



The Billionaire's Instant Triplets

Author: *Holly Rayner*

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Description: He always said his business was his baby,

He didn't think he'd ever want real children of his own,

But all of a sudden, he's inheriting three!

Tristan West never thought he would have a family, so he's stunned when his carefully ordered life is blown up by the arrival of three adorable surprises: the niece and nephews he never knew he had.

As much as he wants to step up and be there for them, boardroom skills don't exactly transfer to childrearing, and it quickly becomes clear that he's extremely out of his depth...

Ria Hampton is a nanny on her last chance, and this might be her most difficult assignment yet. Summoned to a chaotic new household, she soon realizes that her client isn't just another uber-rich, disengaged dad, and that he and his three adorable triplets are reeling from unimaginable tragedy.

It's safe to say Ria has her work cut out for her. She needs to teach Tristan to be a hands-on parent, and give him the confidence to inhabit the father role he's stepped into.

All while staying professional, and ignoring the burning crush that started the day she moved in...

Can she help turn them into a family without falling in love herself?

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PROLOGUE

TRISTAN

Tristan West sat in his yoga room, his hands resting on his lap, his palms facing up, and his breath slow and meditative. Music played in the background, a collection of gentle wind chimes and the melody of singing bowls. The lights were dim, incense was burning, and the atmosphere was incredibly peaceful. Tristan's green eyes were closed. He wore a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, and his black hair was still messy from his earlier workout. It was early January, the beginning of a new year, and all should have felt calm and meditative.

Tristan was making a to-do list in his head.

As a young tech billionaire (press articles always pointed out how impressive he was at just thirty-three years old), Tristan liked to tell people that his success was thanks to a careful routine of hard work, exercise, and meditation. The first two were true enough — Tristan did work hard, and he exercised daily. The last was a bit of a stretch, though. Although he regularly tried to meditate, he always ended up letting his thoughts drift to other things.

Like the new app rollout he was preparing for the following week. Or the tech seminar he'd be attending, as a keynote speaker, on Wednesday. Or the pile of applications for a new assistant he needed to go through, since his current assistant was about to go on maternity leave. Tristan was more than a little annoyed about that. It was hard for him to understand why people were so willing to sacrifice their careers for their children. For Tristan, his company was his baby — and was probably

the closest he'd ever come to an actual baby.

Tristan's phone began to ring and, grateful for the excuse to end his meditation session early, he reached for it and swiped to answer.

"Tristan West."

"This is Kevin Hahn." The voice on the other end belonged to Tristan's lawyer.

"How can I help you, Kevin?" Tristan referred to everyone by their first name and encouraged them to do the same with him. It was part of moving with the times instead of being mired in old traditions.

"You can let me in." Kevin's voice sounded a little strained. "I'm outside your house."

"Really?" Tristan glanced at his watch. It was barely six thirty in the morning. Even stranger, his lawyer had never come to his house before. Immediately, Tristan began to mentally review everything that could present a legal issue big enough for his lawyer to show up so early at his house. "Is this about the copyright for the new app?"

"No. It's, well, rather more personal."

Tristan took a deep breath, inhaled a little too much incense, and stifled a cough. "Then what is it?"

"This should be discussed in person, Mr. West."

"I'll be down in a minute, then. And please, call me Tristan." Tristan hung up, blew out the incense, and headed downstairs. He lived in a luxurious five-bedroom

mansion and, since he lived here alone, he had the freedom to decorate it as he wished. That meant that his home boasted all the latest appliances, a yoga studio, a gym, a home office that was just as modern as his actual office, a couch in the living room that looked more like an oversized semicolon than a piece of furniture, and a daily cleaner and chef to keep everything running smoothly. Tristan loved this house.

He descended the open staircase to the foyer, where he crossed the shining marble floor to let Kevin in. His lawyer was standing on the stoop in a suit and tie, his briefcase in his hand. He avoided Tristan's eyes as he stepped inside.

"Shoes off, please," Tristan said.

Kevin sighed but complied. He followed Tristan into the dining room in his argyle socks then stood stiffly by the counter while Tristan poured himself a glass of water with turmeric and lemon.

"Would you like some?" he asked, holding up the glass to the lawyer.

"No, thank you. I think you should sit down."

For the second time that morning, a ripple of unease skittered down Tristan's spine. His lawyer seemed stiffer than usual. What if something was wrong with Tristan's company after all, something so serious that Kevin hadn't wanted to tell him over the phone? He did as Kevin asked and slid onto a barstool.

"What's going on? Is everything okay with the company?"

"Yes. Professionally, all is as it should be."

"Great." Tristan relaxed a little. "All the copyrights for the new app are still all right?"

“Yes, yes.” Kevin nodded. “Your company is as strong as ever. What I need to talk to you about is more personal... and it might come as a bit of a surprise.”

“All right.” Tristan took a sip of his beverage. With the reassurance that his business was safe, he was no longer very concerned. His parents were both deceased, and Tristan had no siblings and no spouse or children, so there weren’t very many personal things in his life that could be in danger. And there was little that could surprise him.

Kevin set his briefcase on the counter, clicked it open, and withdrew a sheaf of papers. “Your father...” he scanned the top sheet, “Benjamin West... he’s deceased now, is that correct?”

“Yes, both he and my mother passed away almost ten years ago.” Tristan wasn’t sure what this could be about. His parents’ will had long since been sorted out; the money that had been held in trust for him was now his, and there were no outstanding issues with his parents that could draw a lawyer to his home before dawn.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

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“Thank you.” Tristan glanced at his watch. He was increasingly convinced that Kevin was stalling, and Tristan had a lot to do. He couldn’t afford to sit around while the lawyer meandered towards the point. “Please, tell me what I need to know.”

“This is difficult to say, but?—”

“It’s all right.” Tristan let out a puff of breath. “Just tell me.”

“It looks like your father had another child around twenty-eight years ago.” Kevin winced at his own bluntness. “The child was the product of an affair. I’m not sure if you were aware...”

“I have a half sibling?” Tristan sat back, blinking. He’d been wrong — this had come as a surprise. The news of his father having an affair wasn’t particularly shocking; Benjamin West had always been a bit of a playboy. The idea that Tristan had an unknown half sibling, though...that was news.

“Well, not exactly.” Kevin winced again. “The child was a girl — your half sister. Apparently, she passed away last week from cancer. Her lawyer reached out to me this morning, and I came straight to you.”

Tristan sipped his water, reeling. In the space of a few minutes, he’d both gained and lost a half sister. At times like this, he wished that he was better at meditation, because a little calm detachment would have been welcome.

“I... I’m sorry to hear that she passed away. What was her name?”

“Tanya Edison. Mr. West, I’m afraid there’s a bit more I have to tell you.”

Tristan nodded. “Please.” He was so distracted by the sudden news of a sister he’d never known that he didn’t even remind Kevin to use his first name.

“Well, Ms. Edison was raised by a single mother, who also passed away young. Then, a few years ago, Ms. Edison became a single mother herself, to a set of triplets. Jasmine, Jacob, and Jamie Edison — two boys and a girl, just shy of two and a half years old now.”

“Those poor children,” Tristan said. He remembered the pain of losing his own parents, even though he’d been in his twenties, and they hadn’t been especially close. He wasn’t sure how much the triplets would remember of their mother at such a young age, but his heart still went out to them. He wasn’t entirely sure what all this had to do with him, though. Perhaps he’d be asked to give the children some kind of financial support, which he would be happy to do.

“Yes, well. Those children are the reason Ms. Edison’s lawyer reached out to me, and the reason I’m here today. It was important to Ms. Edison that her children do not go into foster care — she wanted them raised by family. Yet with her own mother deceased and no known siblings, that was a difficult prospect. A few months before her death, Ms. Edison hired a lawyer, the same one who reached out to me, to search for potential family. She knew that her father had been married and suspected that he might have other children. The lawyer found you, so Ms. Edison put into her will that the triplets should go to you after she passed away.”

“The triplets should go to me,” Tristan repeated, hoping the news would make more sense if said aloud. This was all too much information in such a short time. “Why didn’t she contact me, if she knew I existed and wanted me to raise her children?”

“I don’t know, Mr. West.” Kevin looked truly sympathetic. “It’s hard to say what she

was thinking. Perhaps she didn't want to make her last months with her children more difficult, or perhaps she thought you'd be more likely to say yes if it were presented as a fait accompli. What we do know, though, is what she wanted for her children."

Tristan was already shaking his head. "I would like to do as she asked, truly, but I don't see how it's possible. I've barely spent any time with children, and I work all the time. I wouldn't make a good father at all. The kids would be better off with someone else."

"With all due respect, Mr. West, these children have lost everything." Kevin leaned forward, his gray eyes beseeching. "Don't let them lose what their mother wanted for them, too."

Tristan wanted to protest. He wanted to tell Kevin that there was no way he could raise three two-year-olds. What did two-year-olds even do? Were they potty-trained? Could they talk? Did they go to school? Could they even walk? Tristan had no idea. Certainly, young kids who had just lost their mother deserved a better parental figure than him. And Tristan had never wanted to be a parent.

Yet he also knew that he couldn't disobey his sister's last wishes. He'd never known Tanya, and he never would, but he could still try to do right by her. So, with that thought echoing through his mind, Tristan found himself nodding.

"All right. If she's sure that I'm the best person for the job, I won't say no."

"That's good to hear." For a fraction of a second, something less professional and more human crossed Kevin's face. "I'm a father myself, and even though I read all the parenting books, I never felt prepared to have my son. I don't think any parent ever does. You'll be fine, Tristan."

Tristan looked up at Kevin. "Thank you." Then, in a rush, he snapped back to the

present moment. Despite the crazy whirlwind his morning had turned into, he still had responsibilities. He was due at work in half an hour and had a busy day ahead of him. “When will I meet the kids?”

“They’re staying with an emergency foster family at the moment,” Kevin explained. “You’ll be able to meet them later this afternoon, and if all goes well, it would be ideal to get them moved in by the weekend.”

“Thisafternoon?Thisweekend?” Tristan’s jaw dropped again. Just when he thought he was on top of things, more surprises kept coming. “I don’t have anything in the house for a two-year-old, let alone three of them!”

“Well, you’ll need to get shopping.” Once again back to business, Kevin handed the folder he’d been referencing to Tristan before getting to his feet. “I’ll be in contact about arranging the first visit and the moving plans. Have a good day, Mr. West.”

“Thank you.” Half in a daze, Tristan said his goodbyes to Kevin, who showed himself out. He sat at the counter for a while longer, sipping his lemon-turmeric water, before he trusted himself to reach for the folder. Inside, along with a stack of legal documents as thick as a history textbook, there was a photograph. The photo showed three kids, all with jet-black hair and bright green eyes, all small and hugging each other. They were dressed identically in blue jeans and black T-shirts, with a green headband in the girl’s hair. They had huge, gummy smiles.

So, these were the kids. Tristan stared at the photo for a long time, wondering what he’d gotten himself into. He didn’t want to let down the sister he’d never known, but he had no idea how to be a father, either.

Already, Tristan could tell that this was going to be a mess.

CHAPTER1

RIA

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Ria Hampton was on the verge of tears.

She'd been called in to a meeting at Oh Pear!, the nanny agency she'd signed on with a few weeks ago. Usually, meetings like this meant good news, but Ria knew that this one wouldn't be good news. Not at all.

Ria wanted to enjoy the bright-green leaves and blossoming flowers of mid-March, but all she could think about was whether she was going to get fired from the agency. The last job she'd worked for them had been a complete disaster.

Ria was an excellent nanny. She knew that. At thirty years old, she'd been doing this job for over a decade, and had worked with dozens of satisfied families. In most cases, caring for and taking care of the kids was enough, but this time, it wasn't. Not with the new agency.

Ria knew it was her own fault that she'd stretched her qualifications to land the job at Oh Pear! Yet the agency paid double what any other agency did, and she needed the money. Her four younger sisters and brothers relied on her, her youngest sister most of all — Nora was still in college, after all. She needed Ria's help to pay tuition for two more years. If Ria didn't have a job, she wouldn't be able to help, and Nora's college education would be in peril.

Ria burst into the Oh Pear! offices and hurried to the back meeting room. A few weeks ago, she'd sat in this same room and told the manager that she was ready to be a nanny at the elite agency. Apparently, she'd been wrong, since her job was already in danger.

The manager, Eloise Rice, was sitting at a large mahogany table with a mug of mint tea steaming in front of her. Her lipstick was bright red, her eyes were outlined in deep blue, and she'd used enough blush to make her cheeks as pink as strawberries. Her hair was bottle-blond, though Ria could see a little gray at the roots.

"Ria. Please, sit." Eloise's tone was firm and not very friendly, the opposite of how it had been a few weeks ago. Ria also noticed that Eloise didn't offer her a cup of tea, as she had last time.

"Thank you for seeing me," Ria said. She smoothed one of her red curls self-consciously behind her ear.

"Yes, well, I didn't really have a choice, did I?" Eloise withdrew a folder from somewhere beneath the table and opened it. "You've only been us a few weeks, dear, and you've already had several complaints."

"I can explain?—"

"I'm sure you can, but I'm not really interested in your explanations right now."

Ria smoothed her slacks with both palms, which had suddenly become sweaty. She usually wore comfy, easy-to-move-in clothes that didn't stain for her work with children, but she'd dressed up today in a pair of slacks and a gray blouse for this meeting. Despite everything, she wanted to make a good impression.

"I understand."

"Let's see." Eloise flipped open the folder. "The first family you worked with, the Amsteads, mentioned that your knowledge of Mandarin wasn't quite up to snuff."

"It's true," Ria said, already flushing. As a redhead, she blushed far too easily. "But

the parents don't speak Mandarin either, and little Timothy already has a daily Mandarin tutor, even though he's only eighteen months old?—”

Eloise held up a hand. “Your next placement, the O’Connells, mentioned that you don’t play the violin. They specifically requested a nanny who could play the violin to soothe their daughter to sleep.”

“I know, but I sang to her, and played violin music on the speaker system in her room. Surely, at nine months old, it can’t make much of a diff?—”

Eloise’s hand was up again. “Your last placement, the Davises, lasted less than a day. Apparently, you made their son a grilled cheese sandwich and apple slices for lunch, when they expressly told you to make a croque monsieur and an apple swan.”

This time, Ria didn’t even try to point out that a croque monsieur was really a French grilled cheese, or that the apple swan was a pile of apple slices arranged in a sculpture. She just folded her hands in her lap and bent her head. Clearly, nothing she said was going to help. Even if Ria pointed out that she’d spent the extra time she didn’t use making lunch helping little Ryan Davis with his math homework, it wouldn’t help. Even if she mentioned that she’d never had complaints about her nannying skills before, it wouldn’t make a difference. Certainly, explaining why she needed this job so badly wouldn’t impact Eloise at all.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Rice,” Ria said.

“That’s as may be, but it doesn’t fix the problem at hand. You’ve clearly inflated your qualifications.” Eloise raised her painted-on eyebrows and looked down her nose at Ria.

“Yes.” Ria smoothed her hands against her slacks again. “I’m sorry that I overstated a few of my qualifications, but I can assure you that I never inflated any qualifications

that really mattered. I really have had eleven years of nannying experience, I've worked with families that have multiple young children, I'm trained in the Waldorf style of education, I?—"

"Yes, yes." Eloise nodded, though her expression was still pinched. "I understand that you care about the children and your work, but, dear, simply caring isn't enough. Oh Pear! offers nannies who can help children become true global citizens, prepared for a future in elite academies and in the upper echelons of the workforce. If you can't offer that, you'll need to seek employment elsewhere."

Ria's heart began to race. It was all she could do not to start fiddling with a strand of her red curls, as she often did when she was very stressed.

"Please, Ms. Rice, give me one more chance. I'll show you that I'm up to your agency's standards."

"I'll see if something appropriate comes up, but you are on thin ice, dear." Ms. Rice closed the folder, slid it to one side, and got to her feet. It was a clear dismissal, so Ria stood as well and held out a hand. Ms. Rice took it, but her gaze drifted to Ria's gray blouse. She wrinkled her nose, and Ria saw in horror that there was a small smudge of tomato sauce near the hem.

"Thank you very much for your time," Ria said. "I can do better."

"You'll have to." Eloise nodded, released Ria's hand, and gestured towards the door.

Ria ducked her head and hurried out, feeling terrible. She knew she'd made a mistake when she'd inflated her qualifications, but she hadn't felt that she had any other choice. After all, Ria's family relied on her. She sent money to her mother every month to help with her expenses and paid most of her sister's college expenses, as she'd done for each of her siblings in turn. Other nannying jobs just didn't pay well

enough to keep up with her family's outgoings.

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Ria herself had dropped out of college after her sophomore year. She'd been studying education and had dreamed of becoming a teacher, but that dream had been put on hold. Her brother, Thomas, had broken his leg playing football, and the medical bills had been too high for their single mother to afford on her own. The family had needed money, fast, so Ria had signed up with a nanny agency and taken her first job.

Ria didn't have any regrets — or not many, at least. She'd done what was needed to help her family, and she loved all of the kids and families she had worked with. Now and then, there would be an unruly kid or a completely detached parent, but that was just part of the job. She got to work with kids every day, as she'd always dreamed of doing.

Ria had inflated her qualifications to land the job at Oh Pear! for the same reason she'd dropped out of college at nineteen: she had done, and always would do, whatever it took to help her family.

This time, she might have gone too far, though.

Ria strode towards the bus stop, her thoughts already racing ten steps ahead. She barely noticed the colorful row of houses with wide balconies that made up the neighborhood, nor the wide pines and patches of green. San Francisco was a beautiful city, although Ria rented her apartment in a cheaper and less fancy neighborhood. She rarely stayed in her own apartment, as most of her jobs were live-in, so it didn't matter that she still lived in a walk-up studio on the fifth floor of an old apartment building that had seen better days.

A bus was pulling up just as Ria approached the stop. She broke into a jog and managed to slip through the doors just as they were closing. Luckily, there was an empty seat near the back of the bus beside a window. She sat and leaned against the glass as the bus climbed up and down hills and wove through the bright buildings of downtown towards Ria's neighborhood on the other side of the city.

As soon as she got home, she would start applying for new jobs. She wasn't fired — yet — but it seemed like it was only a matter of time before Eloise called her into the office again for more permanent measures. Even if Ria got another chance, her new clients would probably expect her to speak fluent French or professionally arrange flowers — her résumé did say that she could. Ria banged her head lightly against the window. She definitely needed to look for something else, though losing the higher pay would hurt. And she wouldn't try fudging her qualifications again.

Ria got off at her stop a while later and walked up a hill, then the stairs, to her apartment. The walls were still painted white, as they had been when she'd first rented the apartment five years ago, and the apartment was furnished with cheap, mismatched pieces she'd found at yard sales. Despite the eclectic and slightly un-homey look, the apartment was always spotlessly clean, and the walls were hung with pictures of Ria with her young charges over the years, as well as drawings that they'd done for her and letters that they'd written.

Ria loved the kids she looked after as though they were her own. She wanted kids of her own, too, but without job stability or a partner by her side, the time had never seemed right. She traced her finger over a drawing of an elephant one of the kids had given her, a smile drifting across her lips, before she took out her laptop, sat at the dining-room table, and started going through job postings.

She would figure this out. She always did.

CHAPTER2

TRISTAN

“And I can assure you that—” Tristan was cut off by the sound of a loud wail outside the office. His investor, Aaron Brewer, looked at him across the table with an expression of concern.

“Is everything all right out there?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, all is well. I brought the kids into work with me today — it was a bit of an emergency.”

The emergency was that reliable childcare was hard to find. Over the last three months, Tristan had worked with a few nannies and babysitters and had tried to put the triplets in a nature preschool a few days a week. Yet, every time, things fell apart. The triplets were rambunctious and hard to wrangle, which meant that nannies and babysitters often quit quickly. The nature preschool had been helpful — until Jacob managed to put paint handprints all over the walls, the floor, the other children’s clothes, and his own face. It hadn’t helped that Jasmine often cried or that Jamie had so much energy that he practically bounced off the walls. The preschool had told Tristan last week that they couldn’t take the kids anymore.

Tristan was quickly running out of options, which meant he’d been bringing his kids into work more than he should.

“Certainly. I have a daughter myself.” Aaron Brewer smiled. Another wail cut through the office’s thin walls, and his expression turned to a grimace. “She’s at home with my wife, though. Anyway, I wasn’t aware that you had children.”

“It’s a bit of a long story.” Tristan reached for his cup of matcha. He still struggled to call the triplets “his kids” — it felt like a betrayal to the sister he’d never known. Anyway, it was difficult to explain how the triplets had come to be in his care, and it

wasn't really any of Aaron's business, anyway. "Shall we return to the matter at hand? We were discussing how much of an investment you'd like to make in the next fiscal year. As I said, a seven percent increase on?—"

Another wail sounded, this one in the form of a word. "Mamaaaaa!"

"Perhaps you'd better go see what the matter is," Aaron said, grimacing again.

Tristan felt his own polite smile turning into a grimace. He wanted to do right by these kids, but he had no idea how to do that. Everything he tried seemed to turn into a catastrophe, and today was no exception. "You're right. Please, give me a minute."

Tristan got to his feet and went to examine the source of the noise. His assistant, Caroline, was holding a screaming Jamie in her arms. His face was scrunched into a red-faced expression of complete displeasure as his small arms flailed wildly. His sister and brother, Jasmine and Jacob, were sitting on the floor, playing with a chunky train set.

"Caroline." Tristan tried to keep his tone calm. "What is going on out here?"

"What's going on is that I'm not a babysitter." Caroline handed the screaming toddler to Tristan. Her usually neat blond curls were frizzy, and there was a stain on her blouse. "He just lost his head all of a sudden."

"I know you're not a babysitter, but I only asked you to watch the kids while I had this meeting."

"Right, maybe today — but yesterday I watched them for three hours while you were in a board meeting. Do you know how many diapers I changed? Seven! In three hours! How is that even possible?" Caroline looked on the edge of a breakdown herself, which Tristan could understand.

“I know it isn’t ideal,” he said. “Let’s all take a few deep breaths.” It was hard to be Zen with a child screaming in his arms, but Tristan had to try.

“A few deep breaths.” Caroline scoffed, her blue eyes rolling. “I signed on as your assistant because I admire your company and your work, but I’ve been spending more time trying to get your kids to eat mashed peas than actually working. I quit.”

“Give me until the end of the day,” Tristan said. “I just need to attend to a few things, and then I’ll figure out a permanent solution for the kids.”

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“I don’t think so.” Caroline grabbed her purse, closed her laptop, and clicked in her tall heels to the door. There was a sticker of Mickey Mouse wearing a Santa hat on the back of her knee, beneath the hem of her pencil skirt, but Tristan decided it was better not to point that out.

“I have to be in this meeting right now,” Tristan hissed, hurrying after her. “It’s a major investor.”

“Well, I have to go home and take a shower. You can’t expect your employees to run a daycare for you.” With that, Caroline pulled the door open and disappeared down the hallway, leaving Tristan alone with the screaming Jamie in his arms. Jacob and Jasmine looked up at him with identical expressions of angelic innocence, their green eyes bright.

“There, there,” Tristan said to Jamie, bouncing the toddler in his arms awkwardly.

“Hungwy,” Jacob said, grinning wide enough to show his tiny teeth.

“Firsty,” Jasmine added, her grin matching her brother’s.

“Mamaaaaaa,” Jamie wailed, kicking his feet as tears squeezed from his eyes.

“I think I’d better come back another time.”

Tristan turned to see Aaron standing in the doorway, his briefcase in his hand.

“Just give me a minute to settle the triplets down, and we can continue our meeting,”

Tristan said. “This is one of those times to roll with the punches that life throws.” He smiled in his best cool-CEO, go-with-the-flow way. As if in response, Jamie grabbed the glasses from Tristan’s face and threw them onto the floor in a fit of rage.

“Call me when this is sorted out.” Aaron waved vaguely at the triplets and the mess of Tristan’s outer office, which was covered in toys, half-open packages of snacks, and toddler-sized clothing.

“Certainly.” Tristan shifted Jamie into his other arm and held out a hand to shake. Aaron smiled tightly and didn’t take his hand. Instead, he disappeared into the hallway after Caroline.

Tristan slumped against his desk, bouncing Jamie and feeling hopeless. Caroline was right. His office, usually sleek, modern, and very efficient, was turning into a daycare center for three rambunctious triplets. Something needed to change.

“Come on, kids,” he said. “Let’s go home.” Clearly, no more work was going to get done today.

Loading the kids into the car was the equivalent of trying to get a flailing cat into a carrier to go to the vet. Only Jacob liked the car — his brother and sister would have done anything not to sit in their car seats.

Once they were home, things only got worse. Tristan’s beautiful home, his pride and joy, was strewn with toys and practically carpeted with crushed Cheerios and chunky child-safe Lego pieces that stabbed his foot when he tried to walk anywhere. His yoga studio had been turned into a bedroom for the triplets, his maid had quit, and his curving staircase was now bracketed by child gates.

Tristan changed all the triplets’ diapers, then set them up in their high chairs in the kitchen with bowls of toddler porridge and sippy cups of apple juice. Jamie had

calmed down and now ate his porridge with his overlarge round-edged plastic spoon while Jacob sipped his juice, but now Jasmine was smearing handfuls of porridge into her hair.

At least all three kids were contained and none of them were crying.

Jacob took advantage of the moment to grab his phone and dial the final nannying agency on his list. He'd asked Caroline to put the list together months ago, and slowly, he'd worked his way through each. They'd send one nanny, maybe even two, and within a week, they'd always quit. The only one left on the list, Oh Pear!, charged exorbitant rates for nannies who were experts in international cooking, foreign languages, and art and music.

At this point, Tristan would settle for a nanny who didn't immediately quit, but cooking, languages, and the arts couldn't hurt.

He dialed the number for Oh Pear! and waited as the phone rang. As if on cue, the moment someone on the other end answered, Jacob spilled his apple juice and began to wail.

"This is Eloise Rice at Oh Pear! How can I help you today?"

"Hello. I'm Tristan West and I need a nanny. Urgently." Tristan picked up the sippy cup, set it on the counter, and went to get a new cup of juice.

"You've come to the right place then, dear." Although the woman on the other end used the word "dear," it came across more like an insult than a compliment. It didn't matter. "Can you tell me more about yourself and your children?"

"I have a set of triplets, a little over two and a half years old. To be honest, we've tried a couple of nannies before, but there's never been a... good fit. The kids are a

bit of a handful.” Tristan winced, convinced that Eloise would tell him she couldn’t help.

“Not to worry; I have just the nanny for you.” There was a smile in Eloise’s voice now. “Would you like live-in or day help?”

Jasmine threw a handful of porridge at the wall, where it oozed down the bamboo printed wallpaper like ectoplasm. Tristan winced. He’d need new wallpaper when the triplets were a little older. The border already bore brightly colored scribbles from when Jacob had found the markers while Tristan had been trying to calm Jasmine down.

“I think live-in would be best.”

“Of course.” Tristan heard the sound of a keyboard clacking. “I should be able to have a nanny with you first thing tomorrow — before lunch.”

“Really?” Tristan could hardly believe his ears. “That’s wonderful.”

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“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll let you go now, but please reach out if you have any questions.”

“I will,” Tristan promised. He hung up and set the phone on the counter before turning his full attention back to the triplets. As one, they smiled at him, and his heart melted. Perhaps he didn’t exactly have the paternal feelings that most people did — he didn’t want to step fully into the role of “parent,” not when his unknown sister should be here to do that. He did want the best for them, though. The triplets should grow up happy and healthy and in a world full of love. Tristan just wasn’t sure he could make that happen on his own.

Once the triplets finished their dinner, Tristan got them down from their high chairs and carried them upstairs for their bath. He didn’t manage to get them in the bath every day, but today a bath was nonnegotiable, since Jasmine was practically coated in her dinner, and Jacob was sticky with apple juice. He ran the water while the triplets opened the drawers that were their height on the bathroom cabinet and started throwing things on the floor. All the while, they chatted with each other in their secret language of half English and half something Tristan was sure they’d invented.

He finally got them all in the bath and clean. Then he wrapped them each in their towels and led them like a trail of ducks to the room they shared. He’d wanted to get each child his or her own room, but they cried when they were separated, so Tristan had ended up letting them share. He tucked the kids into bed, wished them goodnight, and quietly left.

A moment later, the wailing began again, and Tristan felt like wailing himself as he reentered the bedroom to see what the matter was. Help couldn’t come soon enough.

CHAPTER3

RIA

Ria sat at her dining room table, a steaming cup of coffee with plenty of cream and sugar in front of her, and clicked through nanny advertisements on one of the job boards she frequented. She hadn't heard anything from Eloise since their meeting the other day, which meant that she needed to keep applying for jobs. She'd already followed up with a few agencies she'd worked with before, and a few replies had come in saying that they didn't have anything at the moment but would keep her in mind for the future.

With a sigh, Ria clicked on a job that paid less than half of what Oh Pear! did and began putting in her contact information. Even a smaller paycheck was still a paycheck.

Just as she was about to click submit, her phone began to rang. Ria flipped it over to check the caller ID. Her eyes widened as she saw that the call was coming from Oh Pear! — this was almost certainly Eloise calling to tell her that her services were no longer needed. Her heart pounding in her chest, Ria swiped to accept and pressed the phone to her ear.

“Hello, this is Ria Hampton.”

“Dear, I have a job for you.” Eloise's voice was brisk and rather more pleasant than it had been during their disastrous last meeting.

“Really?” Ria blurted before she could think better of it. “I mean, that's excellent, thank you. I really appreciate you giving me another chance.”

“Alastchance,” Eloise corrected pointedly. “It's a live-in job with a wealthy and

respectable client who doesn't have many requirements. It begins today. I'll send the address as soon as we're off the phone, and I'll need you to head over right away."

Ria was already on her feet, pouring out the last of her coffee in the sink and hurrying to the bedroom to get her suitcase, the phone sandwiched between her shoulder and her ear.

"How old is the child — or children?"

"Two and a half," Eloise said.

Ria nodded to herself. Two and a half could be a difficult age, but with only one child, it would likely be a cakewalk compared to Ria's last few jobs.

"And what's the client's name?"

"Tristan West. You might have heard of him — he's the founder and CEO of Limex."

Although Ria hadn't heard of Tristan West, she had heard of Limex. It was a huge tech conglomerate with everything from social media to data aggregation to database management under its purview. Ria tossed T-shirts and jeans into the suitcase as a picture of her new client came together in her mind. He probably worked a lot. He probably had plenty of money to throw around. He probably wanted a nanny who could actually speak foreign languages and play instruments.

"Is there anything else I need to know?" Ria asked as she reached for her pajamas.

"Yes." The seriousness in Eloise's tone made Ria freeze, pajamas in hand. "This is your last chance, dear. Show me that you can do better, or this will be your final job with us."

With that, Eloise hung up, leaving Ria standing in her bedroom with her pajamas in one hand and the silent phone against her ear. Taking a deep breath, she tossed the phone onto the bed and resumed packing. A few minutes later, her phone dinged with an email showing her new client's address and phone number. Ria glanced at it, nodded to herself, and continued packing.

Within twenty minutes, she was out the door, her rolling suitcase in one hand and her purse flung over the opposite shoulder. She double-locked her apartment, unsure of when she'd be back, and headed towards the bus stop. A glance at her navigation app showed that it would take fifty minutes and three buses to reach Tristan West's wealthy neighborhood across town, but that was all right. The bus ride would give her a little time to calm down and prepare for her new job.

She was in luck; the bus arrived after she'd been waiting for about five minutes. She lugged her suitcase onboard and found a seat with space to keep it near her feet. As the bus pulled out, Ria dug her headphones out of her suitcase and put on one of her favorite playlists. Humming to herself, she settled in for the ride.

The apartment buildings and small shops outside slowly gave way to skyscrapers. By the third bus, Ria was passing enormous houses that looked more like mansions than single-family homes, and sprawling, leafy parks full of blossoming cherry trees. At her stop, she got off and checked the map. The route showed that her new client's home was just a few blocks away.

When Ria arrived, she had to double-check to make sure she was in the right place. This house made the neighboring mansions look like dollhouses. Ria was sure she could fit her whole apartment in the Zen garden outside, and the path to the front door looked like it was a quarter-mile long. The house itself was very modern, with sleek gray walls, towering glass windows, and a sloping side. It looked more than a little foreboding.

As Ria made her way along the wide, paved path towards the house, she couldn't help feeling that this wasn't exactly the place she would have chosen to raise children. Not only was it a little too modern, but the yard was devoid of play structures or children's toys. Perhaps her new client just kept a very clean house. Anyway, it wasn't for her to judge other people's choices — she was just here to look after the child.

Ria climbed the three concrete steps onto the front stoop and rang the doorbell. It sounded a loud gong somewhere deep within the house, followed by the sound of running footsteps. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a man holding a small child.

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Ria took in the duo. The man was, well, handsome, though in more of a hipster way than Ria's usual type. He had black hair, cut short, and green eyes reminiscent of Ria's own. A head or so taller than Ria, he appeared both strong and confident. He wore wide, circular glasses with thick rims and a T-shirt with a picture of a heavy-metal band on the front. This must be her client, Tristan West.

The child looked like a miniature version of his father. He had wispy black hair and green eyes, as well as the soft, lean limbs of a toddler growing into a preschooler. He smiled at Ria hesitantly, his chubby cheeks pink. Ria noticed that his T-shirt was spotted with something that looked like apple sauce. This must be her new charge, though she didn't know his name yet.

"Hello." Ria smiled her best meeting-new-people smile and stepped inside, her suitcase in her left hand. She extended her right for a handshake. "I'm Ria Hampton, your new nanny."

"Thank goodness you're here." Tristan handed the toddler over to Ria in lieu of a handshake. More than a little surprised, she adjusted her weight to balance the little boy on her hip. "I'm late for a meeting."

Just then, another little boy, the replica of the one in her arms, came charging into the hallway. He had a red crayon clutched in his fist and a mischievous smile on his young face. Ria knew that look well.

"Oh, twins!" Ria said.

"No." Tristan frowned. "Triplets. Didn't your boss tell you?" His phone began to

ring, and he backed away slowly. “I really need to go. You’ll be all right?”

The last sentence clearly wasn’t a question, because Tristan didn’t wait for the answer. He just turned and strode off towards the back of the house, already answering his phone as he went. Ria stared at him, open-mouthed, as he disappeared. In all her years of nannying, she’d never had a parent rush off so suddenly after she’d arrived.

Ria set down her suitcase, which she’d still been holding, then pivoted to shut the door gently with her hip. Next, she turned her attention to the child in her arms.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Jamie.” The little boy popped his thumb into his mouth.

“Nice to meet you.” Ria gave him a little hug. It wasn’t this child’s fault that his father had rushed off so suddenly. She bent down to the other boy’s level. “And what’s your name?”

“Jacob.” The boy’s smile widened. “Juice?”

“I’m sure we can find you some juice.” Ria scooped the boy into her other arm. “But we should find your brother first.” The third triplet was still nowhere to be seen.

As though Ria’s thoughts had carried, a cry came from the adjoining room. Ria hurried after the sound, Jacob and Jamie each perched on one of her hips, to find a third child lying on the floor in a starfish pose, wailing. The third child wasn’t a little boy at all, though, but a girl with the same dark hair and bright-green eyes. She wore a tutu, a race-car shirt, and a pair of jean shorts. This was clearly a child who had dressed herself.

Ria wanted to scoop the little girl up, too, but she didn't have any more hands. She smiled to herself slightly. She literally had her hands full with this new job.

The little girl's wailing intensified, and Jacob wiggled to be let down. The moment his small feet touched the floor, he ran to the wall, which already bore red marks from the crayon in his hand. Simultaneously, a distinctive smell rose from little Jacob's pants — he needed a diaper change, right away.

Ria looked from the little boy scribbling on the wall to the little boy with the dirty diaper to the little girl lying on the floor wailing, then sent a slightly reproachful glance in the direction their father had disappeared. It was clear that this family needed her help. Desperately.

Taking a deep breath, Ria began formulating a plan for where to start.

CHAPTER4

TRISTAN

Tristan closed the door of his home office and sank into his desk chair. For practically the first time in three months, he could get some work done without one of the triplets needing him.

There was little time to savor his freedom, though. His computer was already sending him notifications that he was late for the all-hands meeting he was supposed to lead. Tristan clicked the link for the meeting, put on his noise-canceling headphones, and focused on the task at hand.

Part of him felt guilty for running off without properly talking to his new nanny. Ria, she'd said her name was. But Tristan had already been late to a meeting — a meeting he'd had to miss or cancel last-minute several times in the past three months, and he

just hadn't had time to talk to her. Plus, Ria was supposed to be the expert, wasn't she? Surely she knew better than he did how to calm a crying child, make a meal the kids would actually eat, or head off a sibling argument.

Now, his new nanny could do her job (hopefully), and he could focus on his job. Anyway, he needed to make the most of the time she was here in case she quit within a few days, like the other nannies he'd employed.

That was another reason Tristan hadn't stopped to chat. Getting to know Ria would probably be a waste of both their time, since she'd likely leave in a week or so, and he would be on his own with the triplets again.

"—and the merger is going well," one of Tristan's employees continued. He tuned back in to the meeting, tearing his thoughts away from the kids and his beautiful new nanny.

Because she was beautiful, wasn't she? Even just a few moments by the door had been enough for him to see that. With her curly red hair and her green eyes, she looked like more like an Irish princess from a fairy tale than a dowdy nanny. A smattering of freckles across her pink cheeks and a bright smile made her look young. She'd been wearing a black T-shirt and blue jeans and carrying a suitcase — Tristan should have offered to take her suitcase. He hadn't even shown her the room he'd prepared for her.

Well, it wouldn't do anyone any good to regret his actions now. He needed to work.

The next few hours were spent attending meetings, reviewing documents, and wading through the pile of work that had been building up since the triplets arrived. Tristan barely stopped to drink water, let alone check on the new nanny and the kids. Around four in the afternoon, he sat back in his desk chair, stretched, and heard his stomach grumble. Cautiously, he pricked his ears for the familiar sound of a toddler wailing,

but the house was quiet.

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Tristan tilted his laptop partially closed and got to his feet. As he walked down the hall and through the dining room to the kitchen, he couldn't help noticing that the house was still eerily silent. Worry began to creep in — until he heard a soft rumble of voices from the living room. He peered around the corner and spotted Ria on the couch, the triplets tucked under blankets on either side of her. They were watching, rapt, as she read aloud from an oversized picture book with a drawing of a duck in rain boots on the front.

“And then,” Ria read, her voice soft and melodic and completely captivating to the children, “Mr. Duck said...”

“Quack, quack, quack!” the toddlers chorused eagerly.

“That’s right!” Ria smiled down at them. “Then Mr. Duck got hungry. He waddled to the store, waddle, waddle, waddle. He waddled right through a puddle! Mr. Duck looked down at his boots and said...”

“Quack, quack, quack!”

“Exactly!”

Tristan ducked back into the dining room as Ria read on. He had the strange feeling that he'd intruded on a private moment, even though this was his home, and the triplets were his niece and nephews — and his kids. Something about the way Ria's hair had escaped from behind her ear as she'd turned the page and the way her eyes had lit up with joy when the toddlers replied with the appropriate duck sound had caught in Tristan's chest. And the triplets had looked so peaceful...

They were definitely better off with Ria while he worked. He wouldn't bother them.

He slipped into the kitchen, where he grabbed one of his packaged kale salads and a protein shake. On the way back to his office, he was tempted to poke his head into the living room again to see if Ria and the triplets were still reading, but he didn't. Tristan had work to do. Lots of it. It was better that he left Ria to her job.

For the rest of the evening, Tristan sat in his office, working, his noise-canceling headphones firmly on his ears. A few times, he was tempted to look out again to see what was going on, but since Ria hadn't come to bang on his door demanding that he explain why his children were so unruly and none of the triplets had come crying to find him, Tristan had to assume that it was going well. The best thing he could do for himself and for the kids was to work, make sure his company stayed afloat, and slowly get their lives back on track.

Tristan kept working, focused and without stopping for more than a quick cup of matcha, until he heard the crash.

CHAPTER 5

RIA

"And this little piggy went home!" Ria gently tapped Jamie's littlest toe, and the boy broke into peals of laughter as though Ria had just told the world's funniest joke. That was what Ria loved about this age. They might cry easily, but they laughed easily, too.

The triplets were sitting in their high chairs, waiting for the soup Ria had made to cool enough for them to eat it. To keep them entertained, she'd removed their socks and was going through each triplet one by one, singing a song about five little piggies and tapping their tiny toes.

The first hour or so with the triplets had been a mess. She'd had her hands more than full trying to keep the three of them entertained, get them changed, and feed them lunch. And she'd been more than a little annoyed with Tristan for running off before he'd even told her the kids' names.

Yet eventually, Ria had gotten on top of things, as she always did. After that, the afternoon had gone by in a blur. The triplets had eaten their lunch (grilled cheese sandwiches and apples, no fancy French cooking required), taken naps, played with their toys, done some coloring, run around the yard to burn off energy, done makeshift sensory stations with buckets of water on the front porch, and were now happily awaiting their dinner.

Sure, the house was strewn with toys and there had been a few tears (only from the kids, so far), but everything was under control. The more time Ria spent with these kids, the more she liked them. They were adorable, funny, playful, and clearly very attached to each other. Jamie seemed like the leader of the group and often tried to cause mischief to make his siblings laugh. Jacob and Jasmine were quieter, but Ria could already tell that they had unique personalities as well.

The more time Ria spent with them, the more she also saw how badly this little family needed her. The triplets still weren't potty-trained, as far as she could tell, even though it was high time to start. They had little in the way of a routine. And they seemed more hyperactive and prone to tears than most kids their age, which could be a sign that they were having trouble adjusting to something.

The timer Ria had set on her phone went off, and she went to dish up bowls of the pea soup she'd made for the triplets' dinner. She added bread to each bowl then set the dishes on each child's tray. They dug in enthusiastically, with about half the soup making it into their mouths and the other half falling to the floor, smearing across their cheeks, or landing in their hair. Ria laughed as Jasmine put a dot of soup in the center of her forehead and grinned at Ria as though she was a comedian on stage. Ria

grinned back.

The kids were so friendly — and so different from their father, based on the brief, confusing, rather unsatisfying meeting she'd had with him. As the day wore on, Ria kept expecting Tristan to turn up, his urgent meeting finished, with an apologetic smile. Yet he didn't make an appearance, even for the triplets' dinner.

After dinner, she considered going to find him. He would surely know that his kids were about to go to sleep. Wouldn't he? Yet Ria didn't know where his office was, or if he was even still at home. It was enough of a struggle to find the bathroom upstairs, where she ran water, added some bubbles and bath toys, and plopped each of the joyfully wiggling toddlers into the tub. Soon, they were splashing happily, covered in soap. Ria sang them a few songs, tickled their tummies, and blew bubbles onto their little heads before rinsing them each clean and wrapping them in matching towels.

"Stowy?" Jacob asked hopefully. Already, Ria was more able to tell them apart — the kids looked very similar, but Jacob tended to be a little more reserved, while Jamie was always "on." As the only girl, Jasmine was, of course, the easiest to identify.

"Of course," Ria told him, toweling him off.

Jamie jumped into a rambling monologue that was part baby talk, part English, and part wild gestures. He seemed to be describing a story about a squirrel that he wanted to read tonight, but it was hard to be sure. Ria listened patiently as she toweled the other two kids off.

"Let's find your bedrooms, shall we?" she asked.

"Not sweepy." Jasmine glared adorably, and Ria smiled.

"Good, because we aren't sleeping yet. First we'll have a story, then a song, then

sleep.”

“Hmm.” Jasmine still didn’t look entirely pleased, but she wasn’t protesting, either.

Ria led the way down the hall, gently pushing open each door she passed. There was a neatly made guest bedroom, perhaps hers, a clearly lived-in bedroom with white sheets on a large bed that must be Tristan’s, a closet, and finally a bedroom with three small beds and a maelstrom of toys that must be the triplets’. Ria had spent most of the day with the kids either outside or in the downstairs playroom, so she hadn’t seen this room yet. The kids clearly had a lot of toys and no organization system, but that was a problem for tomorrow.

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Ria waded through the pile as Jamie belly-flopped onto his bed and started rolling around, singing. Jacob picked up a stuffed giraffe and kissed it on the head. Jasmine went to the bookshelf and returned with a stack of picture books so high, it was hard for her to balance it in her small arms.

“Everyone into bed,” Ria said in her best soothing voice. She turned down the dimmer on the light switch and helped each toddler into bed, tucking them in tight with a few stuffed animals. The next half an hour was spent reading, talking, fetching a last-minute glass of water, repeatedly putting Jamie back in bed when he wiggled out, and finally singing softly until the children’s eyes grew heavy.

Once they were all asleep, Ria waited for a few more minutes before she tiptoed out of the room, turning on the nightlight and shutting off the overhead light as she went. She made sure that the baby monitor was on before slipping into the hallway and slumping against the wall.

It had been a good day, in the end, but wrangling the triplets had been a challenge. They’d had fun (and so had she), but the house was strewn with toys she hadn’t had time to tidy up, and Tristan was still nowhere to be found.

Ria padded downstairs, yawning, put in her earbuds with her favorite playlist, and began cleaning up the toys. There seemed to be little rhyme or reason to the toy organization, so she started labeling bins and sorting toys by type. She put a few bins out of reach on a high shelf to be swapped out later when the current toys stopped being interesting. Next up was the kitchen, where she wiped down the high chairs, washed up the dinner dishes, and did a general tidy. Finally, she went into the living room, where the triplets had curled up to read earlier. The carnage wasn’t as great

here, but there were a few books strewn around and blankets discarded on the floor.

Humming along to her favorite song, Ria danced across the living room, picking up books, folding blankets, and throwing away wrappers from the triplets' afternoon fruit pouch snack. As well as potty training, she'd need to start cleaning up as she went, ideally enlisting the kids' help. Caught up in plans for the next day and thoughts about the one she'd just had, Ria was barely paying attention to her surroundings. She picked up a blanket, turned to shake it out, and heard a loud crash over her music.

Immediately, Ria's blood turned to ice. She was often clumsy, but knocking something over on the first day was a terrible start. She pulled out her earbuds and turned to see a large gray vase, decorated with bright yellow lines, shattered on the floor. Ria's eyes widened as she bent down and lifted a large shard. There was no repairing it.

Although, if she had to break something, at least it was something this ugly. The vase had clearly never been beautiful, even when it was in one piece, so it couldn't be too expensive. Right?

Ria heard footsteps behind her and whirled. Tristan strode into the room, his expression furious.

"What happened here?"

"I'm sorry." Ria straightened up, a piece of the vase in her hand. "I was cleaning up in here and I knocked this over."

Tristan's eyes widened as he took in the pile of shattered ceramic on the floor beside her. "Do you have any idea how much that cost?"

“I really don’t.”

Tristan shook his head. “Let’s just say it was more than your monthly salary.”

Maybe you should be paying me more, then, Ria thought. Certainly, she must be worth more than this ugly vase, especially since she’d been taking care of the triplets all day with no sign of Tristan. She kept that thought to herself, though.

“I am very sorry, Mr. West. I’ll be more careful.”

“If you can’t be trusted with an inanimate object, how can you be expected to look after children?” Tristan’s tone was low and serious. The ice in Ria’s veins grew colder. Breaking something was a bad move, obviously, but it seemed her job was in danger. And worse, Tristan wasn’t sure he could trust her with the kids — there was real fear behind his question.

“I’ve been looking after children for over a decade with no accidents,” Ria said, her voice calm. “I’m very sorry I broke your vase, but the children had a lovely day, and there’s really no need to worry about them.”

“Maybe I should find another nanny.” Tristan looked from the vase to Ria, who took a deep breath. It was time to level with this man. Surely he had an ounce of compassion somewhere deep, deep inside.

“Please, give me another chance,” Ria said, keeping her tone level and lifting her eyes to meet Tristan’s. “Take the cost of the vase out of my wages, if you need to, but I can’t lose this job on the first day. And I don’t want the kids to lose me, either. I really think I can help you, and them. And if I lose this job, I’ll be in a lot of trouble.”

Tristan sighed. “Fine. Just get this cleaned up before one of the kids gets hurt.” As though the mention of the kids had reminded him of their existence, he looked

around. “Where are the kids?”

“They’re sleeping upstairs,” Ria said.

“What are they doing asleep? It’s only seven thirty.” Tristan’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes, it is seven thirty, which is a very reasonable bedtime for toddlers their age.” Ria folded her arms. It was one thing to be upset about the expensive, ugly vase, but it was quite another to go after her childcare skills.

Tristan shook his head. “I need to go check on them.” Without another word to Ria, he turned on his heel and headed for the stairs. Ria watched him go, anger and worry swirling in her chest. She was probably going to lose this job the moment he got back downstairs, which would mean an end to her tenure with Oh Pear! Perhaps that was for the best. Ria would find another job, she always did, and her upper-middle-class clientele tended to be a lot less trying than the extremely rich Tristan West and his peers.

Even if Ria was about to lose her job, she was still employed now. With that in mind, she headed into the kitchen to find a dustpan, which she used to sweep up and dispose of the shards of the vase. By the time Tristan returned, the living room would be perfectly safe for little feet — and the ugly vase would be in the garbage, where it belonged.

CHAPTER6

TRISTAN

It was all Tristan could do not to let out a long, frustrated sigh as he climbed the stairs to the triplets’ room. Ria had been in his home for less than twenty-four hours, and she’d already destroyed an extremely expensive vase. Tristan had lost enough of his

prized possessions to the boisterous play of young toddlers. He didn't need the nanny smashing things, too, even by mistake.

Worse than the vase was the fact that she was lying. She had to be. Tristan had never seen all three triplets sleeping at the same time, at least not before midnight. One of them was always up, crying, needing water or a diaper change, or wanting to play. Ria must have just left the kids alone upstairs.

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Yet as Tristan approached the triplets' room, he heard nothing but the soft whoosh of ocean sounds from the kids' white-noise machine. The door was ajar, and when he pushed it open, he saw the three kids, bathed in the soft glow of their nightlight, asleep. They were all tucked into bed, their eyes closed, their tiny chests rising and falling rhythmically.

Tristan leaned against the doorway, breathing in the sight of the children so soundly asleep. They looked like little angels, all tucked up in their beds. Even though he'd tried to hold himself back out of respect for their mother, Tristan loved these kids. He just wished he could be a better father for them.

Slipping into the room, he kissed each child on his or her forehead, lightly, so as not to wake them. As he did, he breathed in the scent of baby shampoo — they were all freshly bathed. The warmth in Tristan's heart was soon replaced by guilt. He'd chewed Ria out over a vase when she'd given him something much more precious: help with the triplets.

Carefully, he slipped out of the bedroom, closing the door most of the way behind him. As he went down the stairs, he noticed that the house looked tidier than it had in a long while. Yet in the doorway, Ria's suitcase was still standing where she must have left it when she'd arrived.

Tristan's guilt intensified. He passed through the playroom, which was also neatly tidied, and back into the living room. Ria was sweeping up shards of the vase with a dustpan, but she straightened when Tristan entered, her expression a mix of guilt and determination.

“They really are sleeping,” she said.

“Yes, I know. Thank you.” Tristan stepped forward and took the dustpan from her, their hands brushing as he did so. “Don’t worry about the vase. Clearly, you have some superhuman toddler-wrangling skills that I desperately need — and I’m trying to be more of a minimalist anyway.”

“So, I can keep my job?” Ria’s eyes widened slightly.

“Of course. Clearly, you did an amazing job with the kids today, so break as many things as you’d like. Maybe just aim for something a little less expensive next time.”

Ria blushed. “Like what?”

“I don’t know — there’s an ornamental duck in the sitting room that I received as a gift, which I absolutely hate. You could go after that.” He smiled, and Ria visibly relaxed. The tense encounter about the vase was over.

“Aren’t we in the sitting room?” Ria raised her eyebrows as she gestured to the couches, fireplace, and TV.

“No, this is the living room.” Tristan felt even worse as he realized Ria hadn’t even had a tour yet. “Would you like me to show you around?”

“That would be lovely. You can point out objects for me to smash as we go.” Ria breezed by him, tossing her hair, and Tristan chuckled as he followed. They stopped off in the kitchen, where he disposed of the vase shards in the garbage.

“Did you clean up in here, too?”

“Yes, after I made dinner. The triplets sure are messy eaters.” She smiled.

“You can say that again. Anyway, of course, you’re welcome to help yourself to anything in the kitchen. The stuff for the toddlers is in those cabinets and the middle shelves of the fridge, but I also have a few more grown-up items you can feel free to try.”

“Coffee?” Ria’s eyes lit up.

“Definitely not.” Tristan opened a cupboard to show rows of matcha boxes, mixture for green drinks, spirulina powder, and green tea. “Coffee is terrible for you.”

“Do you drink anything that isn’t green?” Ria asked. Tristan was sure he could hear more than a little judgment in her voice.

“Sure; I have water with turmeric and lemon each morning.”

“I see. So... no coffee.”

“No coffee.” Tristan shut the cupboard. “But you’ll find the green tea is quite nice, especially with a little honey.”

“I think I’ll need a little more caffeine than that to keep up with the kids,” Ria said as Tristan led the way into the dining room.

“Try yoga,” Tristan suggested. “Just through there, I have a little yoga studio — mats, bolsters, incense, everything you need. It’s very energizing.” Or, it was supposed to be. Tristan had barely had any time to do yoga since the triplets came.

From behind him, he heard a barely concealed snort, but when he turned around, Ria was admiring the china cabinet.

“What lovely cups,” she said.

“They were my mother’s. I barely use them — there’s never a real opportunity — but I keep them around for her.” Tristan rarely talked about his parents, but seeing the china made him nostalgic. “Anyway, I told you about the yoga room. I had to move it downstairs after the triplets came.”

He led her down a short hallway and opened the door to show her the room.

“I also have a home gym, just here. Feel free to use it. I have a bar, treadmills, all that stuff, and if you need something I don’t have, just tell me.”

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“Lugging around toddlers is all the weightlifting I do,” Ria admitted. “And I run, but always outside.”

“Fair enough.” Tristan was starting to get a picture of Ria. She was sweet and a little clumsy, judging by the knocked-over vase, but she was also no-nonsense and self-aware. Tristan admired that.

“Is your office around here, too?” Ria asked.

“Yes, just down here.” Tristan led her to the end of the hall and showed her his office. “The kids aren’t allowed in here, at least not until they’re older. If you need me while I’m working from home, though, this is where I’ll be.”

“How much do you usually work?” The question was innocent enough, but Tristan detected a slight edge behind Ria’s tone.

“It depends, but I always have a lot of work to do. Being a CEO comes with a lot of unavoidable duties.”

“Hmm.” Ria shrugged, the edge still in her tone. “I wouldn’t know. Is there anything else downstairs I should see?”

“No, I think we can head up. You’ve already seen the playroom.” They returned to the entryway, and Tristan effortlessly carried Ria’s suitcase up the stairs. “You’ve already seen the kids’ bedroom. This one is mine, that one’s a spare, and this one is yours.”

The door was already open, so Tristan stepped inside and set Ria's suitcase on the floor. She followed him, her gaze trailing around the room. Tristan tried to see it as she would. There was a king-sized bed in the middle of the room, neatly made with a duvet printed in a twirling vine pattern. An ornate wooden desk stood beneath the picture window, which looked out over the large backyard.

"Oh, and there's an attached bathroom," Tristan added. "I stocked it with towels and everything, but if there's something else you need, just ask."

"Thank you." Ria turned back to Tristan. "This is really nice."

"I'm glad." He hesitated. Part of him wanted to stay and chat with Ria a little longer. He wanted to ask where she came from and what she did, when she wasn't caring for children. He wanted to apologize again for making such a fuss over the vase. He wanted to tell her that his work was important — otherwise he wouldn't have put Jamie in her arms and run off so quickly.

But Tristan also knew that, no matter how successful Ria's first day had been, that didn't mean she would stay in the long term. No nanny ever had. And even if she stayed, there was no reason Tristan should get close to her. He should let her do her job — and he should do his.

"Well, I'll leave you to get settled in," he said.

"Right." Ria smiled again. "Thanks. Are you going to work more?"

"Yep." Tristan shrugged. "There's always more to do. Anyway, have a good evening."

"See you tomorrow."

As Tristan left, Ria sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed her hand across the duvet. He glanced back at her once more before gently closing her door and stepping into the dark hallway. Tristan took a deep breath. This Ria was unlike any of the nannies he'd tried before. There was something about her, something unique that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Maybe whatever it was would be enough for her to stay.

Still half in thought, Tristan went downstairs, grabbed a green drink from the fridge, and returned to his office. He could easily work two or three more hours tonight before exhaustion took him. And in the morning, he could finally return to the office alone, without the triplets in tow. At last, he'd get some work done.

Tristan's home office felt strangely quiet and lonely after his conversation with Ria, but there was no time to dwell on that. He opened his laptop and got back to work.

CHAPTER 7

RIA

Ria sat on her new bed, hardly able to believe that this was her room — even her temporary room. The bed was enormous and downy-soft, with a duvet so fine it must have had a thread count in the millions (or whatever was good for a thread count — Ria had no idea). The view over the backyard was gorgeous, especially now that the sun was setting, casting rays of light between the apple trees that grew at the edge of the property. Both the bed and the desk were modern and sleek, which wasn't exactly Ria's style, but she appreciated it all the same. And she had her own bathroom! The whole of her studio would have fit in this one room with plenty of space left over.

She had stayed in numerous spare bedrooms while working as a live-in nanny, but this was by far the most luxurious place she'd ever set foot in. On top of that, the kids were great. The only problem was her new employer, the workaholic, too-cool

Tristan.

Ria rolled her eyes slightly as she remembered his comments about coffee and yoga. He was clearly one of those tech CEOs who did his best to be Zen, although by the way he'd flipped out over the vase, he didn't seem to be succeeding. Plus, Ria didn't like that he'd disappeared all day, leaving his kids with someone who was little more than a stranger. His work might be important, but parenthood was, too. He hadn't even checked her credentials or shown her around before disappearing.

Despite her annoyance, though, Ria had to admit that there was something about Tristan that she found intriguing. Perhaps it was just that she'd never met anyone quite like him before. Perhaps it was that he was very handsome (even Ria could admit that). Or perhaps it was the way he'd joked with her after he'd gotten over his upset about the vase. Ria appreciated people with a sense of humor.

Whatever it was, Tristan was going to make the next few weeks or months very interesting. If she was able to keep her job. Ria winced again at the price Tristan had put on the vase. Of course she'd broken something very valuable on her first day. She'd have to be extra careful tomorrow.

Yawning, Ria went into the attached bathroom and washed her face. Then she found her toiletry kit in her suitcase and brushed her teeth, changed into pajamas, and climbed under the sheets of the bed. It was barely nine o'clock, but she'd had an exhausting day and needed a break. She considered working on a potty-training plan for the kids, but instead she found herself pulling out her laptop and putting on her guilty-pleasure reality show. While she watched, she munched on a bar of chocolate she'd packed. Probably, Tristan didn't keep chocolate in the house, so she'd have to find a way to build her own stash. She'd need to find some coffee, too.

A while later, sleep overcame her, and Ria lay down and let herself drift off.

The next morning, Ria woke to her alarm. She quickly shut it off and slipped into the bathroom, where she took a shower and changed into a pair of yoga pants and a dark purple T-shirt. She planned to spend the day running after kids, so she chose functionality over fashion, as usual. She pulled her hair back into a quick braid before going downstairs.

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She'd purposefully aimed to wake before the kids, and a glance at the baby monitor confirmed that she'd been successful. She set the monitor on the kitchen counter and began rummaging through the cabinets in search of breakfast food. A few minutes later, she was listening to music and dancing while mixing a bowl of pancake batter with a few handfuls of blueberries.

One of Ria's favorite songs came on and she sang along under her breath as she put a frying pan on the stove and turned on the heat. When drops of water bounced off the surface, she ladled out the first pancake, then turned to slice bananas and wash a few more blueberries for toppings. Gasping, she almost dropped her spoon.

"Tristan!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you." Tristan stepped into the kitchen, wearing a pair of shorts and a sleeveless tank top that left his muscular arms, chest, and legs on full display. He was a little sweaty, probably having just come from his home gym. "I'm just here to grab a drink."

"Right, don't let me stop you." Ria switched off the music, which she'd been listening to through her portable Bluetooth speaker, and pivoted to the cutting board to continue her fruit prep. "Would you like some pancakes? They'll be ready in a minute or two."

"No, thanks. I usually fast in the mornings — it's good for digestion."

"Right." Ria popped a blueberry into her mouth a little pointedly and sneaked a glance at Tristan. He looked different this morning somehow. She blinked — and

spotted the difference. “You don’t have your glasses on.”

“No, they’re for fashion more than function.” Tristan shrugged as he squeezed a lemon into a glass of water. “I don’t really need them.”

It took all Ria’s powers not to let out a derisive snort. She’d known Tristan was a bit too hip, but wearing glasses he didn’t need felt like a step too far. If he were a kid, she’d have sat him down right there for a conversation about peer pressure and being yourself.

“Hey.” Tristan seemed to notice her judgment. “I do need the glasses a little — for reading, mostly.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Ria ate another blueberry. “When will you be back tonight?”

“Late, probably.” He took a sip of his beverage, which appeared to be just plain lemon juice and turmeric in water. “I don’t know when.” As if it had just occurred to him, he added, “Perhaps you should give me your number — that way I can let you know when I’ll be back.”

“Perfect.” Ria gave her number. “And I can text you if I have any questions about the triplets,” Ria added. She flipped the pancakes, revealing their perfect golden-brown surfaces. How Tristan wasn’t tempted by the delicious aroma of cinnamon-infused batter and chocolate chips, she didn’t know.

Tristan looked slightly confused. “I suppose, but I doubt you’ll have any questions you’d need me for. You’re the expert.”

“Sure, but they are your kids,” Ria countered, now equally confused.

Tristan took a long sip of his beverage while Ria flipped the first batch of pancakes

onto a plate.

“The kids?—”

But whatever he’d been about to say was cut off by the sound of babbling over the baby monitor. Ria turned to check the screen and saw that the kids were waking up. Jacob was already toddling over to the desk, probably in search of more crayons or markers for his wall art.

“Well, that’s my cue.” Ria smiled and turned off the pan. The rest of the pancakes could wait until the triplets were up. “If you change your mind about the pancakes, help yourself. I made plenty.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.” But Tristan just sipped his lemon-turmeric water again.

Shrugging, Ria grabbed the baby monitor and headed upstairs. On the way out of the kitchen, she managed to stub her toe against the bottom of a cupboard and hopped a few steps, hoping Tristan hadn’t seen. A glance back showed that he was watching her, his expression unreadable — though perhaps there was a hint of amusement in those bright green eyes.

“Are you all right?”

“Just clumsy.” Ria gave a thumbs-up. At least she hadn’t broken anything this time. Then she headed for the stairs and her young charges. On the way, her phone dinged with a “hello” message from Tristan and she saved his number.

When she got upstairs, Jacob was sitting on his bed again with a marker in his hand and his truck-patterned pillowcase sitting on his lap, a waiting canvas. Ria quickly swapped the pillow for a sheet of paper before soothing Jasmine, who was asking for

water and a hug. Jamie rolled out of bed and onto the floor, a mischievous smile already on his small face.

“Skuw?” he asked.

“School?” Ria repeated, confused. “No, honey, you’re a little young for school.”

“No skul. SKUW!” Jamie’s face lit up. He jumped onto Jasmine’s bed and tapped her shoulder. “Skuw?”

“Skuw!” Jasmine grinned, her desire for water forgotten. “Wike skuw.”

Maybe the kids were supposed to be attending some kind of kindergarten that Tristan had forgotten to mention. Ria wouldn’t put it past him to have left out some important detail like that.

“I’ll ask your dad about school,” Ria said. “For now, I have some delicious breakfast waiting for you downstairs. You just need to get up, and we’ll head down.”

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She helped the triplets get dressed, wash up, and brush their teeth, then led them downstairs for breakfast. On the way, Jacob held up his arms to be carried. “Hold me.”

Ria scooped him up, planting a quick kiss on his downy head. Tristan might be a little too self-consciously cool for Ria’s taste, but the kids were a delight. Anyway, by the time they got downstairs, Tristan might well be sitting at the table and digging into a huge serving of pancakes.

He wasn’t. In fact, he was nowhere in sight. He probably left for work, Ria thought as she set Jacob down.

“All right, kids, today’s breakfast is pancakes!” She grinned at them, and the triplets cheered, which was adorable. “Do you like pancakes?”

“Yeah!” the kids called.

“Wike skul,” Jamie added very seriously.

“Hold that thought.” Ria winked at him as she pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Tristan.

Do the triplets go to some kind of school? They keep asking about it.

She slid her phone back into her pocket. Usually, Ria was careful not to be on her phone much around the kids, though she did keep it on her most of the time for occasions like this. She turned her full attention back to cooking breakfast. One by

one, she lifted the triplets onto the counter and let them request what shape of pancake they wanted then watch while she made it.

“Heawt,” Jasmine requested, so Ria made her best heart-shaped pancake.

“Dinosauw,” Jacob put in during his turn. He watched with awe as the steaming dinosaur-shaped pancake came off the griddle. Finally, Ria lifted Jamie onto the counter. He gave her a mischievous grin.

“Skuw.”

“Hold on, honey, let me see if your dad knows what that is.” Ria pulled out her phone and saw that Tristan had replied to her question.

No, they don’t go to school. They went to a nature preschool before, but it wasn’t a good fit.

Hmm. Perhaps the kids were missing their nature preschool. Still, Tristan’s reply didn’t help Ria much in her attempt to make fun pancake shapes. She made Jamie’s pancake in a blob that she hoped looked like a school to the casual observer. Jamie seemed happy, and all the triplets soon dug into their food. Ria piled her plate with the pancakes she’d made earlier and joined them for breakfast, listening to their happy babble as they all ate.

After breakfast — and a quick wash to get smears of chocolate and blueberry off the triplets’ chins — Ria decided to take everyone out for a walk. If the triplets were missing their nature preschool, a little fresh air might do them good. It was a little hard to tell which jackets and shoes belonged to which kid, but none of the triplets seemed to care, so she just helped them into whichever clothes were closest at hand and got them outside.

Despite their occasional rowdiness, the kids seemed to understand how to walk outside. Jasmine slipped her hand into Ria's and looked up at her with wide, trusting green eyes.

“Go park?”

“Sure, honey. We can go to the park.” She squeezed Jasmine's hand. The boys, meanwhile, had begun to wrestle a little as they walked. Ria let it play out. They were clearly careful with each other, and it might help get some of their energy out.

Ria didn't know the neighborhood well enough to know where the parks were, so they wandered a little before coming across an open space lined with oak trees that boasted a large, colorful playground. When the triplets caught sight of it, they ran towards the playground, cheering. Thus followed a morning of pushing kids on the baby swings, catching them at the bottom of slides, and clapping for them as they carefully maneuvered the rope bridge. The air was cool and fresh, the park was almost empty, and Ria could hear birds chirping in the trees. She was happy to stay here as long as possible.

After an hour or so, the triplets began to fuss about being hungry and tired, so Ria gathered them up for the walk back home. When they were almost out of the park, Jamie's eyes lit up.

“Skuw!”

Ria looked around. Perhaps the nature school they'd attended was nearby? But he was pointing up, towards one of the oaks. Ria followed his gaze as the other two kids began to shout, “Skuw! Skuw! Hold me — skuw!”

Finally, Ria spotted it and began to laugh. Up in the tree, sitting on a branch and cleaning its paws, was a brown, bushy-tailed squirrel with bright eyes. It appeared to

be completely unaware of its young fan club on the ground.

“Right, asquirrel,” Ria said.

“Skuw!” Jamie beamed.

“Boo-tiful squw,” Jasmine put in helpfully. “Tree home?”

“I think the tree is his home, yes. So, you guys all like squirrels?”

All three dark-haired heads nodded enthusiastically.

“Well, that’s very good to know. Squirrels like to eat nuts, right?”

More nodding.

“When we get home, we can have a special nut snack, just like squirrels. What do you think?”

“Yay!” It was enough to tear the triplets’ gazes away from the squirrel and get them walking again. Ria smiled to herself. The kids hadn’t been talking about a school at all — she just wished she’d known that earlier, when she was making pancakes, because the blob she’d given Jamie hadn’t resembled a squirrel at all.

Back home, Ria prepared a drink and a snack for the triplets then pulled out her phone to send a quick text to Tristan.

They weren’t actually asking about a school, it turns out — they were asking about a squirrel. Who knew?

Hopefully, Tristan would be as amused by the revelation as she was. Though, on second thought, he probably already knew. As the children’s father, he would have heard them talk about squirrels many times before, especially since they were such squirrel fans.

Ria put her phone away and turned her full attention back to the kids. It was time to start potty training and see if she could get them on a good nap schedule.

CHAPTER8

TRISTAN

Tristan wasn't having the best day.

That was surprising, because things were finally going his way. He had Ria to take care of the triplets, so he wasn't worried about them and didn't have to bring them to work. That was a huge relief by itself. He could finally concentrate on his job and on getting things done.

Yet he was strangely hungry all morning. Usually, he tolerated his fasts well, but today, he wanted nothing more than a stack of pancakes piled with sliced fruit and dripping with maple syrup.

"No kids today, huh?" David, the company's financial manager, handed him a document. "This just needs your signature."

"Yep, the kids are home with a new nanny. I'm cautiously optimistic." Tristan smiled and signed the document before handing it back.

"It must be a relief to focus on work again." David shrugged. "I love my kids, but it's good to get a break now and then."

"Right." Tristan nodded, but something struck him as odd about the conversation. He wasn't able to put a finger on it until later, when he was walking out of a quarterly planning meeting. He was relieved to be able to focus on work, but he felt bad about his relief. He was the closest thing to a parent these kids had, but he couldn't be the father they needed. He should want to be with them all the time, shouldn't he?

Yet whenever the kids gave him a hug or pressed a sticky cookie into his hand with a grin, Tristan felt bad for his sister. She should be the one raising her beloved children, not her clueless half brother. It was like he couldn't win. He either felt guilty for not being around the kids, or he felt guilty for being close with them. And either way, he felt guilty for not knowing what he was supposed to do for them.

Guilt was an unfamiliar feeling for Tristan. He didn't much like it.

Around eleven, he got a text from Ria.

They weren't actually asking about a school, it turns out — they were asking about a squirrel. Who knew?

He stared at the text for a long time. He hadn't known that the kids were asking about a squirrel. He didn't even know which squirrel they were asking about — perhaps one of their toys? Tristan told himself that it didn't matter, but he found his thoughts drifting back to Ria and the kids throughout the day. Usually, by now, he'd have gotten a frantic call from the nanny saying that the kids were going wild, but there was nothing but an occasional positive update from Ria.

In some way, that made Tristan feel even more guilty. Clearly, Ria had some kind of magic power over the kids that he just didn't. When all the babysitters and nannies had struggled, Tristan had felt less bad about his own difficulties with the triplets. Now that he heard about how clearly capable Ria was, he felt like he must be doing things wrong.

In short, it wasn't a good day — even though Tristan was able to address numerous urgent business matters that had been on the back burner for some time. He ate his lunch of kale salad at his desk, still elbows-deep in work, and followed it up with some green tea in the afternoon. A memory of Ria joking about the green contents of his cabinet floated back as he sipped his drink, and Tristan smiled slightly.

Five o'clock came and went with Tristan still working. Finally, around eight thirty, he dragged himself away from his desk. Now that Ria was here, he should be able to work like this every day, so he didn't need to work all night anymore. He headed home, the streets of San Francisco still buzzing at this hour, and pulled into the driveway around nine.

Inside, the house was quiet. Tristan took off his shoes and headed upstairs to check on the triplets, who were all sleeping peacefully. He smiled at the sight of them before carefully shutting the door.

Next, he went down to the kitchen. He hadn't eaten dinner yet.

When he stepped through the doorway, he caught sight of Ria. She had on headphones and pajamas (shorts and an oversized T-shirt) and was dancing with great enthusiasm. A pile of dishes sat on the draining board beside her and she had a sponge in her hand. Her red hair was piled into a bun on top of her head.

Tristan paused in the doorway. He should get her attention and let her know he was here, but something about the way she danced — completely freely — was compelling. Just as he was about to say something, Ria turned, sponge in hand. Her eyes widened when she saw Tristan, and she dropped the soapy sponge onto the floor and pressed a hand to her heart.

“You scared me.” She pulled off her headphones.

“Sorry.” Tristan glanced at the fallen sponge. “I see you’re throwing more of my property on the ground.”

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Ria rolled her eyes and scooped the sponge up. “I figured you’d appreciate that it wasn’t something breakable, at least.”

“Thanks. Also, you know you don’t have to hand-wash dishes, right? I have two dishwashers.”

“I know.” Ria shrugged and brushed her hair out of her face with the back of her hand. “But I like washing things by hand. It’s relaxing.”

“Really?” Tristan had never heard that before.

“Really.” Ria turned back to the sink and began scrubbing a pot. Not wanting to just hover, Tristan picked up a dish towel and started drying things. “How was work?”

“Productive.” Tristan would usually have been more excited to talk about his job, but today he wasn’t feeling it. “How were the kids?”

“Oh, they’re great. Although they just can’t pronounce ‘squirrel.’” Ria grinned. “We went to the park, did some baking together, had a nap — well, they did — played some games, did a craft, cleaned up the toy room, had dinner and a bath, and went to bed.”

“Were there any tantrums?”

“A few. Kids that age always have a few.” Ria rinsed the mixing bowl she’d been scrubbing and handed it automatically to Tristan. He took it. As he did so, he wondered how long it had been since he’d washed or dried a dish by hand.

“Really?”

“You sound surprised.” Ria gave him a warm look. “Tantrums are very common.”

“I suppose I expected that the kids would behave for you,” Tristan admitted. If he were being honest, he was a little relieved that everything hadn’t been sunshine and rainbows for Ria when it was so hard for him.

“At two and a half, even if they’re trying to behave, things will fall apart. They have so little control over their emotions, yet their feelings feel so big.” Ria shrugged and handed over a dripping wooden spoon. “They would throw a tantrum or two no matter how was looking after them.”

“Still, you have some kind of magic,” Tristan said. “You got them asleep, all at the same time, two nights in a row. And the house is looking cleaner than it has in, well, a while.”

“You can just call me a sorceress.” Ria winked and twizzled a second mixing spoon in her hand as though it were a magic wand.

“What were you making today?” Tristan asked as he accepted the mixing-spoon-slash-magic-wand and dried it.

“Cookies. I know, you won’t be having any, but they’re actually quite healthy. They’re mostly made of oatmeal, with just a little natural cane sugar and some dark-chocolate chips.”

“You’re right, I won’t have any, but I’m sure the triplets loved them.”

“They were excited mostly because they got to help make them,” Ria explained. “Kids that age love being involved in things. A few chocolate chips did disappear, but

I felt it was an acceptable tax for the fun we had.”

“How do you know so much?” Tristan asked. “About kids, I mean.”

“Experience.” Ria shrugged. “That’s all there is to it, really.”

Tristan hesitated. “Surely, though, you have... I don’t know... some kind of magic you can share with me. Something that would make things easier with the triplets.”

Ria looked at him, her green eyes intense as she held his gaze for a long moment. Tristan realized that he wasn’t going to get her jokes about sorcery this time, and he found himself holding his breath. Perhaps this would be the moment when Ria would say a few magic words and he’d be able to understand the triplets better.

“There’s only one real kind of magic when it comes to taking care of kids,” Ria said gently. “It’s the same kind of magic that makes love thrive anywhere, and the same kind of magic that makes you good at anything.”

“Which is?”

“Showing up. When you’re there for your kids for long enough, every day, and keep showing up when things get hard, that’s when the magic happens. Nothing really changes, but you feel differently, and it becomes easier.”

“Right.” Tristan’s stomach twisted. Those weren’t the magic words he’d hoped to hear from Ria. Instead, she’d confirmed what he knew to be true. He didn’t show up for the kids, not enough. He tried. Of course, he tried. When he was taking care of them, he made sure they were fed and dressed in clean clothes and that they had everything they needed. Yet the first opportunity he had, he always ran away to work.

Part of it was not wanting to step on his sister’s toes. Another part, though, was that

Tristan simply felt he couldn't give the kids as much as someone like Ria could. He'd never been compelled to ooh and aah over babies, nor had he planned to have children of his own. His company had always been his child, and work was what he was good at. He wasn't good with the triplets.

"Here." Ria handed him a plate. "Dry this?"

Tristan understood her request for what it was: a way to change the subject. Perhaps Ria felt she'd overstepped, and she probably had. If Tristan hadn't been so impressed with her, or if he hadn't recognized the truth in her words, he probably would have been angry.

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“Sure.” Tristan wiped the cloth across the plate. “Is this the last one?”

“Yeah, we’re all done.” Ria dried her hands and stepped back from the sink. Her hands went to her hips as she surveyed the counter. “Everything looks all right.”

“It does.”

“Well, I’ll head up to bed.” She pivoted on her toes with the same grace she’d used while dancing around the kitchen. Halfway to the door, she paused and turned back. Tristan half-expected another deep comment, but she just smiled slightly. “If you change your mind about the cookies, they’re in a plastic container on top of the fridge.”

And then she was gone, leaving Tristan alone in the kitchen. He sighed, put the plate away, and opened the fridge. He still needed to eat dinner, and he still had work that needed to be done. Yet now, he felt distracted again. He was caught up in thoughts of Ria and what she’d said about showing up.

How could Tristan ever be a father to the triplets, though, when it would mean erasing their mother? How could he ever be a good father when he didn’t understand what made young kids tick? How could he run a company and raise kids without letting the ball drop somewhere?

Tristan shook his head and pulled a container of quinoa and beans out of the fridge. Before he headed down the hallway to his office, he sent one glance at the container of cookies on top of the fridge. Then he shook his head and left the kitchen. At his desk, he sat and worked, eating bites of his dinner between emails, until it was after

midnight and his eyelids were too heavy to stay open.

CHAPTER9

RIA

Ria handed a strawberry to Jacob, who popped it in his mouth with a delighted smile. The kids were sitting outside on the back lawn to enjoy the surprisingly warm March afternoon. Jamie was on patrol around the fence with a large stick in search of squirrels to befriend. Exactly how the stick was supposed to help in the friendship, Ria wasn't sure, and Jamie couldn't explain. Jacob was coloring on an enormous piece of paper, longer than he was tall, that Ria had found for him. He looked deeply satisfied. Jasmine was climbing up and sliding down a toddler-sized plastic slide Ria had found in the playroom and moved outdoors. One of her small hands clutched a plastic toy horse.

Ria, for her part, was simply enjoying the sunshine and the sound of the children playing. That morning, Tristan had been gone before she'd come downstairs, but her conversation with him the night before kept replaying in her head. She shouldn't have said that the real magic of parenthood was showing up. A comment like that would have gotten her fired from any of her last half dozen nannying jobs.

Yet Tristan hadn't seemed upset with her. He'd just seemed... thoughtful. As though Ria's words had struck him. Whether any changes would come of it remained to be seen.

"Wia?" Jasmine came dashing over from the slide, her horse still in her hand. "Juice?"

"Sure, honey. Let's get some." It was time for a snack anyway. Ria gathered the triplets, got them inside, and settled them on the living room floor with a few toys.

She left the door to the kitchen open so she could keep an eye on them while she looked for juice and snacks. Tristan only kept organic, cold-pressed orange juice (and something muddy-looking and green in a juice bottle that Ria wasn't touching). She poured a little of the orange juice into three sippy cups then carried them back to the kids along with some crackers and halved grapes.

"Wike gwapes," Jasmine said with a grin. "Mommy wike gwapes."

Ria blinked. None of the triplets had mentioned anything about a mother before, and she'd assumed Tristan was a single father.

"Mommy?" Ria asked.

"Mommy wike gwapes," Jasmine said again. She reached for another grape half with enthusiasm.

"And skuls," Jamie added. His eyes gleamed at the thought of his favorite animal.

"Squirrels," Ria corrected automatically. Her mind was racing. Did these children have a mother who was out of town? Was Tristan married? She tried to remember if she'd seen a ring on his hand but couldn't. It was one thing for him not to give all the details about the children's daily routine or possible school, but it was another for him to have left out their mother.

"Yeah. Skuls." Jamie nodded.

"Where is your mommy?" Ria asked. The triplets looked at each other.

"Pawk," Jasmine said finally. She broke a cracker with her hand and popped the largest piece into her mouth.

“Your mommy is in the park?” Ria repeated. The triplets all nodded, but Ria wasn’t any the wiser. She knew kids this age often had trouble imagining where people were, but usually that meant they thought their teachers lived at school or their grandparents lived in a specific restaurant. She’d never heard any kid say that their mother lived in the park.

“Pawk haz skuls,” Jasmine continued. Her tiny green eyes began to tear up, and Ria saw that they were heading into dangerous waters. Of course, kids their age would dearly miss their mother if she were away, even if it was only for a few hours. And given that Ria had been here for more than two days now with no sign of a mother, she must be gone for longer than that.

“That’s lovely. What should we do after our snack?” Ria asked in hopes of changing the subject.

“Skul?” Jamie asked hopefully.

“Cwayon?” Jacob suggested.

“Pawk wif Mommy,” Jasmine said forlornly. Her grapes and cracker shards were forgotten.

“How about we go swimming?” Ria suggested. She’d seen signs for an indoor pool not far from here. That would definitely distract the triplets from missing their mother.

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“Yay!” There were cheers. The triplets began to eat their snacks more quickly, clearly looking forward to a pool trip. After they ate, Ria took them all upstairs and busied them with a chunky puzzle while she found swimsuits and towels for everyone. Still, as she packed the bag, walked the triplets to the pool, and played with them in the shallow water and spouting fountains of the kiddy section, she couldn’t stop thinking about their mother. Why hadn’t Tristan mentioned her?

Even stranger, the house didn’t have much of a feminine touch. Ria would be surprised if any woman lived there. Maybe Tristan was divorced, then, though that didn’t explain why the kids thought their mother lived in a park. Maybe she just had a big yard? Although, if Tristan was divorced, that meant the kids would probably spend some time at their mother’s house, which made Ria’s job a little confusing.

The rest of the day passed in splashy play, a lunch of chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes, and peas, and an afternoon of napping and quiet activities. Evening brought a dinner of spaghetti for the kids, followed by bathtime and their bedtime routine. They were already showing enormous strides with potty training and were talking more, which Ria saw as a good sign.

When she came downstairs after tucking the kids in, the baby monitor in her hand, she ran smack into Tristan, who was just coming home. He was wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a band T-shirt.

“Is that what you wore to work?” she asked. After the words had slipped out, she realized that this was not the way one talked to their employer. Luckily, Tristan didn’t seem annoyed.

“Yeah, we have a very casual office. Are the triplets in bed?”

“Yep, just.”

“Oh.” Tristan’s face fell slightly.

“Were you hoping to see them?” Ria glanced at her phone to check the time. Tristan was home earlier than usual, but he’d still missed their bedtime by a few minutes.

“Maybe.”

“Well, tomorrow is Saturday, so I’m sure you’ll see plenty of them then.”

“Right. I’ll try to keep my work to a minimum.” They were still standing in the hallway, but Tristan now put down his backpack and took off his shoes. “Have you eaten?”

“Not yet. The kids had spaghetti, but I was too busy supervising to eat much.”

“I was just going to get some dinner, if you care to join me.”

“Sure.” They walked together to the kitchen, where Ria dished up a plate of leftover spaghetti from the triplets’ dinner. She added a few sprinkles of fresh herbs and some chili flakes for a little extra flavor before putting together a little salad. Tristan, meanwhile, dished up grilled salmon and steamed broccoli with brown rice from the fridge and heated it in the microwave.

“Healthy,” Ria said, nodding to his food. “Do you always eat so healthy?”

“Usually. But I think most people in San Francisco do.” They sat at the small dining

table in the kitchen, Tristan poking halfheartedly at his fish. “How were the kids today?”

“Good.” Ria hesitated. She was probably about to overstep again. “Although, Jasmine mentioned something that I found a little confusing.”

“More squirrels?” Tristan asked. He winked, and Ria smiled.

“Actually, squirrels did play a part, but they weren’t the focus this time.” She paused, looking down at her plate of pasta.

“Go on.” Tristan lifted those intense green eyes to hers. He’d taken off his glasses again.

“She said something about her ‘mommy,’” Ria explained. “I think I must have misunderstood something — I thought you were a single father.”

“Right.” Tristan nodded slowly. “I am a single father. Actually, the triplets... they’re my nephews and niece.”

“Really?” Ria’s eyebrows lifted. She hadn’t considered that possibility at all.

“A few months ago, I found out that I had a half sister. I never knew her — she was the product of an affair my father had.” Tristan shook his head slightly. “I wish I’d known her, but my father never told my mother or me about her. Anyway, she passed away recently. I’m the only living family the triplets have, so I agreed to take them.”

“Oh.” Ria sat back in her chair, reeling. She had misread the situation, but not in the way she’d thought. “I had no idea.”

“How would you have?” Tristan shrugged. “I never told you.”

“Right. I just... wow.” She shook her head slowly. “That must have been a huge shock for you. And for the kids.” Now it made sense why Jasmine had said their mother lived in a park. She must have meant a cemetery. Ria’s heart broke for those kids, who were so young to be experiencing such upheaval in their lives.

“It was.” Tristan took a sip of his water before lifting those bright-green eyes to Ria’s again. “That’s why I’m such a lousy father.”

“A lousy father?” Ria’s brows wrinkled. “What makes you say that?”

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“It’s like you said yesterday. The magic of parenthood is showing up, and I don’t. At least, not always.”

“First of all, you do show up. You took in the triplets when they needed you most, and you’ve been taking care of them for a few months now. Second, you’re not a lousy father. You’re trying your best in a very difficult situation.”

As Ria spoke, she realized that she believed everything she was saying. Before, she’d judged Tristan for disappearing into his office the moment she’d arrived (and for his too-cool demeanor), but now she was beginning to understand why he acted as he did. Of course he kept some distance from the kids. They’d been a huge surprise.

She still would have liked to see a little more effort from him, though.

“I am trying, but I’m worried it isn’t enough. I just don’t know how to keep them from crying or get them to sleep or even play with them. And I worry about stepping into their mother’s role when she isn’t here.” Tristan bit his lip. Now, his usual attitude was melting away, and Ria saw a vulnerability in his eyes.

“You’re going to be fine. And if you ever need help, you can just ask me.” Ria paused. “You know, we can start tomorrow. I was planning to take the kids to the park in the morning. Come with us.”

“Oh, I’m not sure?—”

But Ria wasn’t about to take no for an answer. “It’ll be nice. We’ll all enjoy a little sun and fresh air, and you can see the fun side of being a parent.”

“All right.” Tristan gave a lopsided smile. “I suppose there’s no arguing with you, is there?”

“Nope.” Ria grinned. “You’ve been told your marching orders. Now you just have to follow them.”

“Is giving orders part of your nanny training?”

“No — actually, I should be giving you two choices, both of which are acceptable to me. For instance, would you like to go to the park with the kids tomorrow, or should we take them to the pool?”

“Now that you present my options like that, the park is sounding good.” Tristan glanced down at his food, which appeared to have been forgotten. Ria realized that she hadn’t eaten anything in a while either and turned her attention to her spaghetti.

“It works on the kids, too,” she said as she swirled a few strands of pasta onto her fork.

“I’ll give it a try.” Tristan halfheartedly stabbed a piece of fish. “So, you know that I had a sister I never knew. Do you have siblings?”

“I have four.” Ria grinned at his look of surprise, which she saw on nearly everyone’s faces when she told them about her family. “All younger than me. I have two sisters and two brothers. The oldest is a few years younger than me, and the youngest is still in college.”

“Wow. I can’t even imagine. I grew up as an only child, and I was always a little jealous of families with siblings, but four seems like a lot.”

“It was.” A memory of bouncing her youngest sister on her hip, trying to calm her

down from a burst of tears after their mother had hurried out to her evening job, flashed through Ria's mind, but she didn't mention it. Hearing about Tristan's sister and beginning to understand his complicated relationship with the triplets was enough for tonight on the revelations front. "But I love them. It's been cool to see them all growing up into their own people."

"Are you close with your siblings and parents?" Tristan asked.

"Yes. Well, I'm close with my siblings and my mom. My dad passed away when I was young."

"I'm sorry."

Ria gave a sad half-smile. "How about you — are you close with your parents?"

"They both passed away." Tristan took another bite of his quinoa. The gesture was almost too casual, as though he was trying to prove that all was well, but Ria's heart broke again. He'd lost both his parents and a sister he'd never known. Now he was raising the triplets without any family support — no wonder things were so difficult.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was a long time ago. And to be honest, we were never as close as some families are."

"I'm sure that doesn't make it hurt any less."

"No." Tristan lifted his eyes to hers. "Probably not."

They looked at each other for a long moment before Ria glanced down at her empty plate. She felt her cheeks reddening, although she didn't want to think too much

about why.

“I’d better go shower and head to bed,” she said, still looking at the empty plate. “The kids will be up early.”

“Of course, and I have a little more work to do.”

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They both got up. This time, Ria loaded her plate and fork into the dishwasher instead of washing them by hand, as did Tristan. They both smiled at each other then melted away, Ria going upstairs and Tristan heading back to his office.

This evening's conversation had been an eye-opener for Ria. She'd thought Tristan was just a detached parent, like so many of the wealthy fathers she worked with. The truth was clearly much more complicated. As she shed her clothes and stepped into the shower, she vowed that she would do all she could to help Tristan ease into his new role as the triplets' father. He clearly needed her help — and so did the kids.

She knew that she couldn't be their nanny forever. And even if she stayed for years, a nanny wasn't the same as a parent. She let the warm water soak into her hair and run down her back as she reached for some of the fragrant shampoo she'd brought from home. The best legacy Ria could leave in this family was one in which Tristan felt confident as a father, and the triplets were settled into their home.

If there was something else there, a flutter of attraction towards the honest and open man she'd met in the kitchen, Ria didn't want to think about it. A crush on her employer would be a mistake. A crush on an employer who she lived with would be even worse. It was better to focus on all the things about Tristan that annoyed her, like his fake glasses and his love of weirdly healthy food and his poor taste in vases. She couldn't let herself think about his smile, the sparkle in his green eyes, or the way he could be quite funny when he wanted to be.

Ria stepped out of the shower, dried herself with one of the fluffy white towels, and slipped into her pajamas. Back in her bedroom, she fell gratefully into bed. Chasing the kids around all day had been one thing, but the evening's revelations had been far

more tiring. Ria had a lot to think about. She had a lot of plans to make, too. Plans for how to help Tristan be a better father. Plans for how to help the triplets feel at home.

Plans for how to keep herself from feeling anything for Tristan or the kids beyond the usual fondness a nanny might have for her employer and her young charges.

CHAPTER 10

TRISTAN

Tristan woke the next morning to his alarm. He crept downstairs, moving quietly so as not to wake Ria or the kids, and headed straight to his home gym. There, he spent half an hour on the treadmill. Ria had a point when she'd said that treadmills weren't as interesting as running outside, but Tristan liked the lack of distractions. He was able to concentrate on his own thoughts instead of the outside world.

Usually, that meant thoughts about his company, but today, it meant thoughts about Ria. The conversation he'd had with her in the kitchen last night had been surprisingly impactful. He remembered the flicker of sympathy in her eyes as he'd told her about his parents and his sister. He never told anyone about his parents, much less his sister. Yet something about Ria had inspired him to open up.

Tristan would have to be careful. Ria was gorgeous, insightful, and clever, all of which were very attractive qualities. Whether she was dressed up nicely or dancing around the kitchen in her pajamas, she was equally lovely.

She was also his children's nanny. Tristan couldn't let himself feel anything resembling attraction to her.

For as long as she stayed in his home, he would need to be careful. He couldn't let himself spend too much time with Ria. He'd need to keep his distance and focus on

work.

Agreeing to take the triplets to the park with her this morning probably wasn't a step in the right direction, but it was too late to back out now.

His gym session over, Tristan stopped by the kitchen for his usual morning beverage. Ria was already there, setting out cereal and milk and slicing strawberries. She smiled at Tristan when he came in.

"Morning."

"Good morning." Tristan made a beeline for the cupboard. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, quite." Ria popped a strawberry into her mouth. "Are you excited for the park today?"

Tristan held in a sigh. He wasn't excited, not at all. As if spending more time with the beautiful Ria wasn't bad enough, he'd also be with the unruly kids in a public place. It was hard enough to keep them corralled in the privacy of his own home. It would be nearly impossible to keep track of them all at an open park.

"It should be fun," Tristan said. Ria chuckled.

"I don't think you mean that, but you're probably right. It will be fun. You'll see."

"Yes, we'll see." Tristan poured water into his glass.

"Would you like to join us for breakfast?" Ria asked. "I'll get the kids up in a minute."

"No, I'm still fasting."

“Hmm. Right. You know, strawberries are very healthy. They’re full of antioxidants and vitamins and stuff.” Ria grinned. “You could at least sit at the table and eat a few strawberries.”

Tristan leaned over, plucked a strawberry off her cutting board, and popped it whole into his mouth.

“Happy now?” he asked. He left the kitchen, drink in hand, to the sound of Ria’s soft laughter behind him. He hadn’t meant to make her laugh. The sound was lovely, though.

Tristan stepped into the shower, where he quickly rinsed off. As usual, he ended with a burst of cold water. Then he dressed and hesitated inside his room. Outside, he could hear the kids chattering and laughing as they galumphed down the stairs. Part of him was tempted to join them, but he decided against it. It was better to get a little work done before the ill-fated park trip.

An hour or so later, Tristan was in his home office, working, when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called. He turned in his swivel chair as Ria stepped through the doors, Jamie balanced on her hip.

“Hewo,” Jamie said, waving his small hand at Tristan.

“Ready to go?” Ria asked.

“Work is piling up, and?—”

“Okay, see you by the door in five.” Ria grinned and disappeared before Tristan could protest.

He sighed, but he closed his laptop and got up. It seemed there was no getting out of this trip. Once Ria set her mind on something, she was clearly used to getting it.

Tristan emerged into the entryway just as Ria was helping the triplets put their shoes on.

“Bwue shoe,” Jasmine was saying, kicking her left foot. “Bwue shoe.”

“Honey, you have a red shoe on your right foot,” Ria explained. She was sitting on the floor in front of the triplets, who were perched in a line on the hallway bench. The boys already had both shoes on. “So, you should also have a red shoe on your left foot.”

“Pwease.” Jasmine made a puppy-dog face. “Wed shoe, bwue shoe.” Her eyes lit up. “One shoe, two shoe, wed shoe, bwue shoe!”

“All right, if you can quote Dr. Seuss so nicely, you can have two different-colored shoes.” Ria winked at the little girl, who beamed. “After all, I suppose they’re the

exact same shoe, just in different colors..." She helped Jasmine slide a blue shoe onto her left foot. Then, one by one, she lifted each of the triplets off the bench and set them on their feet. When she turned to get their jackets, she spotted Tristan by the door, and her green eyes sparkled.

"Tristan, you're just in time."

"I suppose I am." Tristan went to get his own shoes as Ria laid three small jackets on the ground. He watched, impressed, as the triplets put their arms in the jacket sleeves and put them on all by themselves. "How long have they been able to do that?"

"We started working on it when I got here. Being able to get dressed by themselves is a great way for toddlers to learn independence and self-confidence." Ria turned to the kids. "Great job, guys. Oh, Jamie, let me help you with that sleeve..."

A few minutes later, everyone's clothes were straightened out and they headed outside. Tristan braced himself for the kids to dash off in different directions, but they all followed along the sidewalk like a brood of ducklings. After a block or so, Jamie wanted to stop and admire a pile of stones beside the sidewalk, so their procession halted.

"Where's the park?" Tristan asked.

"It's close; a few blocks that way." Ria pointed. "But it might take us a while to get there."

"Skuls at da park?" Jasmine asked. Tristan blinked. Her language skills seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds.

"Probably," Ria said. "We saw a few squirrels last time, remember?"

Jamie's eyes lit up and he hurried back to the group, the stones forgotten. "Skuls?" He fell into conversation with his brother and sister in their special half-English, half-babble language. The walk continued.

"Isn't it cool that they can talk to each other like that?" Ria asked.

"It's cool, but a little disconcerting. Do you think they'll always have a special language?"

"They'll probably grow out of it, but I imagine they'll always have a close bond. It's clear that they love each other very much."

"Yeah. I tried to put them all in separate bedrooms when they arrived — or at least have the boys in one and Jasmine in another. But they wouldn't hear of it. They would just sneak back into each other's rooms in the night or cry and cry."

"That's sweet." Ria smiled at the kids, who had now squatted down to examine a blade of grass growing through a crack in the sidewalk. "Do multiples run in your family?"

"No, not that I know of. I'd never met triplets, or even twins, before I met them."

"Me neither." Ria gently urged the kids to keep walking. "It's cool to watch them, though, isn't it?"

"It is." And Tristan meant it. Even once they arrived at the park, it was nowhere near the chaotic mayhem he'd expected the outing to be. The triplets ran around on a small playground built for kids their age. Jamie soon collected a gaggle of other young kids to play in the sandpit with him. Jasmine joined in, while Jacob played with a series of moving animal pictures on the side of the play structure. Ria and Tristan sat on a bench where they could keep an eye on all the kids.

“Jamie is quite a little leader, isn’t he?” Tristan asked. At the moment, little Jamie appeared to be solving a dispute between two little girls over one of the sand toys.

“He is. You can see Jasmine and Jacob listen to him. And Jacob is definitely the most introspective of the three.”

“It seems strange to call a toddler introspective, but I think you’re right. And Jasmine is very chatty.”

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“And caring. You should see her taking care of her princess doll.”

“Honestly, this whole time, I’ve been so caught up in trying to make sure they were all fed and clean that I don’t think I really saw their personalities.” Tristan paused, watching Jacob line up a tiger picture. “This was a good idea.”

“All my ideas are good.” Ria winked.

“I don’t want to mention the vase, but...” Tristan grinned, and Ria whacked him lightly on the arm, her eyes sparkling.

“I think we officially have to retire mentions of the vase. Honestly, it was ugly anyway.”

Tristan was so surprised that he let out a short laugh. “I suppose you’re right. It was a bit ugly.”

“Why did you have it, then?”

“I don’t know. Everyone was talking about how artistic it was, and I suppose I got caught up in the moment.”

“I can’t even imagine what that’s like. I don’t have anything in my house that I don’t love.”

“Really? Nothing?” Tristan couldn’t believe that. “What about your dishwasher or your vacuum?”

“I don’t have a dishwasher. I do have a vacuum, but obviously I love it. It helps me keep my house clean, and its much less work than sweeping. You don’t know the joys of vacuuming until you’ve cleaned a carpet that had glitter on it.”

Tristan wasn’t sure he’d ever used a vacuum in his life, but he decided not to mention that. Ria was clearly judging him enough because of the ugly vase.

Just then, Jacob began to wail. Ria was on her feet in an instant. She hurried to him and knelt down in the sand, patting his back. A few moments later, she handed him a cracker, and his wailing died down. Soon, he was playing with his animal pictures again, his half-eaten cracker clutched in his fist. He looked as happy as a clam.

Ria came back to the bench and sat down beside Tristan.

“How did you do that?” Tristan asked. “If that had happened and I’d been here alone, it would have ruined the afternoon.”

“Surely not. He was just hungry.” Ria leaned back, tilting her face up to catch a ray of sunshine.

“No, really, you have some kind of superpower or magic. It’s like I said before.”

“Yes, I’m Ria, the toddler whisperer.” Her tone was joking, but Tristan wasn’t kidding.

“Really. How did you get to be so good with kids? Was it all trial and error from nannying?”

“There was trial and error, but it wasn’t about the nannying. I told you before that I have four younger siblings, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, my dad passed away just after my youngest sister was born. My mom handled everything the best she could. She worked a bunch of jobs to take care of us, and she always made sure we had everything we needed — good food and warm clothes and school supplies every September. But that meant that she was away. A lot.”

Tristan nodded slowly. He had some idea of where this was going.

“I became like a second mom to my younger siblings. I practically raised my littlest sister, Nora, from babyhood. She still calls me first whenever she needs advice. That’s why I became a nanny, too — my siblings needed help paying for extracurriculars and college and everything, so I stepped up.”

Ria told the story in a bright, cheerful way, but Tristan’s heart ached for her. “That must have been so difficult for you, though. How old were you when your dad died?”

“I was ten.” Ria smiled. “It was hard, losing him, but he’d always been busy working, too. To be honest, my closest connection is with my siblings, not either of my parents.”

Tristan whistled. “So, at ten years old, you were already caring for younger kids.”

“Yeah.” Ria’s lips lifted in a half smile. “It wasn’t always easy, but my littlest sister is in college now. I promised myself that I would help all my siblings through college, if they wanted to go, and that I’d always be there for them. That’s what I’ve done.”

“That’s amazing. Truly.”

Ria shrugged. “In this life, I think we all step up to do the things we need to. I became

a caregiver to my little siblings. You became a father to the triplets. You never know what hand you'll be dealt — you just have to make the best of it.”

Tristan nodded. "I like that."

"I know." Ria leaned back again, tilting her face to the sun and flicking her eyelids closed. "Like I said, all my ideas are good."

Tristan chuckled. "And you're so humble."

"I know. That's myrealsuperpower."

"What are your siblings like?" Tristan asked. He didn't want to stop talking to Ria, not yet.

"Let's see. There's Ryan. He's twenty-seven now, and he got married this year to his college sweetheart. He works in an auto-repair shop. Then there's Thomas, who's twenty-four. He graduated college a few years ago, and he's working as an engineer. Then there's Ellie, who's twenty-two. She's just graduated and got her first job as a nurse in an emergency room. And finally, we have Nora, the baby. She's just nineteen and in her sophomore year of college. She's studying to become a lawyer."

"Wow. Everyone's so accomplished." Tristan hesitated. "I hope I'm not putting my foot in my mouth, but you said you wanted to help all your siblings through college. Did you never want to go to college yourself? The résumé Oh Pear! sent said you weren't a graduate."

Ria smiled, her eyes still closed. "I went to college, actually, for two years. I was studying education. But Thomas broke his leg playing football, and the medical bills were too high for our mom to pay on her own. So, I dropped out and got my first

nannying job.”

Tristan’s heart went out to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was studying education because I love kids. Now, I get to be around kids every day.” Her eyes opened as she gestured to the triplets on the playground.

“Let me guess — having to leave college was just part of the hand you were dealt.” Tristan was starting to understand that Ria was the kind of person who didn’t just make lemonade out of lemons — she would happily bite into a lemon and try to appreciate the sourness.

“You got it.” Ria winked.

They chatted for a few more minutes, mostly about Ria’s siblings, before the kids started to get tired. Ria led the way home, where she handed out carrot sticks and juice to each of the kids.

“No wike cawots,” Jasmine said darkly when Ria set the plate in front of her.

“Honey, I saw you eat carrots yesterday.” Ria smiled at the little girl. “How about you try one? If you still don’t like it, I’ll get you something else.”

Jasmine pushed the plate away as tears filled her eyes. “No wike cawots! Want owange.”

“How about we make a deal? I’ll peel you an orange if you also try a bite of carrot.”

Jasmine began to cry. Moments later, Jamie and Jacob joined in. Apparently, all three triplets were on strike from carrots. Ria turned and gave Tristan a wry smile.

“It looks like we need an alternate snack choice. Do you want to help me calm everyone down?”

But Tristan found himself backing away. Ria was the expert when it came to the kids. Why should he try to help, when he’d probably just make everything worse?

“I have a little work to do,” he muttered — and he fled. He knew he should have stayed and tried to help, but he worried he’d just make the kids cry more. Ria could calm them down in a few minutes. He knew that.

Tristan spent the rest of the afternoon working. He half-hoped Ria might knock on the door and invite him to join her and the triplets for something else, but she never came. Instead, hours blurred together as he focused on the thing he was really good at — his work.

CHAPTER 11

RIA

Ria couldn’t help being a little disappointed by Tristan’s abrupt departure. She felt like they’d really connected at the park, but as soon as things got a little tricky with the triplets, he was gone. It didn’t feel like a good sign.

Oh, well. There was no time to dwell now. Ria turned back to the kids, hands on hips. She calmed them down, offered a few orange slices, then told a long and involved story about magic carrots that had all the triplets trying their original snack.

The rest of the afternoon was spent playing at home. Ria kept hoping Tristan might emerge from his office to join in with a game, sit with them for story time, or at least come to the table for dinner or tuck the kids in at bedtime, but he was nowhere to be seen. She played with the triplets, fed them dinner, gave them baths, and tucked them

into bed with no sign of Tristan. It was the same pattern she'd followed her first few days, but she'd really felt like something had changed today.

Once the kids were sleeping, Ria tiptoed back downstairs and into the kitchen to get a little dinner for herself. She'd had a few bites of the triplets' dinner, but she hadn't gotten enough to eat. The last few nights, she'd met Tristan in the kitchen, but he was nowhere to be seen tonight.

Ria's heart pinched. Perhaps their conversation at the park had made him hesitant. Maybe Ria shouldn't have encouraged — or forced? — him to come with them in the first place. And very likely, she should have kept things professional between them instead of opening up about her siblings and letting him open up about his sister.

Ria ate her dinner while reading. The whole time, she had one ear open, just in case she'd hear Tristan's footsteps, but there was no sign of him. Once she finished, she slipped back upstairs to read a little more in bed before sleeping. Hopefully, Tristan would eat at some point.

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A few days passed with little sign of Tristan. Ria spent her time playing with the kids, working on potty training, reading to them, and taking them to the park. Tristan seemed caught up in his work. He had dinner with the triplets a few times, and he and Ria shared a few more conversations after the kids were in bed, but it was all surface-level. They chatted about the weather, Tristan's work, how the kids were doing, and what was for dinner. Neither of them brought up parenting or their families.

Tristan was around a little more than he had been in the first few days, but it seemed he still wasn't ready to step into his parental role. After his disappearance following their park outing, Ria didn't want to push him. She kept their conversations professional and dedicated herself to taking excellent care of the triplets. If she still found Tristan attractive, she kept that to herself.

About a week later, she was sound asleep when a noise startled her awake. Her heart racing, Ria sat up in bed to listen for another sound.

“Waaaaah!”

One of the triplets was clearly awake and in distress. Glancing at the clock just long enough to register the time (it was a little after three in the morning), Ria ran down the hallway to the kids' room. Jacob was sitting up in bed, red-faced and crying. Ria scooped him into her arms, patting his back and stroking his hair, as she carefully carried him out of the room. Jasmine and Jamie hadn't woken yet, but if Jacob cried much longer, she'd have three sleep-deprived and upset toddlers on her hands.

“It's all right,” Ria told Jacob, bouncing him slightly in her arms. She nudged the door to the triplets' room closed with her hip as she kept stroking Jacob's back.

“You’re okay.”

A moment later, a shadowy figure appeared in the hallway — Tristan. He strode towards them. Even in the darkness, Ria could see that his handsome features were marred by worry.

“I heard someone crying,” he whispered.

“Poor Jacob here seems to have had a bad dream,” Ria whispered back, still bouncing the little boy. In any other situation, with any other client, she’d have reassured Tristan that she could handle this and sent him back to bed. But he was up anyway, and the fact that he’d come when he’d heard the crying was a good sign. Perhaps this was a way to encourage him into his fatherly role — but Ria still wouldn’t push.

“Is he okay?” Tristan asked.

“He seems all right. You’re okay, huh, Jacob?” Ria patted Jacob’s back. He was still crying a little, but it was far reduced from the wailing that had woken Tristan and Ria. “I’ll just take him downstairs so we don’t wake the others.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Ria nodded, masking her surprise, and they quietly padded down the stairs. Ria carried Jacob into the playroom, where the rocking chair was, and sat down. Tristan sat on the armchair beside her. Now that the situation was a little calmer, and the room was faintly illuminated by the full moon through the picture window, Ria saw that Tristan was in his pajamas. Apparently, he slept in boxer shorts and a white T-shirt. Ria was in her pajamas, too — a pink top and a pair of pajama pants printed with colorful cupcakes. Hopefully, it was too dark for Tristan to see the cupcakes.

“So, do you think he had a bad dream?” Tristan asked in a low voice.

“I think so. They’re not uncommon at this age.” Ria rocked back and forth as Jacob’s sobs turned into quiet whimpers.

“And you’ll stay here, rocking him, until he falls asleep?” Tristan asked. His elbows were resting on his knees as he watched her rock back and forth.

“I will. It shouldn’t be long.” She almost added that he didn’t need to stay, but if Tristan was showing interest in parenting, she didn’t want to discourage him.

Tristan sighed. “I didn’t know kids this young could even have nightmares. When one of the triplets cried at night, I always thought they were hungry or thirsty or needed a diaper change.”

“That’s a fair assumption,” Ria replied. “But often, a kid just needs a little comfort.”

“Right.” Tristan shook his head. “I just... I wish I knew that kind of thing. I’ve read books, I’ve tried my best, but I always feel like I fall a little short.”

“Every parent feels that way,” Ria said. “I did, too, when I first started taking care of little ones. I always worried I was doing the wrong thing! Just give it time. I know you love the triplets. Everything else can wait — and I’d be happy to help you.”

“I know.” Tristan’s mouth quirked into a smile. “You were the one who encouraged me to come to the park.”

“I’m sorry if I overstepped a boundary.”

“Not at all. It just... well, it was a lot. But maybe it’s time that I try to be more of a father to the kids, instead of a clueless uncle.”

“You aren’t a clueless uncle,” Ria protested, though internally she was singing with

joy that Tristan wanted to step into a father role. “You already love the triplets, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Tristan’s eyes crinkled. “I do. They’re good kids.”

“So...” Ria rocked a little more, choosing her words as the rocking chair creaked faintly. “Do you accept my help?”

“I do.”

“It means I’m going to tell you what to do.”

Tristan chuckled. “All right. I’m ready.”

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“Then your training starts now.” Ria stood, carefully shifting Jacob, and gestured to the rocking chair. “Have a seat.”

Tristan followed her instructions, and Ria carefully handed Jacob to him.

“Like this?” Tristan asked.

“Perfect. Now, stroke his back gently with the flat of your hand.”

Tristan did so. Jacob fussed a little, but he was relaxing into Tristan. Clearly, the stress of whatever bad dream had woken him was already fading away.

“Am I doing it right?” Tristan asked.

“You’re doing it perfectly.” Ria sat back on the armchair she’d taken from Tristan and folded her legs beneath her. There was something magical about watching him rock the little boy in the faint light. That sight made her feel as though all could be well. “You can also talk to him a little or sing if you’d like.”

“Singing is out of the question.” There was a smile in Tristan’s quiet voice. “If I tried, neither you nor Jacob here would ever sleep again.”

“I’m sure you’re not that bad.”

“Trust me, I am. The only thing I’m really good at is work.”

“You must be.” Ria stifled a yawn. There was no way she was leaving, not when

Tristan was finally making progress, no matter how tired she felt. “You founded your own company, right?” Ria didn’t want to admit it, but she’d looked up both Tristan and his company after moving in. He was wildly successful for someone his age.

“Yes, I did.”

“And you made your legacy from scratch. I’ve read that, too.”

“It’s true... although I think I should admit that I got help from my parents. My father gave me a start-up loan, and since he was a businessman, he taught me a lot of useful skills.”

“Really?” Ria was surprised. “Your story online sounds like you built your business from scratch.”

“That’s how I wanted it to look,” Tristan admitted. “But I can’t deny that there’s more to it.”

“Hmm. Well, even if you had financial support from your parents, even if you had advice, you’ve still done amazing work. No one can deny that you’re good at what you do.”

“Thanks.” Tristan’s teeth flashed white in the darkness as he smiled. “I think this little one is asleep.”

Ria checked Jacob’s eyes, which had drifted shut. The young boy had long since stopped fussing, and his head now rested on Tristan’s shoulder as his chest rose and fell peacefully.

“I think you’re right. Do you want to take him back upstairs?”

“Yeah.” Tristan stood and, carefully so as not to jostle the little boy, headed towards the door. He paused just before he reached it, though, and turned back. “It’s so different, holding a sleeping child compared to holding an awake one. He’s so warm and heavy.”

“Whereas in the day, the kids are all flailing limbs and wet kisses,” Ria agreed.

Tristan smiled again, then disappeared upstairs.

Ria knew she should follow. She should get back into bed and reach for sleep again, at least until dawn brightened the house and it was time to make breakfast for the triplets. Yet she didn’t move from her spot in the armchair. The last half an hour with Tristan had given her a lot to think about.

She wasn’t surprised that he’d had support from his parents. So many wealthy and successful businessmen did. The fact that he’d admitted it had been a shock, though. Everyone wanted to prove that they were making their own way in this life, when there wasn’t a single person alive who didn’t rely on someone else, at least a little.

Another surprise, a bigger one, was the fact that Tristan had gotten out of bed at all. This wasn’t the first time one of the triplets had cried in the night. It wasn’t the first time Ria had woken from slumber and rushed into their room to carry a fussy toddler downstairs for a rock in the chair and a little gentle talking. It was the first time Tristan had come running too, though. Perhaps his actions signaled a change in his relationship with the kids. Perhaps this was the start of him stepping more and more into his role as a father.

Ria smiled to herself.

Just as she was thinking of getting up, perhaps for a cup of herbal tea before trying to sleep again, Tristan reappeared in the doorway.

“You’re still up,” he said.

“Yeah. I’m not that tired now.” Ria shrugged. “I might stay up a little.”

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“I feel very awake, too.” Tristan seemed to hesitate. “I could make us some tea.”

Ria’s heart warmed. “That would be lovely.”

She flicked on the lamp on one of the side tables, bathing the room in soft, warm light, and pulled a blanket over her legs. A few minutes later, Tristan returned with two steaming cups of something herbal and warming.

“I was worried it was going to be matcha or something,” Ria joked as Tristan handed her one mug.

“Nope, it’s just chamomile. It’s caffeine-free and relaxing.” Tristan winked and settled onto the couch. He took a second blanket and pulled it over his knees.

“Okay, but you have to tell me.” Ria leaned forward slightly, her mug cupped between her hands for warmth. “Why do you drink the turmeric-and-lemon water in the mornings?”

“It’s good for inflammation,” Tristan answered easily.

“No, but why? Why did you start drinking it in the first place? Why do you eat so much kale and wear glasses you don’t need and buy ugly vases you don’t like?” For a moment, Ria thought she’d overstepped again and offended him, but he didn’t seem upset. He just looked thoughtful.

“I want to fit in, I suppose. Tech CEOs are supposed to be fashionable and eat healthy and own expensive things. When I was a kid, I never felt like I fitted in with my

parents. I was always passed off to expensive schools and nannies — no offense — and I never spent much time with my mom and dad.”

“No offense taken,” Ria said automatically.

“Good.” Tristan flashed her a brief smile. “My parents always seemed... ashamed of me. When I got older, it became important that I did and said the right things so that they’d be proud. And so that the media and the public would take me seriously and respect me.”

“Did your parents ever say they were proud of you?” Ria asked.

Tristan smiled. “No. But my father gave me money and advice to start my company, so I have to imagine that he was proud. Anyway, I do like some of the stuff I do. I exercise a lot, which I enjoy, and I think eating healthy is good for me.”

“And the glasses? And the fasting? And the vases?” Ria ticked each habit off on her fingers.

Tristan chuckled now. “All right, not all of it.” He paused. “I’m sorry for saying I was unhappy that I was always passed off to nannies.”

“No, I’m not offended. Nannies are great, but we can’t replace parents.” Ria hesitated, then plowed forward. “That’s why I’m so happy you got up to help Jacob today. And that you’ve been joining the triplets for meals or playtime a bit more. And especially that you asked me for help.”

“I am trying.” Tristan sipped his tea. “It’s just too bad that I can’t impress them with an expensive vase or a pair of glasses, like I can with other people.”

“Ha.” Ria grinned. “Toddlers are so easy to impress. So easy.”

“How?”

“Play with them. Make them some nice food. Let them stay up a little late or watch a movie in their pajamas in the morning. Take them somewhere fun. Kids that age just want your time and attention, really.”

Tristan nodded slowly. “I think I can do that.”

“You definitely can.”

Ria sipped her tea. In that moment, talking with Tristan in the middle of the night when everyone else was sleeping, she felt a thrum of connection between them. Perhaps it was just that they were finally opening up to each other. Perhaps it was simply the magic of the nighttime.

Or perhaps the crush Ria had been suppressing for weeks now was stirring, unable to be contained any longer.

CHAPTER 12

TRISTAN

Tristan glanced at Ria, sitting in the armchair, sipping her tea, her hair a swirl of curls around her lovely face. He was glad he’d gotten up when he’d heard Jacob crying, and not just because he’d been able to comfort the child. It was nice to talk to Ria like this. Tristan wasn’t sure of the last time he’d been so open with anyone.

“I’ve answered quite a few of your questions,” he said. “Maybe it’s time for you to answer one of mine.”

“All right.” Ria grinned. “Ask away.”

“You told me how much you love kids, and I’ve seen for myself how good you are with them. Do you want kids of your own?”

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Ria paused, as though she were trying to formulate the right answer. “I do, of course, although the time has never been right. I wouldn’t want to be a single mother — I saw how hard that was for my mom. Plus, since most of my jobs are live-in, it would be hard to have a baby. At the same time, I always feel like the kids I nanny for are my kids, in one way or another. I make a difference in their lives, and they make a difference in mine. Kids don’t have to be my blood to feel like my kids.”

“I understand that,” Tristan said — and he did. “I’ve tried to fight it, but the triplets do feel like my kids, even though they aren’t.”

“You tried to fight it because of your sister?” Tristan nodded, so Ria continued. “I know it must be hard. But remember, you being the kids’ father doesn’t mean that your sister wasn’t their mother. Kids need so many people to love them.”

“I know.” Tristan sighed. “I do love them.”

“I love them, too.” Ria smiled, though her expression was a little distant, now. “They’re such good kids.”

Tristan wanted to ask if it would be hard for her to leave the kids, but he didn’t want to remind her that the job would eventually come to an end. He didn’t want Ria to leave. At least not yet.

“They are good kids,” he said instead. “And they have so many hobbies.”

Ria giggled. “I know! They draw and swim and run and play and help with cooking and put on little plays together. I must have been the same way, though I can’t

remember.”

“Me neither. Before the kids came, I used to have hobbies, too — I did yoga and meditation as well as exercise. Now I’m lucky if I can get in half an hour in the gym around everything else.”

“I run, or I try to, but that’s it,” Ria said. “That’s one of the good things about the kids, though. When I play with them, I get to draw and play and swim, too, and that reminds me how much fun those things can be.”

“You’re a real Mary Poppins, aren’t you?” Tristan felt his mouth lift into a smile as he imagined Ria pirouetting around his home in a Mary Poppins-style gown, singing about sugar and fun and charming the kids and him alike.

Ria grinned. “Thanks. I like the idea of that. Maybe, someday, I’ll start my own nannying agency — Ria Poppins, Inc.”

For some reason, the idea of Ria going off and starting a nannying agency made Tristan’s heart clench. It was probably the thought of losing her, which was inevitable. He didn’t voice his sadness.

“That’s a great idea,” he said, instead. “Do you like working for Oh Pear!?”

“No.” Ria chuckled at the abruptness of her answer. “It’s... not a great fit. Remember, I told you after I broke the vase that I couldn’t afford to be fired on the first day? Well, it wasn’t just about how bad that would look on an employment record. My boss told me that this job was my last chance.”

Tristan sat back, surprised. “How can that be? You’re a wonderful nanny.”

Ria sighed. “Apparently, not so much — at least, not according to her. And, well, it’s

my own fault.” She blushed. “I may have... inflated my credentials... to get work with them. They pay so much better than the competition, and I was sure I could do a good job.” She looked down into her mug.

“What credentials did you inflate?” Tristan asked. “As far as I’ve seen, you’re everything that was advertised, and more. You care about the kids, you’re great with them, and you even cook and keep the house clean. What more could anyone need?”

“That’s what I thought, but apparently I should also be an expert in French cooking, speak at least three foreign languages, and be able to instruct my charges in extracurricular activities from karate to embroidery.”

Tristan whistled. “That’s alot.”

“Yeah.”

“But for kids as young as the triplets, surely you wouldn’t be expected to do all that?”

Ria laughed drily. “You’d be wrong about that. I worked with one client who wanted me to teach her three-month-old Mandarin. The kid didn’t even speak English yet!”

“Well, with or without French cooking or foreign languages, you’re a wonderful nanny, Ria.”

“Still. I know I shouldn’t have padded my résumé.” She sighed. “It’s just, well, my last sibling, Nora, is in college now. If I can just push a little, I can get her through, and the extra salary was exactly what I needed to support my family.”

“I understand.” Tristan smiled at her. “I guess we both put on a different face at work than at home.”

“True.” Ria’s lips quirked into a genuine smile. “But those poor toddlers are stuck with us.”

“I don’t know how they’ll live without a nanny who can make cream puffs in the shape of swans while singing to them in Flemish and sewing clothes for them out of handmade lace,” Tristan said.

“Exactly. And what will their childhood be like with a father who doesn’t actually need glasses?”

They smiled at each other, then Tristan added, “I don’t wear the glasses anymore, you know.”

“Really?”

“Really. You were right. It’s silly to wear them when I don’t actually need them.”

“I don’t think I ever said that the glasses were silly...”

“No, but it was strongly implied.” Tristan raised his mug to her. “Here’s to you, for getting me to give up the pretentious glasses.”

“Okay, I definitely didn’t saypretentious...” But there was laughter in Ria’s voice, and Tristan knew she’d been thinking it. Their eyes met in the warm lamplight, and Tristan felt a shiver run through him. When Ria looked at him with those big green eyes, he had the feeling that she was seeing right through his façade to the man he really was. And strangely, he didn’t mind it. He would happily have sat here with her for hours, baring his soul and listening to her do the same.

He would happily have pulled her out of that chair to sit beside him, just so he could hold her hand and smell the vanilla-and-roses scent of her shampoo.

That thought scared him more than anything, so he quickly broke their eye contact and glanced out the window.

“Is it getting light out?”

Ria followed his gaze. “Oh, I suppose it is.” She looked at her phone and winced. “I should start breakfast.”

Tristan knew that he should go upstairs and get at least a little sleep before work. He didn't want to, though. He wanted to stay with Ria, just a little longer.

"I can help," he said.

"Really?" Ria's eyes widened. "I mean, that would be great. Let's go." She stood, folded the blanket she'd had on her lap, and set it on the couch. Then she stretched. Her pajama top lifted slightly, revealing the curve of her side and the soft, pale skin of her stomach, before she turned and headed out of the room. Tristan took his time following her.

He'd found Ria attractive and impressive from the first time he'd seen her, but it had been easy to keep his feelings at bay. Today, though, it was growing more difficult to stop himself from imagining what it might be like to run a hand through her red curls or kiss the freckles on her pink cheeks.

Tristan knew he shouldn't let himself develop a crush on his nanny, but it was too late. He already found Ria amazing. Yet he also knew that there was no future for them. There was no chance he and Ria would even have a relationship, so he could allow himself to feel a thrill of attraction, as long as he didn't act on it.

Ria was already in the kitchen when Tristan entered. Balanced on her tiptoes, she carefully pulled a mixing bowl down from a top shelf. Tristan paused in the doorway until she had the bowl safely on the counter.

"How can I help?"

"Let's see. You can help me get the ingredients. I need flour, sugar, milk, eggs..."

Tristan grabbed each ingredient as Ria listed it off, ending with a plastic box of fresh cherries from the fridge.

“What are we making?” he asked.

“Cherry-chocolate muffins,” Ria explained. “Now, you have your choice of jobs. You can mix everything together with the stand mixer, or you can pit the cherries.”

“I think I’ll be better off operating the machine than performing surgery on fruit,” Tristan said.

“Great.” Ria handed him her phone, on which she had the recipe open. “Just follow the instructions.”

It was a simple command, but it turned out far less easy to execute than Tristan had expected. He managed to pour the wet ingredients into the bowl of the stand mixer and beat them, but when he added the dry ingredients, he misjudged the angle of the beaters. Batter flew everywhere, landing on the walls, the counter, the floor — and all over Ria.

Anyone else might have been annoyed by the mess, but Ria’s eyes just widened — and then she began to laugh. With one finger, she wiped a glob of batter off her cheek and popped it into her mouth.

"At least it tastes good," she said, still giggling.

“I am so sorry.” Tristan found himself smiling, too. “I had no idea that would happen.”

“Clearly. I guess kale doesn’t fight back as much. Still.” Ria bit her lip. “You did get me very messy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You will be.” Ria grabbed a handful of flour and tossed it at Tristan, leaving a white cascade down the front of his T-shirt.

“Hey!” Tristan’s mouth dropped open.

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“Hey yourself.” Ria shrugged, clearly fighting a smile. Then she reached for the flour again. Tristan closed the gap between them, grabbing her hand to stop her movement. Ria pivoted, twirling under his arm like they were in a ballet, and put a dot of cocoa powder directly on Tristan’s nose. Finally, he retaliated, smearing cherry juice along Ria’s cheek. They were both laughing harder than Tristan had laughed in years.

“Okay, okay.” Ria held up her hands in surrender. “Truce. The kids will be up soon.”

“Truce.” Tristan held out his hand to shake. Ria took it, and he pulled her closer to him so that he could toss flour onto her arm. “Okay, now it’s a truce.”

Ria’s eyes narrowed, but she nodded. “For now, anyway. But don’t think I’ll forget this anytime soon, Mr. West.”

“Oof.” Tristan released her arm. “Not even my employees call me that.”

“Really?” Ria leaned against the counter. “Why?”

“Mr. West is my father. I always wanted to be different from him.”

“All right, then.” Ria smiled. “Don’t think I’ll forget this, Tristan.”

“Better.” Tristan looked around at the mess. “I’ll start cleaning this up.”

“You’ll need my help.” Ria tossed him a kitchen towel. “Start with the walls.”

They both began cleaning. Every once in a while, one of them would find batter in a

very strange location — inside the refrigerator, hanging like an icicle from the ceiling, or splattered across a tile in the exact shape of an octopus — and they'd both start laughing again.

Eventually, Ria straightened up from where she'd been cleaning the fronts of the cupboards and put her hands on her hips. "Okay, I think we got everything."

"Um, not quite." Tristan tried to hide his smile. "You still have a little batter on you."

"Where?" Ria looked down, then started to laugh again. Batter was splattered on her bare legs, across her pajamas, and on her face. Tristan, who had been standing behind the mixer, had escaped the worst of the splatter. Ria wiped her legs and pajamas, then her arms and face. "Did I get everything?"

"Not quite." Tristan tapped his own nose. "You missed some here."

Ria wiped the tip of her nose with a paper towel, but the batter just spread onto her cheek.

"Did I get it?"

"No."

"Come on, then." Ria's hands were on her hips again and her expression was half-daring. "Help me with it."

Armed with a paper towel, Tristan stepped closer. Very lightly, he dabbed the towel across her nose and cheek. Once the batter was gone, his hand fell slowly to his side as he realized just how close they were standing. He could feel the warmth of Ria's body just inches away and see the flecks of gold in her green eyes. He could count the freckles scattered like constellations across her cheeks and see the way that her pink

lips were ever so slightly parted. Her head was tilted back to meet his gaze, and she looked sweet and defiant and vulnerable, all at once.

“Tristan,” she said, her voice soft.

“Ria.” He reached for her hand, and she let him take it. Her hand was small and warm in his. She lifted onto her tiptoes, and Tristan bent his head towards her. All he could think about was Ria. She was like the sun, bright and warm and all-consuming, and he was a planet caught in her orbit. All rational thought was gone. Tristan hesitated just long enough to give Ria time to pull away, but she didn’t. She just reached for him, her hands resting on his shoulders as they slowly closed the distance between them.

There was an inevitability to this moment, as though they had been pulled together by the sheer force of gravity from the first moment they’d seen each other. Tristan could already imagine the soft press of Ria’s lips against his own and the?—

"Waaaaaah!"

Tristan and Ria jumped apart like teenagers caught out after curfew. The crying over the baby monitor was loud and insistent and couldn’t be ignored. Tristan’s heart hammered in his chest. Thank goodness for whichever of the triplets had just woken up. A second longer, and he would have kissed Ria. That would have been a terrible mess — even if kissing her was all he really wanted. Even if she seemed to feel the same way.

“I’ll go,” Tristan said. Without waiting for Ria to reply, without looking at her face to see how she was feeling, he turned on his heel and hurried out of the room. The whole way down the hallway and up the stairs to the triplets’ room, he chastised himself. He should never have let himself join Ria in making breakfast. And he definitely never should have joined her playful food fight. And he certainly,

absolutely, should never have allowed himself to come so close to kissing her.

Yet as much as Tristan told himself off, he knew it was no use. He cared for Ria. No amount of chastisement and no amount of keeping his distance would change that. Now, the only thing that mattered was what he was going to do about it.

And for now, what he was going to do about it was get the kids dressed and go to work. He needed a little time to think things over. He needed to figure out what to do next.

CHAPTER13

RIA

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:31 am

Ria leaned against the counter, her heart racing. She had just come very, very close to kissing Tristan. The triplets' dad. Herboss. And he'd come very close to kissing her, too.

Everything had happened so fast. One moment, they'd been cleaning up the kitchen, which was certainly not a very romantic activity, and the next, he'd been holding her hand and looking down at her with those deep-green eyes. In that moment, Ria had been overwhelmed by his nearness. He smelled like aftershave and peppermint and something masculine and warm. He was taller than her by about a foot, enough that he had to bend down, and she'd had to lift onto her tiptoes. It was all too easy to imagine what it would have been like for him to capture her mouth with his own and pull her against his muscular torso. He was strong enough that he probably could have lifted her clean off the ground, yet Ria was sure he would have been gentle, too.

Ria shook her head. She could not let herself get caught up in her daydream of kissing Tristan. She needed to focus. Allowing herself to get so close to him had been a mistake — a big one. She turned back to the counter, where she began mixing a new batch of muffins. As usual, baking calmed her, and she soon found herself able to think more clearly again.

It had seemed that Tristan wanted to kiss her, too. Ria's heart fluttered at the thought — but she knew it didn't matter. Even if Tristan had wanted to be closer to her, a guy like him was probably interested in a fling, not anything serious. And Ria knew she wasn't the kind of woman who could have a fling. She always cared too deeply and with her whole heart. If this man, who she already found attractive, kissed her, she'd fall head over heels.

There was also a good chance that Tristan hadn't shared her feelings. Maybe she had misread the whole situation, and he really had just been helping her clean up after their food fight. Either way, she needed to keep her distance. There was no denying her crush now, but there was also no pretending that it was a good idea.

Within a few minutes, Ria had mixed the muffin batter, which she poured into the tin and topped with cherries and chocolate chips. The oven was already warm, so she popped the tin inside and set a timer. There were a few sounds from overhead, but no more crying over the baby monitor. Ria hurried upstairs, caught sight of Tristan helping Jamie into a dinosaur T-shirt, and slipped into her room before he could see her. There, she took the quickest shower of her life to get the remaining batter out of her hair, changed into a pair of gray jeans and a dark green T-shirt, and pulled her hair back in a quick braid. In the mirror, she looked every bit the professional nanny, and not at all like the woman who'd just had a food fight and almost-kiss with her boss in the kitchen.

A few deeps breaths later, she joined Tristan in the triplets' room. To her surprise, the kids were already dressed.

"Did you do all this?" she asked.

Tristan turned to her with those intoxicating green eyes. Ria tried to ignore the flutter she felt in her stomach when he looked at her. "Contrary to popular belief, I do have some skills," he said with a wink. The flutter intensified, and Ria quickly went to Jacob and scooped him up.

"Shall we have breakfast?"

"Yay!" the triplets chorused. Ria lifted Jamie into her other arm as Tristan picked Jasmine up. They carried the triplets downstairs, where Ria settled them into their high chairs just as the timer on the oven began to beep.

“Hey.” Tristan caught her arm as she turned to get the muffins out. For a moment, tension blossomed again. “Do you need me?”

“Hmm?” In her sleep-deprived and borderline swoony state, Ria almost misinterpreted his question. Before she said anything ridiculous, though, she realized that he was asking if she needed his help with breakfast. “Oh, um, no. I can manage. You should get ready for work.”

“Thanks.” Tristan’s hand lingered on her arm a moment longer, warm and firm, before he left. Ria quickly got the muffins out and returned to the kids with sippy cups of water and some mandarin segments. She kept her thoughts firmly focused on the triplets as she prepared their breakfasts.

The morning poured by slowly like honey from a spoon. Ria entertained the kids with a craft project, took them on a walk through the neighborhood, and made them a quick lunch, yet her thoughts kept drifting back to Tristan. She remembered his hand on her arm, his gaze on her own, his warmth as he’d bent closer. It was hard to push the memories from her mind, even though she needed to.

At nap time, Ria napped alongside the triplets. She badly needed to make up sleep from her very early morning. The afternoon went by in a whirl of library story time, an episode of the toddlers’ favorite TV show, a round of sensory stations, and a while snuggling on the couch while singing and reading picture books.

Ria cared for Tristan. She did. But as the day went on, she reminded herself that she cared about the triplets more. What mattered most was doing what was best for them. These kids had lost their mother, and they needed Tristan to be a good parent. Until he could be, they needed Ria to be a good nanny. She would focus on taking excellent care of the triplets and teaching Tristan to do the same. Anything she felt, anything she imagined, anything she wished for... none of it mattered in comparison to the triplets.

Ria reminded herself of that all day, each time her thoughts drifted back to Tristan. By the time he came home around four thirty, she was practically sure that their almost-kiss hadn't mattered at all.

At the sound of Tristan's footsteps in the hall, the triplets leaped off the couch and ran to greet him. There was a noticeable difference in how they behaved around Tristan since he'd started spending more time with them. Ria followed more sedately. She wished she didn't feel so nervous about seeing Tristan again.

"You're home early." She leaned against the wall as Tristan and the triplets finished their greetings.

"I wanted to help with dinnertime. I'm early enough, right?"

"Your timing is perfect." Jasmine wandered over to Ria, arms lifted, and Ria picked her up. "Follow me."

As she and Tristan prepped rice and veggies for the kids and double-teamed dinnertime, Ria felt any residual awkwardness from the morning melting away. She and Tristan slipped back into easy banter as they brought the kids water and chatted with them about their days. Jasmine told an elaborate story about a unicorn, showing off her developing verbal skills, while Jacob arranged his veggies into fancy shapes on his tray table. Jamie sang a song about a squirrel as he happily ate his rice.

"What do you think, honey?" Tristan asked, leaning towards Jacob and gesturing to the carrots. "How does your dinner taste?"

"Good." Jacob smiled a bright smile, and Ria's heart warmed at the clear expression of love on both of their faces.

"I would say it's just as good as the food in Italy. My compliments to the chef."

Tristan winked at Ria, who grinned.

“Thanks.” Then a thought occurred to her. “Have you been to Italy?”

“Several times, actually.” Tristan straightened and leaned against the counter as his expression grew thoughtful. “It’s a beautiful country. Lake Como was my absolute favorite, although there’s a lot to be said for Venice.”

A new kind of longing flared in Ria’s chest. “I’ve always wanted to travel, but I haven’t had much opportunity for it. My biggest adventure thus far was accompanying a family I was nannyng for to Disneyland. It was fun, but chaotic.”

“I used to travel several times a year,” Tristan replied. “Sometimes for work, sometimes for fun. Now, of course, I’m a little more stationary.” He nodded to the row of triplets.

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“Well, when they’re a little older, I’m sure you can all travel together.” A sudden image bloomed in Ria’s mind — the triplets, age eight or so, with matching backpacks and luggage, standing on the tarmac of a private airport somewhere. She could almost see Tristan, in his usual rock-and-roll T-shirt, taking their hands as they climbed the steps and took off on some adventure. The longing in Ria’s chest intensified.

“I’m sure. And I’m sure you’ll get a chance to travel sometime, too. Where would you most like to go?”

“Hmm...” Ria bent to wipe a little rice out of Jamie’s hair. “I’ve always wanted to visit Hawaii. Perhaps it isn’t the most exotic of locales, but I always loved the beach and the mountains, and I’ve heard so many wonderful stories about Hawaii.”

“I’ve never been there, but it’s on my list, too.” Tristan grinned. “I’m sure the kids would love it. There’s lots of space to run and play, and I think they’d like swimming in the ocean. When they’re a little older, of course.”

“Of course.” Ria turned to fill Jasmine’s sippy cup with a little more water, trying to ignore how much she suddenly wanted to be a part of that future trip to Hawaii. She’d like to be there when the kids first dipped their feet into the warm turquoise waters and tasted a cone of shaved ice. She wanted to help them shower the sand off, then slip off to the terrace with Tristan to watch the sunset and?—

Ria cut herself off. There was no point thinking like that. She was just the nanny.

“Well, it looks like everyone’s finished.” She put her hands on her hips, surveying the

triplets. “Who wants a bath?”

She and Tristan carried the triplets upstairs and got them into a warm, soapy tub. As they played with their flotilla of rubber ducks, Tristan leaned against the counter.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” he said.

“Oh, not at all.” Ria was sitting on the floor beside the bathtub on the bathmat, as she usually did when the triplets were bathing. His presence was deeply distracting, but she wasn’t going to say that. “The kids like having you around.”

As if to punctuate her point, Jasmine grinned up at Tristan and waved.

“I hope so.” Tristan smiled and waved back. “So, tell me, where else would you like to go?”

Ria considered changing the subject. Imagining future trips that would never happen with a family she wouldn’t ever be part of was too hurtful. Perhaps it was better to face things head-on, though.

“Lots of places. My family did a lot of camping when I was younger, since it was a cheap way to have a fun vacation with a big family, so I’d enjoy doing more of that. I’d happily take a tour of Europe, or go on safari in Kenya, or cruise to Alaska to see the whales.” She paused to hand Jasmine a duck. “What’s the best place you’ve been?”

“Probably Italy, though there were a lot of places I loved. Ireland was gorgeous. I was in Japan for a while, and I liked that a lot, although I didn’t get much chance to explore since I was working on that trip. I once went to India.”

“India.” Ria smiled. “When I was a child, I had a book of photography taken in India.

I used to flip through it before going to sleep. I loved the colors and how everything looked so... alive.”

“I loved India, although people are right when they say it’s a land of contrasts. The traffic is so busy, the temples are so peaceful, the skyscrapers are so tall, and the food is so spicy. It’s everything all at once.”

“That sounds like parenthood.” Ria poured a little water onto Jamie’s hair. “If India really is a land of contrasts, I think the triplets must be the very best preparation for going there. They’re always either at a hundred or at zero.”

“True,” Tristan replied. “The other day, I was taking Jamie up to bed, and he was wiggling and dancing and chatting in my arms. I put him in bed, and he just flailed and sang. Then, I stroked his hair for literally thirty seconds, and he was out like a light.”

Jamie beamed up at Tristan. He clearly understood that he was being discussed, even if he didn’t know exactly what they were saying.

After bathtime, Tristan and Ria carried the kids into their room and tucked them into bed. Tristan read a few stories while Ria stood by the door. Her heart warmed as she saw the way Tristan smiled at the kids and kissed their foreheads before slipping out.

“It’s been less than a day, and you’re already getting the hang of this,” she said. Then she hesitated. Usually, she’d ask if Tristan wanted to join her in the kitchen for a shared dinner, as they had several times, but she wasn’t sure it was appropriate after their near miss this morning. She should probably go back to her room instead.

As though he could read her thoughts, Tristan spoke up. “Would you like to join me for dinner? We can get takeout from that Chinese place.”

Ria's heart soared at the invitation, even though her logical brain repeated that she should just slip off to her room for a quiet evening. In the end, her heart won out.

“Sure. I'd love to.”

Joining Tristan for meals, talking about travel plans with him, and going through the triplets' routines by his side wasn't going to help her get rid of her crush. Yet Ria also couldn't stop herself from soaking up every moment that she felt like a real member of this little family.

To an outsider, she thought, as she followed Tristan downstairs, they'd look like a real family. If someone peered through the windows of Tristan's mansion now, they'd see two parents in the kitchen, sitting at the table, chatting about travel. They'd see the kids, sleeping peacefully upstairs.

They'd never know that Ria didn't really belong.

CHAPTER14

TRISTAN

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Over the next few weeks, Tristan felt more and more like a father to Jamie, Jacob, and Jasmine.

He began joining them for breakfast each morning, even eating alongside them instead of fasting as usual. He hurried home from work each day to be there for dinner and bedtime, and on the weekends, he spent the day playing and visiting local parks and pools with the kids. He read bedtime stories and dried tears and cajoled the triplets into trying new vegetables.

More and more, Tristan felt confident in his new role. When one of the kids started crying, he no longer felt panicked. When they were full of energy and bouncing off the walls, he now knew that he should suggest something active to burn their energy. And when they turned their noses up at dinner, he had an idea of how to help encourage them to eat. He even understood more and more of their babble.

Part of his newfound confidence came simply from the time he was spending with the kids, but most of it came from Ria. She was by his side every step of the way, gently offering tips and advice when he stumbled. She made breakfast with him while teasing him about eating so early in the morning. She danced around the living room with the triplets when they had clean-up parties. She advised him on toilet training and balanced diets and nap requirements with the instructive tone of a teacher.

And after the triplets were in bed, she joined him in the kitchen for dinner. Tristan cherished his time with the kids during the day, but he cherished this time alone with Ria, too. They talked, often into the night, about everything and nothing. Often, their conversations circled back to the triplets, but they also had long discussions of everything from Tristan's college days to Ria's first nannying job to their hopes for

the future. He found out that Ria hoped to resume her teacher training someday. He told her that his dreams revolved more and more around the three tiny people sleeping upstairs — though he didn't mention that she'd begun to feature in his dreams, too.

Every day he spent with Ria confirmed for Tristan that he had more than just a fleeting attraction. Ria didn't just have superpowers when it came to toddlers. She was an amazing woman on every level. Yet Tristan made sure to keep his distance from her, still. Ria was his nanny, and he couldn't make her uncomfortable by suggesting that he had feelings for her. No, he had to wait for the right moment. He had to make sure she felt the same way too.

“What's for dinner tonight?” Ria asked, sidling into the kitchen and breaking Tristan's train of thought. She'd taken a shower and changed into her pajamas after a particularly messy toddler dinner of sloppy joes. Her red hair was wet and hung loose around her shoulders. As always, she was smiling.

“Leftover sloppy joes and celery,” Tristan told her. He'd put on the radio in the background, and a pop song he didn't know played softly.

“Really?” Ria made wide eyes as she slid into the seat opposite Tristan. “There's no kale in that. No turmeric, either.”

“Ha-ha.” Tristan rolled his eyes. “I know. Here, I made you a plate, too.”

“Thanks.” Ria twirled a celery stick between her fingers. “How was work today?”

“It was fine. We're working on an acquisition, but it's mostly boring legal stuff. I prefer the tech-development side — there's always something new and interesting going on. How were the kids today?”

“They were great. Jacob is a talented artist — did you know? He’s completely stopped drawing on the walls, and his pictures actually look like the things he wants them to look like — at least some of the time. You should be proud.”

“I am.” Tristan took a celery stick. “I’m proud of all my kids.”

“Tristan.” Ria’s face lit up as though she’d just won an all-expenses-paid trip to Hawaii. Her green eyes were sparkling.

“Yes?”

“Didn’t you notice?” She was beaming now, and her cheeks were pink with excitement. “You said my kids. I don’t think you’ve ever said that before.”

“You’re right.” Tristan took a breath. “I did. I guess I’ve started to think of them as my kids, not just my nephews and niece. I hope my sister wouldn’t mind.”

Ria reached for his hand across the table. “Your sister would be thrilled. I’m thrilled, too. This is great progress.”

“Thank you.” Tristan smiled at her. Carefully, he flipped his hand so that he could intertwine his fingers with hers. Warmth thrummed between them. “Thank you for everything. Any progress I’ve made as a father has been because of you and all your help.”

“No.” Ria shook her head, causing her hair to fan across her shoulders. “I may have given you a bit of advice, but the hard work was all you. I’ve seen how much you’ve shown up for the kids. For your kids. I think my work here is almost done.”

Fear surged in Tristan’s chest. He wasn’t ready for Ria’s work here to be done, not at all. It was a good thing that she considered him ready to parent his triplets, but it

wouldn't be a good thing at all if she left. Not before he had a chance to see if she shared his feelings.

"I think I still have a lot to learn," he said, as casually as he could. "You might need to stick around."

"Sure. I could do that. For a little while, at least." Ria looked up at him from beneath her long lashes, then quickly took her hand away. "All right, we'd better try these sloppy joes. I'm excited to see if we can eat them any more neatly than the triplets did."

"As long as you don't get any filling between your toes, you should be good," Tristan said with a wink.

"That was pretty funny, though. Jamie seemed so proud that he'd done that." Ria giggled. Then she lifted her sandwich and took a bite.

"So," Tristan said, "you told me a few days ago that your sister was applying for an internship. The one who's in college, Nora." He bit into his own sandwich.

"Yes." Ria swallowed her food as she nodded. "And she found out yesterday that she got it. Isn't that wonderful? She'll start in a few weeks, at the beginning of June."

"Is June really just a few weeks away?" Tristan shook his head. "That's hard to believe. Time's really been flying since the triplets arrived. Anyway, good for your sister. You must be proud."

"Very." Ria smiled. "I was on the phone with her for almost an hour last night after you went to bed. She told me all about the professor she's interning with and the other students she'll be working with."

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Tristan imagined Ria sitting on her bed with her phone, laughing and chatting with her younger sister. “You’re a good sister.”

“I try to be.” Ria sipped her water. “I don’t think we did a great job with these. Half the filling from my sloppy joe is on my plate.”

“Mine too. Want a fork?”

“Yes, please.”

Tristan got up to fetch the silverware. As he passed the radio, he turned the volume up slightly as a new song came on. It was a love song, and it sounded familiar, though he wasn’t sure where he’d heard it before.

“This is my favorite song,” Ria said. She got to her feet, rinsed her hands, and did a quick twirl around the kitchen. Tristan took his seat again, setting one fork beside her plate and another beside his own.

“You dance a lot.” And you look beautiful when you do.

“I do. I love it. And you should join me.” She held out a hand. “Come on, Tristan.”

“Ha. No way.”

“Come on.” She grinned, swaying back and forth with her hand outstretched. Her eyes crinkled. “It’ll be fun.”

“It won’t, I promise. I’m a terrible dancer.”

“Like I’m many good. Trust me.” Ria grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. She took his free hand with her other and swung their hands back and forth between them. It was the same move he’d seen her do with the triplets during their spontaneous dance parties.

“All right, all right.” Tristan chuckled. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right.” He released her hand and placed his palm on her hip. He guided her free hand to his shoulder and led her in a simple box step around the kitchen.

“I thought you couldn’t dance!” Ria looked up at him, her eyes shining and her lips curved into a smile.

“I’m not good at dancing, but I do know the basics.” He spun her beneath his arm and brought her back into the starting position, a little closer this time. “It’s hard to grow up in a wealthy family without mastering the basics of ballroom dancing.”

Ria’s hand fanned against his shoulder. “What other skills did you learn?”

“I had piano lessons.” Tristan swayed her from side to side, savoring her nearness. “I played tennis. And my parents taught me about business from grade school on.”

“You must have had quite the lemonade stand.” Ria grinned.

“No, I always liked technology more than anything else, so I did some coding work when I was little.”

“Coding?”

“Yeah. My parents put me in a coding camp the summer I was twelve, so I did some

coding after that. I even got paid a few times.”

Ria whistled under her breath. “See, as much as you said earlier that your success is thanks to your parents’ support — and it is, at least somewhat — you clearly worked hard to be where you are, too. You should be proud.”

Tristan twirled her again and watched her hair whirl out around her head. Then the song slowed, and he pulled her close again.

“Ria—” He wasn’t sure what he was going to say. Part of him wanted to admit that he had feelings for her, but a stronger part knew that would be a mistake, even now. Just because Ria was kind to him, just because she helped him, just because he saw her eyes sparkle when he held her close, that didn’t mean she was interested in the same things he was. If he pushed, he could lose her. And he still wasn’t quite sure what she meant to him or exactly what he wanted to do about it.

Perhaps, then, it was for the best that the sound of crying came over the baby monitor at just that moment. Ria quickly stepped back, blushing.

“I’ll go see what’s up.” She disappeared, leaving Tristan alone in the kitchen, the love song still playing over the radio. With one hand, he shut it off, then leaned back against the counter. It was the second time they’d come close to... something. Tristan wasn’t sure if he’d been about to lean in to kiss her or if he’d simply wanted to share how he was feeling. Either way, it was better that they’d been interrupted.

Ria came downstairs a few minutes later.

“Everything’s fine — Jamie just needed a little water. I gave him a drink and he fell right back asleep.” She looked up at him. “I should... well, I should go sleep, too.”

“Of course.” It was barely nine o’clock, but Tristan understood. “I’ll see you in the

morning.”

Then, in a puff of warm vanilla scent and a flash of bright curls, Ria was gone.

CHAPTER15

RIA

“What a beautiful family you have.”

Ria sat on a bench at the park, the warm June air lifting her spirits. She had her book in her hands, but she'd been watching Tristan push the triplets on the swings instead of reading. The toddlers were sitting in baby swings as Tristan ran back and forth down the line, pushing each one in turn. The kids were laughing uproariously, especially when he made faces or tickled a foot when they swung forward. Tristan was beaming, too, as if he was completely in his element.

And it seemed that he was.

Ria had been so caught up in watching the heartwarming sight that she hadn't noticed an older woman sitting down beside her. The woman wore a flowered dress, and her gray hair was knotted into a neat French twist.

“Sorry, what did you say?” Ria tore her eyes away from Tristan in his shorts and rock-band T-shirt, pushing Jasmine then pretending to be kicked by Jamie as he swung forward. The toddlers burst into laughter.

“I was just complimenting your family.” The older woman nodded to Tristan and the toddlers.

“Oh, they're not... I mean... I'm just the nanny.” It was hard to say, even though it

was true. Ria was just the nanny. At times, she found herself imagining that she was more than that, that she was a mother to Jamie, Jacob, and Jasmine, a partner to Tristan. She just couldn't admit that — even to herself.

“Really?” The woman looked surprised. “My apologies, dear. I just saw how you were looking at them. And those kids have your eyes.”

“They do, don't they?” Ria smiled a little distantly. Tristan had just grabbed the chains of Jacob's swing and was holding him in the air while the little boy kicked with joy.

The older woman patted Ria on the shoulder. “I'm sure you'll have a family of your own one day.” Then she pulled out a book and began to read.

Ria sighed. She'd always felt resentful of strangers telling her she'd have a family one day — how could they know if she even wanted one? But today, she just felt a pang in her heart.

The longer Ria spent with this little family, eating dinner with Tristan, teaching him how to parent, meeting his eyes over the toddlers' heads when one of them said something funny, the more she could feel herself falling in love with him. And it wasn't just Tristan, either. She loved little Jacob's artistic enthusiasm, Jamie's bold and often hilarious leadership, and the way Jasmine would slip her hand into Ria's as she told a story or asked how something worked.

It was only a matter of time before Ria toppled head over heels into love with this whole family. And that could only mean heartbreak because, at the end of the day, she was just the nanny. Nothing she did would change that.

Although... at times, she felt that Tristan might feel something for her, too. Maybe. Just then, Tristan caught her gaze and grinned, waving her over. Ria got up, nodding

a goodbye to the older woman, and joined him by the swings.

“So,” he said, “we were thinking of a little treat after the park.”

“Oh?” Ria turned to the triplets, gently pushing Jamie’s swing. “What would that be?”

“We want ice cream!” Jasmine half-shouted. Her speech had improved in leaps and bounds over the last few months, but Ria was still impressed by how well she was talking now.

“Ice cream, huh?” Ria grinned at Tristan. “That sounds great.”

So, they helped the triplets down from their swings and walked the few blocks to the nearest main street. Ria held Jacob’s hand on one side and Jasmine’s on the other. In turn, Jasmine held Jamie’s hand, and Jamie held Tristan’s. They walked in a chain, swinging their hands back and forth as the kids chanted, “Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream.”

Ria caught Tristan’s eye, and they smiled at each other. Ria had the fleeting thought that she and Tristan were almost holding hands, several kids removed.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Tristan took a deep breath of the fresh June air.

“It is.” Ria swept her gaze across the blossoming flowers and leafy trees that had taken over the streets. When she’d arrived, buds had barely been sprouting, but now the neighborhood resembled a forest. Had several months really passed? Several months of quiet dinners together and loud days with the kids?

“I was thinking of taking the kids on their first vacation towards the end of summer,” Tristan continued.

“Really?” Ria’s heart beat a little faster in her chest. She wasn’t sure if she was invited on this vacation.

“Yeah. Just a short trip to the beach, I think; maybe a night or two in a nice hotel with a pool and a view of the sea.”

“I think the kids would love that.” There was a pause, then Ria decided it was time to change the subject before she said something she might regret. “Have you thought more about preschool in September?”

“Yes, and I think you’re right. The nature preschool I tried didn’t work, but that was probably just because the kids weren’t feeling very settled yet. A few mornings a week at a nice preschool would probably do them all good.”

They’d talked about preschools a few nights ago after dinner, long after the triplets were in bed, while they’d sat on the couch in the living room, teas in hand. Ria had been the one to suggest that the kids might benefit from more socialization and a little introduction to academics. What she hadn’t said was that, if the kids were ready to spend time at school, her role would slowly disappear.

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“That’s great. I’ll have a look around for a few good options and show them to you later.”

“Wonderful.”

They arrived at the ice cream store, where Jacob and Jasmine both ordered scoops of vanilla, while Jamie went for the more adventurous chocolate. The kids were getting excited and boisterous, so Ria took them outside to wait while Tristan paid for and got the ice cream. She corralled them around an outdoor picnic table.

“Shall we play a game?” she asked.

“Yay!” the kids replied in chorus.

“Okay, what animal am I?” Ria held up two hands beside her ears and snuffled her nose.

“Rabbit!” the kids replied.

“And me!” Jasmine announced. She folded her hands into paws and pretended to wash her face, letting out a dignified “meow.” The answer was easy, since she was always the same thing.

“Cat!”

Jamie stuck out his front teeth and mimed eating a nut. All together, Ria, Jasmine, and Jacob chorused, “Squirrel!” Jamie laughed with delight and nodded.

Tristan reappeared a few minutes later, ice cream balanced on a cardboard carrier. He handed the kids' cones to them, then gave Ria a cone of Rocky Road.

"My favorite," Ria beamed as she accepted the ice cream. "I didn't know you were getting anything for me."

"Of course I was." Tristan winked. He'd settled on a lemon sorbet with a scoop of dark chocolate, which Ria thought was pretty impressive for a man who'd refused to eat sugar at all until a month or so ago.

The treat turned into a calamity as rivulets of dripping ice cream ran down the kids' cones and onto their hands. From there, it dripped onto their clothes, smeared across their faces, and covered every inch of their tiny bodies in sticky goo. Ria and Tristan glanced at each other, smiling, before grabbing napkins and starting the clean-up process. The triplets were just happy to be eating ice cream — they didn't care that they were also wearing it.

On the way home, the triplets ran ahead, stopping before each street as Ria had taught them. Tristan and Ria walked in the back, keeping a close eye on them. When they entered the yard, the kids ran straight for the slide Tristan had bought them a few weeks ago as Ria and Tristan sat on the steps up to the front door to watch.

"Oh, it looks like you didn't escape the ice cream massacre unscathed," Tristan said.

"What do you mean?"

"You have some on your cheek." He grinned. "Don't worry, I'm an expert." He reached out and, with the tip of his thumb, swiped away the streak of ice cream. Ria's breath caught at his nearness. He had that masculine peppermint-and-shaving-cream scent he always carried. She could see the faint line of five o'clock shadow already forming across the sharp curve of his jaw. Shivers ran across Ria's cheek and down

her spine, pooling in her stomach, at Tristan's fingers on her face.

"Did you get it?" she asked, her voice coming out a little higher than she'd expected.

"I think so." Tristan swiped his thumb across her cheek once more, then let his hand fall. They were sitting on the steps, leaning towards each other like magnets. Ria's hand lifted, almost of its own accord, to rest on Tristan's. The whole time, their eyes never left each other's. Ria wanted, more than anything, to close the few inches of distance between them and kiss Tristan. She'd imagined, all too many times, how it might feel if he kissed her.

"I got a stick!"

Tristan and Ria pulled apart as Jasmine ran over to them, brandishing a small twig with a V at the end.

"It's beautiful," Ria said. She avoided Tristan's gaze. She needed to bring her heart rate back to normal and banish her thoughts of his lips on hers.

"Thanks." Jasmine ran off again and left Tristan and Ria alone. This wasn't the first time they'd shared a tense moment. In fact, over the last few weeks, it seemed that they could barely spend time together without Ria's cheeks beginning to heat and her imagination running wild. Each time, she hoped that Tristan might lean forward and kiss her, or at least give some indication he shared the attraction she felt, but he never did. She didn't, either. After all, Tristan was her employer, and this was her job. She couldn't risk everything she'd built here over a crush that could be entirely one-sided.

"Are you okay watching the kids for a minute?" Ria asked. "I think I have some ice cream on my clothes from helping the triplets. I need to change."

"Of course."

She hurried into the house, which felt quiet and very spacious after the bright energy of the kids outside. Upstairs, Ria stripped off her shirt, which was still relatively clean despite what she'd told Tristan. She swapped it out for a different shirt, ran her fingers through her hair, and was about to head back downstairs when she caught sight of her phone. Ria tried not to be on her phone around the kids, which meant that she barely checked her messages. Now might be a good time.

Ria saw a few texts from each of her sisters and one from her brother Thomas. There were a couple of checking-in messages from friends and a bunch of emails asking her to donate money, subscribe to a new nanny agency, or read about the day's news. There was also one email from a company called Child First. Ria had worked with the agency a few years ago and had reached out to them during her frantic flurry of applications when she'd thought Oh Pear! was going to fire her. Curious, Ria clicked on the email.

Dear Ms. Hampton,

Thank you for your interest in working with Child First again. We've matched you with a new family looking for a long-term, live-in nanny. The family has one child, a five-year-old boy, and is located in Los Angeles. They are willing to pay a small relocation bonus, as well as a higher salary for an experienced nanny such as yourself.

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The email went on to lay out more information about the salary and the family, ending with, Please confirm as soon as possible if you'd like to accept this match. The family is hoping for a start date in the next few weeks.

Ria's first instinct was to reply that she wasn't interested. After all, she wanted to stay with Tristan and the triplets. She wanted more warm hugs from tiny toddlers who smelled like baby shampoo. She wanted more late-night chats with Tristan. She wanted to find out if Tristan reciprocated her feelings.

Yet, she hesitated before replying. Maybe she should consider taking this new job. After all, her stay in the West home was always supposed to be temporary, and Tristan was clearly ready to be a father on his own. He understood that as well as she did, even if they hadn't talked about it much.

If Ria stayed, her feelings for Tristan and her love of the triplets would only grow. Each day, she found it harder to imagine ever leaving this beautiful family. She wanted to be there for their trip to the beach. She wanted to see the kids off on their first day of school, and cook dinner with Tristan every night. She wanted to finally find out how it would feel for him to take her into his arms and kiss her.

Leaving now would be almost impossible, but leaving in a few months, when she'd grown even closer to the West family, would be much more heartbreaking. Maybe it was better to leave now, on her own terms.

And maybe... Ria's heart began to beat faster. Maybe Tristan did share her feelings, at least some of them. Perhaps, instead of either accepting or rejecting the job outright, the best thing would be to talk with him about it. If he told her to accept the other job,

well, she would know once and for all that he didn't feel the same way about her. And if he told her to stay, that would be a clear sign that he did care about her. Maybe, being reminded of her temporary role would be enough to encourage him to act on any feelings he did have.

Ria bit her lip. She didn't like the idea of giving an ultimatum, but this wasn't one. At least, she didn't think it was. After all, she was just discussing a job possibility with an employer. This was the kind of thing she would do with any family she was nannying for when it was clear that the time was coming for her to move on.

A peal of laughter sounded from outside, and Ria quickly tossed her phone away. Whatever she was going to do, now wasn't the time to do it. She'd enjoy the rest of the day with Tristan and the kids. Once the children were in bed, she would decide what to do.

Ria hurried down the stairs and back into the yard. Tristan was lifting each toddler over his head and spinning them around, one at a time, as they shrieked with laughter. When he saw Ria, he grinned at her.

"I think I can officially get rid of the home gym," he said with a wink as he lifted Jamie into the air. The toddler squealed joyously as Tristan spun him around. "There's no weightlifting like toddler-lifting."

Part of Ria wanted to just stand here, watching Tristan play with his kids and seeing the happiness on all their faces. Yet she knew she should join in.

"I couldn't agree more." She lifted Jasmine up, balancing her on her hip and tilting the toddler back. Jasmine giggled uproariously as Jacob ran over, hands raised.

"Me too! Me too! Hold me!"

Ria set Jasmine on the floor and did the same trick with Jacob. Her heart felt light. When she glanced at Tristan and saw him looking back at her, it was easy to forget all about the job offer and imagine that this was her life.

Which, perhaps, was all the more reason to consider the offer.

CHAPTER 16

TRISTAN

Ria seemed a little distant, though Tristan couldn't put his finger on why. She cooked lunch for the triplets, spent a few hours with them while he got a little work done, then perched on the side of the table, chatting with him and the kids, while he cooked dinner. It was all as it usually was — except that there seemed to be a shadow on Ria's lovely face.

Over the last few weeks, Tristan and Ria had fallen into a routine — a routine he enjoyed more than he wanted to admit. There was something wonderful about spending time with Ria, whether it was the emotionally charged moments they often shared in the evenings, or simply the quiet glances they exchanged while playing with the kids. Tristan never knew he could be so happy outside of work. Of course, despite how wonderful everything was now, Ria would leave eventually. He knew that.

And eventually, Tristan would have to tell Ria how he felt. If he wanted her to stay, of course.

Yet that moment felt far in the future. Tristan didn't want to ruin the wonderful times they shared now by questioning the future. He was happier than he'd been in a long time, with Ria and the triplets, and he didn't want to lose that.

“Shall we tag-team bedtime?” he asked Ria as the triplets finished their dinner.

“Let’s do it.”

Like a well-oiled machine, Ria and Tristan carried the kids upstairs, ran them through the bath, and tucked them into bed. They each read two stories with the triplets snugly tucked into their beds. Then Tristan went to each of his kids, kissing them lightly on the forehead and making sure the sheets and pillows were just right. He flipped on the nightlight and the white-noise machine, checked the baby monitor, and slipped out of the room.

Ria was already in the hallway. She nodded towards the stairs, and they went down to the kitchen side by side. Tristan poured them each a glass of wine while Ria dished up salad and pasta. As she turned to set the plates on the table, she stubbed her toe against a chair, winced, and accidentally tilted one of the plates. A few lettuce leaves cascaded onto the floor, and she winced again.

“Are you okay?” Tristan took the plates from her and set them on the table, his gaze drawn to her foot.

“Yes, I’m just clumsy.” She shrugged. “As always.”

“You’re notthatclumsy.” Tristan pulled out a chair and helped her into it, then bent down and took her ankle in his hand. She was barefoot, as she often was around the house, and Tristan found his fingertips brushing across the sensitive skin around her ankle. He looked up at her and saw she was watching him, her green eyes bright, her lips slightly parted. The band of connection tightened between them until Tristan’s breath caught.

“What’s the prognosis, doc?” Ria asked, her tone joking but her expression serious.

“I think you’ll live.” Tristan set her foot down on the floor and straightened up, his eyes never leaving hers. He wanted to reach for her hands and draw her to her feet —

and into his arms. It finally felt like the time was right to tell her how he felt. He didn't want to wait any longer.

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“There’s something I should tell you.” Ria bit her lip, her gaze skating away from Tristan’s.

“Oh?” Tristan’s heart began to beat faster. Perhaps she wanted to tell him the same thing he wanted to tell her.

“I got a job offer.”

In an instant, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room — out of Tristan’s lungs, too. He forced himself to take a slow breath. Just because Ria had gotten an offer didn’t mean that she had any plans of accepting it.

“Did you?” He took his seat and reached for his wine glass.

“Yes. The family is based in Los Angeles. It looks like a good job.” She bit her lip again. “We both know that you’re ready to parent on your own, Tristan. You’ve been doing wonderfully with the triplets, and you barely need any help from me. I don’t think you need anannyanymore.”

Tristan didn’t know what to say. He’d been hoping to confess that he had feelings for Ria. He’d wanted to tell her that she’d become very important to him over the last few months, and that he wanted to kiss her. He’d hoped to take her in his arms and capture those soft pink lips with his own.

Meanwhile, Ria had been planning to take another job.

Sadness warred with betrayal in Tristan’s chest. He didn’t want to lose Ria, not at all.

He cared for her, deeply. She was exactly who his little family had been missing, exactly who he'd been missing, even if he hadn't known it.

Yet Tristan couldn't force Ria to stay if she wanted to move on. Nor did he want to. If she was ready to take another job, he wouldn't stop her.

"Well, if it's a good offer, I suppose you should just take it." The words came out a little more acidic than Tristan had intended.

Ria's eyes widened and she sat back a little. "Really?" She sounded almost upset, but Tristan was upset, too. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more his sadness turned to anger. How could she leave the kids like this? They weren't ready. Neither was he.

"Really." He set his wine glass down a little too hard on the table. "If you want to go, then go." His tone grew increasingly sharp.

"All right." Ria folded her hands together, her face shuttering. "I'll go. If that's what you want."

"Although, how you think this is the right decision is beyond me." Tristan shook his head. "The kids care about you. They rely on you. They love you. And you're just going to leave them!"

There was more Tristan wanted to say, though he didn't. He wanted to tell her that he cared about her. That he relied on her. That he loved her. And that he couldn't believe she was just going to leave him. But it wouldn't have mattered, surely. He couldn't tell Ria how he felt. Not now. Not when she wanted to leave.

"I'll say goodbye and explain everything," Ria said, her voice catching. Tristan saw that her green eyes were filled with unshed tears. "I won't just run out on them."

“I think we can agree it’s best for you to leave soon.” Tristan’s tone was clipped now, as he got to his feet. Their dinner was forgotten. “Tomorrow will be best. There’s no point in drawing out the goodbyes. We’ll be just fine without you. After all, you’re just the nanny.”

“Right.” Ria nodded, her eyes still sparkling with tears. “Thank you for your honesty.”

But Tristan hadn’t been honest, not even close. Honesty would have meant asking Ria to stay, and he just couldn’t do that. He couldn’t plead with her to stay for one more day, one more week, a year, the rest of her life, only to have her shake her head and leave anyway. It was better that she left now, on his terms.

“I appreciate what you’ve done for us. You’re a good nanny,” he said stiffly. “You’ll receive your final paycheck in your account.”

With that, he left the kitchen, his steps brisk. He went to the one place he always felt in control: his office. There, he sat in front of his computer and dropped his head into his hands. Everything had crumbled so fast, and he wasn’t sure how it had happened. He’d wanted to kiss Ria. Instead, she was leaving.

Tristan booted up his computer and stared at the screen for a while, willing himself to start working. If he could just lose himself in his company, he could forget about Ria, at least for a little while. Eventually, he did get a few things done, but the whole time, his mind wandered back to Ria’s slim ankle in his hands, her palm on his chest as they’d danced, her sparkling green eyes... and her leaving. Tomorrow.

Tristan heard the sound of footsteps, but Ria was just going upstairs. That was the last he heard from her that evening.

Tristan wondered how the triplets would handle her departure. He wondered if he was

really ready to be a father without her. Most of all, he wondered how things had gone so wrong. If Ria hadn't gotten the job offer, if she'd stayed just a few more months, perhaps he could have told her how he felt. Now, though, he was going to lose her. The triplets were going to lose her.

Part of him wanted to run upstairs. He wanted to knock on Ria's door and tell her that he'd made a terrible mistake. He wanted to explain that he loved her and that he didn't want to imagine his life without her. He wanted to pull her close and kiss her until they were both breathless. At the very least, he wanted to beg her to stay for just a few more months. If she would just agree to be here until the triplets' upcoming third birthday, perhaps it would be enough.

Tristan couldn't do that, though. He couldn't do any of it. Ria wanted to leave. She'd looked for and found another job. If Tristan chased her and begged her to stay, that would make him a bad person. Or, at the very least, a selfish one. Tristan didn't want to imagine his life without Ria, but he also didn't want to force her to stay.

It hurt that she was leaving now. But if she stayed for another month, a week, or even a day, the heartache would only worsen. And not just for him. Her departure would hurt the triplets, too, and it would hurt them more the longer she stayed.

No, letting Ria leave, even if they weren't parting on good terms, was the best thing Tristan could do for himself, for the triplets, and for Ria. If only knowing that made it hurt any less.

CHAPTER17

RIA

Ria walked upstairs, being careful to keep her footsteps light. She checked on the sleeping triplets before slipping into her bedroom. There, she closed the door, clicked the lock into place, and sat on the bed. Only then did she let the tears come.

She'd hoped for a sign from Tristan that he still wanted her around. A hesitation, perhaps, a sense of remorse, or even a direct request for her to stay. In her daydreams, she'd imagined that he might sweep her into his arms like they were in a rom-com and tell her that she was so much more than a nanny to him.

Instead, he'd told her, in no uncertain terms, to leave. Tomorrow. Ria's heart broke at the thought, and another wave of tears threatened to overwhelm her. In the morning, she'd have to leave this house forever. She'd have to say goodbye to the triplets forever. And she'd have to let go of any crush she'd felt for Tristan. Forever. It was clearly never to be.

Ria cried until her chest ached and she was thirsty. Then she drank the glass of water she kept on her nightstand and got her suitcase out of her closet. There was no point in putting off the packing, not when she had to leave the next day.

Some small, hopeful part of her listened, just in case Tristan came to knock on the door and tell her he'd made a mistake. No luck, though. If Ria were braver, or if Tristan hadn't dismissed her so harshly, she might have gone to him herself. But it was clear that Tristan thought of her as nothing but a nanny. Speaking of nannying — Ria wrote a quick email to the agency to accept the new job in Los Angeles and let them know she could start as soon as possible.

Ria folded shorts and T-shirts, jeans and sweaters into her suitcase. When she'd arrived, it had been March, and she'd worn winter clothes. Now, in June, the summer breeze was fresh in the air, and she'd changed to warm-weather clothes. Never once had she gone back to her studio apartment on the other side of the city. It would have broken the spell of this place by reminding her that she belonged elsewhere.

Next, she collected the children's artwork, mostly Jacob's, since he was the biggest artist in the bunch. She'd hung a few of the best drawings on the walls to decorate her room. Ria paused in front of one picture, which was a crayon drawing of three small blobs, two larger ones, and a spiral floating in the sky. Jacob had explained to her, as best he could, that it was a drawing of the triplets, Ria and Tristan, and their mother floating in the sky.

Ria held back another rush of tears. The worst part was that she wasn't just breaking her own heart. Her abrupt departure would hurt the kids, too, especially after they'd lost their mother so recently. Usually, she had at least a week to prepare her young charges for her leaving. Now, she didn't even have a full day. How would the triplets react when she told them that she was leaving right away?

Ria's sadness began to fade, replaced by anger. Tristan shouldn't have insisted that she leave the next day. Even if he was happy for her to take another job, he should have let her have at least a short notice period. He'd accused her of not thinking about the triplets, but clearly he was the one who hadn't thought about them.

Ria swept the drawings into a folder and placed them carefully on top of her laptop. Next, she packed up most of her toiletries, save for a few things she'd need in the morning.

The bedroom looked bare now. Over the last few months, it had begun to feel like home to Ria. Now, without the personal touches she'd added, it looked just like the soulless guest room she'd first moved into. Ria wondered if Tristan would hire a new

nanny, a nanny who would stay here. The thought of him spending late-night dinners with another woman, going with another woman to the park, dancing with another woman... it made Ria feel teary and angry all over again.

There was nothing for it, though. He clearly didn't want her around. In fact, he wanted her gone so badly that she'd have to leave the very next morning. Whether he moved on tomorrow or in a year, he would move on. He'd find someone. Someone who could be a mother to the triplets and a partner to him.

That would never be Ria.

She spun once more, checking for any personal items she'd left, then got into bed and switched out the light. On a normal night, she might have read, but tonight, she just curled up, buried her head under the covers, and reached for sleep like a welcome friend.

* * *

The next morning, Ria woke early. She showered, dressed in her nicest skirt and top, and did her hair and makeup. There was no reason she shouldn't show Tristan what he was missing by telling her to leave. Once she was ready, she packed the last of her things and carried her suitcase downstairs. She made a quick breakfast of pancakes and fruit, half-hoping and half-fearing that she'd run into Tristan in the kitchen. She didn't. A quick check of her phone showed that the agency had already written back confirming her acceptance and suggesting a start date in a few days' time.

Finally, Ria went to the triplets' room.

"Good morning, my darlings."

The triplets wiggled and stretched as they slowly woke up. Jamie, often cuddly in the

mornings, lifted his arms for Ria to pick him up. She did, savoring his smell of baby shampoo and sleep.

“Who wants pancakes?” she asked.

“Yay!” the triplets chorused. Ria smiled and hugged Jamie close, even as her chest constricted. This was the last morning she’d hear the triplets shout with joy. And they were so young. In a few months, they would forget all about her, though she would never forget about them.

“Come on, then!”

Downstairs, she settled them at the table instead of in their high chairs and offered them pancakes with fruit. Tristan was still nowhere to be seen as the triplets devoured their pancakes enthusiastically and chattered about what they wanted to do that day.

Once they were done eating, Ria helped them wash their hands and faces then took them into the living room. Her heart aching, she snuggled them in on either side of her.

“So, my dears, I have to go for a little while.” There was no point explaining she’d never be back. Kids this young wouldn’t really understand, and she’d only make them sad if she tried.

“Why?” Jasmine asked. She looked up at Ria with eyes full of confusion. “Where?”

“Just because.” She smiled at the little girl and hugged her close. “But I’ll always think of you. We had so much fun, right?”

“Yeah.” But the triplets looked sad. Ria snuggled with them a while longer, chatting with them and reading a few books, but soon she realized she was just delaying the

inevitable. She got up and headed into the entryway, thinking that maybe Tristan wasn't even going to turn up to say goodbye to her — but there he was. He leaned against the wall with folded arms and an impassive expression. Ria looked away quickly. She didn't want to see the distance in his eyes, not when he used to look at her as though she mattered.

“Okay, my dears.” She hugged each of the triplets. “Be good for your father, all right?” Tears pricked at the back of her eyes, but she held them at bay. She refused to make things harder for the triplets by crying — nor did she want to let Tristan know how sad she was. As she straightened up, Ria turned to Tristan, who held out a hand.

“Thank you.”

She took his hand for a quick, firm shake. As always, when they touched, a surge of electricity ran up her arm, but she ignored it.

“Thank you, too.” She let go of his hand and turned to the door. Her feet went into her shoes, and her hand grabbed the handle of her suitcase, but in her mind she was miles away. As Ria opened the door, she heard Jacob start to cry. Jasmine joined in, then Jamie’s voice added to the chorus of sadness. Ria turned back.

“It’s all right. I love you, kiddos. It’s all right.” She blew a kiss to each of them.

But the triplets cried on. Ria couldn’t help them, not without going back and scooping them into her arms, and she couldn’t do that. She had to leave.

Without looking back again, Ria slipped out the door and shut it behind her. The warm summer air played across her face as a single tear broke past her defenses and rolled down her cheek. It was always hard to say goodbye to her young charges, but this was on another level. The modern house had felt like home. The triplets had felt like her own kids. And Tristan had felt like a real partner, a confidant, and a man she could have loved.

Ria walked down the path towards the bus station. It was the reverse of the route she’d taken that first day, when she’d been nervous but excited for a new job. Now, she didn’t feel excited about her new work. Not at all. All she wanted to do was climb into bed and cry — or run back to the house that was slowly disappearing into the distance.

On the bus ride home, Ria pressed her face against the window and watched the city roll by. Everyone seemed to be with their families, walking hand in hand with loved ones as small children frolicked ahead. It was a relief to pass through downtown, where most pedestrians wore suits and ties and walked alone.

Ria returned to her studio apartment. It was dark and quiet and smelled a little stale. She opened the windows, letting streams of light and fresh air in, and saw that her plant had died. Of course it had. She hadn't been back to the apartment in months.

Ria fetched a glass of water and perched on the edge of her couch. There was no point unpacking — she'd start her new job in a few days anyway. Instead, she dialed her sister and spent an hour or so on the phone. She didn't talk about Tristan or the triplets. She just asked about Nora's life and listened to her sister talk, and that was enough. For now.

* * *

A few days later, Ria stepped off the airplane in Los Angeles. Even though both cities were in California, she was always surprised by how different LA looked. The air smelled different, more tropical, and palm trees seemed to line every road. A cab took her to the new family along broad boulevards and past a stretch of gleaming sapphire-colored ocean and white-sand beaches. Ria had always wanted to live in LA, but she could barely enjoy it. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Tristan, Jamie, Jacob, and Jasmine. How were they faring without her? Did they miss her? Would she ever hear from them again?

The new family, the Robinsons, lived in a sprawling ranch house with tasteful orange stucco walls and a yard of local drought-friendly plants. The mother, Chrissie, met her at the door.

"You must be Ria!" she beamed. "Welcome, welcome. We're so glad you could start

right away — Callum's au pair had to go back to France to be with her mother, and we had a bit of a scramble for childcare." She pulled Ria into a hug.

The welcome was the polar opposite of what Ria had experienced at Tristan's home. Chrissie led her on a tour of the house, focusing on Ria's beautifully decorated bedroom and Callum's room. A few minutes later, the door opened, and young Callum arrived, along with his father. The little boy was friendly and had good manners. Even at just five years old, he smiled up at Ria as he held out his small hand for a shake.

"Welcome," he said adorably.

The rest of the day was spent getting to know the family and playing with Callum. That night, Callum's parents insisted on doing the bedtime routine — "We always do," Chrissie said. "It's our family time." While they took care of baths and stories and tucking in, Ria slipped off to her room.

This was the kind of job she'd always dreamed about. Callum was a sweetheart, his parents clearly loved him, and the house was gorgeous. Ria knew she could settle in and be happy here. Yet all she wanted to do was book the first flight back to San Francisco to be with the Wests. Eventually, surely, her heartache would pass, and she would move on. Until then, though, it was hard to accept that she would never again see the little family she'd come to love.

CHAPTER 18

TRISTAN

Tristan had expected things to fall apart after Ria left. After all, before she'd arrived, he and the triplets had existed in a state of total chaos most of the time. Instead, though, everything continued much as it had before. Tristan enrolled the kids in one

of the preschools Ria had found and secured a spot for them in a local daycare for a few more hours a day so that he could go to the office. The triplets enjoyed making friends and playing with all the toys at daycare and preschool, and Tristan was able to work.

At home, things went smoothly, too. Each time something came up, from Jacob turning his nose up at a stray leaf of spinach to Jasmine crying in the night to Jamie spilling his juice all over himself and his car seat, Tristan knew how to handle it. He knew because Ria had taught him, patiently and caringly, everything he needed to know.

So, when Jacob raced towards the wall with a marker in his hand, Tristan thought of Ria. How had she handled this? Then he grabbed Jacob a piece of paper and set him up at his small toddler table to color. As Tristan watched his little boy happily drawing a picture of an elephant, his thoughts stayed with Ria. He remembered her encouraging Jacob's drawing and always making sure he had a notepad and crayons with him. He remembered Ria with her arm covered in scribbles of green marker after she'd let Jacob try out his coloring skills on her. He remembered wanting to trace one of those green lines from her fingertips to her shoulder.

When Jamie woke one night in tears, Tristan scooped him up and took him down to the rocking chair. There, he stroked his back and talked to him softly, just like Ria had shown him. In the predawn light, he remembered sitting with Ria in this very spot, talking and laughing and staying up the rest of the night.

When Jasmine told a story, Tristan remembered Ria texting him on her first day about the "skuls." She'd been so confused, and Tristan had been, too. Now they both knew about the triplets' love of squirrels — and Jasmine's language skills had greatly improved.

Without hesitation, Tristan handled potty time and bathtime. He fed the kids and

played with them. He took them to the park and read them books. He kissed them goodnight and again each time he dropped them off at preschool. He was alone now, but it didn't feel like it. Every time Tristan turned, he half-expected to see Ria standing beside him with her infectious smile. Every time he heard a crash, he half-expected it was Ria who'd knocked something down. And every time one of the triplets asked about her, which was almost constantly, he wished she were here.

Slowly, days piled into weeks. Tristan was truly a single father, but he still thought of Ria often. So did the triplets.

At first, he felt angry with her for leaving. But soon, his anger melted into just missing her. He appreciated all she'd taught him, and he wished she were there. Then, both faded, and Tristan realized that he'd acted in haste, too. Ria was always going to leave, but he could have handled it better. At least for the triplets' sake, he could have suggested that they stay in touch.

The more time went by, the more Tristan realized that he didn't just miss Ria for the triplets' sake, though. He missed the way she always lit up a room when she entered. He missed the way her eyes would widen when she was worried that she'd gone too far in something she'd said. He missed the feeling of her slight hand in his and the sparkle in her eyes when she laughed.

Ria had left because she wanted to, but Tristan certainly hadn't made matters any easier by asking her to go the very next day. He also hadn't helped by not asking to stay in touch. Slowly, it dawned on him that Ria had never said she wanted to leave him and the triplets — just that she had a new job offer.

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The more Tristan thought about it, the more he worried he'd made a mistake. He just wasn't sure how to fix it now. He didn't even know where Ria was. He had her phone number, but it didn't feel quite right to call.

One night, after settling the triplets into bed and doing a little work, Tristan took a seat on the couch where he'd spent so many nights chatting with Ria. With a feeling of great anticipation, he dialed the Oh Pear! number. The same overly friendly woman he'd spoken with months ago answered after a few rings.

"This is Eloise Rice at Oh Pear! How can I help you today?"

A wave of déjà vu washed over Tristan, and for a moment, he was certain he'd slipped back in time and that Ria would be arriving tomorrow all over again.

"I'm Tristan West," he began as he shook off the memories.

"Mr. West." Eloise's voice turned from cheerful to sympathetic. "How are you?"

"I'm well. I wanted to ask about a nanny who worked with my family for the last few months. Ria Hampton."

"Yes, Ria. I've certainly heard a lot about her. How did she work out for you?"

"Very well, actually, but she's now moved on, and I forgot to get a forwarding address for her."

"Well, she's moved on from our agency as well. Last I heard, she took a job with

Child First and gave us her notice. I'm sorry I can't be more helpful, dear."

"That's quite all right."

"Would you like a new nanny?" Eloise continued. "We have several new joiners who could be a perfect fit for your family. I can?—"

"No, it's all right," Tristan interrupted. He got the feeling Eloise was about to go into a whole sales pitch, and he didn't have the energy for that. "Thank you for your time."

He hung up and tapped the phone against the edge of the couch as he considered. Maybe he should just call Ria. In thirty seconds or less, if she had her phone with her, he could be speaking to her again. Yet something held him back. After the way they'd left things, he wanted to know, at the very least, if she was still in San Francisco before he reached out.

It felt like Ria had disappeared. Tristan had no way to get ahold of her except her phone number. She wasn't even registered with the same agency anymore. In just a few weeks, Ria had completely vanished from his life, leaving a gaping hole behind. He missed her terribly and might never see her again. Maybe she was out there somewhere, with a new family, missing him, too.

Tristan sighed. Perhaps he was being silly. There was every chance that Ria just didn't want to hear from him at all. He got up, stretched, and walked slowly back to his office to work. Reaching out felt too complicated. He didn't want to impose on Ria if she didn't want to hear from him — he'd never wanted that. Yet the thought of never seeing her again was equally unimaginable.

A few days later, Tristan picked the triplets up from preschool. They were skipping, happy and chatty, because one of their classmates had had a birthday party with cake

— at least Tristan was almost certain that's what they were saying.

“Chocowate and chewwies,” Jasmine explained, her green eyes wide as her small arms gestured broadly. She was wearing a pink gown and fairy wings today — Tristan had tried to dress all the kids in more standard clothing at first, but he'd decided that as long as they were happy and their clothes were clean and fitted well, they could wear what they wished.

“Sing happy birfday,” Jacob added, skipping alongside his sister. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a dinosaur T-shirt, while Jamie had on black pants, a blue shirt, and a superman cape.

“No skuls,” Jamie finished with a sad expression. All the talk of birthdays reminded Tristan that the triplets' third birthday was coming up in a few weeks. When the triplets had first arrived, the thought of organizing a birthday party would have sent Tristan over the edge, but now he found he was looking forward to celebrating his kids on their special day.

When they arrived home, he set them up with a snack and got his laptop. Once again, Tristan wished that Ria were here — she'd know how to throw a wonderful birthday party for the three little ones.

Then an idea sparked. He could invite Ria to the triplets' party. It would be a clear sign that he was asking her back as someone who cared about the children (even though Tristan cared about Ria, too). It would also be more relaxed than him calling her up and asking if she missed him as much as he missed her, which he was still half-tempted to do.

Things began to fall into place. During the kids' nap time, Tristan spent a few hours mocking up invitations to the party and making a list of kids to invite from the preschool and daycare, as well as a few of his colleagues. He also placed orders for

cake, finger sandwiches, and drinks from a local bakery. Tristan knew there was more to a birthday party. There would need to be games, for sure, as well as balloons. He cast his memory back to his own birthday parties as a child, but they'd often been staid affairs with just his parents and their colleagues. He wanted to do better for his kids.

Over the next few days, between work and spending time with the triplets, Tristan stopped by a local party store for balloons and decorations, looked up party games, and handed out invitations. His employees had a few laughs at his expense when he brought a large piñata in the shape of a squirrel into the office, but Tristan needed a place to store it where the triplets wouldn't stumble across it.

"You really love those kids, don't you?" one accountant asked as he squeezed into the elevator with Tristan and the squirrel piñata.

"I do." Tristan smiled. "They're my kids, after all."

And they were. All the time Tristan had spent with Ria made him feel comfortable claiming the triplets as his own. He would never erase the role their mother had played in their lives, but that didn't mean they didn't deserve a parent now.

Two weeks before the party, almost everything was in place. There was only one important task left to do — invite Ria to the party. Tristan had gone back and forth about the best way to ask her. In the end, he settled for sending her a text with a PDF of the party invitation attached. His heart raced as he clicked send. Would she come? If she did, what would he say to her?

That night, as Tristan tucked the triplets in, Jamie looked up at him with big eyes.

"Where Ria?"

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The question had come up many times over the last few weeks, and each time, Tristan had given the same answer.

“She had to go.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Tristan kissed his son on the forehead. Usually, that was the end of the exchange — it was hard for a toddler to argue with something like “because.” But today, Jamie frowned. He bit his lip in thought, and Tristan had another wash of déjà vu — Ria did the exact same thing. The triplets had learned a lot from her.

“I wuv Ria,” Jamie said. “You wuv Ria?”

Tristan’s heart constricted, but he smiled down at the little boy as if all was well. “Yes, I do. I love Ria.”

“We family.” Jamie yawned. “Wuv Ria. Ria come home.”

Then he rolled over and snuggled down under the blankets. Tristan patted his shoulder, kissed Jacob and Jasmine good night, and slipped out of the room. As he went down to the kitchen to find some dinner, Jamie’s words replayed in his mind, over and over.

We’re family, the little boy had said, in his own way. We love Ria. Ria should come home.

And it was true, wasn't it? Tristan had wavered so much about how to tell Ria what he felt. He'd been so hesitant, in fact, that Ria had left. Even when she'd told him she had a new job, he'd just told her to leave instead of trying to put into words how much he loved her. Now, he was ruminating about what to tell her if she came to the triplets' party.

Talking to little Jamie had made everything so much clearer. There was no need for Tristan to overcomplicate things. If he ever saw Ria again, he would simply say what was in his heart. You're part of my family. I love you. Please come home.

There was still every chance that Ria wouldn't want to see him again, that she wouldn't want to hear that he loved her, and that she wouldn't want to come home. Perhaps she'd never thought of Tristan and the triplets as anything more than her clients. But at least Tristan would have tried everything he could to let Ria know how special she was. That had to be enough.

Of course, it all depended on whether she came to the party. Tristan would just have to wait for her answer to his RSVP.

CHAPTER 19

RIA

Ria jogged through the winding suburban streets of the Robinsons' neighborhood. Sprawling ranch houses, towering palm trees, and expensive cars rolled by as she picked up the pace, her heart rate rising. The air smelled fresh and citrusy, with just a tinge of salt, and the sky was still streaked with early morning pink. Despite the early hour, it was already hot. July in LA was a scorching time of year.

It had been a few weeks since she had relocated to LA, and so far everything had gone very smoothly. Callum was a sweet and intelligent little boy who loved to draw,

play with toy cars, and go for bike rides around the nearby park. He went to a morning kindergarten session, so Ria had a lot of free time when he wasn't home.

Callum's parents were wonderful, too. They were incredibly welcoming, often offering to have Ria join their family for dinners out or weekend trips to the mountains or the beach.

When Ria was building sandcastles with Callum on the beach or trying hibachi for the first time with the family, she could stay present. Yet in the quiet moments, when Callum was in school and his parents were at work, or after bedtime, her thoughts always drifted back to Tristan and the kids. She wondered how they were doing and if they missed her.

As more time went by, Ria felt like her questions were answered. Tristan and the kids must not miss her. After all, she hadn't heard anything from them, even though Tristan had her phone number. She could have called Tristan too, she knew that, but after the way they'd left things, she didn't think he wanted to hear from her. The more time passed without him reaching out, the more certain she was about that.

Ria's time with the Wests began to feel like a dream. It had been a beautiful dream, certainly, but it couldn't have been real. Sometimes, she remembered dancing with Tristan in the kitchen or sitting with him on the stoop while the kids played. She thought of the way he smelled, like aftershave and peppermint, and those silly glasses he'd worn when they first met. She thought of his morning turmeric-and-lemon drink, which the Robinson parents had each morning as well. She thought of how he'd grown into his role as a father, and what a joy it had been to watch that happen.

And then she remembered that her time with Tristan and the kids was in the past. Dwelling on the past wasn't going to help her. It wouldn't help anyone. Ria picked up her pace again, her feet flying as she raced down a slight hill.

After all this, after almost a month had passed, Ria had gotten a text from Tristan last night. Her heart had skipped a beat when she saw his name pop up on her phone. Was he asking for parenting tips? Was he, just maybe, telling her that he'd made a mistake and that he wanted her to come back? Or was it a pocket text?

But it hadn't been any of that. Instead, the text had an attachment. It was an invitation to the triplets' third birthday party in two weeks' time. Ria had been confused when she'd seen it, and she was still confused now.

Ria slowed to a stop, her heart pounding, and put her hands on her hips as she recovered. With her thoughts on Tristan, she'd pushed herself too hard. She needed to get her heart rate down again.

Ria wanted to go. Ofcourseshe wanted to go. She wanted nothing more than to see the kids again and make sure they were all right. And she wanted to see Tristan, too, despite how they'd left things. Her heart ached at the mental image of him opening the door and welcoming her inside.

The problem was that she wasn't sure she was strong enough. Seeing Tristan and the triplets might break her heart all over again. If she set foot back in that house, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to leave.

Ria started to walk back towards the Robinsons' house, breaking into a light jog once she'd recovered a little. The other problem was that she didn't know what Tristan had meant by the invitation. Had it been a peace offering? Did he even expect her to come? Did he want to see her again as much as she wanted to see him? Had it been an accident? Had he just sent the invitation to all his contacts? There hadn't been a message with the invitation, so there was no way for Ria to know. Since she'd first seen the message last night, it had been all she could think about.

The Robinsons' house came back into view. Ria had another few hours before she

needed to pick Callum up from kindergarten, so she took a shower and put together some lunch for herself and her young charge. As she did so, she kept thinking about the invitation.

It would be hard for her to see the little family again. And it would be silly to fly all the way back to San Francisco for a one-day event. She'd need to take time off from her brand-new nanny job. Worse, she'd need to walk back into the house she'd called home as a guest. And worst of all, she'd have to shake Tristan's hand as though he'd never been anything more than her boss when, at one point, she'd imagined a future by his side. More than once, she'd pictured him taking her into his arms for a slow, deep kiss. She'd imagined him lifting her onto the counter in the kitchen, forgetting everything else in his desire to be near her. She'd imagined simpler things, too: evenings curled on the couch with her head on his arm; holding hands while walking with the kids; or waking up beside him in the morning.

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It broke Ria's heart to let go of her daydreams. But practical, cool, sweet Tristan would never show up with a bouquet of red roses and an apology. He would never show up at all. If Ria decided to see him again, it would be as nothing more than a family friend, and she just wasn't sure she could handle that.

Yet she also wasn't sure she could handle never seeing Tristan or the kids again.

Ria tried in vain to distract herself, first with a book, then with a TV show, and finally with a deep clean of the kitchen. Nothing worked. Eventually, it was time to pick Callum up, so Ria walked the half mile to his school, pulling the wagon the little boy liked to ride in. Callum came flying out of the school, all smiles and stories.

"Hi, Ria!" He jumped into the wagon. "School was so funny today."

"What happened?"

Callum launched into a story about his teacher doing a dance to teach them phonics. Ria listened attentively, laughing in all the right places. For the first time since she'd gotten the birthday invitation, she was able to drag her thoughts away from Tristan West and his kids.

At home, Ria and Callum spent the afternoon painting with watercolors, playing hide-and-seek, and working on Callum's "homework" of finding sticks, rocks, and leaves in particular colors outside.

"Look, Ria." Callum pointed into a tree. "The squirrel is brown, too!" He was looking for something brown now and wasn't entirely satisfied with the stick he'd found.

Ria's heart skipped a beat as she remembered other young voices calling out about squirrels. Were the triplets still as excited about squirrels? She remembered how their faces lit up when they saw squirrels and how she would do anything to see them so happy. Perhaps Tristan had invited her to the party to make the kids happy, not because he wanted to see her. Ria wasn't even sure what to hope for.

"Are you okay?" Callum asked.

"Of course." Ria bent down to his level. "The squirrel is very nice and brown, but remember, we can't take any living creatures into school."

"Right." Callum stuck out his lip. Then his face brightened. "What about dirt?"

Ria chuckled. "Let's see what we can do about dirt."

After the afternoon with Callum, Ria ate dinner with his parents and had an early night. It should have been a beautiful day, but it was hard to enjoy it fully with thoughts of the birthday invitation constantly drifting back into her mind. She was almost ready to curse Tristan's name. When she'd finally been able to get him out of her head, he'd popped back in with this invitation.

Maybe the best thing to do was delete his number and forget all about the man who'd stolen her heart. In fact, the more Ria thought about it, the more certain she was. This was her life now — sunny picnics with Callum, trips to the beach, and being included in a new family. She had to enjoy it. She couldn't let herself live in the past with Tristan.

Ria wouldn't go to the party. It was better that she stayed here and embraced the life that was now hers — a life she would have dreamed of just a year or two ago.

Ria grabbed her phone from the bedside table. She was ready to delete Tristan's

number and the invitation. She was ready to put that chapter of her life behind her. She pulled up the message, tapped it, and reached for the delete button. Yet, instead of pressing it, she hesitated, her finger poised above the screen. Then she locked her phone and set it back on the bedside table.

For all her bravado, she wasn't quite ready to let go yet.

Maybe she never would be.

CHAPTER 20

TRISTAN

"Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me!" Jamie sang. Tristan had just come into the triplets' room to wake them, only to find that they were already awake and singing. Their faces were alight with the childhood joy of a party. For the last few days, Tristan had been answering hundreds of questions about their birthday party. Now, as he perched on the edge of Jacob's bed and watched the kids wiggle and jump with enthusiasm, he prepared himself for another round.

Sure enough, there were things Jasmine wanted to know (or be reminded of). "We have cake?"

"Yes, we'll have cake," Tristan assured her. "Actually, we'll have three: one vanilla cake with strawberry filling and pink frosting for Jasmine, one chocolate cake with green frosting for Jamie, and one vanilla-ice-cream cake with blue frosting for Jacob."

The kids cheered.

Then Jasmine was ready with the next question. "How many kids?"

“There will be fifteen kids. Most of them are from your preschool class, and a few are from daycare or are kids of my colleagues.”

More cheers.

“And presents?” Jasmine’s eyes lit up. Both her brothers wiggled with enthusiasm.

Tristan leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. “Wait, do you want presents?”

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“Yes!” the kids chorused.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes, yes!”

“Maybe you want a verysmallpresent.”

“No!” they chorused.

“Big present,” Jasmine added, holding her arms out as far as she could.

“Coloring,” Jacob said.

“Princess dress,” Jasmine requested.

“Skul,” Jacob finished, his eyes glowing. Luckily, the kids had been asking for the same three presents for weeks, so Tristan was ready. He winked.

“Okay, there will be presents.”

“Yay!” The kids spilled out of their beds, dancing around the room in joyous shakes and wiggles. Then, as if by silent communication, they piled onto Jacob’s bed with Tristan and exchanged looks. Tristan knew what was coming even before Jamie asked.

“Ria come?”

As always, when the kids had asked this question, Tristan's heart sank. The truth was that he didn't know if Ria was coming. He'd sent the invitation weeks ago and hadn't heard anything back. Odds were good that Ria had decided not to come. Perhaps she'd even changed her phone number and hadn't received the invitation at all. Either way, it wasn't looking good for Tristan.

Tristan wanted nothing more than to see Ria again, at least one more time. He wanted to apologize for what a jerk he'd been when she told him about the new job. He wanted to tell her that he loved her. He wanted to explain that he couldn't live without her — and that he didn't want to try. He wanted to ask her to come home. But if Ria didn't come to the party, he wouldn't be able to say any of that.

Tristan couldn't explain to the triplets what had happened between him and Ria. So, instead of trying, he gave the answer he'd given each time they'd asked before.

"I don't know. But I'll be there. Your friends will be there. And cake and presents will be there!"

The triplets smiled, but their reaction wasn't anywhere close to the joyous cheers they'd given at the prospect of presents, friends, and cake just a few seconds before. Tristan opened his arms wide, and the kids climbed into them to snuggle against his chest.

"I know you miss Ria," he told them. The kids nodded. "I miss her, too. But I'm right here, and I love you very much."

"Okay," the triplets chorused.

"Now, let's get up, get dressed, and get downstairs for breakfast!"

Tristan served the kids a balanced breakfast of toast, eggs, and fruit in hopes of

counteracting the rush of sugar they'd have later in the day. Once they'd eaten, he set them up in the living room with their favorite show and started blowing up balloons, hanging streamers, and setting up party games in the yard. He'd done a lot of the prep work in previous days, but there was still a little to do this morning.

Soon, the house looked great, the kids were dressed in their special birthday outfits, and the food had arrived. Right on time, the doorbell rang. Immediately, Tristan sat up a little straighter. Was it Ria? He got up from the kitchen table, where he'd been sitting and coloring with the kids, and went to answer.

On the other side of the door stood two twin toddlers from the triplets' preschool, along with their parents. The twin girls were dressed in frilly party dresses to match Jasmine's, and the parents held wrapped gifts and a bottle of soda.

"Welcome!" Tristan smiled, even as his heart sank. "Come on in."

The parents settled on the living room sofa while the kids, too excited to color now, chased each other around the house in an elaborate game of pretend that Tristan couldn't have followed if he tried.

The bell rang again. This time, Tristan was still hopeful, but less so. His heart sank when he saw one of his employees and her young son, but again, he smiled and welcomed them in. Even if Ria didn't come, the triplets' party was shaping up to be something great.

Over the next half hour, more families trickled in, until all the invitees had arrived. There was still no sign of Ria, but Tristan refused to let his sadness ruin the triplets' special day.

"Everyone out to the yard!" he said. The kids ran, screaming with joy, out the back door, while the parents followed at a more sedate pace. Once outside, they ran back

and forth between the bouncy house Tristan had rented for the occasion, the triplets' new swing set (which was one of their birthday gifts), and the mini wading pools full of water and bubbles. The parents took seats on the porch or played with the kids.

Meanwhile, Tristan brought out the food. The parents served themselves, but the kids were happier to just run past the table and grab a handful of carrot sticks, a few potato chips, or a small sandwich as they went. For now, Tristan was happy to let them play, though he'd make sure the triplets ate something more substantial before he brought out the cake.

Hands on hips, he surveyed the yard. The parents were talking happily, and the kids seemed to be having the time of their lives. The yard looked suitably festive with bouquets of colorful balloons and rows of streamers on the fence and trees. The bounce house was a particular hit — the kids couldn't get enough of it.

“Daddy.”

Tristan looked down to see Jamie standing beside him. “Hey, kiddo.” Slowly but surely, the kids had started calling him “Daddy.” Instead of feeling strange, the term was very welcome.

“No Ria?” Jamie stuck out his lip.

“No, honey, but look at all your friends.” Tristan ruffled his son’s hair. “Are you going to show me some cool superhero moves in the bouncy castle?”

“Yeah!” Jamie’s eyes lit up, and he gave Tristan’s leg a hug. Then he ran off to rejoin the party, calling, “Daddy, you watch?”

“I’m watching,” Tristan called back with a wave.

That’s when he heard it. A familiar giggle rang out from behind him, and he turned slowly, his heart already racing. Ria stood on the back porch, dressed in a pretty dark green sundress and holding a stack of three identically sized but differently wrapped gifts. Her red curls were pulled back in a clip at the top, with a few strands free to frame her face. Her freckles seemed a little more pronounced, and her green eyes were sparkling, but otherwise, she looked the same as the last time Tristan had seen her, more than a month ago.

“You came,” he said, surprise, relief, and joy warring within his chest.

“I did.” She looked over one shoulder at the house then back at Tristan. “I just let

myself in. I hope that was okay. When I rang the bell, no one answered, so I thought you might be back here.”

“Yes, of course, that’s more than okay.” Tristan was almost bursting with all the things he wanted to say to Ria. He wanted to pull her off to a quiet corner so they could finally talk, but he was also running the triplets’ party. He couldn’t just disappear.

“You look so comfortable amidst the chaos.” Ria waved a hand around the playing kids and chatting parents. “Just a few months ago, you would have been a fish out of water.”

“I do feel comfortable.” Tristan smiled. “It’s thanks to you. Listen, Ria, could we?—”

Just then, Jacob came tearing across the grass, his face lit up in a smile, and a balloon trailing from a string clasped in his small fist.

“Ria here! Ria here!”

Ria scooped the little boy into her arms and spun him around. “Hi, Jacob. I missed you so much.”

“Miss you.” He hugged her tightly. “Miss you.”

The commotion drew Jasmine and Jamie’s attention, as both kids practically flew out of the bounce house and across the garden to Ria. She lifted them up, too, until she was balancing all three triplets in her arms. The kids’ faces were shining — and so was Ria’s. She hugged them close, kissed their dark hair, then carefully set them down.

“You guys have a great party here.”

“Got three cakes,” Jasmine said, holding up three tiny fingers. “Many bawoons. Presents. Hundred kids!”

“That’s amazing!” Ria squeezed her shoulder. “Now, go play with your friends.”

“You no go?” Jamie asked suspiciously.

“I won’t go.” Ria smiled down at him, though Tristan was almost certain he heard an unspoken “yet” at the end of the sentence. Reassured, the kids ran off to play with their friends again. Ria and Tristan were alone. She turned to him.

“Were you saying something?”

“Yes, but it can wait. There might be a little too much going on right now for us to talk. Just promise you won’t leave right after the party, okay?”

Ria nodded. “Okay.” Her expression was solemn.

Tristan wanted to reach out to her and take her hand. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t just want her to stay after the party, but to stay for a very long time.

“Hey, Tristan.” One of the dads was walking over to him, holding his young son in his arms. “Sorry to disturb you, but Mike needs to use the bathroom. Could you point us in the right direction?”

At exactly the same moment, Jacob ran over.

“Cake?”

Ria and Tristan exchanged a look as another feeling of déjà vu rolled over Tristan. They’d tag-teamed hundreds of similar situations before when one triplet needed

something, and another needed something else. Falling easily back into well-oiled patterns, Tristan turned to the dad.

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“Sure thing. Let me show you where it is.”

Simultaneously, Ria bent down to Jacob’s height. “It isn’t quite time for cake yet, but how about I get you a sandwich?”

As Tristan led the dad and son into the house, he sent one last glance back at Ria, who was now holding Jacob’s hand as she led him to the refreshments table. She looked up, as if sensing that he was watching her, and her lips lifted into a hesitant smile. The party chaos around them seemed to fade, until it was just the two of them looking at each other. Then Ria turned her attention back to Jacob. Tristan focused his own attention on the father and son.

The rest of the day flew by in a whirl of birthday chaos. The kids played in the yard until they were tired then feasted on lunch and cake. Next came presents; each of the triplets got what they had wanted, as well as some toys, board games, and candy from their friends. Throughout the party, Tristan kept looking back and forth between Ria, Jasmine, Jacob, and Jamie. He couldn’t believe his luck.

This time last year, he had been alone — and he’d thought he was happy. His days had been filled with work, following the latest trends in health and wellness, and more work. He’d rarely, if ever, imagined having children or a partner. Now, he had three beautiful kids who he loved more than life itself and a woman he loved — even if things were still tenuous between them. As the kids squealed with joy over their art supplies (for Jacob), princess dresses (for Jasmine), and robotic toy squirrel (for Jamie), Tristan realized that he’d never receive a better gift than getting to see these three grow up.

Except, perhaps, for Ria. With her bright-red hair and beautiful smile, she stood out among the party guests like she'd been kissed by sunshine. Tristan could hardly believe she was here — and she didn't seem angry, either, even though she had a right to be. As she handed out cake and bounced in the bounce house with the triplets and held Jacob in her lap while opening gifts, Tristan couldn't help marveling at how wonderful she really was.

Even better were the brief moments alone the two of them shared. At one point, they went into the kitchen together to carry out the cakes. Ria looked around the kitchen with a grin before turning to Tristan.

“I have to ask. Do these cakes have spirulina or fish oil or something in them?”

“I swear they don't.” Tristan grinned back. “I try to make sure the triplets eat healthy food, but part of the joy of childhood is having a special, spirulina-free cake on a birthday.”

Ria nodded approvingly. “Good. I just had to check.”

For a moment, it felt like they had their old banter back — especially when Ria accidentally knocked a stack of napkins off the table with her elbow while she was picking up Jamie's cake. They smiled at each other, but then she slipped out of the kitchen with the cake in her hand, and the moment was broken.

The whole day, Tristan reminded himself that when the guests left, he would have time to talk to Ria. When the time came, though, he realized his mistake. The triplets were still hopped up on sugar and filled with joy over their new gifts, Ria's return, and their wonderful party. So, instead of getting a quiet moment with Ria, the pair spent the afternoon playing games with the triplets to wear them out, then fed them an early dinner.

Tristan was grateful that Ria never made any overtures about leaving, instead seeming content to spend time with the kids all day. By the time dinner was on the table, the sugar was starting to wear off and the kids yawned as their eyes drooped. Ria and Tristan carried the kids upstairs to wash their faces, brush their teeth, and put on pajamas before tucking them into bed. As they slipped out of the room, where the triplets were already sound asleep, Tristan felt another wave of *déjà vu*. They'd put the kids to bed together dozens of times before. For a moment, it felt as though Ria still lived here and nothing had changed.

"That was a great day," Ria said, sending Tristan a quick smile. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for coming. And thank you for staying until bedtime. The triplets loved seeing you again." And so did I. Yet the words Tristan had been wanting to say to Ria for weeks stuck in his throat.

"It was wonderful to see them, too. I miss them so much." Ria wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I feel like they grew, even though I was only gone for a few weeks."

"I think they did." Tristan grinned. "And they're talking more and more every day. So much of their success is thanks to you, you know."

"No." Ria shook her head. "Not at all. You're their dad, Tristan, and it's clear that having you as a dad has been wonderful for them. They seem happy and well-adjusted."

"I try to make sure they are. Sometimes they ask about their mom, and we go to visit her now and then and talk about her plenty, but mostly they just seem... happy." Tristan hesitated. "How's your new job?"

He didn't want to make small talk with Ria. He wanted to kiss her thoroughly and tell her how he felt. Yet now that the moment had finally come, he was nervous. What if Ria didn't feel the same way? What if she'd really just come back to see the triplets again?

"It's going well. LA is a great place to be." Ria smiled, though it looked a little forced, then glanced at her phone. "Listen, it's getting late. I should go. It... it was nice to see you again."

In that moment, Tristan knew that this was his chance — his only chance. If he didn't tell Ria how he felt now, he might never be able to. His nerves slipped away as he shook his head.

"Not yet, Ria. Please, join me for dinner. After that, I can call a cab to take you wherever you need to go."

"Oh." Ria hesitated. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

She bit her lip, her eyes skating away from Tristan's. "I just... I just don't think it would be."

Everything came down to this moment. Tristan reached out, slowly, and took Ria's hand in his own. Her fingers threaded between his as their eyes met.

"Just stay for dinner," Tristan said.

Slowly, Ria nodded. "All right. I can only stay for a little while, though."

"I understand." But even that felt like a win. Tristan squeezed her hand once before

letting go. “Come on.”

Together, they walked down the stairs towards the kitchen where they'd shared so many meals. Tristan's heart beat a quick rhythm in his chest. Once again, he mentally replayed Jamie's words. He just needed to speak from his heart. Everything else would fall into place... if Ria felt the same way as he did.

CHAPTER21

RIA

What are you doing?The question replayed in Ria's mind with every footfall as she followed Tristan towards the kitchen. She'd been firm with herself when she'd decided to come to the party. She was here for the triplets, nothing else. She would stay for the party and perhaps a little longer, but then she would go. She couldn't hesitate. She couldn't let herself be drawn in by this beautiful little family.

Yet now, she had agreed to join Tristan for dinner. It was a mistake — clearly. For Tristan, dinner was just dinner, but for Ria, it was yet another glimpse into the life she'd had to leave behind. Seeing him and the triplets today had been difficult enough. Ria had enjoyed the party and her afternoon with the kids and Tristan more than she could say. Yet each smile, each piece of cake, each toddler hug, and each glance she exchanged with Tristan, had been tinged with the knowledge that this was just temporary. At the end of the day, she'd have to leave all of it behind again.

"I may have made a mistake," Tristan said, and Ria blinked as she flew back into the present moment. What did he mean by a mistake? Could he possibly be referring to the way they'd ended things a month ago? Her heart began to race — until she saw that he was looking in the refrigerator. This must be a culinary mistake.

“Oh?”

“I didn’t know if you would come, so I didn’t prepare anything for dinner. We have toddler snacks or leftovers from their dinner.” He made a face. “Groceries are coming tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe it’s a sign that I should just head out.” Ria smiled, though her heart had begun to ache again. “After all, I didn’t tell you I was coming — I don’t want to be an intrusive guest.”

“You aren’t.” Tristan closed the fridge and stepped closer. “Let’s order something.”

“Are you sure?” This was Ria’s mistake. She should leave now — she should have left right when the triplets went to bed. Or, better yet, she should have left when the other party guests did.

“I’m sure. Come, sit. How about that Chinese place?”

“All right.” Ria crossed to the table and gripped the back of a chair. They’d ordered from the local Chinese restaurant several times in situations like this. “I’ll have the usual.”

Tristan took a seat across from her, tapped at his phone for a few minutes, then set it face down on the table and looked at her with those intense green eyes.

“Ria...” He smiled slightly. “Please, sit.”

“All right.” Ria pulled back the chair she’d been gripping and slid into it. “But I can really only stay for dinner.”

“When’s your flight back?”

Ria hesitated. She didn't want to admit the truth to Tristan — that she'd booked a last-minute, one-way flight when she'd finally decided a few days ago that she wanted to be here. The Robinsons had given her a week off, so she had a loose plan of seeing some of her siblings and hanging out in San Francisco for a little while before going back down to LA.

"I have a bit of time," she said.

Tristan nodded. He took a sip of water before bringing his gaze back to Ria.

"I made another mistake, too."

"Did you?" It was probably another culinary crisis. Ria wouldn't let herself get her hopes up.

"I shouldn't have asked you to leave so quickly. And I shouldn't have spoken to you so harshly when you told me about your new job. We both knew you were going to leave eventually."

Ria nodded and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry for springing the new job on you. I didn't apply for it, but I was registered with the agency. I'd expressed interest before I took the job with you. And just to be clear, I wasn't announcing that I was going to take the job. I just wanted to know how you felt about it."

Tristan looked down at his hands. "I understand that, now. I know you would never have done anything that wasn't in the kids' best interests. I was the one who made things difficult for them by asking you to leave so quickly."

"Well, it's water under the bridge now." Ria's heart was aching so hard that she was tempted to press her palm to her chest. Finally, she and Tristan could resolve the misunderstanding that had led to such an abrupt and tense end to their time together.

But the resolution had come weeks too late. Perhaps she and Tristan could still be friends, but there was no way she'd ever have the kind of closeness with him that she'd dreamed of.

"That's the thing, Ria." Tristan leaned forward. "I don't want it to be water under the bridge. I don't want to be water under the bridge."

"What do you mean?" Ria bit her lip. One of her hands lifted to tug on a loose curl.

"What I should have told you, back when we talked about your new job, is that I didn't want you to leave. That's why I reacted so poorly — because I wanted you to stay."

"I didn't want to leave, either." Ria folded her hands. "But there was always going to be a time when you didn't need me as a nanny anymore. You're a wonderful father, Tristan. You don't need my help."

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“I know. What I’m saying is...” Tristan sighed. “I’m making a mess of this. Do you know what Jamie said to me the other night?”

Ria shook her head.

“He said that he loved you, and he missed you, and he wanted you to come home.” Tristan met Ria’s eyes, and she felt a spark there, the spark they’d always had between them. “That’s what I want to say, too. I’ve missed you, Ria. I love you. Please, come home.”

Ria’s breath caught in her chest. “I—” But she didn’t know what to say. This was all so completely unexpected that it caught her off guard. She’d hoped that she and Tristan could stay friends, but that had seemed like the best she could hope for. Now, he was saying that he loved her and asking her to come home, and her mind couldn’t process what that meant.

“From the first day I met you,” Tristan continued, his lips quirking in a smile, “you turned my life upside-down. You broke my vase and made fun of my glasses.” Ria winced, and Tristan’s smile widened. “That was a good thing. Especially since you also taught me how to be a father instead of just a CEO. More than that, you taught me how to love. I’ve always held myself apart from people. I never thought I could truly know someone or truly be known. But with you, I realized that love and family might be closer — and much better — than I’d imagined.”

“Tristan...” Ria felt tears prickling at the backs of her eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“Of course I mean that. Ria, you’re amazing.” Tristan shook his head. “I’ve never

met anyone like you. You're funny, smart, clumsy, kind, thoughtful, gorgeous... You're everything. And getting to know you, getting to love you — even if you don't feel the same way — has been an immense privilege."

"You love me." Ria's brow furrowed. "You love me."

"I love you." Tristan nodded. "And I know you might not feel the same way. That's all right. I just thought you should know."

Ria was on her feet in an instant. She barely noticed that she'd knocked one of the triplets' plastic sippy cups off the table as she stood, until Tristan got to his feet and bent to pick it up. He straightened, sippy cup in hand like a peace offering. They were close now, as close as they'd ever been in one of their near-misses. If Ria lifted her hands and leaned forward, they would be touching.

A half dozen times or more, they'd been in exactly this position, and one of them had moved away. This time, neither did. They stood for what felt like both a millisecond and a decade at once, just looking at each other. Ria saw the familiar five o'clock shadow across Tristan's cheeks, and his neat haircut that had become messy over the course of the day. She saw the flecks of gray in his green eyes, and the curve of his surprisingly long eyelashes. She saw the ripples of muscles beneath his T-shirt, and the way he stood at least six inches taller than her. She smelled his peppermint aftershave and a faint scent of toddler shampoo and birthday cake.

"It broke my heart, leaving you," Ria whispered. "I wanted nothing more than to stay."

"Then stay." Tristan's voice was low and deep now, and it made heat pool in Ria's abdomen. "Stay with me." He set the sippy cup on the table, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I don’t know.” Ria wanted to say yes. She wanted to jump into his arms and finally get that kiss she’d been dreaming of for months. But as much as her heart was ready to leap into this, her brain told her to hold back. “I have a new job.”

“Forget your new job.” Tristan’s gaze was intense.

Ria laughed softly. “I’d have to go back and quit.”

“Fine, as long as you come back here.”

“I have an apartment.” Ria’s voice grew softer. She could feel her walls tumbling down as Tristan’s gaze pulled her in like a magnet. He felt like the only person in the world right then.

“Forget your apartment.” His head was tilted now.

“Well, then.” Ria felt like she was poised on the edge of a cliff in a pair of manufactured wings. One step forward, and she’d see if those wings would really hold her, or if she’d crash to the ocean below. “I suppose I could stay.”

A smile spread over Tristan’s face like the sun coming out. Ria felt her wings lift her into the air. “May I kiss you, then?”

Ria answered by lifting onto her toes and bringing her mouth to his. At first, the kiss was soft and gentle. Tristan’s lips caressed hers, sending waves of sensation rushing through her. His hands rested on her waist, as light as feathers, as Ria savored the feeling of finally having him so close. She was flying. The wings held. The ocean stretched far below, sparkling and full of possibilities.

Then Tristan deepened the kiss as his hands slid up Ria’s back and into her hair. They were pressed against each other now, her curves fitting perfectly against his muscular

chest. As if Ria were weightless, Tristan lifted her and set her on the counter. Ria's legs wrapped around him to pull him closer as he pressed kisses to her lips, across her cheek, and down her neck. Every place his lips touched felt warm and tingly. Ria lifted her arms to rest on Tristan's shoulders as she kissed him back.

"Wait."

The moment she spoke, Tristan pulled away. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's perfect." Ria hesitated, savoring the look on Tristan's face and the way it felt to hold each other like this. "But before we continue, I wanted to tell you something."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I love you, too."

And then they were kissing again. It was as though they were pouring all the passion, all the love, and all the attraction they'd both been suppressing for so long into each other. Ria's head spun. The only thing she could think of was that she wanted to be closer. She let out a soft moan as Tristan's hands caressed her back, and his lips caressed hers, sending waves of sensation washing through her.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Tristan and Ria pulled apart.

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“What’s that?” Ria asked, breathless.

“Ignore it.” Tristan leaned in again, but Ria pressed a hand to his chest, giggling.

“I think it’s our food.”

Tristan swore under his breath then gently lifted Ria down from the counter. “I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared down the hallway. Moments later, he reappeared with a paper takeout bag in his hand. He set it on the counter before reaching for Ria again, and they fell into each other.

After that, there were no interruptions. The doorbell didn’t ring, the phone didn’t chirp, and the triplets didn’t wake. Ria felt like this time had been carved for them, a small sliver of their lives when they could simply be together. They kissed, they talked, they made love, and they ate their dinner in bed from paper takeout boxes, their legs still intertwined.

“I never imagined today ending like this,” Ria said as she pinched a spear of broccoli between her wooden chopsticks.

“I hoped it might,” Tristan admitted. “But I was so glad to see you again this morning, I barely thought this far ahead.”

Ria leaned against his shoulder. “Thank goodness I decided to come.”

“Indeed.” Tristan kissed her cheek. “I love you, Ria.”

“I love you, too, Tristan.”

In that moment, everything felt perfect. All the misunderstandings and near-misses felt worth it, because they led to this moment. Ria wanted to stay here forever, with Tristan. She wanted to discover more about him, travel with him, and share many more moments together. She wanted to watch the triplets grow up.

And now, she could. They ate together, talking and laughing about everything and nothing, as the night slipped by and dawn approached. Finally, Ria belonged.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: RIA

“Happy Birthday to you,” Ria sang, smiling down at the triplets all snuggled in their beds. “Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday, dear Jacob-Jamie-Jasmine, Happy Birthday to you!”

“Again, again!” the triplets chorused. Ria chuckled.

“Sorry, guys, but your birthday is over for now. It’s time to sleep.”

“Aw.” Three little faces fell.

“But don’t worry,” Ria continued. “I think being four years old will be amazing.”

“Yeah.” Jasmine grinned. “I like being four.”

“Ireallylike being four!” Jacob put in.

“I like squirrels,” Jamie added with a yawn.

Ria smiled at all of them, blew kisses, then slipped out of the room. They’d probably chat a little more, as they often did, but that was all right. It was their birthday, after all.

Tristan was waiting downstairs in the kitchen with tacos on the table. When he spotted Ria, he poured her a glass of lemonade and stood to pull her chair out for her.

“Thank you.” Ria sank into the seat across from him. “So, their birthday is over. Again.”

“Can you believe that they’re four?” Tristan shook his head in wonder. “It feels like just yesterday that they turned three.”

“It feels a bit longer than that. After all, it’s been a whole year that I’ve been living here now.” Ria smiled. “A whole year that we’ve been in love.”

Tristan took her hand across the table. “It’s been a good year, hasn’t it?”

“The very best.”

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“Listen.” Tristan squeezed her hand. “I know how hard you’ve been working — how hard we’ve both been working — to make the triplets’ birthday a success. So, I thought I’d give you a little present, too.”

“Really?” Ria couldn’t hold back her smile. “What is it?”

Tristan slid an envelope across the table to her. Curious, Ria let go of his hand and slit open the envelope. Inside was a printed itinerary for what looked like a trip to a nearby coastal island known for its gorgeous views and relaxed atmosphere.

“Are we taking the kids to Angel Island?” Ria asked. They’d gone on a few trips with the kids over the last year, including an amazing vacation to Hawaii over Christmas. Ria’s dream of seeing the Big Island had finally come true, and it had been even better than she’d imagined. They’d snorkeled, hiked, and lounged poolside while the triplets splashed in the shallow kiddie pool in front of the resort. Ria was looking forward to another such trip.

“Not quite.” Tristan smiled. “I asked Nora to come babysit for the weekend, and she agreed right away. Apparently, she feels like you’ve always given her everything you could, and she wants to return the favor. Anyway, it’ll be just the two of us on a romantic island getaway.”

“Oh, Tristan.” Ria beamed. “I can’t wait. I love the kids, but it’ll be nice to get some time for just the two of us.”

“Definitely.” Tristan leaned across the table to give her a quick kiss. “We leave in two weeks.”

“Wonderful.” Ria reached for a taco. “I feel like we’ve barely had any time to ourselves in the last year.”

“Me neither. Even though we’ve had our moments.” Tristan winked, and Ria blushed.

It had been a wonderful year, even though they’d been busy. Ria had fallen more and more in love with Tristan every day. He was attentive, thoughtful, and very sexy. And now that Ria was living with him, they’d gone through the house together, weeding out ugly vases and pretentiously cool items Tristan had bought. The house looked, and felt, more and more like a home.

The days were spent with the kids. Tristan still worked most of the week, but he always came home in time for dinner and bedtime. The triplets went to preschool a few days a week, during which time Ria had begun taking college courses again. She was a year or so away from getting her teaching certificate, as she’d always hoped to. She’d given her notice to the Robinsons, who’d graciously let her out of her employment immediately and wished her well in her future with Tristan. Ria’s next job would be as a teacher.

Evenings were spent with just the two of them, eating dinner together, snuggling on the couch, talking late into the night, and exploring their connection. It was everything Ria had dreamed of and more.

Of course, not everything had been easy. Some adjustments had been needed as they’d grown used to living together as a couple, instead of as a dad and a nanny. But overall, things had gone more smoothly than Ria could have dared hope.

Ria’s excitement for the Angel Island getaway carried her through the next two weeks so quickly she felt like she was walking on air. She was so distracted by thoughts of a weekend with just her and Tristan that she barely noticed she was more tired than normal. And when she came down with a bout of stomach flu right before

they were supposed to leave, she was very disappointed.

“Do we need to cancel?” Tristan asked when he found Ria in the kitchen drinking ginger tea and looking very pale the morning before they were supposed to leave.

“No, let’s go,” Ria insisted. “It’ll be fun, and I’m sure the sea air will make me feel better soon.”

“All right.” Tristan gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Do you need help with the triplets today?”

“No, it’s all right.” Ria sipped her tea. “They’re off to preschool in an hour or so. I’ll be fine.”

She felt better after eating a little breakfast and was able to walk the kids to school the long way, through the park. The kids laughed and chased each other around as Ria followed with a smile. After she dropped them off at preschool, she decided to swing by the grocery store to get a few things. It was only when she passed the section of pregnancy tests that she put two and two together. She’d been tired, she’d been sick, and her period was late. Her hands shaking slightly, she added a pregnancy test to her cart and headed to the checkout.

* * *

“It’s a beautiful day!” Tristan called as the ferry plowed across the cerulean waves towards Angel Island. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay!” Ria called back. She was still a little nauseated, but eating candied ginger seemed to take the edge off, and she was enjoying the trip. The skies were blue, the water sparkled, and they’d spotted a school of dolphins just off the coast that had tried to race the boat. “And I think we’re almost there!”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the ferry docked at Angel Island. Tristan held out his arm to Ria as they joined the throng of disembarking passengers. Ria took deep breaths of fresh, salty air as she savored the open expanse of blue sky above and her hand on Tristan's arm. It was hard to believe that this was her life. She had a man she loved and children she adored. And she got to be here today, on this beautiful island with Tristan by her side.

"You look happy."

"I am happy." She grinned at Tristan. "It's such a beautiful day. Thank you so much for doing this."

"Anytime. We should get away more often, just the two of us."

"We should. Although I have to admit that I keep wondering how the kids are doing on their own."

"Me too." They shared a smile. "I'm sure they're fine, though. Your sister is an amazing babysitter, and the kids love her."

"She is." Ria's thoughts drifted away from the island and back to the pregnancy test she'd taken that morning. Perhaps the result shouldn't have been a surprise, but it had been. She needed to talk to Tristan, but she was hesitant to add potential complications to a beautiful weekend, the first they'd had alone in quite some time. She could talk to Tristan when they were back in San Francisco, surely.

They dropped their bags off at the cute little bed-and-breakfast Tristan had booked for them. After they both freshened up, Tristan suggested a walk along the beach, and Ria agreed without hesitation. Hand in hand, they strolled along the sand, the waves washing over their bare feet.

“Ria.”

Ria looked up at Tristan. His carefree smile had grown serious.

“Yes? Is everything all right?”

“More than all right.” He squeezed her hand. “I did want to talk to you, though.”

“All right.” Ria’s heart began to race, and Tristan squeezed her hand again.

“This last year and a bit, with you by my side, has been the best of my life. I think people would laugh if I admitted this, but I’d rather clean the kitchen or wrangle tantrums with you than do anything with anyone else. I feel like I’ve grown to love you more with each day that’s gone by.” Tristan smiled at her, his green eyes crinkling.

“That’s sweet.” Ria nudged him with her shoulder. “Do you still love me more each day, even though I’ve broken at least a dozen cups and one of your windows?”

Tristan chuckled. “I think those things made me love you more. Anyway, you have to admit that it took skill to break that window.”

“Yep. I had to run into the bookshelf at just the right angle so that it would fall into the window.” They both chuckled at the memory. Luckily, the kids had been out of the house at the time — they’d been rearranging the playroom as a surprise. While moving the furniture, one thing had led to another until the window was in pieces.

“I wasn’t even surprised, though. After the vase, I was ready for anything.” Tristan stopped in front of Ria, bringing them both to a stop, and took her other hand in his. “But seriously, Ria, you’ve made every part of my life better. I’m a better father because of you, of course, but I’m also a better man because of you. I love you more than I can put into words.”

Ria smiled up at him. “I love you, too.” Then her mouth dropped open as Tristan slowly sank onto one knee.

“Ria Eliana Hampton,” he said, his gaze never leaving hers. “I never want to spend another day without you. I want you in my home, in my bed, and in my life, always. I want to make our decisions together. I want to raise our kids together. I want to grow old by your side. I want to show you every day, every hour, every minute, how much you mean to me. Ria, will you marry me?” In his hand, a beautiful diamond ring glittered in an ornate velvet box.

Ria wanted nothing more than to fall into Tristan’s arms with an enthusiastic “yes!” But she couldn’t. She took a deep breath.

“Tristan, there’s something I should tell you.”

“Oh.” Tristan looked alarmed. “Should I get up?”

“No, no. I just...” Ria let go of one of his hands so that she could press a palm to her stomach. “Tristan, I’m pregnant. I know you never planned to be a father, and the triplets were quite a surprise, and this is another surprise, but?”

But Tristan was already on his feet, sweeping Ria into his arms. “Oh, Ria, this is the best news!” He kissed her, lightly, then dropped to his knees again so he could kiss her stomach.

“Really?”

“Of course. I love you. I love the triplets. I already love this baby — although it might be more convenient if it’s just one baby.”

Ria chuckled. “I can’t make any promises.”

Tristan stood again, lifted her into his arms, and spun her around. Then he set her down. “Being a parent with you has been one of the best experiences of my life. OfcourseI’m happy that we get to keep doing that.”

“Me too.” They smiled at each other for a long moment. Then Ria’s eyes widened. “Oh! And yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, if you still want to marry me, there’s nothing I want more than to marry you.”

“You do?” Tristan beamed. The ring reappeared, and he carefully slid it onto her finger. “Then let’s get married. And let’s become parents all over again! I’m ready for anything — as long as you’re with me.”

“Always.” Ria stretched onto her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Tristan’s lips. He kissed her back, thoroughly, until Ria’s knees were weak. In that moment, everything felt absolutely perfect. The two of them stood on the white-sand beach, beside the crashing cerulean waves, beneath an azure-blue sky, in each other’s arms. They were getting married. They were parents to the triplets. They were having another baby.

“Well, future Mrs. West,” Tristan said, “shall we go back to the bed-and-breakfast?”

“Let’s go.” Hand in hand, they walked back the way they’d come, already talking about their wedding, about baby names, and about the future. Ria’s heart was so, so full. Everything was as it was meant to be, and the future seemed as wide and as bright as the sparkling, endless ocean beside them.

The End