond to me right now. I’m not kidding.

The driver chuckles, oblivious to my plight, and I look up from my phone.

“Are we in a movie or something? You’re going to need to be a little more specific than that.”

“I don’t know this area well. Just take me somewhere at least a couple of hours away and where it would be hard to find me.”

He scratches on the patchy beard covering his chin. “Ever heard of Blue Mountain?”

“No.”

He turns around and faces forward. “My uncle lives there. You’ll love it. It’s a little town in the North Georgia mountains. I go up there to see him all the time.”

I buckle my seatbelt. “Sounds good to me.” He pulls out into the crazy Atlanta traffic.

“What’s Blue Mountain like?” I ask.

“It’s a bit of a tourist town. Lots of people in Atlanta have their vacation cabins up there.”

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“That sounds nice. Think it’ll be easy for me to get a job there?”

He glances over his shoulder and then switches lanes.

The traffic here is horrible. Soon we’re at a standstill. “There’s a grocery store that always has job postings on their bulletin board. There are usually ads for places to stay too if you need that.”

“I sure do.”

“You’ll probably find something there. They aren’t big on technology in Blue Mountain. It’s gotten better since the vacation rental market picked up though.”

“What are the people like?”

“Warm and friendly. My uncle is a groundskeeper for this big billionaire family that owns most of Blue Mountain. You might be able to find a job with them.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Most rich people are stuck up like Markus. Not really my idea of who I want to work for. Maybe the local grocery store needs a cashier, I think before I nod off to sleep.

Five minutes later, I get woken up by my phone ringing. It’s Markus. I hit ignore and lean my head against the window again. Except I can’t sleep, and my heart is pounding again.

A text message comes through.

Markus: Where are you going? I can see that you've left the airport. You need to get back here right now or you're going to be sorry. I didn't say you could leave.

Panic tears through me. I forgot to turn off the GPS tracking on my phone. We don't use it very often, so I didn't think about it. Markus has me trained to tell him when I'm going at all times, so we've never had a need for the GPS before. I turn the location setting on my phone off and avoid answering Markus's text.

When three more threatening angry texts come through, I shut off my phone. There, now I can breathe again. I've never dared to be this brave before.

A couple of hours later, we're in a completely different world. Quaint shops line the street, and we pass a firehouse and a library.

"We're here," my driver says to me.

I yawn and stretch. "Can you drop me off at a coffee shop or something?"

"You got it."

He pulls up to a coffee shop, and I get out with my luggage. I pay him the two hundred-plus fare and add in a decent tip, and he waves goodbye. There is zero chance that Markus will think of searching for me here. It looks like I'm in the middle of nowhere.

He must be so furious that I'm not responding to him. I feel like a little kid who's disobeyed her parents and is waiting for their wrath. Markus is terrifying when he gets enraged. Usually, when that happens, I placate him. I tried standing up to him once. It didn't go well at all. I ended up apologizing to him for it. I know that sounds messed up, but most people didn't understand what it was like to be married to a guy like Markus. It was a matter of survival. I was willing to put up with it for years, but

now it's a different story. Because there's a baby involved. My kid. And I'm not going to let anything hurt him or her. I'm all this baby has, and I have to be strong for it.

I pull open the door to the coffee shop and walk inside. It's a cozy place with couches scattered around the room. I order a mocha latte and then sip on it while lounging on one of the couches. Is it safe for me to be drinking this much caffeine? I'm not sure how much is okay, so I'd better limit it to just one cup.

A woman who looks to be my age with a smile and her hair in a perky blonde ponytail walks up to me. "Hey, do you care if I sit next to you?"

"Not at all. Have a seat." I scoot over to make room for her. "What's your name?"

"I'm Stella. And who are you? I haven't seen you around here before."

"That's because I've never been here before." I stick my hand out. "My name is Callie."

Stella shakes my hand. "Nice to meet you, Callie. What brings you to Blue Mountain?"

I force a smile. "You know..." I hesitate. How could I put this? "Men."

"What? You have a guy here?"

"No," I admit. "I'm running away from one." It sounds crazy to say out loud. But Stella doesn't know Markus, so it's not like she can tell him where I am.

"Aren't we all?"

“I don’t usually tell random strangers my problems. The truth is, I’m looking for a fresh start. I just found out I’m pregnant, and my husband doesn’t want kids. I know if he finds out, he’ll want me to get an abortion, and I don’t want that.” There’s something about Stella that puts me at ease. She’s nice to talk to.

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Her eyes soften. “Oh, honey. That’s so hard. I’m sorry. Unfortunately, I totally understand bad exes. My ex-husband was terrible to me too. I’m so glad I got out of that marriage. What can I do to help?”

“My head is kind of spinning. I can’t even think straight.”

“Well, maybe I can help you brainstorm. Do you have a job?”

“No. That’s my next step. My taxi driver said I can find postings at the grocery store.”

“You can. Do you need a ride over there?” Stella asks.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to bother you with a ride.”

“It’s no problem, really. It looks like it’s about to rain out there. You don’t want to walk to the grocery store in that.”

“It’s just down the street, right?” I ask. “I saw it when we were coming in town.”

“Yep. So it’s really fine. I promise.”

“Okay.” I nod. “Yeah. That sound’s good.” I should have just asked the taxi driver to drop me off at the grocery store, but I really wanted coffee. I didn’t think about not having a way to get to the store after that. Life is going to be much harder without a car. That means I’m going to need a job that’s close enough to walk from wherever I can find a place to stay.

“Ready to go?” Stella asks. “You can just bring your coffee with you if you’re not finished.”

“Okay.” I stand up, and she leads me out to her vehicle, a little black economy car. “Did you grow up here?”

“My whole life.” She grins at me as she heads to the driver’s side.

“And do you like it here?”

She shrugs. “I don’t really know anything different. It’s home.”

“What do you do for work?” I asked.

“I’m a maid for a family who lives around here.”

“The billionaire family?”

“That’s the one.” She raises an eyebrow at me. “So you’ve heard of the Keiths?”

I buckle my seat belt. “I hadn’t heard their name, but my taxi driver told me they were a prominent family in the community.”

Stella puts the car into reverse. “They basically own the town. The Keiths own a big real estate corporation based out of Atlanta, but their family goes way back in this town. They’ve been here for generations. Old money, if you know what I mean.”

As a native, Stella knows an awful lot about this town. And that wealthy family. She probably picks up a lot of information being a part of the household like that.

“I’m not the hugest fan of ultra-rich people. My, uh, ex,” I stumble over the word,

“had money, and he was a class A jerk.” Is that who Markus is to me now? My ex? It sounds funny to say that.

“Hey, not all wealthy people are bad. The Keiths are great people.”

“So you know them?” I ask.

“Of course I do. They treat their household employees like family.”

Markus and I had someone who cleaned our house. But he didn’t even know her name. That isn’t my life anymore. It was weird to think about.

She pulls into the grocery store parking lot. “Well, that was a short drive.” I totally could have walked. So what if it is starting to drizzle?

“This town isn’t very big,” Stella admits. “What do you think of it so far?”

“It seems like a good place to hide.”

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“Who are you hiding from?”

“My ex. It’s a long, twisted, messed-up story. I won’t bore you with the tedious details.” Only they aren’t tedious. They’re depressing. No one wants to know how much I’ve been putting up with from Markus. It’s embarrassing and makes me look weak. But now I’ve left. That should count for something, right?

“Sorry if it seems like I’m prying. You just seem like you’re down on your luck. I want to help. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t feel comfortable sharing.”

I open my car door after she parks. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Do you want me to go in with you?” Stella offers. “You know, show you around?”

“If you want.” It’s nice to make a new friend. Who would have expected that? It’s been a long time since I’ve been friends with someone. Markus didn’t really allow me to have friends. Maybe being in Blue Mountain will be just the fresh start I need.

2

WESTON

TWO DAYS PREVIOUSLY

“Skipper?” A little ball of white fluff dashes past me, down the marbled hall of my mansion. I chase after him, catching up to him next to my grand piano. “Come back here, boy. What were you doing in Natasha’s room?” I crouch down beside him and

scoop him up, the short legs of the bichon frise dangling. There's something in his mouth. It looks like some type of chain. "What do you have there?"

Martha, the housekeeper who has been in our family since I was young, steps in to help. She's a short, curvy Latina woman and the most amazing cook. She grabs the little furball from me and pries open his mouth, pulling out the long chain. "Isn't this your grandmother's locket?"

"What was that doing in Natasha's room?" It's worth a fortune and is one of the family's prized possessions. Grandmother Keith wants me to give it to the woman I end up marrying.

Natasha's my assistant who lives with me. My family owns and operates a real estate business that's been around for generations, starting with my grandfather, Weston Alexander Keith Senior. I'm the oldest of five boys, and I was named after him.

It's been convenient to have Natasha in the household. While I have enough resources to hire an entire staff, I like to keep my household small with only the core people around. I don't need a bunch of people doting on me. But I can't live without my assistant. I stay busy, and I need someone to handle my errands.

"So that's where all the missing things have been going," Martha says.

"You think she stole this?" I ask, a sinking feeling dropping into my gut. Betrayal hits me like a punch in the face from your supposed best friend who just stole your girlfriend and lied to you about it. I trusted Natasha. How could she steal from me?

Martha puts her hands on her wide hips. "Who else would steal from you?" She has a good point. Martha would never take anything from me.

That means I need to find a new assistant.

* * *

Afew days later, after finally accepting that Natasha can't be trusted and dismissing her, I drive to the grocery store to post the job opening. Don't laugh. It's how we do things in Blue Mountain. Yes, I know I'm a billionaire and can afford to hire someone to find me a new assistant, but I want someone from the town. Someone I can trust. I got Natasha from an agency and look where that got me. She stole from me right under my nose.

After pinning the job notice on the bulletin board and circling the store for a few items, I pay for my food and head back to my car.

I back out and hit the brakes when I see a flash of something in my rearview mirror, followed by a light thump. Holy Smokes! Did I just hit that girl? I slam my car into park and get out.

"I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

The girl I nudged with my car—I refuse to say that I hit her—is gorgeous enough to turn a thousand heads with luscious black waves tumbling down her back. Unfortunately, the Latina girl is also covered in a smelly substance.

"You hit me!" Her bag of groceries is in a messy heap at her feet with glass scattered across the parking lot. "I have pickle juice all over me. So much for that."

Stella, a girl who cleans my brother's house, is standing next to her with her arms waving around like a monkey with a firecracker shoved down its throat.

"Are you injured? The food can be bought again. I'm more worried about you."

"I'm just fine. You barely touched me. I don't even think it's going to leave a bruise."

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I saw the whole thing,” Stella says. “She’s okay. Just a little shook up.”

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“Well, at least let me help you clean up this mess.” I reach down and put the broken glass back into the grocery bag.” Then I pull out my wallet and take out a stack of hundreds. “Please, take this. It’s the least I can do.”

Her eyes widen at the bills in my hand like I’m offering her a poisonous snake. “I don’t need your money. I’m fine. I promise.”

“I insist.” I shove the cash toward her.

“You should take it,” Stella said. “He did hit you, after all. What if you end up with medical bills?”

“No, really,” she insists. “I don’t want it. I have plenty of money. And that’s way too much.” She juts her chin out stubbornly.

I pull out a twenty instead, cringing because now I feel like a cheapskate. “How about this much?”

She takes it from me. “Fine. That should cover the groceries. And we’ll exchange insurance info.”

“That seems fair,” I say. It’s the least I can do after practically running the poor girl over. And of course she has to be totally gorgeous. That’s not embarrassing at all. Nope. Not that I’m looking for a girlfriend or anything, but this town isn’t exactly known for its overabundance of beautiful women. Most of the single ones are girls I’ve known since childhood. They’re more like sisters than potential dating candidates.

I have a bad dating history, anyway. The last girl I dated cheated on me but wanted to keep me on the side for my money. Believe me, that felt great. Since then, I've had multiple women act interested in me once they learn about my family's wealth. Is it too much to ask for to have a woman want me for me?

I say goodbye to the two ladies and head back to my place. We keep a wall around our property with a gate. I punch in the key code, and the gate opens. Is it just me or did it seem like that Latina girl I hit was shooting daggers at me with her eyes? If looks could kill, I'd be long gone. She really didn't want my money either. I couldn't turn away from her fiery eyes. Something about her drew me in like the strongest magnet imaginable. Maybe it was the fact that she was turning my money away. I'm not used to that. Most women are clawing at each other to get their grubby hands on my billions.

I drive up the long driveway that winds up the mountain. My family has multiple estates around Blue Mountain. I picked this hilltop for my estate. My parents also have estates around the world, but I have this one, the one in Atlanta where I do most of my business, and one overlooking the beach in Antigua.

I've lived here for five years and had it built to my specifications. Every detail was planned carefully with a top-notch architect. This is where I want to bring home a wife one day. And if all goes well, hopefully children too.

My mother is chomping at the bit for grandkids. As the oldest of her five unmarried sons, she expects me to have provided them for her by now.

And she seems to think Jenni Finley is just the woman for me. There's nothing wrong with Jenni. I just don't feel anything like that for her. She's more like a sister to me. The Finleys and the Keiths have been friends for generations. Jenni's dad married a wonderful woman of Indian heritage connected to a powerful family in India. Jenni was raised in Blue Mountain, so although she looks Indian, she has an American

southern accent.

My parents really want a union between the two families, but if it ever happens, it won't be because of me. Hate to disappoint. Jenni's brother is best friends with my younger brother Langston. Those two always got along fine. And I got along great with Jenni. I just never felt anything romantic for her. I didn't when we were growing up, and I still don't.

My mom doesn't plan to give up anytime soon. She's relentless. That's what happens when a woman wants grandbabies. It's like they're baby hungry all over again. She's already picked out my kids' schools, the perfect nanny, and bought them designer baby clothes. She's picked out names too. The woman is out of control. She has five boys. I don't know why she has to focus so much on me.

My brothers travel all over the world. Ashton spends a lot of time doing business in Singapore, so I don't see him as much as some of my other brothers. Brensen, the fourth son, is off on some soul journey before he's ready to come back to join the family business. He's planning to come back in a few months for a family trip we have planned on our yacht in the Caribbean next June, but then he's heading back to Africa or wherever he plans to go next.

My youngest brother, Kaison, spends a lot of time in Dubai. He just joined the company and decided to jump in with both feet. He just went through a nasty breakup with the girl he dated all through college, and now he's turned into quite the playboy. He's either working or off with some woman, even when he comes home to Blue Mountain. We've collectively decided as a family that he's trying to numb his pain.

I pull into my five-car garage and park next to my off-roading Mercedes G-class. I just got it last month and still haven't found the time to take it out. What a shame. I've been too swamped with work to play much. And if I don't get a new assistant soon, I'll be in a world of hurt. My work to-do list is getting longer by the day, and

my deadlines are closing in faster than my mom chasing after my next girlfriend.

I come into the house from the garage with my grocery bags in my hands, and Skipper dashes toward me, slipping and sliding across the marble floors. He slams into my legs and promptly gets up and runs circles around me.

“Hey, boy!” I reach down and scoop him up. Something smells amazing from the kitchen. I set the bags on the counter. Martha is standing at the stove, stirring a pot. “What are you cooking?”

“Taco soup.”

“Fantastic. If it tastes as good as it smells, it’ll be amazing.” I settle at the bar. “I can’t believe Natasha has been stealing.” She had denied it when I’d confronted her. But I didn’t really expect anything more. I’d had my fair share of women lying to me, especially after what happened with my last girlfriend.

Martha shakes her head. “It’s hard to find reliable people to trust these days.”

“That’s why I’m putting up that job posting in town. I want someone local.” I’d lucked out with Martha. She’d been on my parents’ staff when I was growing up. “You don’t know anyone who might be able to replace Natasha, do you?”

“Let me make some calls.”

“Good. Because I’m not sure I can wait for someone to call from the bulletin board. I need help right away.”

My phone rings. I’d been anonymous when I posted about the job. I don’t want anyone trying to get the job so they can steal from me again. And whoever it is will have to get a background check. I’m sure the agency I used before could handle that

for the right price. Natasha had one, and it came back clean, but that doesn't mean she wasn't a thief. Lots of people stole and never got caught.

I answer the phone.

“Hi, my name is Callie Richardson. I'm calling about the job posting you had on the bulletin board at the grocery store.”

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“Yes?” I sit forward eagerly. I wasn’t expecting to get a call so soon.

“I’m interested.”

We go over the details of the job and set up a time for her to meet at the house. Relief washes over me like a person who’s finally made it to the bathroom after holding it a long time. I know that’s a gross comparison, but it’s strangely accurate.

There’s something familiar about this woman’s voice, I think as I hang up with her. But I can’t quite place it.

3

CALLIE

Stella is kind enough to offer me a ride to my job interview. I’m not sure what to expect. Stella punches the address into her GPS, and when we arrive at the gate, my stomach ties in knots.

This person has money. A lot of it. I can’t see the house from the gate and there’s a ten-foot brick wall surrounding the property.

“I bet this house belongs to one of the Keiths. I’ve never been to this one, but no one else in town has money like this,” Stella says.

She drives around the bend, and a mansion large enough to house all of Blue Mountain comes into view. Stella pulls up to the front door, and I get out.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Stella offers. “I can tell them how amazing you are since I work for one of their family members.”

“First, you just met me. I could be an ax murderer for all you know. And second, are you sure this is one of their houses? Couldn’t this belong to someone else?”

Stella shakes her head, her blonde ponytail flinging back and forth as she does it. “In Blue Mountain? I don’t think so. And you’d better not be an ax murderer. Although, that would be just my luck, since I really like you.”

“Thank you so much for giving me all these rides,” I say.

“That’s what we do here in Blue Mountain. We help each other out, and I know you just got here, but you’re one of us now. So, do you want me to come in with you or not?”

“Sure. I can use all the help I can get. I really need this job.”

We go to the front door and knock. It swings open to reveal a short, plump woman. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m here for a job interview. My name is Callie Richardson.”

She opens the door wider, and her eyes fall on Stella. “Oh, hi, Stella. What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Martha! I’m her ride.”

“You two friends?” Martha asked.

“Yes,” I say.

A shrill bark pierces the air, and a little white ball of fluff darts around Martha's legs. The tiny dog bares its teeth at me and growls.

"Skipper, cut that out," Martha says.

"Is that a bichon frise?" I ask. Markus had wanted one of those dogs.

"Yes, and he runs this place," Martha says. She pushes the door open wider to let us in.

"You can have a seat right here." She points to a couple of chairs lining the side of the entryway. "Mr. Keith will be with you soon."

Skipper doesn't follow her. Instead, he sits and watches us like we're going to do something shady on his property. I can hardly see his eyes because of all the fur, but I have a feeling he's staring right at me. He trots up to me, and I reach my hand out slowly to pet him. But instead of licking my hand or sniffing it, he lifts his leg and pees on my foot.

I let out a cry like a banshee and jump up to get away from that little white pee machine.

Just then, the guy from the grocery store parking lot shows up in the entryway. He's the kind of man who takes your breath away when you look at him. But I don't want to think about that because I'm still mad at him for practically running me over.

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“What’s going on?” he asks.

“This dog just peed on my foot.”

“Skipper?” He frowns. “He wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. That wetness dripping down my foot must be my imagination. My bad.” I clamp my hand over my mouth. What am I thinking? I can’t talk to this guy like that. He’s probably Mr. Keith himself here to interview me. The same guy who practically ran over me.

“You’re the person I almost ran over.”

“Yep. That’s me.”

“Sorry about that. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Just peachy.” I really am okay, but I’m not that excited to see the guy who hit me, and I have dog pee sinking into my socks. Stella had insisted that I get checked out by the local OBGYN when I told her I was pregnant and had been hit by a car. She’d been able to pull some strings since she knew the doctor personally, and he squeezed me in right away. Everything seemed to be just fine, but the ultrasound and the office visit cost me a considerable chunk of my money. I only had a couple of days in my hotel left.

“I apologize for my dog’s behavior.” He frowns. “I’m sorry. Where are my manners? I’m Weston Keith. How are you?”

“Hi, I’m Callie. And this is Stella. She’s my ride here.”

“I know Stella. It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too,” she says.

“Are you two friends?” Weston asks.

“We met a couple of days ago, but Callie is amazing. You’ll love her,” Stella said.

“We’ve hung out a bunch since she got here.”

It’s true. After I got hit by the car, I’d seen a lot of Stella. She insisted on mothering me and making sure I was okay.

“You can go clean up in the bathroom,” Weston says. “Stella, you can have a seat in the living room.”

“Thanks,” she says.

“I’ll show you where the bathroom is, Callie,” Martha says, coming back into the entryway.

I get up and follow her down a long marble hall to the nicest bathroom I’ve ever seen. The sink is made of marble and looks like it’s part of a giant piece of dark wood furniture. There’s a bidet next to the toilet and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

I take my shoe off and then wipe the dog urine from it. Not that it helps much. The pee is soaked into the suede. I’m not sure what I’m going to do at this point. I just bought them for this interview since my other shoes were drenched in pickle juice. That’s what I get for giving into my pregnancy craving. At least it isn’t something worse, like crab salad that would spoil.

I finish up in the bathroom and return to the entryway with the wet shoes in my hands. Martha sees me and guides me to a massive office with high ceilings and an ornate wood desk. Weston is sitting behind it.

“Have a seat,” he says. “Sorry again about my dog. He can be a little troublemaker.”

I sit in one of the armchairs across from his desk. The chair looks like it costs more than a car. And I thought Markus was affluent. This guy is easily much wealthier. I already don’t like him because he bumped into me with his car. Now I don’t like him because he’s another spoiled rich guy who probably thinks he can do whatever he wants. Do I even want to work for someone like that?

“Tell me about yourself,” he says, steepling his fingers.

My mind immediately goes blank. How much do I want to say to this guy? The only thing I can think of is the drama I’ve been through lately, and I don’t want to tell him that. So I need to craft an answer that will appease him. I should have thought about this last night, but I was too busy trying to find a permanent place to stay. The internet had limited options for housing in Blue Mountain, and I wasn’t able to find anything promising on the bulletin board at the grocery store.

“Something about me?” I squeak. I’m stalling. It’s pathetic. “I—” I need to say something. Anything would be better than nothing at this point. I stare down at my peed-on shoes sitting on the floor next to my chair. “I’m a dog person.” Normally, I’m good with dogs, but I haven’t made the best impression on Skipper if he’s peeing on me. Wait. Does that mean he likes me or doesn’t like me? Was he marking me as his territory? What made a dog want to pee on someone?

He lifts his brow. “Is that all?”

“No.” I scramble to think of something else to tell him. “I’m organized and good with

people. And I'm a fast learner." I'm pretty sure I just made up that random stuff. I'm horrible at organization, but I do learn fast. "And I love to cook." Another crock of bull. I'm a horrible cook, and I hate it.

"Good. I'm going to need someone who can handle the complexities of my daily tasks. There's a lot that goes into this job."

"I'm reliable too." That one's true. Although Markus was a garbage husband, I was always there for him. Until now. Okay, scratch that. Maybe I'm not that reliable, after all. I couldn't be relied on to stick around. But I had a good reason for that. I should be sad about my failed marriage, but when think of things ending with Markus, I just feel relief.

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“Why do you want this job?” Mr. Keith asks.

Because I’m desperate, and I need the money. I can’t say that though. That won’t convince him to hire me. I’m bad at this. Finally, I say, “I’m looking for a new experience, and eager to meet new people. I’m here for a fresh start, and I feel this job would be a good fit for me.” Okay, that wasn’t so bad. And it was true this time.

“Do you have experience as a personal assistant?”

Not officially, but I was like one to Markus. “Yes. For a guy in Savannah.” That was where we’d lived. Markus hadn’t had a personal assistant. He’d had me. I’d been at his beck and call. But I hadn’t been paid anything for it. I got the privilege of getting to be his wife and have him financially support me. At least this time there’s a paycheck involved.

He asks me a few other generic questions, and I answer the best I can. I can’t get a read on how this interview is going because his face is neutral.

Finally, he says, “Well, as long as your background check comes back okay, the job is yours if you choose to accept it. It shouldn’t take too long for me to get it back. I have people in Atlanta standing by who can handle it.”

“Okay,” I say. The background check shouldn’t be a problem. There’s nothing sketchy in my past. I was Markus’s perfect little wife. We’d gotten married when I was young and dumb, and I’ve been paying for it ever since. I’d always been sad about the fact that he didn’t want kids. I’d wanted them, but it never seemed like I could voice that since Markus’s opinion always came first.

“It would require you to live here at the house. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

A problem? I need a place to live anyway. “It’s not a problem at all. I’m in a hotel right now.”

“Great. It sounds like this will work out then.” He stood up. “Can you start as soon as we get your background check back?”

Do I want to work for him? I’m not the biggest fan of rich guys, and I’m insanely attracted to this one. It’s a recipe for trouble. How am I supposed to have a boss who’s that attractive?

“Yes. I can start whenever you need me to.”

“Good. It sounds like you’re new in town. I know I haven’t seen you around before. Well, other than our encounter in the parking lot. Sorry about that, by the way. I should have asked before how you’re doing.”

“I’m doing fine. No injuries.”

“That’s great to hear. How do you like Blue Mountain so far?”

“I love it here. Everyone has been welcoming.”

“What brings you here?”

Nothing much, I think. I’m just running away from an abusive ex, and I happen to be pregnant with his baby and I’m avoiding aborting it. We can’t forget that part. But instead, I say, “Some really good luck.” And by that, I mean I had a nice driver who recommended the place. That’s the most positive answer I can come up with. Because good attitudes are important, right? “There’s something you should know. I

don't have a car. Will that be a problem?"

"Not at all. I'll make sure you have something to drive."

This job offer is getting better and better. A paycheck, housing, and now a car? Not to mention the eye candy I'll be looking at every day. No, Callie. Bad girl. I can't go thinking about my boss like that. Even if he does have an amazing set of biceps. At least he has money. That should deter me from thinking about him too fondly. Because I'm through with rich men. Absolutely through.

4

WESTON

It helps to know that Stella knows Callie. That was a big determining factor in my decision to offer her the job. But there's something about Callie's dark, expressive eyes that draws me in. I know I'm a fool for falling for that, but I can't help it. I want this woman near me. Anyway, her interview went about as well as could be expected after what happened with my dog. That should count for something, right?

The background check comes back within the next thirty minutes. I have Stella and Callie wait around for it, sending them to the kitchen to have a snack with Martha. Callie's check comes back clean. I have a good feeling about her, but I'm still nervous about hiring someone new. It's been tough to have someone I trusted steal from me.

My front door opens. "Weston?"

I look up to see my mom coming in. Jenni is with her. Her dark hair is down and long, and she's wearing a pantsuit. Always looking so professional.

“Oh, hi, Mom. Hi, Jenni. What’s going on?”

“I heard you lost Natasha!” she says. “How horrible. How are you going to get by without an assistant? You know we’re closing on that big deal next week, right? This is no time to lose an extra set of helping hands. So I have a solution. Jenni knows someone who can help you.”

“Relax, Mom. I have it under control. I just hired a new assistant.”

Her mouth pops open, like she can’t believe I managed to do something on my own.

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I'm a grown man, for Pete's sake. I do grown-up things all the time.

"You did?" she says.

"I did. In fact, she's here right now," I tell them. "Sorry about your friend, Jenni. I hope she finds a job somewhere soon. Do you two want to meet the person I hired?"

"Sure," Jenni says.

"How do you know this one's trustworthy?" my mom says.

"Stella vouched for her, and I got a background check done. She came back clean," I say.

"Stella? The girl who cleans for Langston?"

"Yes."

She looks like she's considering that for a moment. "Oh, okay. I guess that's fine. But keep a close eye on your belongings."

"I will."

We move to the kitchen. "Good news, Callie. Your background check came back clear. When can you start?"

"I can start today. I just need to go get my things."

“Great. So, some introductions are in order.” I turn to my mom. “This is my mother, Mrs. Laurie Keith.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Callie says.

“And this is Jenni Finley. She’s an old friend of the family.”

“Hi there.” Callie smiled at her.

“Hi.” Jenni leans against the kitchen counter and smiles at Callie.

“Where are you from, dear?” my mom asks Callie.

Callie doesn’t speak up right away. Is she uncomfortable with my mom’s questioning? Finally, she says, “Savannah, Georgia.”

“Lovely city. I’ve been there many times. We have a branch of our business out there. What brings you to Blue Mountain?”

Again, Callie looks uncomfortable with my mom’s interrogation. “I’m here for a fresh start. I was told it was a great place to live.”

She puts a hand on Callie’s arm, the ever-concerned mother figure. “What are you running from, dear?”

“Mom, don’t you think those questions are a little invasive?” I ask.

“Not at all. If she’s going to be living in your house, you need to know these things.”

“I’ve already given her the job. You don’t need to interview her a second time.”

My mom lets out a disappointed sound. “Fine. What’s next then?”

I turn to Callie. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the car you can use, and I’ll get you some keys. That way you can gather your belongings and bring them back here.”

“That won’t take me long.”

I lead her to the garage and flip on the light when we get there. “You can drive the Lexus parked in the third stall over there. I don’t drive that one as much.” I pull the keys from a hook and hand them to her.

Her eyes are round. “You’re going to let me drive a Lexus?”

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I blink at her. What a strange question. “Well, yes. Don’t you have a driver’s license?”

“Of course, I do. It’s just—You know what? Never mind.” She shakes her head. “Thank you.” She takes the keys from me.

Stella appears behind us. “I’m going to head out, guys. I need to get to work. Let me know if you need anything, Callie.”

“Of course. Thank you for everything, Stella.”

“Why don’t you go get your stuff, and when you come back, I’ll give you a tour of the place and go over everything I’ll need you to do?” I suggest.

“That sounds good to me,” Callie says.

* * *

Callie returns to my home not long after she left. I can see Martha opening the door from where I’m sitting behind the desk in my office. Callie is standing on the porch with a tiny suitcase behind her. I think about all the bags Jenni brings with her when our families travel together. It’s like Callie is staying for only one night.

“Do you need help unloading the rest of your belongings?” I ask.

“This is it for me,” she says.

My jaw falls open. I promptly snap it shut. “Okay.” Callie is one strange girl. But who am I to try to understand the inner workings of a woman’s brain? Those strange creatures never cease to confuse me. As soon as I think I’ve figured out what’s going on with them, someone else pops up with a miniscule suitcase, declaring that’s all she needs.

“I guess you have it handled then.” I stand up. “I’ll show you where your room is.” Normally, I would have asked Martha to show her around, but I feel strongly drawn to Callie. And now I’m making up excuses to show her around instead of working on the large list of pressing tasks I need to accomplish before the day’s end.

I lead her down the long hallway.

“Did your mom go home?”

“She did. Why do you ask? Scared she’ll try to have you thrown out?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that,” Callie admits.

“Don’t let my mom scare you. She can seem intimidating at first, but she really does mean well. She’s only trying to protect me.”

“Did something bad happen with your last assistant?” Callie asks.

“We caught her stealing from me. My mom’s worried it might happen again.”

“I would never steal from you. But you can’t really know that. First, I’m not that kind of person, and second, I need to keep this job—” Callie stops short like she’s said too much.

Interesting. The more I get to know this woman, the more intrigued I become. She’s

running from something, and I can't imagine what it must be. Hopefully, I didn't make a mistake in hiring her. Am I a fool for allowing a pretty face to cloud my judgment? Is that what I did? Callie seems to be well-put together, and I need an assistant right away. I have a good feeling about her anyway, even though she's clearly hiding something.

5

CALLIE

Weston shows me around the mansion and leads me to a gigantic room with a king-sized bed in the middle of it. There's a sitting area on one side of the room with a chandelier hanging over it. He walks into the massive chamber. "This will be your room." He pushes open a side door. "And this is the en suite bath." The floors are the same marble as the rest of the house, and a huge soaking tub with a shower is the highlight of the space. It's nicer than the master bathroom at my house with Markus. And now I'm just the hired help.

"My room is just down the hall if you need anything. You can set up in the smaller office next to mine."

"Do you mostly work from home?" I ask.

"It's split between multiple locations. We spend a lot of time in Atlanta as well. We have a helicopter that we can take to my penthouse downtown. You'll be coming along with me wherever I go. I'll have another car you can use in the city."

I thought Markus was loaded. This was a whole other level. While it was nice to have such luxury around me, part of me hated it. Because it was all coming from a wealthy, powerful man. Everything that I'd grown to despise—they tended to use that power in a selfish, cruel way.

I hear the jangle of a dog's collar, and Skipper trots into the room. He jumps up onto the bed in one giant bound and curls up in the middle of the expensive bedspread. "He really runs this place, doesn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," Weston says. "I need to put him in doggy lessons or something to get him under control, but I've been too busy with work to set aside time for that."

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“Is that something you’d like me to arrange?” I ask.

“We’ll put it down for later. There are too many other pressing things to deal with right now.”

“Got it,” I say. “What do you need me to do now?”

Weston gives me a tour of the rest of the house and the property, including the pool, tennis court, and a network of trails for horseback riding or hiking. It takes a long time. If he’s so busy with work, why doesn’t he have Martha give me this tour?

I can’t say that I mind though. Every second I spend with Weston is better than the next. I have no business checking him out or having thoughts like these. I’m pregnant with another man’s baby, a guy who happens to be my husband. As soon as I get my first paycheck, I’m hiring a lawyer to file for divorce, so the husband part will be going away soon.

“Over here are the stables,” Weston says.

I take a step to follow him and trip. I stumble forward, but he catches me.

“Careful there,” he says. His arms are strong and steady around me, and he smells like the woods on a spring morning right after an overnight rain. I breathe in his scent, and a shiver dashes down my spine.

“Thank you. Sorry I’m so clumsy.” All this walking is starting to make me feel weak, and I’d only started to work. If I stayed married to Markus, I’d be spending my days

traveling from one vacation spot to the next. I did some light work for him, but it wasn't much. But I don't regret my choice. Working hard is worth it if it means my baby has a life. I'm capable of working hard, even if I am pregnant.

Being in Weston's arms feels natural, and part of me wants to stay there forever. But that would be awkward and inappropriate, so I step back. He probably doesn't want me hanging on him anyway. Just because I'm attracted to him doesn't mean he feels that way about me too.

I take a step away from him, and my foot lands right in a big pile of manure.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say.

"Looks like one of my horses left a gift for you right there," Weston says.

"How nice of them. I can't wait to meet them now."

"Your shoes have been through a lot today. First Skipper pees on them, and now this? I feel like I owe you a new pair of shoes."

"Don't worry about it." I dismiss his offer because I don't need him buying me gifts. Watching my feet this time, I carefully avoid the piles of joy the horses have left behind.

"You smell nice and ripe. Are you sure you don't want me to buy you some shoes? It's the least I can do."

"You've given me a job. That's plenty."

"Think of the shoes like a job perk. I can't have you walking around with shoes covered in animal urine and feces. And I don't want to smell you anymore." He

pinches his nose.

“Do I stink?”

“Well, it wasn’t so bad before, but it’s pretty potent now. What size shoe are you?” he asks.

“Seven.”

He pulls out his cell phone. “Martha? Can you buy new shoes for Callie? Size seven. She just stepped in a pile of horse manure.”

My cheeks heat up at the laughter I hear on the other side of the line. It’s bad enough that I have horse poop all over my foot. Now I’m getting laughed at too? I guess I can’t blame Martha. It is getting pretty comical with all the nonsense my feet have been going through lately. Pickle juice, dog pee, and now horse doo-doo. I blame Weston. All of this happened because he was around.

The smell of the horse manure becomes too much to bear, and nausea overwhelms me. Taking a few deep breaths doesn’t help, so I clamp my mouth shut. Throwing up in front of Weston is out of the question. But my pregnant body has different ideas. I make a mad dash for the side exit of the barn and heave out all the food I’ve eaten today onto a poor, unsuspecting patch of grass.

“Are you okay?”

“Why are you following me?” I say with my hands propped on my knees and my hair hanging around my face.

“I’m worried about you. Are you sick?”

Weston can't see me like this. At my worst. Markus did this to me. He made me like this. And he's not around to make this better. Not that he would. Even if, by some miracle, I were to convince him to let me keep this baby, he would do nothing but complain about how sick I am and how it's inconvenient for him.

"Let's get you back to the house so you can get cleaned up," Weston suggests.

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“That sounds like a good idea.” I could go for a nap right about now, but I need to work. That was my future. Hard work. Putting the baby in daycare. Fighting to make ends meet. This job doesn’t pay an incredible amount of money, but it’s enough to put together an apartment.

I’m not sure how Weston will feel when he finds out I’m pregnant. Will he allow the baby to live in the house too? Does he even like babies? I have about a million other unanswered questions, but I have to remind myself that I just got the job, and I have eight more months to figure out all the answers. I just hope Weston ends up liking me enough that he won’t fire me when I start getting huge and waddling around. I know there are laws against discriminating against an employee like that, but these rich guys are great at finding loopholes and getting away with everything. I would know. I was married to a guy just like that. Am married. I have to remind myself that I’m still married to that bozo.

Hopefully, that won’t be the case for long. I’ll have to let Weston know what’s going on eventually, but I want to keep my drama confidential for as long as possible. I need to keep this job.

“Are you coming down with something?” Weston asks as we head back to the house.

“I don’t think so,” I say honestly. “I just have a sensitive nose, and that horse manure got a little overwhelming.” That isn’t entirely untrue. I just left out the biggest part where I’m impaired because I’m growing a little human inside me, and it’s messing with my hormones and turning me into a crazy person. Eventually, it will become impossible to hide the fact that this little stinker is hiding out in my tummy and growing bigger every day. But I’ll deal with that problem when it happens. For now, I

have to keep from puking every time I smell something bad. It's a wonder I didn't throw up this morning when Skipper peed on my foot.

It's also lucky that I didn't fall flat on my face when I tripped earlier. I could have lost the baby from a fall like that. It's good that Weston was there to catch me. And that memory causes my brain to glitch because who wouldn't have a glitchy brain with so much hotness around? Weston steals the breath from my lungs. How am I supposed to work for him and keep a serious face when I feel like constantly fanning myself?

He's so attractive it should be illegal. And he's overflowing with wealth on top of it. No guy should be allowed to be that perfect. Most billionaires were crotchety old men. Not young guys with stylish haircuts, chiseled jaws, and bulging biceps. Weston is gorgeous enough to be a model. I wouldn't be surprised if he's appeared on the cover of a magazine before. He probably has one lying around his office somewhere.

It seems like there might be something between him and Jenni. I don't have any concrete proof, but she's gorgeous. There's no way he's not into her. She seems like his type, all wealthy and perfect. I can't help the twinge of jealousy that sparks inside me when I think of them in each other's arms. But it's ridiculous. I have no right to feel anything toward Weston. He's my boss. It shouldn't matter who he dates.

We get back to the house, and after removing my disgusting shoes, I make a beeline to the bathroom attached to my room. I wash off my face and then brush my teeth. Because who wants to be around a girl who just puked and didn't clean up properly afterward? Ew. Just ew. Weston will probably never be attracted to me now.

Where did that crazy thought come from? He's my boss. Get that in your head, Callie. That's all he can ever be. Because I'm way too big of a mess for him to be anything else. And I don't like wealthy men anymore, right?

WESTON

Martha opens the door. It's my mom and Jenni again.

"Hi, Mom. I'm crazy busy with work right now. What's going on?" Why is she over here with Jenni again? I have this creeping feeling that she's still trying to set me up with her, and she's finding every possible excuse to bring her over. Like if Jenni comes over enough, I'll magically fall in love with her, and a long line of babies will spontaneously pop out of Jenni's midsection.

I can't tell if Jenni is interested or if she's just placating my mom for whatever reason. My mom constantly reminds me about how it would be beneficial to both our families for us to be married.

There's nothing wrong with Jenni. I actually really like her. There's just no spark. She's too much like a sister to me. I can't bring myself to feel anything but brotherly love toward the woman. Kissing her would be like kissing a family member.

I've tried telling that to my mom, but she doesn't seem to want to accept that answer from me.

"Jenni is here to help you with your work project," Mom says. "She has a list of connections that you need. It's a partnership destined to be."

Jenni smiles up at me. "I do have a list of properties in Belgium you could acquire that would be a big help to the company. I've been in contact with the seller, and it sounds like they're motivated."

Now this is actually helpful information. "Callie, can you come take some notes for me?"

She comes into the room and pulls out her phone. “Mind if I record the conversation?”

“Not at all,” I say. Then the three of us sit down, and we launch into the information. My mom disappears at some point to socialize with Martha. The two of them have been friends for a long time.

After an hour of discussion, my stomach growls and I stand. “I could go for some lunch. Are you two hungry?”

“Sure,” Callie says.

“I could eat,” Jenni says, kicking off her heels next to the couch.

We all go into the kitchen where Martha has prepared ham and cheese sliders with pickle spears.

We settle around the table, and Martha backs up with a tray of sandwiches to bring it to the table. Skipper is at her heels licking his chops, hoping to snatch one of the sandwiches for himself. But Martha doesn’t see him and trips over him. The pan goes flipping through the air, and the sandwiches fly everywhere across the kitchen.

Martha spouts off a string of Spanish, likely curse words, and Callie laughs.

“Do you speak Spanish?” I ask.

“My parents are Puerto Rican. I don’t speak it fluently, but I know enough to know she could burn the ears off a sailor with that kind of talk.”

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Skipper runs toward me, probably for shelter from the raving madwoman across the kitchen. He darts under my chair and cowers.

“Are you okay, Martha?” I get up to check on her.

“My ankle. It hurts so much.” She plops down on a chair and sets the injured foot on the chair across from her.

“Let me take a look.” I come toward her. “You probably need to see a doctor. That looks like it might be a sprain.”

She spouts off another long string of Spanish, and Callie chuckles.

“I hope you’re okay,” Callie says.

“Let’s get you to the hospital,” I say.

“What about lunch?” Martha asks.

“We’ll grab something after we drop you off.” I glance across the room to see Skipper chowing down on the sliders. The little troublemaker. He got what he wanted out of the situation. He’s going to be sick if he doesn’t stop eating those. But I have no time to deal with him right now. My main focus is making sure Martha gets to the doctor to be seen as soon as possible.

I go in the cabinet and grab out a large cloth bandage and wrap up her foot. Then I grab a bag of peas from the freezer and hand it to her.

“I hate to see you going through all this trouble for me,” Martha says.

“You’re like family. Of course, I’m going to do all I can to help you,” I say.

“What can I do?” Callie asks.

“Grab my purse from my bedroom,” Martha says. “If I’m going to the hospital, I’m going to need my insurance cards.”

“No problem,” Callie says. Martha’s room is next to hers so she shouldn’t have a problem finding it.

“I’ll just go get my shoes,” Jenni says. “I left them in the office.”

“I’ll go with you,” I say. “I left my wallet in there too.”

I follow Jenni into my office and spot Skipper hovering over Jenni’s shoes, puking up some of the sliders in them.

“Oh, come on, Skipper,” I say. “Not again.”

Callie comes into the room. “I got Martha’s purse.” Her hand goes to her nose. “What’s that disgusting smell?”

“Skipper threw up in my Jimmy Choos.”

I grab him and pull him away from the mess. “Little troublemaker.”

Callie’s face turns a peculiar shade of green, and she turns her head away from the pile of vomit like the smell is getting to her. “I can clean that up for you.”

“You sure?” I ask. “You don’t look so good.”

“It’s no problem,” she insists. “I’m your assistant. So it’s my job to...you know...assist. Besides, who else is going to do it? You?” She disappears into the laundry room, I assume to get cleaning supplies.

She comes back into the room with a spray bottle, a plastic bag and a roll of paper towels. She gets on her hands and knees to clean the mess, but then she ends up throwing up in the trash can next to my desk.

“Hey,” Jenni says. “You don’t have to clean that.”

“No. I can do it.” She groans.

“I’m not going to wear them again. I’ll just get new ones.”

Callie stops cleaning. “What are you going to wear?”

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“You got any shoes I can borrow?” Jenni asks.

“Maybe. What size are you?”

It’s a good thing I had Martha buy three extra pairs.

“I’m a seven,” Jenni says.

“Me too,” Callie says. “I’ll bring them out to you.”

Well, this is working out better than I thought.

“So much for my Jimmy Choos,” Jenni says, tucking a dark strand of hair behind her ear.

“Sorry about that. Skipper can’t control himself when it comes to food.”

Callie comes back with a pair of ankle boots. “Will these work?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Jenni says.

“Can you take Martha to the doctor?” I ask Callie. “I would do it, but I’m way too swamped with this project.”

“Of course.” Is it just me, or does her voice seem stiff? “You just stay here with Jenni.”

What's up with her? Is she jealous that I'm staying behind with Jenni? Maybe she's wondering if there's something between us. I can see how it may look that way to someone from the outside.

* * *

An hour later, Callie calls from the doctor.

"Hello?" I ask into the phone.

"Martha's ankle is sprained. The doctor wants her to stay off of it for a few weeks."

That means someone will have to fill in for Martha. The thing is, I hate having strangers in the house. It's hard for me to even have Callie around. I've been warming up to her fast. "I'll need you to take over Martha's duties while her ankle heals." It's not ideal, but at least I won't have to hire someone else. And Martha will still be around to help her.

"I can still work!" Martha's voice speaks up in the background. "I just have to use crutches."

"Put it on speaker," I say.

"Okay," Callie says. "You're on speaker."

"Listen, Martha. You're going to need to take it easy. Callie can help pick up some of your duties. It's just until you're better. Your job won't be going anywhere."

"I don't like it," Martha complains. The rest of what she says is in Spanish, and she doesn't sound happy about it at all.

“You’ll be as good as new before you know it,” I say. “Callie, can you pick up dinner tonight? Unless you feel up to cooking.”

“I can get you whatever take out you’d like,” Callie offers.

“How about some burgers and shakes?” I ask.

“Sure. Any place in particular you want them from?”

“Harvey’s. It’s the best burgers in town. Be sure to get something for yourself and Martha as well,” I say.

“You got it. And thank you. We’ll grab them on our way home,” Callie says.

She hangs up the phone, and I turn to Jenni. “Should I have told her to bring you a burger too?”

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She shakes her head. “No, no. I need to head home. I have a date tonight.”

“Oh, really? Is it with anyone I know?” I ask.

“You might know him. Ray Southerland?”

“You mean Raymond Scott Southerland the Fourth?” Yes. I’ve heard of the guy. He doesn’t seem right for Jenni. There’s nothing really wrong with him. He’s just a bit boring. I don’t see the date going very far. If I had to pick a guy for Jenni, I’d set her up with Langston, one of my younger brothers. He’d never go for it because he’s best friends with her brother and Ronnie would probably kill him if he went after Jenni, but those two have obvious chemistry together. Even I can see it from a mile away.

But it’ll likely never happen. Not with Ronnie around, and he’s always with Langston. Those two are inseparable.

“Well, good luck with your date tonight,” I tell Jenni.

She grins at me. “Thanks. Don’t tell my parents this, but I’m only going because they want me to.”

“I get that.” But I don’t tell her she’s the one my parents want me to ask out. That would just be weird. Besides, there’s only one woman I can think about lately, and she’s out grabbing dinner tonight.

CALLIE

It's been three days since Martha sprained her ankle. So far, I haven't cooked anything yet because Weston had a family dinner and then went out with his brother, Langston. But tonight, he wants to eat at the house, and I'm in charge of preparing dinner. But how hard could it be? All I have to do is follow the instructions, and I'm perfectly capable of reading a package.

I scan the pantry and the freezer, and it looks like there's not much to choose from.

Martha hobbles into the room. "I was about to go to the store when I hurt my ankle. You'll need to go today to pick up some things. I made you a list."

"That was helpful of you."

"It's on the side of the fridge."

I spot it and scan the foods Weston seems to like. "Fish sticks? Chicken nuggets? I was expecting caviar or something."

"Oh, no. Weston eats like a child," Martha says. "He is very picky. He has to eat the fancy foods all the time at dinners. When he's home, he wants basic frozen foods. Don't ask why. That's just how he is."

What a relief. I have nothing to worry about then. I grab my purse and head out to the expensive car Weston has for me to drive. It's strangely familiar to be around such luxury. I'd been expecting to have to live in poverty when I walked away from Markus. That was a huge part of why I hadn't dared to leave him before I did. I'd wanted the security his money brought.

The job with Weston keeps me on my toes, but it isn't anything I can't handle. So far

he hasn't suspected anything about my pregnancy, but it's only a matter of time before he figures something out. But I plan to keep it a secret as long as I can. I just hope he doesn't get mad at me for withholding information from him. Legally, I don't have to tell him, but he may mind anyway, on a more personal level.

Things between us are starting to feel more... intimate. I'm with him all the time. Sometimes he even has me share his desk so I can see what he's doing better. But that doesn't mean anything. I see him like that with Jenni too. I still can't figure out if there's anything between them. And the jealousy has flared up a few times, especially when he sent me to take Martha to the doctor and they cozied up behind his desk while I was gone. It's ridiculous for me to think this way. He's free to date whomever he wants. I have zero say in the matter.

But I can't shake the feelings that keep bombarding me when I smell his cologne or our arms brush unexpectedly. And, believe me, that stuff happens all the time. I'm his assistant. I'm always assisting him which means I'm close by a lot.

I head to the grocery store and fill the cart with the list of foods Weston likes. Fish sticks, chicken nuggets, mac and cheese. Then I pick up a container of muffins and a few boxes of cookies. Oatmeal cream pies go into the cart as well as a box of chocolate snack cakes. Weston has no concept of how to eat healthy if this is the kinds of foods he wants. There's not a single fruit or vegetable on this list. I head to the produce section and put a bunch of bananas, a bag of apples, and a couple of bags of carrots with the rest of the items. He may not like these, but they'd at least be around if he feels like eating better. Why not have the option?

I'm not the healthiest eater, either, but I at least attempt to add fruits and vegetables into my diet.

When I get home, I put the groceries away. Martha sits at the bar and oversees my progress.

“No, you don’t put the bananas in the refrigerator. They go on the counter.”

“Oh, sorry.” Markus and I had a housekeeper and a cook. I never went grocery shopping when I was with him. I plunk the bananas on the counter.

“Be careful with them. They bruise easily.”

“Got it.” I put the fish sticks on the top shelf of the fridge.

“¡Niña tonta! You can’t put fish sticks in the refrigerator. Don’t you know anything?”

“Where else am I supposed to put them? Won’t they go bad if they don’t stay cold?”

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“You put them in the freezer,” she says, looking exasperated with me.

I pull out the drawer of the freezer and put them in there. “I guess you’re going to tell me the chicken nuggets go in the freezer too.”

“Of course, they do.”

Martha gets a phone call, and she hobbles back toward her room to talk to what sounds like her mom in Mexico. She told me on the way back from the doctor that her mom lived there.

What a relief. Now I could cook dinner in peace without Martha correcting every single thing I did. Who cares if the fish sticks are in the fridge instead of the freezer? I’m about to cook them anyway. I look at the instructions on the back of the box. It looks like I’m going to need a pan of some sort to cook them in. Rummaging around in the massive kitchen, I find a pan that matches the picture. After dumping the fish sticks onto the pan, I arrange them like the picture and heat the oven to 400 degrees like the box says. This isn’t hard at all. What was I worried about?

While the fish sticks cook, I pull out the list of chores Martha gave me that she usually does on Thursdays. Cleaning the bathrooms? Gross. This wasn’t in my original job description. Hopefully, I can get through it without throwing up too many times. My stomach feels queasy just thinking about it. I go to the supply closet and jangle around in there, finally coming out with a caddy of cleaning supplies, a bucket, and a scrub brush with a long handle inside some sort of caddy. I hold them as far away from my body as possible. I don’t want any bathroom juices getting on me.

How many bathrooms are in this house, after all? Do I need to clean them all today? This could take me all night. I roll up my sleeves and get scrubbing. After about fifteen minutes of work, Martha pops her head into the bathroom to check on my progress.

“What are you doing?” she shrieks.

I jump, and the long-handled brush flies through the air, smacking her in the face.

“Oh, sorry,” I say.

“You don’t clean the sink with that brush,” she says.

“Why not? It’s doing a great job.”

“That is the toilet brush. It’s only for the toilet. You don’t want disgusting toilet water in the sink.”

“Oh, I guess that is pretty gross.” Now I’ll have to clean the bathroom all over again.

“What am I supposed to clean the sink with?” I ask.

“Use a bucket of water mixed with cleaner and a soft rag,” Martha explains.

“This bucket?” I say, holding one up.

“Yes. And the cleaner you have on the floor over there,” she says.

“Okay,” I say.

Martha sniffs the air. “What is burning?”

“Burning? I can’t smell anything but bathroom cleaner.”

“No. Something is burning in the kitchen.”

“Oh no. The fish sticks!” I go back to the sink to wash my hands because bathroom germs and kitchen chores don’t mix. That’s when the smoke alarm goes off, practically deafening me. I race back to the kitchen. Martha is already opening the oven. A billow of smoke puffs from the inside. That can’t be good.

“So much for dinner.”

“Didn’t you set a timer?” she asks.

“Yes. For fifteen minutes. It was supposed to go off.”

Martha puts her hands on her hips. “What timer?”

“The one over the stove.”

She hobbles over to it. “You forgot to turn it on. The time still says fifteen minutes here,” she says. “Do you even know how to cook?”

“How hard can it be? I followed all the instructions. I even spread the little fish sticks out like the picture.”

“What’s that smell?” Weston says, coming into the room.

“I burned your dinner.” I hang my head in shame.

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“Hey, it’s okay,” Weston says. “Why don’t we just go out to get some food?”

That perks me right up. “We?”

“Sure. Just the two of us. Unless you want to come along, Martha?”

“No, no,” she says. “You two go and have fun. I’m going to watch my telenovelas with my feet up.”

A dinner alone with Weston? That sounds exciting and scary. I’m afraid of the feelings building up inside me the more I’m around him. “Is it all right if I just go get ready?” I ask.

“Of course. Let me know when you’re finished, and we’ll head out. Wear something nice. I’m in the mood to go someplace fancy.”

“Good, because I probably smell funky from cleaning the bathroom. You’d be sorry real fast if you hadn’t said yes.”

He laughs. “Thanks for the warning. If you need me, I’ll be in my office, finishing up some work.”

I go back into my room and enter the enormous closet. About six outfits are hanging there, the results of a shopping trip that happened the other day. There aren’t many options for shopping in Blue Mountain, so I had to travel a bit to a shopping center.

I choose a red dress that I’d gotten for special occasions with Weston. As his

assistant, I'd have to appear at functions with him from time to time. After putting it on and checking my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I brush my long, black hair until it shines and put on some cherry red lipstick. After a couple of spritzes of perfume, I feel satisfied.

I meet up with him in his office. "I hope you're not afraid of flying," he says. Then he looks up at me and takes in my appearance. His eyes scan me from head to foot like he's a starving man seeing a feast before him. "You look nice."

"You always look nice."

His brow lifts. "Wow. Okay. I didn't know you felt that way."

My gaze falls on his desk, and a vision flashes through my mind of Weston setting me on it and leaning in for a passionate kiss. Whoa. Where did that come from?

He steps closer to me. "Ready to go?"

"What did you mean when you asked if I was afraid of flying?"

"You'll see. The restaurant I had in mind is a little ways away. Hopefully, you're not starving right this minute."

Shaking my head, I say, "I ate a snack around five, so I'm good for a bit."

Weston puts his hand at the small of my back and guides me from the room. We head to the garage. He opens the door to a car that looks like it drives very fast. I've only seen cars like that in the movies. I climb into the front seat. He gets in too and backs out of the garage. Then he hits the gas, and we speed down his driveway, the powerful car propelling forward. I fly back into the seat behind me, and my stomach lurches.

Weston travels to a gated area down the street and swipes a card in front of a sensor. We go through the now-open gate, and he speeds around the bend. A helicopter comes into view with the propeller already spinning.

He turns to me and grins. In his expensive suit and sunglasses, he looks good enough to keep. His dark hair is styled to perfection, and his teeth are perfectly white. “Ever been in a helicopter before?”

I gulp. He’s so beautiful I can barely form words. So I shake my head.

“You’re about to go on an adventure then.” With that, he sweeps from the car, and I follow him to the helipad. He helps me onto the helicopter, my hair flying around me. Once we’re inside, I smooth it down and he hands me a headset. I put it on. We’re able to still talk to each other and protect our hearing at the same time.

My heart skips a beat as the ground grows distant below us. I look over at Weston, and his smile widens. It doesn’t take long before I can see the Atlanta traffic below. We skip over all of it. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

The helicopter flies toward a skyscraper and lands on top of it. Weston unbuckles his seatbelt. “Welcome to my Atlanta home.”

“You live here?”

“Sometimes. This is where I stay when I have work to do in the city, which is all the time. We’ll get you set up with a bedroom here as well.”

I follow him off the helicopter to the door that leads to the building. He takes me to an elevator, and we go down one floor. The doors open to a gorgeous penthouse with

expansive views of the sun setting over the city. “This is my place. I thought I’d show it to you really quick before we head to dinner.”

“It’s nice.” While his home in Blue Mountain is ornate with marble and wood, this place is sleek and modern with chrome and simple, straight lines. The walls are lined with windows overlooking the city below, and it’s huge. A staircase leads to another floor.

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“The bedrooms are upstairs,” he says. “Want to see where you’ll be staying next time we come?”

“Sure.”

He leads me up the staircase with a chrome railing atop clear glass. I can see between each step to the floor below, and it’s a little disorienting so I keep my eyes averted to the floor above and away from my feet.

Weston passes a few bedrooms and leads me to a room at the end of the hall. “My room is this door, and across from it, is your room. I move around a lot, and it helps to have you stay with me wherever I go. Everything is easier that way.”

Except for the fact that I’m starting to have feelings for you, and it’s getting hard to be near you. But I don’t voice that opinion. Instead, I say, “That makes sense.”

He pushes open the door to my new room, and I gasp at the view. The sun’s rays are shooting into the room and spilling across the sleek white comforter. A huge tv is mounted on the wall over a dresser, and a bathroom is connected on the right side of the room. “Not that I’m complaining, but this room is too big. I don’t need all this space.”

“I don’t have any smaller bedrooms. The place doesn’t come with them. Ready to go eat?”

“Sure. What else do you have at this location?”

“There’s an indoor pool on the floor beneath us as well as a sauna and a gym. I have a massage therapist that comes in frequently so there’s a room set up with massage tables down there as well. You can set up times for her to work on you too. I know this job can get stressful.”

From the looks of Weston’s biceps, he probably visits that gym a lot. “This is like a five-star resort,” I say.

“Why not have everything I need if I have to be here often? Our main office is in Atlanta, and we sell a lot of our real estate here as well.”

“How are we going to get to the restaurant if your car is back in Blue Mountain?” I ask.

“I have a car here, too, of course.”

We walk back to the elevator.

“It’s in the parking garage. I had a car brought here for you as well.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” I say.

He shrugs. “I’ll be keeping you busy. I’ll need you to have transportation in the city. How else are you going to get my dry cleaning or coffee in the morning?”

I hadn’t thought of that. But I should have. I’d been going to the local coffee shop every day to bring Weston his favorite drink in the mornings. It figures that he’ll want the same thing in the city too.

The car Weston has in this parking garage is just as nice as the one he drove us to the helicopter in. He gets a call as we’re getting in the car, and when he hangs up, he

turns to me.

“It looks like we’re going to need to stay in the city tonight. I’ll have clothes and necessities purchased and brought to you tonight while we’re at dinner. You’ll need to accompany me to the office first thing in the morning for the meeting we have with this big client.”

My head spins at this news. Markus and I traveled a lot, but most of our trips were well-planned ahead of time, not this spur-of-the-moment stuff.

Weston takes me to a restaurant I’ve been to once with Markus when we’d come to Atlanta. It was one of those places where none of the prices were on the menu. But we usually ate in the main dining room. Weston has a special room in the back of the restaurant reserved for him whenever he wants to come by.

“This is my favorite place to eat in Atlanta. I’ve made friends with the chef.”

He’s not kidding. The chef comes out to greet us personally after we’re seated. “I recommend the salmon tonight. It was caught today and flown in.”

“Sounds fantastic,” I say.

Weston doesn’t even look at the menu. “I’ll have a glass of your finest chardonnay and the calamari to start. And I’ll have the salmon.”

“Me too,” I say, unfolding my napkin. “I’ve never had the chef take my order before.”

“Jake always comes to see me when I eat here.”

“Does he ever make you fish sticks?” I ask. “Martha seems to think that’s what you

like to eat, so I'm surprised that you're interested in all this fancy food."

Weston laughs. "I love fish sticks, but I love a good fresh-caught salmon too. It's possible to like both."

“I guess you’re right.”

“What about you?” he asks. “What do you like to eat?”

His question catches me off guard. I’m just the hired help. Markus never seemed to care about what I wanted either. We always went to the places he liked, and he often ordered for me too because he didn’t want me to eat food that would make me gain weight. He ordered the salads and diet foods like steamed veggies and grilled chicken.

“I guess I like seafood,” I say. “Deep fried.”

“So you’d like fish sticks too?” he asks.

“I’ve never had them,” I admit.

“What? Never?”

“Nope. My husband—” I stop short. I was going to say he never let me eat fried foods, but then I realized I’d never mentioned Markus to Weston before.

“You’re married?” he asks.

I stare back at him. How did I get myself into this mess? Would Weston think I was being dishonest with him, withholding information?

WESTON

Callie's mouth falls open like she hadn't meant to mention her husband. "I—no. I mean. Yes. I'm actually going through a divorce."

"Not that it's any of my business," I say quickly. "I don't mean to pry. It's just you never mentioned it."

"I don't really like talking about that part of my life."

"Is that why you came to Blue Mountain? To get away from him?"

Her large brown eyes settle on me for a moment before she speaks. "Yes. But it's complicated."

"I can understand that." Not that I have experience with a divorce. My parents are still married and none of my siblings are even married yet. But I deal with complex situations at work all the time, and plenty of my clients are divorced. "Aren't most divorces complicated?" My protective side comes out when I think of some man mistreating Callie. "Have you filed yet?"

She shakes her head. "I'm still looking for a lawyer."

"You can use mine. I'll throw him in as a job perk," I say. "I happen to know he handles family law as well."

Her eyes get huge. "You'd do that? It seems like too much."

I have to admit, I have my own motives for wanting her nice and single. I'm starting to fall for this woman. The sooner she's away from that guy, the better. Is that wrong of me? I don't know anything about her situation. She's said it's complicated, but that

could mean any number of things. I respect marriage, and I believe it's important to fight for them, but I also respect Callie and her ability to know her own mind. And if she wants a divorce, she probably has a good reason for it.

"I hope you don't mind if I ask, but what happened between you and your soon-to-be ex?"

"Oh, he's my ex now. We may still be legally married, but I don't want any connection with him romantically. We're completely through. But I don't mind you asking. Markus is a controlling guy. I hardly know how to make my own choices now because he made so many decisions for me. All I want now is to be a strong, independent woman with the ability to choose for myself."

"Well, you have that now. I respect your agency. All you have to do is let me know your preference, and you'll have it the way you want."

"I'm not used to that. It's strange to think about," Callie says.

"Thank you for stepping in to help Martha. It's true I could have just hired another person to help around the house, but I don't enjoy bringing in new people to my home. I will bring in someone to clean bathrooms though. Martha said you weren't exactly trained to clean that way."

Callie's face flushes at my words. "Yeah. I'm not exactly the best at cleaning bathrooms."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," I say. "I don't know how to do it either."

Callie laughs, a rich, beautiful sound.

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“Where are you from?” I ask.

“I grew up in Savannah, Georgia, but my parents are both from Puerto Rico. What about you?”

“I grew up all over the world, but I claim Blue Mountain as home.”

“Did you go to a private school growing up?” she asks.

“No. I had a tutor who taught all the boys in our family. We traveled a lot, and it gave us more freedom. My dad needed to travel for the business, closing real estate deals across the world, and my mom didn’t want to be away from him or from us. So we went with him.”

“Was that hard as a kid?” she asks, her eyes soft with concern.

“Sometimes,” I admit. “But I loved traveling and exploring the world.”

“I love traveling too. I did quite a bit of it in my marriage to Markus. That was one of the good things about being married to him. Not much else was good,” she admits. “I’m sorry to be so negative about it.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s part of your life. I’d like to get to know you better and what you’ve gone through.” Because I did that with all my assistants, right? I’m getting myself into trouble. This woman has a lot on her plate. She probably doesn’t want to get romantically involved with someone else. I need to keep my distance before I take things to a place where I can’t take them back.

* * *

The next couple of months pass quickly. Callie and I make an excellent team, and we've traveled around the world by now. She was able to meet with my lawyer and get her divorce finalized. From what I understand, her ex put up a bit of a fight but relented in the end. For someone who wanted that much power, he gave it up easier than I would have thought. Although, my lawyer is the best of the best.

I gaze across the water from my comfortable position on the lounge chair on my yacht. Skipper perches at my feet and keeps watch over the sea. It's June now, and we're on a seven-day cruise of the Caribbean with my parents and my brothers, Langston, Ashton, Brensen, and Kaison.

I'm working from the boat, so I asked Callie to come along. At least that's the excuse I give myself. I think the real reason may be because I don't want to be away from her. My brothers have all met her by now, and they adore her. Brensen and Kaison have even teased me about flirting with my assistant, but somehow, it wasn't very funny at the time.

"You know we gave Skipper his name because of how he rules this yacht," I say to Callie.

"I can see that," she says. "How does he use the bathroom when he's on the boat?"

Kaison looks over to her from where he's leaning against the railing. "He has a little patch of fake grass that he uses. It's over on the other side of the ship."

A dolphin jumps out of the water and dives back in, back arched. Skipper goes nuts barking.

"You show those dolphins who's boss," Ashton tells him.

Skipper jumps up onto my lap and licks my face. “Gross,” I say. “I just saw you licking your hindquarters with that same tongue.”

“Oh, come on,” Ashton says. “He just wants to show you some love.”

“Let him lick your face with his crotch mouth,” I say.

Ashton sits up in the chair next to me and smiles. “Nah, I’m good.”

I laugh. “See? You don’t want him licking your face either.”

“For such a cute dog, he sure is gross,” Callie says.

“What? You don’t like him peeing on your shoes?”

“I still can’t believe he did that. It was my first interaction with him too,” she says.

“He’s warmed up to you some. He just needed a little time,” I say.

“I’ve warmed up to him too,” she admits. “He’s not so bad once you get to know him. I still can’t believe he gave Martha that sprained ankle though.”

“At least she’s doing better now,” I say. It hadn’t taken her long to get back on her feet. It’s a good thing, too, because I couldn’t take much more of Callie’s cooking. I made every excuse I could to take us out to eat. Somehow, I think she’s planned that all along. Like she cooked badly on purpose to get me to take her out. If that’s what she’s been doing, it’s been working for her.

“You look like you’re out of sparkling water,” my mom says coming up to us.

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Callie looks at her glass. “It looks like I am.”

“Andrew,” she calls to one of the ship’s servers. “Can you bring Callie more sparkling water?”

“Of course, ma’am.” He comes over with a new glass for her.

My mom has taken an intense liking to Callie. I’d hoped that would mean she’d back off about me marrying Jenni, but that hasn’t seemed to be the case. Of course, it wouldn’t. Because Callie is my employee. Not a romantic interest. I have to keep reminding myself about that. Because I’ve gotten comfortable with Callie around. I’ve kept my distance out of respect for her marriage, but she’s a divorced woman now. No. I shake my head internally. She’s still my employee. It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to go after her. If she rejected me, I may have to let her go, and that wasn’t fair to her. I couldn’t put her in that position. I know she needs the job.

So I continue to keep my distance, but every moment she’s around me, I feel more drawn to her. She’s beautiful, and smart, and kind. A truly selfless person. Her ex-husband was a piece of work for ever mistreating her. I can’t imagine how he could ever do it to someone as amazing as Callie.

After lunch, I put on my swim trunks and go to the end of the ship where the ladder is. The sun is beating down on the Caribbean waters around us, and it’s the perfect moment for a dip in the ocean. I pass Callie, and I can feel her eyes on me.

“I’m going for a swim. Want to join me?”

“Sure. I’ll go get changed.”

I glance over at her face, and her cheeks are flushed. Does she feel the same attraction to me that I feel to her? She’s pretty hard to read most of the time. So full of her own secrets. She hasn’t really opened up to me about her past since that night we went to that nice dinner in Atlanta.

I jump in the water, and my brother Langston tosses an inflated tube out to me. I swim under it and pop up through the middle, arranging myself so I’m lounging on it. I relax out there for a while until I look up to see Callie standing in a polka-dotted one-piece swimsuit with ruffles all over it. Her long, tanned legs are hard to keep from staring at. She looks gorgeous. She jumps into the water with a splash and swims up to me.

“This water feels amazing,” she says.

“It really does. Especially on a hot day like this.”

We swim around for a while like that. She grabs the side of my tube and uses it to keep herself afloat.

“I’m getting tired,” she admits.

“Here,” I offer. “Climb up.”

“In your lap?”

“Sure,” I say. “Come on.”

“Won’t I crush you?” she says. “I’m huge like a whale.”

“Hardly. You look perfect to me.” Did I really just say that out loud?

Yep. Because now, she’s blushing. But then she climbs up. I grab her arm and around her waist and hoist her up. She laughs.

“I’m not sure this is going to work. We’re going to capsize this thing.”

“I have you right where I want you,” I say. And then, without warning, I tickle her.

She squeals, and writhes on top of me. “Stop!” she swats at my hand. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

And then she retaliates, going for my sides. But I can’t get away from her. She’s pinned me down with her body. “Okay, okay. I give in. You win,” I say between breaths.

All four of my brothers are standing at the railing, sending catcalls down to us.

She twists to look at me, and her face is only inches from mine, ignoring my idiot brothers on the boat. “Now you know who’s really boss,” she teases.

“Oh, is that so?” I challenge her. But what she’s saying is true and is becoming truer every day. She’s beginning to be the queen of my heart, but she doesn’t even realize it. At least she doesn’t seem to.

9

CALLIE

The sun is setting, and I lean against the railing of the boat to take it all in as I sip on a virgin daiquiri. I still haven’t told Weston I’m pregnant, but it’s getting harder to

hide it from him. He and his brothers have offered me alcohol several times, and I finally told them I don't drink. I just didn't explain why. It's only a matter of time before the truth comes out. That's the thing about pregnant bellies. They tend to get bigger and bigger until they're impossible to hide. Especially when you're constantly going to exotic locations where you need to put on swimsuits.

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I'm starting to show just a little, so I bought a swimsuit with ruffles to hide my shape as much as possible. But in another month, I won't be able to get away with it anymore. I also need to come up with a childcare solution when I'm traveling all over with Weston. Would I be able to bring my baby? How could I breastfeed when I'm trying to work? I know women do it all the time. But I don't know how they're able to do it.

"Mind if I join you?" Weston comes up beside me with a glass of champagne.

"Not at all."

"What are you so deep in thought about over here? You look like you're contemplating world hunger or all the tragedies of the planet."

"I'm sure you don't want to hear about my messed-up life," I say, hoping he takes the hint and drops the subject.

He looks at me with eyes that match the ocean. "But I do want to hear about it." He takes my hand. "I've been wanting to hear about your life more and more lately."

I pull my hand away. "Is that really appropriate? I mean"—I shift my eyes back to the water and brush a stray hair back from my face—"I work for you." I say the words, but I don't really feel them. It's like I'm saying it because I'm supposed to, but the truth is, I really want him to take me in his arms and kiss me. I want him to tell me I'm the most beautiful woman in the world.

He lets go of my hand, and I feel the loss with an ache in my chest. "You're right. I'm

sorry. It won't happen again."

Those are the words he's supposed to say, but I don't really want to hear them. I look into his eyes and there's fire in them as he holds my gaze. I feel my face heat up. Every nerve in my body is alive with feeling. The wind brushes against my skin, and goosebumps prickle my arm. "What if I wanted it to happen again?" I say boldly. "I know it's a horrible idea, but there's this part of me that will regret this for the rest of my life if I don't speak up."

He slides along the railing, closer to me. "And what is it you have to say that's so important?"

I swallow. He's standing close enough to feel the warmth radiating off his body. And he's beautiful—like a work of art from a Greek master. The desire to trace the line of his strong jaw to see if it feels like granite overwhelms me. I've been holding back for so long, wanting to touch him for months, to tangle my hands in his hair and hear him whisper in my ear. Because I have this feeling that he's experiencing the same emotions that I am. It's reflecting in his eyes.

"What if I want to know what it's like to be with you, to have your lips on mine?" I can't believe I'm letting these words pass through my mouth. I've officially lost it. But that's what having a guy this attractive around can do to a girl. It's mind-scrambling stuff. All logic flees when he comes near. It's not the best combination when you're trying to take care of business transactions. It's become impossible to focus when I'm trying to get work done. The chemistry between us has almost become too much to fight. All the leaning across desks, trying to share a computer screen. It's heady stuff, and it's a miracle we've lasted this long without putting our hands all over each other.

His gaze bores into mine, and he wets his lips. The motion makes me weak at the knees, and it's hard to stand. "Would it really be so bad to have one tiny kiss? We're

both consenting adults, right?” he says. “That is, if you’re consenting. Because I am.”

My eyelashes flutter as my thoughts spin out of control. But then I calm them. He’s consenting. He wants to kiss me. I nod. “I’m consenting too. I want this.”

He steps even closer, and I part my lips as he puts a hand at the base of my skull, buried deep in my long waves. He brings his lips to mine in a kiss that begins tenderly, and slowly teases to become more as he explores the kiss. My head spins as the kiss progresses and he deepens it, pulling me toward him like he can’t get my body quite close enough to his. Because that’s how I feel. We’re still too far apart. My knees go weak, and I don’t want him to ever stop.

“Weston Alexander Keith the Third! What are you doing?”

We break apart to see his mom standing with her hands on her hips, giving us a disapproving glare. But he seems unperturbed. “Thank you for that interruption, Mother. You have impeccable timing.”

“You can’t kiss her! She’s your employee.”

“I’m well aware of that. And I have the situation under control.”

“No. You’re out of control. Your behavior is completely inappropriate.”

He seems unfazed by her chastisement. “And it’s none of your business.”

She gasps. “How dare you talk to me that way? And what about Jenni? You know your father and I were hoping the two of you would eventually marry someday.”

“I don’t want to marry Jenni. I have nothing against her, but I don’t feel anything romantic when I’m with her. That’s not what I want for the rest of my life. I’m sorry

to be such a disappointment to you, but that's just the way it is."

Standing with my back to the railing, with my mouth hanging open, I haven't a single clue what to say. All this time I've considered Jenni a threat, but now I see that's not an issue at all. Weston doesn't have feelings for her. That's good news.

10

WESTON

"You have a responsibility to this family. You're the eldest son," my mom says later when we're below deck in the expansive lounge of the yacht. My dad and Ashton and Brensen are with us.

"Your mother is right," my dad says. "Jenni is a perfectly wonderful woman. You'd be lucky to have her." My father is a tall man and looks like an older version of me. I got both his name and his looks, and he wants me to expand his already massive wealth by joining with one of the most prominent families in the Southern US.

I swirl the last of the rum in the bottom of my glass and lean back into the cushions of the couch. "We're not in the nineteenth century. If it's so important to you to have our families be joined with Jenni's, then go convince one of my brothers to date her."

"Hey," Brensen says, "If Weston doesn't want to date Jenni, then get Langston to do it."

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“Langston would be a great choice.” Ashton threads his fingers through his dark hair, still wet from an earlier swim. All five of us boys have the same dark hair. We were little blond-headed kids before, but we all turned dark as adults. Sometimes it’s strange to think about how I have four other dudes walking around who look so much like me.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking too,” I say. “I’m simply not interested.” I tip my glass to my mouth again and allow the liquid to travel down my throat.

My mom stares at us with her mouth hanging open. Then she clamps it shut. “Well, I hadn’t thought about asking Langston.”

“That’s not a terrible idea,” my dad says.

“Dude.” Ashton busts up laughing. “Langston’s going to thank you for this later.”

Great. What have I done to my poor brother? Mom and Dad were going to be all over him now.

Martha comes into the room with more drinks for us. “Oh, thank you, dear.” Mom takes a glass from her before she finishes handing us more drinks.

Martha turns to leave, but then my mom stops her. “Oh, wait just a second. Have you seen my diamond tennis bracelet? I could have sworn I brought it on the boat, but when I went to put it on this morning, it wasn’t with my jewelry.”

“No, ma’am. I haven’t seen it. But I’ll keep a close watch for it.” She disappears

toward the ship's kitchen.

"I hate it when I lose things. Oh well, I'll just have to get another one. But that one was special because your father bought it for me on our last anniversary."

And it's probably worth a small fortune. Hopefully, she's just misplaced it and one of the staff hasn't taken it. We've had enough of that lately. "I'm sure it's around here somewhere."

* * *

The next day I go below deck to Callie's room to see if she wants to go ashore with me to do some shopping. But she's not in there when I knock on the door. It pushes open a bit. I know I shouldn't go sneaking around her room, but I step inside. She's nowhere to be found. Maybe she's in the bathroom down the hall. There's a bottle of perfume on the dresser, and I can't help but pick it up to sniff the fragrance once more. She always smells so lovely.

I bring the bottle to my nose and press down just a bit to release a little of the scent. But instead of just a little, a lot comes out, shooting up my nostril. I drop the bottle and it shatters all over her dresser and splashes onto my shirt. That's what I get for snooping. Now I smell like a bomb of girliness just exploded next to me. And what's worse, my nose burns where I sprayed it up there.

I sweep the remnants of glass into the trash and grab a towel to soak up the rest. But I can't find a towel. There's nothing but a swimsuit cover-up draped over the end of her bed. So I grab that and soak up the spilled liquid. Hopefully, she doesn't mind her beachwear smelling like flowers.

A dip in the ocean would fix the smell issue that I have. But the boat starts to move, and I have no opportunity to wash off. I'll just have to take a shower instead. I head

through the boat to my quarters.

Langston and Kaison pass me on the way.

“Why do you smell like a woman?” Langston asks.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kaison covers his nose with his hand. “That’s horribly strong. You need to go take a shower. And then burn your clothes.”

“Where do you think I’m going?” I say.

“By the way,” Langston says. “Mom told me you’re trying to set me up with Jenni. You know I’m dating Sarah right now. Plus, Ronnie would kill me if I tried to date his sister.”

“Oh yeah!” Kaison says. “You would be great with Jenni.”

“You’re not helping. Please stop talking,” Langston says to Kaison.

“Ronnie wouldn’t kill you,” I say. “He knows you’re a great guy.” I slap him on the shoulder. “You and Jenni are perfect for each other. And it gets Mom and Dad off my back. It’s a win-win.”

“You’re horrible, and I’m perfectly capable of choosing my own women. I don’t need help in that department.”

“No one’s saying you need it. It’s just a friendly suggestion.”

He wrinkles up his nose. “You really need to take a shower. That smell is filling up

the entire hallway, and it's making my nose burn."

"I know. I'm working on it. You're the one who wants to talk so bad."

* * *

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That night, as the moon reflects off the water, I sit on the deck by myself. I can't help but think of Callie and how it felt to have her lips pressing against mine. Hopefully, it won't be a problem that we work together. At least I seem to have gotten my parents off my back about dating Jenni.

"Mind if I join you?" Callie asks.

"Not at all."

She steps next to me at the railing. "It's a beautiful night."

"Yes, it is," I say.

She wrinkles her nose. "Why do you smell like my perfume?"

I sniff myself. "I think you're just smelling yourself. Because I would have no reason to smell like your perfume." Shoot. I thought I'd scrubbed all of the scent off me, but it must still be lingering.

"No. You definitely smell like my perfume. I would know," she insists.

"Well, maybe I snuck into your room and sprayed it on myself," I say. It sounds ridiculous enough that maybe she'll realize that and stop asking me about it.

"That would be weird," she says.

"Exactly. You should hear yourself. It's a weird thing to accuse someone of smelling

like you.”

She scrunches her forehead in confusion. “I’m just going to change the subject now.”

Good. The conversation is stressing me out.

“Do you think we made a mistake last night?”

“You mean the kissing?” I shake my head. “No way. That could never be a mistake.” I thought it would be bad talking about the perfume fiasco, but this is even worse.

“You know, the boss-employee thing? It might get us into trouble.”

“In trouble with who? The other people in the office? We’re hardly ever there. You’ve only been there twice, and we don’t have to tell them we’re a thing.”

“And are we a thing?” she asks. “Or were you just kissing me for the fun of it with no strings attached?”

Whoa. This conversation got real serious real fast. “I don’t know. The last relationship I had didn’t go so well.”

“What happened? I hope you don’t mind me asking,” Callie says.

“Her name is Ripley. She was using me for my money and sneaking around with a guy from my grounds maintenance team. I found them making out in my stables, right on my property. They didn’t even have the decency to go someplace else. I broke up with her right away, and she had the audacity to ask me for money before she left. That was when I realized it was all about the cash for her. I’d paid off her student loans.”

“Is that why your parents are pushing you to be with a girl from your own social status?”

“Probably. I hadn’t really thought about that. I’m sure they just want to protect me. We’re always a target for people trying to use us for our money or steal something expensive from us.”

“And Jenni already has her own money. It would make sense. They wouldn’t have to worry about someone just being in it for the wealth.”

“I’m sure you’re right. But now I have problems trusting again. So for now, I don’t want this to get too serious too fast.”

“So you’re saying that because I’m not rich like you, I must be a money-hungry woman out to use you and then cheat on you?”

“It doesn’t sound so great when you put it like that,” I say.

“I can’t believe you’d think so little of me,” Callie says. “I think I’m going to go to bed now.” She turns and walks away.

“Callie, wait!”

But she just keeps on going. I’ve officially ruined everything.

11

CALLIE

Fuming, I head back to my cabin. I'm the one who doesn't want to be with a wealthy guy, the last person who would be a gold digger. After living that life, I've seen it's not all it's cracked up to be. Loaded guys tend to be full of themselves, thinking they can do whatever they want just because they have a bunch of money.

I open the door to my room, and a wall of flower smell hits me. I nearly gag. What happened in here? My perfume bottle is in the trash in pieces, and my swim cover up smells like someone dumped the entire bottle on it. Did Martha do this when she was in here cleaning my room? Maybe that was why Weston smelled like my perfume. She could have transferred the smell to him somehow. Or maybe it was Skipper. He's always getting into trouble.

The next morning at breakfast, Weston approaches me with a collared shirt unbuttoned to show his abs and perfect pectorals. A pair of sunglasses is perched on top of his head. He takes a seat next to me. "I'm sorry about the way things went last night."

"It's okay," I say. "But maybe it's best if we keep things professional between us."

He nods. "If that's what you want."

Well, I'm not really in the mood to become some guy's plaything either. I just got out of a bad relationship, and I'm not in the mood to be used and tossed to the side.

The rest of the trip passes uneventfully, and Weston, Langston, their parents, and I take one of the family's six private jets back to the tiny airport in Blue Mountain. The rest of the family members are dashing off to various parts of the world. Ashton is going to Singapore, Brensen is going to Kenya, and Kaison is going to Dubai.

Weston told me they never flew into big airports. They avoided them like the plague because they hate the crowds and traffic.

There are three black cars lined up to take us back to our various homes, and our driver takes Weston and me back to Weston's estate. My mom calls when we're driving back home.

"Hi, Mom."

"How was your trip?"

"It was fantastic." I'd told her all about my trip and my divorce from Markus. She didn't know about the baby though. I know I have to tell her soon because she's going to figure it out anyway. I plan on keeping the baby.

The next two weeks pass by quickly. My belly is getting bigger too. It's getting harder to hide it from Weston, but he hasn't seemed to notice that I have an abnormally large belly for my frame. It's July now, and Blue Mountain is sweltering. Weston will be gone to Atlanta for the rest of the day, and he left me in Blue Mountain to finish up some paperwork for him. When I finish, I decide to take a swim in the pool.

Since he's not around, I decide to put on my bikini. It's the one I'd taken to Hawaii months ago and had put in my carry-on—one of the only items I still had from my old life with Markus. I look in the mirror. My belly protrudes, and I can't help but decide that it's adorable. I've been feeling the baby moving around some too. I just

hit twenty weeks pregnant, the halfway point of my pregnancy.

I head outside. The house is deserted because Martha went grocery shopping, and the landscapers have finished up for the day. Weston isn't due back until tomorrow. The sun beats down on my head. I pull down my sunglasses from where they've been resting against my messy bun.

I walk down the steps and glide through the refreshingly cool water. It feels amazing after the heat of the day. I swim a few laps before getting out and wrapping a towel around me. Then I stretch my towel out on a lounge chair and take a nap.

I wake to a growling in my stomach. Guess the baby's hungry. I stand and blink in the bright sunlight.

"Taking a swim?"

I look up and squint to see Weston coming out of the house.

"You're back early."

"One of our meetings got canceled, so there wasn't really a reason to stay another day."

I wrap my towel around my midsection to hide my belly, but Weston is staring. He's had to have noticed the fact that I have a protruding pregnant belly.

I walk past him, but he grabs my bare arm.

"Callie."

The way he says my name sends a chill down my spine.

“Is there something you need to tell me?”

I turn to meet his eyes. He’s not smiling. But his expression isn’t unkind either. It’s serious, and a little sad. Maybe betrayed. It makes me feel sick. Because I’ve been keeping this huge secret from him, and now he knows.

“You weren’t supposed to see me like this. You were supposed to be gone.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:15 am

“I know this is one of those questions a guy isn’t supposed to ever ask a girl, but I’m going to ask you anyway, because I feel like I need to know. Are you going to have a baby?”

“Are you asking me as my boss? Because you’re not allowed to do that, are you?”

“I’m asking as your friend because I’m worried about you and I care about you.” His expression is filled with compassion and love.

Love? I dismiss the thought. Weston doesn’t feel that way about me, does he? He made that clear on the yacht.

“Fine. Yes, I’m pregnant.”

“How soon is the baby coming?” he asks.

“January.”

He swallows but keeps his eyes on me. “Have you decided what you’re going to do when the baby is born?”

“Not yet. I didn’t know how you’d feel about it. I figured I had more time to discuss it with you. But I’m getting bigger, and it’s getting harder to keep it a secret. I guess there’s no point in hiding it anymore.”

“Is this your ex-husband’s baby?”

“Yep. That’s why I left him. He said he never wanted kids. He would have forced me to get an abortion.”

“No one can force you to do that. It’s your choice.”

“Believe me, he could have done it. He controlled everything I did.”

“How could he have done that?”

“Markus had the power to make my life so miserable. You have no idea.”

Weston’s eyes harden, and a muscle tics in his jaw. “It’s a good thing he’s not around.”

“Yes, and that we’re already divorced.”

“Does he know about the baby?”

“No,” I say. “He didn’t need to know. I don’t want him near this baby.”

“Didn’t you have a legal obligation to disclose that information to him?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. I don’t want him hurting this baby like he hurt me.”

“Won’t he see you again and figure it out?”

“I don’t see how he could. He doesn’t know where I am, and I don’t plan on telling him.”

“You have a home here as long as you need it. Whether you choose to work for me or not, I’ll help you find a childcare solution.”

Relief flows through me, and tears spring to my eyes. “Thank you, Weston. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

“You mean a lot to me. I only wish you’d told me sooner. We could have saved you a lot of worry.”

How did I get so lucky to have such a great guy as my employer? It almost feels like he’s going above and beyond, like a guy would do for the woman he loves. Is that what is happening here?

12

WESTON

I gaze over to where Callie’s keyboarding next to me. I can see the baby moving from here as her rounded middle shifts beneath the cotton shirt she’s wearing. Her belly has grown rounder, but I’m only that much more attracted to her. We’re sitting in my office together just doing everyday work, but it feels comfortable to be here with her.

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“She’s going crazy today.” She pats her belly and then pokes at it. “It’s so weird to have another person living inside you.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” Callie’s the bravest woman I’ve ever met. I can’t believe she had the courage to walk away from her ex. From what I now understand, he did a lot to provide for her financially.

The past few months have flown by. We had some expensive things from the house go missing again, and I’m not sure who to trust. Callie says she hasn’t taken anything, and I’m starting to wonder if maybe Martha would do something like that. Martha said it could have just been misplaced while cleaning, but we’ve looked around and haven’t found them. I’m careful about who I let around the property, but we have had some maintenance guys around, too, fixing various broken things.

Martha steps into the room. “Dinner will be ready at six.”

“Thank you, Martha. We’re just wrapping up some things, and then we’ll be in there to eat.”

Callie tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and then types some more as she stares intently at the screen and wrinkles up her nose, something she always does that when she’s concentrating. It’s the most adorable thing. She doesn’t even notice me watching her because she’s so absorbed in the work.

Callie is thriving as my assistant, always going above and beyond, picking up quickly on how the business works and helping me land properties I couldn’t have gotten on my own.

I bring her to dinners with investors, and she's got everyone at the table laughing. And by the end of the dinners, they're shaking hands over a business deal. It's happened many times, and business is booming now, thanks to Callie's natural gift for working with people.

She's one of the most amazing women I've ever met—talented with a sharp wit and an even-sharper mind.

“Aren't you glad Martha's back to cooking again?” She looks over at me, and I can tell she's holding back a laugh.

“It wasn't so bad when you were cooking.”

“Yeah, right. You like burnt fish sticks and overcooked, dried-out chicken?”

“Okay, I was trying to be polite, but yeah. It wasn't the best. It doesn't mean you aren't amazing at a bunch of other things though,” I say, hoping I haven't gotten myself into trouble.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“You're great with people, and you're funny and smart.”

She blushes. “Thank you. You're all those things too.”

“I can't believe your ex didn't come fighting for you after you left.”

“He really didn't try very hard. He sent me a few texts, but when I finally told him I wasn't coming back, he didn't seem that disappointed. It was like he didn't even want to try to win me back.”

“Were you having problems before you left?” I ask.

“We argued all the time. He was always taking me on these trips, and the entire time we just fought or he was off doing his own thing. I heard him talking to another woman when I was leaving the airport.”

“You mean he’d been cheating?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. I don’t know how long it had been going on, but it only confirmed that running away was the right thing to do.”

“Well, I’m glad you did, or I wouldn’t have gotten the chance to meet you,” I say. I reach out and take her hand. “I’m glad you’re in my life. And your baby too.”

Her eyes soften. “I’m glad I ended up here too.”

We go back to our work, settling into a comfortable silence, the only sounds the occasional scroll of the mouse or click of a key. Martha comes into the room after a while.

“Dinner is ready.”

Skipper runs into the room barking. “I think he needs to go out.”

“I can let him out,” Martha says.

“No, you’re in the middle of dinner. I don’t mind doing it.” I step toward him, and he turns in the opposite direction and dashes down the hall. “Where are you going, you silly dog? That’s not the way to the backyard.” I follow him toward the bedrooms. “Skipper!” I call. “Here, boy.” Where did he go? His barks carry from one of the bedrooms. Turning the corner, I find him in Callie’s room. “What are you doing in

here? Let's get you outside before you pee on the floor again. Or something worse." I reach down to get him, but he darts away. "What is up with you?"

There's a purse unzipped in the corner of the room, and Skipper buries his head in it. "What are you doing over there?" Did Callie leave treats in her purse?

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Skipper pulls his head up, and there's something in his mouth.

"Drop it," I command. The last thing we need is for him to eat something weird and to throw up all over the place again.

He releases whatever was in his mouth, and it hits the marble floor with a soft clink. That doesn't sound like something edible. I stoop down to see what he dropped, and my heart stops. It's my grandmother's ring. A priceless family heirloom. I'd been planning to give it to my future wife one day. My mom gave it to me, hoping it would end up with Jenni. I've been thinking about giving it to Callie.

How did this get in Callie's purse? I feel sick. The only explanation I can come up with is that she took it and put it in there. Just like Natasha. I'm the biggest fool alive. How could I have trusted Callie? She probably needed extra cash for the baby. Anger and betrayal build inside me until I feel like I'm ready to scream. Was my grandmother's precious ring about to end up in some pawn shop?

I'd let myself start to fall for this woman, and all along she'd been playing me. If she wanted wealth, she could have had it! All she had to do was be patient, and I likely would have proposed. Then all my property would have been hers anyway. There was no chance of that happening now. Not after a betrayal like this.

What else had she taken? I went back to my room where I kept the precious family jewels in the closet. I punch in the combination to the safe I bought after Natasha stole from me. The combination was my parents' wedding anniversary. I had it written on a slip of paper in my desk. Callie could have seen it there if she'd wanted to snoop. I hadn't labeled what the numbers were for, but she could have found the

safe and put two and two together.

I open the safe and take inventory of the contents. Nothing else seems to be missing. I'd had the ring out yesterday because I was thinking about using it to propose to Callie. I must have forgotten to put it back in the safe. Either that, or Callie had found the combination. I was so stupid to put it down on paper. I was afraid I'd forget it, and I didn't think Callie would figure it out. I'd trusted her. She didn't seem like the type to steal, but then again, neither did Natasha. I'm clearly not very good at spotting a thief.

Dread fills my heart, causing it to grow heavy. I'll have to let Callie go. I hate this. It's tearing out my heart to admit it, but I can't have her around if she's stealing from me, betraying me like that. The only thing I can do is tell her to pack her things and leave. But before I do that, I change the combination to the safe. This time, I change it to Skipper's birthday.

13

CALLIE

"Where's Weston?" I ask Martha.

"He went to get Skipper to let him out."

"He should be back by now."

"What's the rush?" Martha asks.

"I'm hungry. I've got to eat for two, and you can't let a pregnant woman go without food or terrible things will happen. You don't want to see me when I'm hangry. You'll be scarred for life." I pace back and forth in the kitchen. "What's taking so

long?”

“Why don’t you just go back there and find him if you want to hurry things up?” Martha suggests.

“Great idea,” I say. I go down the hall and call out to him. “Weston?” Skipper comes running from his master’s room. “I thought you were going out, boy.” Maybe Weston is in his room since Skipper had just come from there. I don’t usually go into Weston’s room because I want to give him as much privacy as possible. You know, to build trust and whatnot. But I’m hungry, and he’s taking forever. “Are you in here?” I don’t see him.

But then he steps out of his massive closet. How do I know it’s massive? Okay, I poked my head in once. That’s how I know. I didn’t dig around or anything, but I was curious to see how big it was.

His face is normally warm and welcoming when he sees me, but he looks downright hostile right now. “We need to talk.”

“What’s wrong?” I’m assuming something is wrong because he looks like he’s a king ready to chop off some heads.

“I found out who’s been stealing all this time.”

“Who?”

“Don’t play games with me, Callie. It’s over.”

“What are you talking about?” My heart pounds. It’s almost like he thinks I’m the one who’s been stealing all this stuff. But that would be nuts. I’ve never stolen anything in my life.

“I found my grandmother’s ring in your purse in your room.”

“What?” Confusion swirls through me, quickly followed by a nice, big dose of panic.

“I don’t know how it got in there. I’ve never even seen your grandmother’s ring.”

“You don’t get to lie to me anymore. Pack your things because I can’t have a thief in my house.”

“I’m not a thief, I swear!” How could I convince him I’m telling the truth? “I would never steal from you. I love you, Weston. Don’t you see that?” Why hadn’t I told him before now? If only I’d been more verbal about what I’d been feeling, then maybe he’d trust me enough to know I’m telling him the truth.

There’s a fire lit in his eyes. “It’s too late for that now. You have to leave.”

“And go where? You told me this is my home.”

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“That was before I figured out you’ve been stealing from me.”

“I didn’t steal from you. Please believe me.” I’m getting desperate for myself. I can’t be uprooted again. I don’t want to feel scared like I did in the Atlanta airport.

His eyes are hard and unfeeling. “Save your breath. I’ve made my decision.”

Tears spill down my cheeks. There’s nothing else to do but gather my belongings. I’d eat a protein bar for dinner. The last thing I want to do right now is sit down to dinner with Weston.

I go in my room and dig around in my sock drawer until I find my emergency stash of protein bars. I tear open the package and take a bite. When I’ve devoured the entire thing, I pack my suitcase. At least I’d bought a bigger one for all the traveling we’d done.

I’d have to start all over again with a new job so I’d have a way to provide for the baby. I’m naming her Angel because she’s the precious angel who saved me from that awful marriage. It’s my turn to save her now.

My phone rings, and I walk across the room to where it’s sitting on my bedside table. It’s Markus. What does he want?

“Hello?”

“Hey, babe. It’s Markus.”

“You can’t call me that anymore. We’re not married.”

“Oh, come on. We can still be friendly, right?” he says.

“Markus, I don’t know.”

“Look, I’m not the same guy I was before. I know I’ve messed up a lot in the past, but I’ve been going to therapy, and I’m doing really well now. I’m really sorry about all the bad I’ve done to you before.”

A small flicker of hope grows inside me. Could he have really changed? “That’s great, Markus. I’m glad you’re doing all that inner work.”

“I’m basically a brand-new man. You really deserved better.”

I can hardly believe the words I’m hearing. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“So how are things going for you in Blue Mountain?” He ended up finding out about where I was when I filed the divorce papers. By then things had calmed down enough that he had accepted things were over between us. Or so I’d thought.

I sigh. “Not well. I’m moving.”

“Oh? And where are you going? What happened to the job you got?”

“It didn’t work out. So I’m leaving. I don’t know where I’m going yet.”

“This may sound like a crazy suggestion, so say no if you’re not comfortable with it. I don’t want to pressure you or anything. But you’re always welcome to come live with me. You know, just until you work things out.”

I really do need a place to stay. Going back with him would be easy. I wouldn't have to make all these hard choices. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to spend a few weeks at his place just until I got a new job. It didn't mean I had to live with him forever, right? I don't exactly have anywhere else to go. I have a little money saved up, but I'll need it for a deposit on my new place. I have the car I got in the divorce, so I at least have transportation. "I'll think about it, Markus. Thank you for the offer. It's very nice of you."

"Just let me know, sweetheart."

Will he be furious if he finds out I'm pregnant with his kid, and I want to keep her? It's not like I can hide the fact that I have a big pregnant belly. But honestly, it shouldn't matter to him now, right? If he doesn't want the baby, then he shouldn't care if I never tell him about her. I won't ask him for child support, and he won't have to deal with being a dad since he never wanted to experience life as a parent.

But maybe he's changed about that too. He deserved a chance to at least find out the truth about the baby. "I need to tell you something, Markus."

"What is it? You can tell me anything."

"I'm pregnant."

"What?" For a moment his tone goes cold, but then it quickly switches back to the honeyed voice he was using before. "Who's the father?"

"You are. I haven't slept with anyone else."

He's quiet for a long time. "Is this why you left?"

“Yes.”

“I wish you’d just told me. We could have figured something out. You scared me half to death when you ran away like that. Have you ever stopped to think how I felt that day?”

I really hadn’t. All I’d cared about was protecting my baby. “No.”

“It was horrible. You put me through a lot. But I forgive you. I’ve worked through all this in therapy. There’s no need to bring up the past again.”

I hang up the call with Markus and curl up on my side in bed, pulling the covers over me. It was strange to talk to him again. We’ve had a few calls since I left. He tried to talk me out of it at first, but then he gave in pretty easily. I was surprised by how quick our divorce was. He’d already owned the house for a long time before we were married, so I wasn’t really entitled to much of it. I agreed to give up my payout so we could have a speedy divorce. I just wanted to be done with him and the entire process.

So why am I thinking about going back to stay now? I’ve come so far. It makes little sense to put myself back in that situation. But I’m not sure I can face being without a home. Then again, Markus isn’t married to me anymore. He can’t force me to get an abortion. No one can really force a woman to get an abortion, but he could have made life awfully miserable for me until I agreed to listen to what he wanted. I know this because he’s done awful things to me in the past to get me to bend to his will.

I shudder. I can’t revisit any of that. It’s too dark, and it’s not part of my life anymore.

My phone rings again once I have most everything packed up.

“Hey, Mom,” I say after I answer.

“Hey, what are you up to tonight?”

“I just got fired.” A plan forms in my mind. Maybe I could stay with them. It would be better than crawling back to Markus.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry to hear that,” Mom says. “Where are you going to live?”

“Do you think I could come back and stay with you and Dad for a while until I get another job?”

“Of course, you can,” she says.

A lump forms in my throat. “I really wanted to prove that I could do it on my own, but I’ve completely failed. I’m having this baby soon, and I need a stable home for her.”

“We don’t want our grandbaby out on the street. Come home. We’ll let you have your old room back, and we’ll turn my sewing room into a nursery.”

Relief washes over me. “Thank you, Mom. I promise it won’t be for long. I’m planning to find a job and a place of my own.”

“And that’s fine. But in the meantime, you have a place here with us.”

We talk for another few minutes as we figure out all the details. I end the call and lie back on my pillows. My heart aches. How could Weston believe I really stole that ring?

His face swims before me, and I can see his angry expression in my mind again. It's hard to lose my job, my home and my security, but I'll survive that. But I'm not sure how I'll survive never seeing Weston again.

14

WESTON

Itoss and turn in my bed, the Egyptian cotton sheets tangling around my legs. Finally, I get up and head out to the living room of my condo in Atlanta. I sit on the couch and flip the switch that lights the fireplace. It crackles to life and brings warmth to the room.

Callie is gone, and my stomach is twisted in knots over how things ended up playing out. I sure have bad luck with personal assistants. I'd called Jenni yesterday to see if her friend was still available to work. It was a slim chance, but her friend had come through, even though it had been several months since Jenni had told me about her.

I need to get some rest. Tomorrow, I'm meeting with a new client, and I hope to make a good impression. My stomach growls. Why am I hungry at three in the morning? I get up from the couch and go into the massive pantry next to the kitchen. I grab a box of Lucky Charms and pour a bowl. One can never go wrong with cereal in the middle of the night. I have all the money I could ever want for the fanciest food in the store, and all I really want is cheap, sugary cereal. My family mocks me for it, and I don't care one bit.

Because I can never eat a bowl of cereal without staring at my phone, I pull it out. Instead of mindlessly scrolling through my social media like I usually do, I hover my finger over the search button. Oh man. How have I stooped this low? Now I feel like stalking the girl I fired on social media. Because that's all she is to me, right? Some girl I caught stealing and, therefore, fired?

It's embarrassing, but no one's around to know about. Okay, who am I kidding? I'm embarrassed to be doing this in front of myself right now. But I don't care. The pull to see her face again is too strong.

Why did she have to turn out to be a thief? I can't help but feel angry all over again. Because she destroyed what we had. She disrupted her own stability. I'd wanted to give her a home. But I can't do that if she's going to steal from me. I have plenty of money, but my grandma's ring is precious to me.

I pull up her profile, and I scroll through her photos. Yes, it's embarrassing, but it's worth it to see her face again. I find old pictures from when she was with Markus. There's one where they're on a beach together, and she's in a bikini. His abs are clearly cut and lean in the picture. I peer at his face. He looks like he's full of himself, and I don't like the way he has his arm around her like she's his personal property.

Okay, so maybe he has his arm around her like a normal husband, but since I know he's a controlling abuser, it looks sinister to me. And I don't like the fact that he's touching her at all. I put my phone down. This is making me too upset. I need to finish my cereal and go back to bed. But how can I sleep now with the image of Markus putting his hands on Callie?

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It's not actually real anymore. I have to remind myself of that. She's not with him now. Unless she decided to go back to him. I don't really know that, do I? Because I threw her out. What's done is done. I can't change it now. But regret snakes through me. Maybe I should have taken more time to conduct an investigation. I should have gotten my security cameras fixed. They'd been messed up. If I'd taken the time to get them repaired, I'd have proof of who took the jewelry.

Callie said she didn't do it. Had I made a mistake by not trusting her? She's never lied to me before. It's possible that I was too hasty.

It makes me sick to think that she might have gone back to him. I turn over my phone again. Should I send her a message to check in with her? I pull up her profile and pull up the screen that has our last private chat. We'd talked about Skipper peeing behind the grand piano.

Of course. Our conversation was centered on my ridiculous dog. Can I send her another message? I keep staring at the screen while I take another bite of Lucky Charms.

It's too late to message her. What if her phone isn't on Do Not Disturb, and it wakes her up? She's pregnant, and she needs her rest. I'm exhausted and not in my right mind anyway. It's the middle of the night, not exactly the best time for me to be making major life decisions.

Because that's what this would be. Callie is important. She'd quickly become that way. But I'm not sure if she's supposed to be in my life anymore. How can I be with someone I can't trust? That dependability is everything.

But not having her is about to destroy me.

No. I won't message her tonight. I'll finish my cereal, go back to bed, and finally get some good rest. Because my meeting in the morning is important, and that's what matters right now. Talking to Callie can wait.

Maybe in the morning things will be clearer, and I'll see what a bad idea it is to text Callie.

Because this is just me being irrational in the middle of the night, right? It has nothing to do with the fact that my heart is aching for this woman I know I shouldn't want. She's proven herself to be greedy just like my ex-girlfriend. I've learned my lesson about girls who just want me for my money.

Callie said she didn't want to get involved with a guy with money, but her actions are proving otherwise. She clearly has positioned herself in my home so she can benefit from my wealth. For all I know, the next thing would be for her to cheat on me like what happened before.

I can't take that chance, and I won't take it. I just hope the throbbing hole in my heart will go away soon. Because the longer I'm not with her, the worse it seems to get.

* * *

I walk into my office at our headquarters in Atlanta the next morning. The receptionist comes into the room. "Your ten o'clock is here. He couldn't make it, so he sent someone in his place."

"Ok. Sounds good." I get up and head down the hall, coffee and notepad in hand. I walk into the room, and a guy with dark hair has his back to me. "Thanks for coming."

He turns to me, and my heart goes cold. “Mr. Keith, I apologize Donald couldn’t make it today. He suddenly came down with the flu.”

Am I hallucinating? Because the man in front of me looks identical to Markus, the guy I was stalking on social media. Oh yeah. I ended up staying up even later, stalking his page instead of going to bed. He seemed like he was completely full of himself. But this guy is his exact replica. It’s uncanny.

Because I can’t help myself, I say, “I didn’t catch your name. What did you say it was?”

“Markus Richardson.” He reaches out to shake my hand, but I don’t take it. “Is something wrong?” He keeps his hand outstretched.

What am I doing? I overcome my shock and take his hand. “Sorry. It’s nice to meet you.”

He clears his throat. “So I’ve been looking over the proposal, and I think we have an excellent shot at making this work.” His voice drones on, but I can’t focus on anything he’s saying. In my mind’s eye, I keep seeing his arm possessively around Callie, and her pale face wherever she talked about what life with him was like. I hope with everything in me that she hasn’t gone back to him.

I know I’m being horribly rude and unprofessional, but I interrupt him anyway, because I can’t stand another minute of this conversation. “You say your name is Markus Richardson?”

He pauses. “Yes.”

“I believe we may have a mutual...” What’s the right word? Friend? No. Definitely not that. Acquaintance? That doesn’t seem strong enough. “Well, we both know the

same person.”

Markus blinks at me. “Who is it?”

“Callie Richardson.”

“How do you know her?” he asks.

“She used to be my personal assistant.”

“Used to be? What happened?”

I feel my face heating up. I can’t believe I’m about to say this. “It turns out she’s a thief.” I probably shouldn’t be telling him this, but I’d like to see what he thinks about the situation. Because he probably knows Callie better than anyone else, and he’ll know if she’s capable of stealing. Of course, there’s always the chance that he’ll throw her under the bus just to be a jerk, but this is the only way I can think of to possibly clear her name.

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“A thief?” He shakes his head. “Callie? That doesn’t sound like her at all. She’s the girl who won’t let you fill your cup with soda when you get the free water cup at a fast-food place. The one who makes you go back to the register and pay for it. Callie’s a rule keeper. What makes you think she stole from you?”

“I found my grandmother’s ring in her purse.”

“What were you doing in her purse?”

“My dog found it in her purse.”

“I don’t care if that ring was in her purse. All I can tell you is Callie wouldn’t steal from you. There’s plenty about her that I don’t like, but she’s not dishonest.”

“And what is it about her that you don’t like?” I know I probably shouldn’t go down this road in the middle of a business meeting, but I can’t help myself. I’m asking for trouble.

“Callie is the most selfish person I’ve ever met.”

That doesn’t sound like Callie. “How’s that?”

“She chose a tiny mass of flesh over our marriage. She threw away everything.”

“Mass of flesh? What are you talking about?” Realization dawned on me. “You mean her baby?” I want to punch his face, but I don’t. How does he have so much control over my emotions? But it’s not him really, is it? It’s Callie. I feel a powerful urge to

protect her, and she's not even here. Because I love her.

"Whoa there." Markus scrutinizes my face with his eyes narrowed, and then a light dawns in his eyes. "Wait a second. You're in love with her. It's in your expression."

Tearing my gaze away from him, I say, "I don't know what you're talking about." Am I really that obvious?

Markus suddenly looks furious. "I need to go." He closes the folder he had open on the table, gets up, and storms from the room.

So much for that business deal.

15

CALLIE

After submitting yet another job application, I lean back in my desk chair and breathe out a sigh. I've updated my resume ten times in the last two weeks and have gone in for a few interviews, but I'm pretty sure my huge pregnant belly is just scaring off potential employers. I don't have the best job history either. Before my work with Weston, I hadn't worked in years because I didn't need to with Markus paying for everything.

I've moved in with my parents, and while they've been great, I miss working. Especially for Weston. I was good at that job. I even saved him a few clients who were about to walk away. It was more than just grabbing his coffee or running paperwork around. I loved what Weston was doing. I wanted to work at the company to help find new properties.

Maybe I need to stop applying for jobs as an assistant and instead go get my real

estate license so I can sell commercial real estate on my own or with another company. Taking an enormous step like that when I'm about to have a baby is scary.

There's a knock on the front door and both my parents are at work, so I go to see who it is.

Markus is standing on the front step. "Hey." He looks nervous to see me.

Immediately, panic rises inside me, but I push it down. Markus isn't the same guy I divorced. He's gone to therapy now. Shouldn't I at least give him a chance to speak? "Do you want to come in?"

Relief washes over his features. "Sure. I was half expecting you to slam the door in my face."

I almost had. "Why did you come to see me?"

"I see you're getting right to the point," he says. "Mind if I sit down?" He gestures to the couch.

"Go ahead." I sit in the armchair next to the couch. My chest is tight, and I'm fighting to keep it relaxed. But there's something so familiar about being in the room with him again. It's like going back in time.

He scoots closer and takes my hand. "I miss you, Callie. When are you going to come home?"

I allow him to hold my hand even though the hairs on the back of my neck are prickling. I fight the urge to pull my hand away. "I am home."

"You know you won't be able to stay under your parents' roof for long. Your mom's

going to treat you like a kid again, hovering around you, and you'll go nuts."

Markus knows me, oh, so well. My mom is already driving me nuts. That's why I've been trying so hard to find a job. I'll take just about anything by now. As long as it pays enough to cover my bills.

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“Come move back in with me.” His eyes are pleading and gentle.

“Markus, I don’t know.” How can I ever trust him again?

“You belong with me. I know I’ve messed up in the past, but like I told you before, I’ve learned my lesson. Give me another chance. After all I’ve done for you, don’t I deserve that?”

My hand is still in his. “Maybe for just a little while.”

Triumph flashes in his eyes. “Really?”

I’m feeling numb, and now I’m just going through the motions. But then Angel kicks me hard in the ribs like she’s saying, Hey, Mom! Stop being an idiot and think about what I want here. “What about the baby?” She deserves to have her dad in her life, right? What if we become a family?

His voice is soothing when he answers me. “We’ll go to a state where abortion is still legal at your stage of pregnancy and get the baby taken care of.”

I yank my hand away from him. “What?” I spit out in horror. “You want me to kill Angel?”

His expression turns from that soothing look to one of disgust. “You named it?”

“Of course I did. She’s my daughter.”

“So, you’re still going to choose that baby over me?” Fury roils in his eyes. “We’ve been together for years, Callie. How can you just throw all that away?”

I stand up. “You need to leave.”

“Come on, Callie. Can’t we just talk about this?”

“We’re done talking. Get out.” I fling my arm toward the door. Power wells up inside me. It feels amazing to fight for the little one I’m carrying, the kid I’ve grown to love, who kicks me all night long and keeps me awake at night. She’s never done anything wrong to me, and Markus has controlled and belittled me for years. I can’t believe I almost took him back. After all the growth I’ve done, all the independence I’ve gained. I almost threw it all away in one, stupid, weak moment. It’s hard to be out there, supporting myself, but that freedom is worth it.

“I’m having this baby, whether you like it or not. You can be in her life, or you can take a hike. That’s up to you.”

“You never listen to me.”

Not when he’s telling me to kill our kid. “You’re my ex-husband. I don’t have to listen to you. But you’re in my home, and I’m kicking you out so you have to listen to me for once. If you don’t, I’ll call the police and have you escorted off my property.”

“Fine, I’m leaving. But just think about my offer. You’re still welcome to live with me. We can even go to the justice of the peace and get married again quickly if you want.”

“At this point, I wouldn’t want you even if you were offering a cute nursery and a life for our baby. You’ve blown whatever slim chance you had.” I’d been an idiot to think he’d actually changed from therapy. I should have known better, but there’s a part of

me that still cares about Markus, and that part wanted him to be somehow good. It's probably the same part of me that kept hoping I could fix him somehow. What a ridiculous joke. "Are you leaving, or do I need to put in a call to the local police station?"

"You're going to regret this decision, Callie. When you're dealing with a crying baby and you want my help, just think about the life you could have had sipping drinks on the beach by my side."

"You're disgusting. Get out."

Finally, he listens to me, and he leaves.

I shut the door behind him and release a shaky breath.

* * *

That night, over dinner, I tell my parents what happened with Markus.

"I can't believe you let him in our house," my mom says. "That man is scum."

"Any man who wants to hurt our precious grandchild isn't welcome here," my dad says.

"You better not have been thinking about going back to him."

"I was for a minute," I admit. "Angel deserves to have both her mom and her dad together."

"But it would be toxic for her to be around that man," my mom says.

“He’s her dad.”

“Do you think he’s going to take his visitation?” my dad asks.

“I doubt it. I probably won’t even get child support from him. Although, I did reach out to my lawyer after Markus left to see if we can hit him with child support now. That’s what he gets for trying to get me to abort our kid.”

“You should have done that from the beginning,” my mom scolds. “You probably don’t have a legal leg to stand on since you didn’t disclose your pregnancy from the start.”

“I know.” I sigh. “I didn’t want him to know about the baby because I didn’t want him to try to talk me into aborting her.”

“You did what you thought was best,” my dad says, shoving a forkful of rice into his mouth.

“And what about your old boss?” my mom asks. “Do you think you can convince him you didn’t steal anything from him?”

I scoff. “No. He kicked me to the curb.”

“He was a little more than a boss to you, wasn’t he?” My mom gives me a sympathetic look.

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

“It’s in your eyes when you talk about him. You love him.”

My heart tugs in my chest to hear my mom say it aloud. “He was going to put up a nursery for Angel.”

“You need to fight for him,” my mom insists.

“I’m done with rich men,” I say. “Especially after what Markus did.”

“Just because Markus is a total waste of humankind, doesn’t mean Weston is too,” my dad says. “He might be an idiot for thinking you stole from him, but that has nothing to do with how much money he has.”

“You need to go back there,” my mom says.

“And what if he calls the cops on me for stealing from him? I’m lucky he hasn’t done that already.”

“I think if he were going to call in the police, he would have done it already. And besides, you could just go to talk to him, and see if he still feels the same way. Maybe he’s changed his mind about you,” my mom says.

“Do you want me to call him and tell him you’d never steal?” my dad offers.

I shake my head. “I can handle it.”

But is it too late to make things better with Weston? Will he actually listen to me?

I finish up with my conference call and head back to my room. Just then, Skipper runs out of Martha's room with something flashy in his mouth. "What do you have there, boy?" I catch up to him and grab him by the midsection. It's my gold watch. "Where did you find this?"

My stomach drops. Has Martha been the thief all along? After talking to Markus, I stopped thinking it was Callie. But I felt like such an idiot, I didn't know how to call her and apologize.

I take the watch from Skipper's mouth. "Good boy." I should have known better than to leave it out on my nightstand last night. Ever since I've been using the safe, nothing has gone missing. But all this time it's been Martha. She just cleaned in my room too. Did she think I wouldn't know it was her, eventually?

I go to confront her when the doorbell rings. "I've got it," I tell Martha. Since I'm standing right by the door, anyway, I might as well save her the trouble. We can talk later. It looks like I'm probably going to be in the market for a new maid. Maybe Stella knows of someone looking for cleaning work.

Callie stands on my doorstep. "Can we talk?" Then she glances down at what I'm wearing, and her eyebrow pops up. "Nice outfit."

I glance down at myself. Oops. I totally forgot I'd put on a dress shirt and tie and suit coat on my top half, but on my bottom half, I'd left on my red plaid pajama bottoms. "I had a conference call earlier. They don't see the bottom half of me. I figured why not be comfortable? Those dress pants can be a bit tight sometimes."

She just stares at me.

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Right. We aren't exactly on the best of terms. I clear my throat and use my tough-guy voice. "You have a lot of guts showing up here." I stare at her, but then I can't help but smile because it's so good to see her again and my heart is about to burst.

"You're smiling. Does that mean you're not going to call the police on me?"

"I'm not going to call the police on you," I promise. "Come on inside." I've missed her so much. Her belly has grown bigger, and she's so adorable I could just squeeze her. "How could I call the police on a pregnant woman, anyway? Wouldn't that just be messed up?"

"You said you thought I stole from you," I say. "You'd have a reason to report me. Not that it's true."

"I don't think you stole from me," I say.

"You don't?" She stares at me, stunned.

"No. You wouldn't believe who I met that vouched for you." I open the door wider, and she comes inside.

"Who?"

"Your ex, Markus. He showed up at my office unexpectedly for a business meeting."

"How did you know it was him? You've never met Markus before, have you?"

My cheeks heat up, and I rub the back of my neck as I stand in the entryway. “I, uh... Well, you see...”

She crosses her arms and stares at me. “What?”

“Well, I might have stalked you on social media and saw his picture there.” The words come out in a rush like it will somehow be less embarrassing that way.

Her brow lifts, and a small smile plays on her lips. “You looked me up, huh? Did you miss me?”

“Maybe a little,” I admit. Okay, it’s a lot, but I don’t tell her that part. I’ve been practically dying without her. My new assistant is horrible at her job, and I’m about to fire her for messing up a deal for me. “But my point is, Markus vouched for you. I figured he had no reason to do that, and it must be true.”

“Did you ever find the real thief?” she asks.

I sigh. “I’m pretty sure it was Martha.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asks.

“Skipper ran out of her room with my watch in his mouth.”

“Again? Well, he’s just a little detective dog, isn’t he?” Callie says.

“The little stinker.”

“So just because he came from Martha’s room, you think she’s the one who stole?” Callie has her hands on her hips and a thoughtful expression on her face like she’s trying to figure something out.

“Well, yeah. Obviously. Why else would the watch be in Martha’s room?”

“Well, that ring was in my purse, and I know I didn’t put it there. I bet you anything Martha didn’t put that watch in her room either. Didn’t you say she’s been with you for years?”

“Yes, but I know her son’s going through some financial hard times, and she’s desperate to help him. She has plenty of motive to steal.”

“Why don’t you check the security footage to be sure? That way you can catch the thief red-handed.”

“Well, I would, but I never bothered to get my cameras fixed.”

“I got them fixed for you,” Callie says. “Remember? You gave me that list of stuff to do. It was on the list.”

“You did? You never told me that. If you knew the cameras were fixed all this time, then why didn’t you say something before when I fired you?”

Callie’s cheeks turn pink. “This may sound dumb, but I let my pride get in the way. I figured if you didn’t believe me, I didn’t want to work for you, anyway.”

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My heart feels heavy in my chest. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. I believe you now. Can you forgive me?” I take her in my arms, and she looks up at me with her big, dark eyes.

“I forgive you, Weston.”

My lips find hers, and it’s like we’re in heaven. Nothing else matters but this moment. I thread my fingers through her hair and bask in this perfect moment with her. I kiss her again and again, afraid if I stop she’ll somehow disappear from my life again, and I can’t have that. Pulling away, I gaze into her dark, enchanting eyes. “I love you, Callie.”

Her red lips stretch into a beautiful smile, one that makes my heart do flips in my chest. “I love you too.”

A shrill bark sounds as a tiny furry body pushes between us. I look down to see Skipper panting up at us with his cute little pink tongue sticking out.

“I think someone is a little jealous,” Callie says with a laugh.

“You’ve caused enough trouble today,” I say. “Should we go check that footage?”

“Sure.” She follows me into the office. I’m not sure how to work the software, but Callie knows exactly what to do. It’s impressive how good she is at everything she does. Except for cooking and cleaning. But I’m okay with that. I just hope Martha isn’t the one who’s been stealing from me because I’d be lost without her around here.

Before long, she has an image pulled up on the screen of Skipper running from Martha's room. "That's it. Back it up a little bit more."

We check a few cameras, and finally we see Skipper going into my room and snatching my watch from my nightstand. "Do you think it's been Skipper all along?" I ask.

"It's possible," Callie says.

"But what about when my mom's tennis bracelet went missing on the boat?" I say. "How could Skipper have gotten that?"

"He was on the boat too, remember?"

"Oh, you're right. He was."

"I bet he has a stash of stuff hidden somewhere in your house," she says. "Because didn't you say all kinds of expensive things have gone missing?"

"Yes, and come to think of it, some not so expensive stuff has been missing too. Like the TV remote and some of my favorite pens."

"We should check around for a secret stash. I bet he has a hiding place somewhere," Callie says.

"That's not a bad idea." We search under beds, couches, the back corners of the pantry. Finally, after an hour of searching, Callie lifts a couch pillow in the upstairs family room I don't use often and finds the mother lode.

Callie lifts a giant, sparkly bra. One strap looks like it's been chewed up as well as the middle. There's a jagged hole right through one of the enormous cups. "The only

person that would fit is Martha.” Callie bursts into a fit of giggles.

“Oh.” I cover my eyes. “I really don’t want to see that. Make it go away.”

“I think we can safely say Martha isn’t your thief. Unless you think she has a thing for chewing up her bras.”

“What else is in here?” I find a few more jewelry items that had gone missing months ago when I kept the jewelry on a lower table in a little box. Come to think of it now, Skipper could have nudged that box open with his nose. The little thief!

“Can you do something for me?” I ask.

“What’s that?” she says.

“Can you take your old job back?”

“Actually, I had something else in mind.” She grins at me. “I’d like to become a realtor myself. As much as I enjoyed being your personal assistant, I want to build a better life for my daughter.”

“I totally respect that. We actually have an opening in our company, if you’re interested in working with me.”

“Really?” she squeaked. She cleared her throat. “Sorry. I mean, really?” she said in a more normal-sounding voice.

“Really. I’m in love with you. I don’t want you away from me.”

“You don’t think it will be a problem for me to work in your company if we’re dating?”

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“We already know we work well together. We make an amazing team.”

“That is true. I love working by your side.”

“Then it’s decided. When you get your license, you have a spot available in the company.”

“You’re an amazing man,” she says. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” After brushing her hair back from her face, I kiss her with all the longing I’ve been feeling since she left. My heart had ached so much for this beautiful woman before me. And now she was here, and she’s mine. I’m never letting her go again.

“What a crazy day,” Callie says after we’ve gathered all Skipper’s treasures and carried them downstairs.

I toss the chewed-up bra in the trash. Martha won’t want it anymore. “I can’t believe I fired Natasha for stealing. All this time she was innocent too. Maybe I’ll offer her old job back.”

“Don’t you already have someone working for you?”

“Yeah, but it isn’t going well,” I say. “She’s lost me a client, and I have another deal that’s about to fall through thanks to her negligence. Natasha did a good job. Not as good as you, but she was decent.”

“She probably has another job by now.”

“Well, I can at least reach out and apologize to her.”

Callie looks up at me with admiration in her dark eyes. “You’re an amazing guy, did you know that?”

I smile down at her and say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” before kissing her sweet lips. She kisses me back and then pulls away with a satisfied smile on her face.

How did I ever get so lucky to have a woman like this by my side?

EPILOGUE: LANGSTON

“That is one adorable baby,” I say, looking down at the wide eyes of the little girl. She looks like Callie, with dark, soft tufts of hair. A big smile cracks across her face, and I can’t help but feel like I’m melting a bit inside. “How old is she now?” I ask Callie.

“She’s four months old, and the biggest stinker already,” Callie says.

I sniff the air. “You’re not kidding about her being a stinker. I think something exploded in her diaper.”

Martha shows up out of nowhere and takes the baby from Callie without having to be asked. “I’ll change her. You enjoy your company, Miss Callie.”

“Oh, thank you, Martha. You’re so wonderful.”

Martha and the little stink bomb disappear to the back of the house where Weston has

a nursery set up for her. Soon after Angel was born, Weston and Callie were married. It was a small, intimate wedding with just family and a few friends there. Callie had my maid Stella as her maid of honor. The two of them have gotten close and still are. Apparently, Stella was there for Callie when she was in trouble, and Callie hasn't forgotten about it.

"Did you guys end up closing on that deal yesterday?" I ask. Callie got her real estate license and is working with the company now.

"Natasha just told me they accepted our offer."

"That's fantastic," I say.

Weston ended up hiring back his old assistant, Natasha. She accepted his apology and happily came back to work for him. From what I understand, she and Callie are close friends now. Having Skipper get them both fired bonded the women in a way that the rest of us can never understand.

Speaking of Skipper, the little thief is trotting up to me right now to sniff at my shoes. "You'd better not pee on me," I say. "I just got these shoes, and they're Italian leather."

"Skipper's ruined so many of my shoes that I've had to keep them locked up in the closet," Callie says.

"Does he still steal stuff?" I scratch behind his fluffy ears.

"You'd better believe it," Weston says. "But we know his hiding spot, so it's pretty easy to find anything that goes missing."

"We're a lot more careful about leaving stuff around the house," Callie says.

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“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” I say.

Martha comes back with Angel, freshly changed. “All better now.”

“I can take her,” Callie says, and Martha hands her over.

“This baby has me completely wrapped around her pinky finger,” Weston says.

“You’re quite the family man these days,” I say.

He leans back into the couch. “It’s the best life. You should try it.”

“You sound like Mom. Now that you’re taken, she’s bugging me to get married.” My girlfriend Sarah and I broke up about two months ago. She fell in love with her old high school boyfriend and called it off between us. I’d been gearing up to propose, but evidently, she wasn’t on the same page.

Weston laughs. “Have fun with that. You know, Jenni is still single. You should ask her out.”

“Hilarious. Mom’s been asking me to take her to dinner for months.”

“What’s the holdup?” Callie asks. “Jenni seems nice enough.”

“Jenni is fantastic,” I say. “But her brother is my best friend. Do you know how scary he is? Ronnie would kill me if I dated his sister. So, Jenni will forever stay in the friend zone.”

“Famous last words,” Weston says. “Just wait. You never know what might happen.”

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