



The Nanny Contract (Westbrook #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: CASEY:

Logan Westbrook is everything I should avoid: broody, straight, and my boss.

Becoming a live-in nanny for a family worth six hundred million dollars didn't faze me—until I met Logan.

The pensive, overworked dad is barely holding it together, his teenage son is still grieving, and the Mercers—his late wife's parents—are trying to take custody of Henry, claiming Logan's demanding career makes him an unfit father.

As the nanny, I'm caught in the crossfire, shielding Henry while helping Logan fight the biggest battle of his life.

Through it all, I'm trying to keep my feelings for Logan strictly professional. But the more time I spend by his side, the harder it is to remember my place—or what's at stake if I let myself fall.

LOGAN:

Being a single dad was never part of the plan.

After losing my wife, it's just been me and Henry, balancing late-night surgeries with teenaged mood swings. When my mother Betsy insists on hiring a live-in nanny, I write it off as another one of her meddling whims.

Then Casey Grant shows up.

He's sharp, funny, and connects with Henry in a way I never could. Casey is exactly what my son needs—and the kind of distraction I can't afford. Especially now that my late wife's parents are challenging me for Henry, trying to tear apart the only family we have left.

But the more time I spend around Casey, the harder it is to ignore what he stirs in me. I've always thought of myself as straight, but Casey has me questioning everything. He's made me feel things I

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Chapter 1

Casey

The gate at Westbrook Meadows opened like a portal to another world.

I'd made sure to be right on time, ready to interview for a nanny position that could change my life.

The Westbrook family were legends among Charleston's elite. They were often featured in the local tabloids and whispered about in the pews of historic churches. Stories about their lives were too wild to believe but too ostentatious to ignore. The Westbrooks were more than just a family—they were an entity whose names had practically been etched into the city's cobblestone streets.

By some stroke of luck, it appeared I was about to step into their lives as the new nanny.

And into more chaos than I could have ever imagined.

That was, if I could land the job.

My financial situation had become bleak. After my previous employer's son went off to college, they no longer needed my services.

Three months.

No job.

Almost broke.

Today wasn't just important; I needed it to be my lucky day.

As I drove down the winding driveway, my heart skipped a beat. I realized I was filled with a little more anxiety than I'd originally anticipated. The position of live-in nanny had recently become available and, much to my surprise Betsy Westbrook, the matriarch of the family, had reached out to me.

Hopefully today I'd finally meet the mysterious Logan Westbrook, my boss, if hired. Logan, a thirty-six-year-old cardiac surgeon, was a single father to Henry, his fifteen-year-old son. From what I'd read in the society gossip tabloids, Logan's wife Gloria had passed away two years ago.

Maybe, if hired, I could be a positive presence in their lives.

Entering Westbrook Meadows, I was impressed if not a bit bewildered by the property.

Over five-hundred acres, the estate was magnificent.

The grounds impressed with massive oak trees dripping with Spanish moss, picket fences, and vast, open meadows. It was the type of place where I could spend hours doing everything and nothing all at once. Westbrook Meadows had a magical, enchanting atmosphere that both beckoned and intrigued. To live here would be an absolute dream.

Before long, Betsy's eccentric choices caught my eye. First, I noticed a pond with a large ten-foot-tall gold statue of a duck standing in the middle.

How charming , I thought.

During my phone interview with Betsy the previous day, she had referred to it as her reflecting pond and told me that I'd simply love it.

Up next, I noticed the sculpture garden with trimmed hedges and rose bushes. Inside I saw oversized, surreal forms, all varying objects, and sizes. There was a twelve-foot-tall pair of ballet slippers and a giant teacup.

It was as if I had stepped into Alice in Wonderland with a hint of southern charm.

The dream—or nightmare—continued as my car meandered down the private road. Just outside one of the gardens was an army of gnomes, at least fifty in number. They each had hand-painted custom outfits; some held lanterns.

Finally, the house came into view.

My jaw dropped as I contemplated the possibility that I might live here.

The French Provincial mansion was bigger than any home I'd ever seen in my life. It more closely resembled a castle than a mere house. The manor exuded a stately appearance with creamy stucco walls and subtle stone accents.

Before I could grasp the full enormity of the house, the doors flew open, and out glided the one and only Betsy Westbrook. Her face was instantly recognizable because I'd seen it printed across the local newspapers dozens of times. The Charleston press loved talking about the Westbrooks, and I couldn't help but wonder if the Westbrooks enjoyed the attention.

Part of me was disappointed as I'd wanted to meet her son Logan first, especially considering that I'd be spending the better part of my days with him and his son

Henry.

“Casey!” she shouted, opening her arms and waving me over. “You made it past the gnomes!”

Past the gnomes?

I winced at the sound of my car’s squeaking brakes.

No job, no money, no new brakes for my car.

Embarrassing, especially in front of Betsy.

For a woman as wealthy as her, the sound of squealing brakes was probably foreign.

According to the press, her husband Frank passed away a year ago, bequeathing Betsy a six-hundred-million-dollar fortune. Rumor had it that Frank left a note for Betsy, requesting that she disperse one-hundred-million of the fortune to various family members. Naturally, new Westbrook family members had appeared overnight, coming out of the woodwork and clamoring for a slice of the fortune.

In some ways, I felt bad for Betsy having to constantly deal with sycophants.

Then again, gazing around at her beautiful home and lifestyle, I suspected she was doing just fine.

“Welcome to Westbrook Meadows,” she said, exuding southern charm and grace, as I awkwardly climbed out of my old, beat-up car.

“Don’t worry,” she added, “this place grows on you. Like a fever dream.”

Betsy was a vision of high-society quirkiness. Dressed in a patterned silk caftan, the fabric flowed around her dramatically as she moved, welcoming me to the estate. On her fingers were beautiful rings with different jewels, each like a wearable piece of art. Her hair was pulled up neatly, and she spoke with a slow drawl that immediately made me feel at ease.

“And it looks like Logan is right on time too,” she said with a smile and a knowing tone, pointing behind me. “As usual.”

I turned and saw a black Rolls Royce Phantom winding down the driveway. It was the kind of car that cost ten years of my salary, driven by a sharply dressed chauffeur with a black hat and white gloves. The car rolled to a stop and out jumped Henry wearing baggy jeans and a sweater with holes and various paint stains.

No pretense from this kid, I thought.

Henry breezed past us with a casual hello, headphones covering his ears.

Next, Logan Westbrook stepped out. At first glance, he was clearly the kind of man who could stop a room with his presence alone. Tall and broad shouldered in his custom-tailored suit, he seemed like someone who was accustomed to taking charge of tense situations. He scanned the area as if looking for his next task.

Effortlessly commanding, he carried himself with a quiet intensity that hinted at inner strength and fortitude.

Logan walked over and extended his arm to shake my hand.

“Mr. Grant,” he said, professional from the start. “Thank you for coming in.”

“My pleasure.”

His smile was tight, his tone was measured, and his handshake was firm. “I’m sure my mother has already given you the full welcome?”

I nodded politely.

I had to admit, Logan Westbrook was handsome. His sharp jawline was dusted with a hint of stubble, framing a face that was rugged yet refined, and his dark hair was impeccably neat.

I had expected nothing less from someone with the Westbrook name.

Polished and perfect.

Logan’s eyes were stormy gray with flecks of blue, and I immediately picked up on the contrast between his formality and Betsy’s nonchalance.

Before either of us could say anything else, Logan’s phone rang, stealing his focus.

He answered the call, nodded at the two of us, then walked inside.

I instantly felt Betsy’s hand on my back.

“Don’t worry, darling,” she said. “I know he’s not Mr. Warm and Fuzzy. But give it some time and you’ll see he’s less rigid. I tell him all the time to relax, but he’s too busy saving lives, you know.”

She winked at me, and I already felt like I was in on family secrets.

“Don’t let Logan scare you off,” she said. “He’s all bluster, really. And if my grandson Henry acts up, you just let me know. I’ve raised two Westbrook men. I can handle another!”

I smiled. “I just hope I can make a good first impression during the interview.”

Betsy chuckled. “Oh dear, were you under the misguided impression that Logan makes the hiring decisions around here? Bless your heart.”

She was a firecracker. And my earlier suspicions had been confirmed: Betsy called the shots around here.

She shook her head. “My son doesn’t know what’s good for him half the time. But he’s a good father to Henry. After his wife Gloria passed two years ago, Logan has struggled.”

I nodded. “I’m so sorry.”

“Time heals all,” she said. “My husband Frank passed away a year ago and I think about him every day. We’ve had a lot of loss around here, Casey. But we’re all decidedly ready for a big change.”

“I completely understand.”

Betsy pointed at the house. “Now all we need to do is talk over lunch. Don’t worry, nothing too formal. Just us; you, me, Logan, and Henry. Lunch will be ready soon; meet us in the dining room in half an hour. Go through the front door and down the main hallway—the dining room is the first room on the right. I have a good feeling about you, Casey.”

For the first time in months, I felt confidence coursing through my veins. If I played my cards right, this could be an incredible opportunity for me. Especially since the Westbrooks were offering almost double my previous salary.

I couldn’t say no to that.

Betsy pointed off in the distance toward the gardens. “Westbrook Meadows is the kind of place you need to experience firsthand. Head over to the greenhouse to grab some exotic flowers. When you return, I’ll place them in a vase for a beautiful table setting!”

Whenever Betsy spoke, it felt like a directive rather than a suggestion. I didn’t mind at all. She was very frank, and I admired that.

She grinned at me with a twinkle of mischief in her eyes. “You’ll have to go through the garden maze to get to the greenhouse for the flowers. The maze is a place of whimsy. Wonder. And... the occasional existential crisis.”

What?

“But don’t worry darling!” she added, turning to walk away. “Only two people have ever been lost in there for more than a day. I’m quite sure you’ll fare better.”

Her words caught me off guard and shook my newfound confidence.

Westbrook Meadows was already the kind of place with a forbidding element to it.

I didn’t want to humiliate myself by getting lost in a garden maze.

Then again, I didn’t want to say no to my new boss. Well, hopefully my new boss, if everything went well during the interview.

“Just remember,” she said with a playful smile as she ascended the stairs into her palatial home, “if you hear whispering, it’s probably the wind. Probably.”

A few minutes later, I was firmly planted at the entrance to the infamous garden maze.

My task: to retrieve some unnamed exotic flowers for a table setting.

Perfect , I thought. This is exactly what comes to mind when I think of typical nanny responsibilities.

But Betsy had made herself clear.

So, it was onward for me.

Wandering into the garden maze, I was initially enchanted by its charm. The mysterious hedges loomed far over my head—at least ten feet tall. They were perfectly well kept by what I could only imagine was a small army of gardeners. Light barely filtered through the leaves, casting strange, ominous shadows on the ground, shifting and moving.

Relax. Don't be a scaredy cat. It's just a garden.

Heading into the interior of the garden, Betsy's affinity for peculiarities started to show. Strange statues peeked out from within the foliage—an owl here, a rabbit there, a fox in the distance.

The maze was eerie, with a watchful quality.

I found myself wondering about security cameras, but I didn't see any around the garden. Surely a family as wealthy as the Westbrooks would have cameras all over the place. Everyone in the city of Charleston talked about them—they'd be foolish not to be protected at all times.

A few wrong turns later, I realized I was helplessly lost. Each pathway looked identical to the one I'd taken before, and it felt as if I were walking in circles.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

I had assumed the maze would be simple.

I was wrong.

It had turned into an imposing labyrinth of towering, looming hedges. Each turn brought new eccentric details: statues of flowers, whimsical fountains with trickling water.

Suddenly, Betsy's comments about whispering came rushing back to me.

My hands shook—hell, my entire body shook.

Sunlight occasionally glimmered through the leaves, casting light on stones which were covered in moss under my feet. I'd lost track of time, and I couldn't determine if I'd been inside the maze for five minutes or thirty.

Panic finally set in as I took turn after turn. What little poise I'd retained dissipated rapidly as the sky darkened, making it almost impossible to find my way out. My heart pounded, each thud reminding me that I was lost.

After another wrong turn, I stepped onto a stone that sank under my weight, like a hidden pressure plate.

Suddenly, a terrible, shrill alarm bell rang out. It echoed and reverberated throughout the entire estate and sent shockwaves through my body.

Shit.

I had no idea what I'd done, but I knew one thing for sure: I was definitely not going

to get the job.

There was no way people as cultured as civilized as the Westbrooks would hire me after this. I'd set off the idiot alarm and now someone was going to have to come rescue me.

The alarm was old-fashioned and surprisingly jarring. Anyone in the vicinity could hear that some moron had activated it.

I winced with embarrassment, hoping someone—anyone—might come and lead me to safety.

As if on cue, the sprinklers burst to life. They shot streams of water from every direction, catching me in the crossfire as I frantically tried to dodge them. There was no escape. In just a matter of seconds, I was completely drenched. I stumbled and tried to shield my face, but it was no use.

Before I could compose myself, I heard Betsy's voice from behind.

Spinning around, I saw her standing there, wearing rain boots, and holding an umbrella over her head.

Where the hell did she come from?

She beamed at me.

"Casey, darling!" she exclaimed over the sound of rushing water. "You activated the guest distress system. We built it to help us locate wayward souls!"

Clearly, she was proud of her maze.

She clicked a small remote in her hand and suddenly the alarm stopped.

Silence encompassed us, punctuated by the sound of loud sprinklers pummeling my face.

Betsy, on the other hand, was completely shielded by her nifty umbrella. To my relief, she gestured for me to follow her.

“Don’t worry dear,” she said sweetly. “Consider it a rite of passage.”

I couldn’t help but grin as she maneuvered the two of us out of the maze as if she had done it hundreds of times before.

There, soaking wet and surrounded by wet leaves and roses, I realized that—if I got the job—my time at Westbrook Meadows would be as unpredictable as Betsy herself.

“I think you’ll fit in fine here,” she said, obviously trying to ease my embarrassment.

Now I just needed to figure out how to get along with Logan as swimmingly as his mother. Henry would be a breeze; I could tell that from the start.

We finally emerged from the maze and Betsy gave me a sly smile and a wink.

“Consider this your first lesson at Westbrook Meadows,” she said.

Quite a lesson, I thought.

“This place has a way of testing people,” she added. “You’ll see soon enough.”

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Chapter 2

Logan

Having a new nanny around the house was oddly disorienting. Casey had been around for a couple of days so far and I was trying to get used to his presence.

It was as if the air had subtly shifted at the estate, and I was the only one who'd noticed. In fact, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Casey.

Fixing my tie in the mirror, I glanced out over Westbrook Meadows and took in the morning sunlight. Normally I woke up fairly relaxed, but there was an unease that accompanied me today.

When my mother first mentioned the idea of hiring a nanny a few weeks ago, I'd thought she was joking. But I knew that, realistically, I could no longer place the burden of Henry's care on his grandmother. She needed to live her own life, and she was right that Henry needed more supervision. In a few days he'd turn sixteen and get his first car—along with his first real taste of independence. Since I typically worked seventy to eighty hours a week at the hospital, it was time for something new.

With no regard for my privacy, Betsy had taken it upon herself to place Casey in the guest suite located very close to my own bedroom. When I asked about the detached guest house on the property, she'd politely informed me that it was currently being used to house gnomes while she looked for their permanent home on the grounds.

I hadn't asked any follow-up questions.

Betsy Westbrook ran a tight ship, and I was just along for the ride. After my wife passed, Henry and I had tried to stay in our family home but eventually he'd begged for us to move. My mother welcomed us with open arms, and there was certainly plenty of space.

If only I could get used to the antics.

A sudden, sharp knock at the door jolted me from my thoughts.

Martin opened the door and shuffled in with a gleaming silver tray, presenting a porcelain coffee pot and fine china plates filled with assorted pastries and danishes.

I would call Martin the family butler, but the truth was he was Betsy's butler and catered to her every quirky whim.

"Coffee, sir?" he asked, pouring a cup before I could answer.

"Thank you."

He glanced up at me while pouring. "Your mother has requested your presence at a photoshoot here at the house this morning, sir."

A photoshoot?

Martin shared the information as if it were completely normal. For him, it probably was. Dressed in his perfectly pressed, wrinkle-free black suit and white vest, he donned white gloves for most tasks, including scraping butter onto bread.

"A photoshoot for what?"

He glanced up, trying to mask the unspoken truth that he hadn't dared ask my mother

any further questions. Our eyes met in a silent but profound exchange that spoke volumes. In many ways, I couldn't help but feel bad for the man who had spent years mastering the delicate art of bending to my mother's will. Then again, rumor had it that mother paid Martin almost double the industry standard, so it was impossible to feel too sorry for him.

He poured a drop of cream in my cup. "Jean Pierre Duval, the world-renowned photographer, has been flown in by your mother to photograph important family heirlooms."

World-renowned? That sounds expensive.

Martin placed a warm, flaky croissant covered in a faint glaze of butter on a sparkling clean white plate. As he fussed about the plating, I grabbed my phone and did a quick search for the professional he'd mentioned.

Sure enough, the photographer's fees were astronomical. One celebrity gossip website mentioned that Jean Pierre had been paid a cool six figures to take photos of a movie star's wedding in Paris.

Evidently, perfection didn't come cheap. But at Pierre's prices, the photos had better come with a paparazzi-proof force field.

No doubt he was as bewildered by my mother's request as I was.

Minutes later, I walked downstairs into the sitting room which had been transformed into a chaotic scene. Betsy fussed around a few things while Jean Pierre looked confused and scratched his chin behind his extravagant camera setup.

On the floor in front of the camera was an ancient typewriter, a dented helmet, and a crowned rooster.

“Good morning,” I said, catching Mother’s attention.

She whipped around, her long hair flying around her face. “Logan! You’re just in time.”

“Mother, why did you hire a world-class photographer to document a rooster?”

Her jaw dropped open in feigned surprise. “This isn’t just any rooster, dear. It’s the crowned rooster. Please be seated for your photograph!”

“My photograph?”

“With the rooster,” she said as if it was completely normal. “I’ve loved this rooster since you were a child, and I think it’s important to document heirlooms with sentimental value.”

Jean Pierre looked as perplexed as I felt.

“Mother, I’m not posing with a rooster. That’s absolutely unnecessary.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, don’t be a stiff! It’s our family heritage and it embodies Westbrook pride.”

I was initially resistant, but eventually gave in, reminding myself that there was no point in arguing with her.

More often than not, she won.

I flopped down in the chair as Mother gently placed the rooster on my lap. Unfortunately, it was surprisingly heavy.

As if on cue, Casey and Henry walked into the room mid-shoot, just as the camera started clicking away.

The moment Casey entered the room, it was as if the air shifted. Casey paused in the doorway, taking in the unusual scene with a grin lighting up his face. His eyes flickered over to me as I sat with a fucking rooster on my lap.

Incredibly dignified for a cardiac surgeon.

Casey's laugh was soft and barely audible, but it was enough to send a wave of—something —over me.

I didn't know what the something was yet.

He had a certain way of moving. Casual, but confident at the same time. It was as if he didn't care who was watching. Part of me was just a tiny bit jealous of that. With my career as a surgeon and my position on the board of directors at Pinehurst Medical Center, I was often overly concerned with what others thought of me.

But not Casey.

His shirt was untucked at the hem and his sleeves were rolled up to reveal his forearms. They were somehow... distractingly solid. He was obviously a man who looked after himself. His hair caught flickers of sunlight as it pressed into the oversized sitting room.

As Casey's gaze landed on mine, there was a hint of something in his eyes.

Maybe it was simply amusement.

Or curiosity.

Either way, it caught me off guard and made me swallow harder than I should have.

Out of nowhere, the camera's flash started going off, blinding me so that I could barely see anything. But I definitely saw Henry take out his phone and snap a picture of me in all my absurdity.

Casey and Henry exchanged a look, both their grins barely concealed.

It was good to see that they were getting along.

Martin entered the room quietly, pushing a tray filled with various breakfast foods and more coffee.

"Casey and Henry!" my mother exclaimed, stealing everyone's attention. "Come and stand for the photo," she directed them.

"Nope!" Henry said and quickly darted out of the room.

"Hey!" I called out after Henry. "Do not post that photo online."

Casey smiled, clearly amused. "Oh Betsy, I'm not the most photogenic person. Unless you're looking for a 'before' picture for a makeover show."

Who was Casey kidding? The man was strikingly good looking. The kind of handsome that turned heads and lingered in minds.

Betsy appeared unamused. She gave him a sharp look, one eyebrow arched like a queen issuing a decree.

Casey walked over, almost as if he were gliding. "Don't blame me if this ends up as one of those awkward family photos!"

He moved with an ease that caught me off-guard, surprisingly at home in my mother's orbit where she intimidated most.

Her wealth, her personality, her presence.

And mother loved being the talk of the town. Constant coverage by the gossip rags, the tabloids.

She was having fun, all the while utilizing connections and wealth to propel the family forward. She was a fierce protector, and we were all grateful for her.

As Casey stood next to me, I found myself hoping this would all be over soon. It was a complete humiliation to sit in a chair with a rooster on my lap.

However, when his arm gently draped over my shoulder, his touch was light and steady, catching me off guard.

Instinctively, my body tensed, but I hoped he wouldn't notice. I found the warmth of his hand on my shoulder disarming. It was suddenly impossible to focus.

He leaned down and whispered in my ear so that Betsy couldn't hear. "I guess when the queen commands, we must obey."

His easiness took me by surprise, and the sound of his voice sent a shiver down my back.

I must have appeared frozen to him, but he handled it graciously.

"Relax," he added, his tone laced with comforting humor, "they're not going to engrave this photo on a monument."

I was glad that he mistakenly thought my tension was because of the photo. I knew deep down that it was something else entirely.

The camera clicked. I was suddenly reminded that this moment would be documented forever. And in my mother's hands no less.

I knew I needed to shake it off and maintain my composure.

Having a new presence in the house had obviously thrown me.

The photographer stopped snapping, clearly satisfied with his masterpiece.

Casey stepped back, removing his hand from my shoulder and leaving me surprisingly disappointed.

I risked a look at Casey and noticed his eyes meeting mine. A mischievous smile spread across his lips and lingered for a brief moment. My breath caught in my throat, and I immediately forced myself to look at the rooster and fix its crown.

As if it was a matter of great importance.

I didn't want to look at my mother, but I couldn't help it. I glanced over and caught her watching us. Her smirk was sharper than her navy-blue suit. I braced myself for her to say something. But she said nothing at all.

She merely sipped her tea with an air of triumph.

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Chapter 3

Casey

A fter just two days at Westbrook Meadows, I'd started to find my footing.

Well, as much as anyone could in a place this opulent and bizarre.

I descended the sweeping staircase toward the kitchen, hoping to grab a snack for lunch before picking up Henry from school later that day. From the rumors I'd heard around the estate, Henry might be receiving a new car from his grandmother on his birthday the next day.

I knew he'd be thrilled. In my short time as his nanny, he'd been remarkably independent, and a car would mark a new time in his life.

On my way to the kitchen, an unusual scene caught my eye.

Betsy was fussing about the grand sitting room. She had set up the seating in a semi-circle that was centered on an ornate lectern. Betsy noticed me and waved me over.

She was absolutely commanding in her bright green suit and beautiful hat. She moved around the room like a stage director, adjusting vases and fluffing pillows as if she were preparing for a performance.

"Casey!" she exclaimed.

It was as if she was always happy to see me. Her welcoming warmth had made my adjustments to living at Westbrook Meadows easy.

“Big day today,” she said with theatrical flair, her diamond rings catching the light. “The family is about to learn about bequeathments. You’re in for a show.”

That sounds intense , I thought.

I recalled the local headlines about Betsy’s task: distributing one-hundred-million-dollars of her fortune among her family.

I wouldn’t want to be in Betsy’s position, having to determine who gets what. Then again, being in her position would mean a life of unimaginable wealth where money was never a concern.

But that wasn’t my world. I was the nanny, here to do a job.

Still, as I stood there, I couldn’t help but marvel at my surroundings. I soaked in the grandeur of the space, knowing how lucky I was to glimpse this life even temporarily.

I glanced again at the lectern.

This was going to be quite a show.

Before I could envision it, Martin appeared in the room.

“Ma’am, the Mercers are here,” he said. “They’ve requested an audience.”

An audience?

I raised an eyebrow.

This was like living at Buckingham Palace.

Betsy sighed and looked at her feet, her brow furrowed in frustration. She turned and glanced at me.

“The Mercers are Henry’s maternal grandparents,” she said.

Martin nodded stoically. “They’re in the parlor, ma’am. Shall I have them come in?”

Betsy nodded yes and rushed over to whisper while we waited for their arrival.

She pulled out her phone. “I’m going to text Logan to come down right now. I can’t believe they’d show up announced.”

I had no idea what was going on, but I didn’t like it.

Betsy frowned as she typed into her phone. “I have a bad feeling.”

She quickly fired a text to Logan before looking up at me.

“They haven’t been around much since their daughter’s passing,” she declared in what she must have thought was a whisper.

It wasn’t.

Her voice echoed through the cavernous hallways and ricocheted off the antique mirrors.

Glancing nervously at the couple approaching us, my heart sank as I thought about them overhearing. Betsy, of course, was completely and utterly unbothered.

She leaned in closer as if to lower her voice but somehow got even louder.

Her tone was drenched in faux sympathy. “I know grief is hard on them, but that’s no excuse to ignore their own grandson. I feel so bad for Henry, it’s been horrible for him.”

I winced, my internal discomfort at its absolute max, knowing that the Mercers could hear us as they approached. I practically willed Betsy to stop, but she was on a roll.

She adjusted her hat, and her tone was as casual as if she were discussing the dinner menu.

Next, Betsy delivered a classic southern insult. The kind that felt like a velvet-cloaked dagger. “They’re not nearly as attentive as I am.”

I could hear their footsteps as they approached.

Any moment now.

“And let’s be honest,” Betsy added with a polite smile that could melt steel, “they’re absolutely insufferable.”

Suddenly, the Mercers were in the room.

They both gave off a polished, upper-class appearance, but I suspected from first glance that they were nowhere near as wealthy as the Westbrooks. Even the Mercers seemed intimidated by their surroundings, even though they’d probably been here before.

Helen Mercer approached Betsy and gave her an uncomfortable air kiss. “We were in the neighborhood and just wanted to stop by for a visit.”

Neither of the Mercers looked at me. Not even a glance.

I was probably like the furniture to them: taking up space, nothing important.

Suddenly, Logan appeared with Martin in tow. Evidently, Betsy had commanded all the troops to locate Logan and bring him forth posthaste.

Logan cleared his throat, confusion on his face. “Helen? Robert?”

I wasn’t entirely sure, but there appeared to be a hint of animosity in Logan’s expression.

“What can we do for you?” Betsy asked.

“Something to drink?” Helen replied with a haughty grin.

Martin quickly turned to Betsy and apologized for not bringing refreshments. “I’m sorry, ma’am, what can I bring?”

Betsy’s smile was deceptively sweet. “Let’s make it something special, Martin; after all, it’s been so long since we’ve had the pleasure.”

Helen winced.

“Maybe a nice iced-tea,” Betsy added. “Sweet, of course. We wouldn’t want anything bitter, would we, Helen?”

Helen’s grin disappeared and her expression tightened.

Logan smiled, and for some reason I smiled too.

The Mercers were incredibly off-putting.

Helen's lips pressed into a frown. "We've heard that there've been some staff changes around here."

Her gaze finally flickered to me, cold and glaring. Like I was an art exhibit she wasn't impressed by.

"We wanted to make sure that Henry is still living in a stable environment."

It was a dig. I knew it, plain and simple.

I was furious.

Logan didn't miss a single beat. "The environment we're raising Henry in is loving and attentive."

Betsy, naturally, didn't bother with subtlety. "If only you were around more to witness it."

Damn. No sugarcoating from Betsy.

Robert smirked. "That's exactly what we were thinking. As a matter of fact, we'd like to see more of Henry."

Helen cast her awful glare at me again. "We just know how hard it must be for Henry, adjusting to a new presence in the house."

Logan paused and cleared his throat again. "Henry is fine. You both know that I have no problem with you spending time with him."

Helen nodded. “We were actually thinking about more than just spending some time.”

Robert added, “In fact, that’s why we’re here today: we’d love to have Henry?—”

But Helen interrupted. “Robert, no. We’re only here for part one today.”

Betsy stepped forward. “Part one? What the hell is this all about?”

Helen froze, obviously realizing she had let something slip. “We just miss Henry so much.”

Silence filled the air, thick and tense.

It seemed as if everyone was firmly in place, daring anyone else to make the next move.

Robert finally broke the silence. “It’s obviously a bad time. Maybe we could stop by this weekend for a proper visit?”

Logan hesitated, visibly grappling.

It was apparent that this was a difficult decision for him. If it were me, I’d be furious that the Mercers had shown up in the middle of the day and made things uncomfortable. Betsy turned and looked at Logan, a rare moment of deference from someone of her stature. It was almost weird—the queen stepping aside. But Henry was Logan’s son, and Logan alone could make this decision.

Logan nodded toward the Mercers. “As I said, I have no problem with you both visiting Henry. Give me a call later and we’ll schedule a time.”

Everything inside of me wanted to believe that was the end of it. But something still felt off.

It was clear to every single person in the room: this was far from over.

An hour later, I stood by and watched in awe as various Westbrook family members trickled into the grand room to learn of their potential fate in regard to the money.

They all looked absolutely eager—or maybe even desperate—to clamor for a slice of the estate.

I, on the other hand, felt nothing but anxiety over the Mercers' visit earlier in the day.

The encounter had left me shaken and a little upset. The idea of someone taking Henry away from Logan was horrifying to me, so I could only imagine that Logan was probably furious.

After the conversation, Logan had escaped outside to talk with Henry. I had no idea how much Logan planned to reveal to his son about his conversation with the Mercers earlier in the day.

Now, as I watched family members sit around Betsy's lectern, I tried to focus on the task at hand: providing care for Henry.

Betsy had hinted at an upcoming birthday surprise for him and told me to be prepared to assist.

Finally, Logan entered the room, looking tense as he adjusted his collar with obvious discomfort.

Henry had gone off to do his own thing around the property.

I took a seat near the back of the room, eager to watch the proceedings.

Once everyone was seated, Betsy stepped up to the lectern.

She lifted a crystal glass and cleared her throat dramatically. “Thank you all for joining me today.”

Silence fell across the other family members.

Obviously, when Betsy spoke, everyone listened, their eyes filled with anticipation about what might come next. There were over twenty people in the room, and I had no idea who they were.

Except for the mid-forties woman sitting in the front row, whom I’d been told was named Veronica. She was Logan’s cousin and, evidently, the black sheep of the family. From what I’d heard so far, Veronica was a person who constantly attempted to manipulate the family for financial gain. She’d taken money from Betsy for failed business ventures, and possibly even leaked a bad story to the press for a quick payday.

“As you know,” Betsy continued, “I am nearing my final decisions about the Westbrook estate, but before I finalize anything, I feel that you each should demonstrate your commitment to our family’s legacy.”

Silence lingered in the air as light filtered through the windows and onto the hushed faces of the Westbrook family.

Betsy’s eyes sparkled as she said, “That’s why I’ve created the Westbrook Legacy Challenges. Each of you will be given a Legacy Challenge—a task that, when completed, will show that you’re truly committed to this family.”

I glanced over at Logan and noticed that he was the only one who didn't look nervous. In fact, he had a big grin on his face.

Then again, maybe it was because he was already a successful man in his own right. A quick internet search a few days prior had clued me in to the fact that the average cardiac surgeon earns about three to five-hundred-thousand-dollars a year, so I figured Logan wasn't too concerned with money.

Still... it was hard to be sure. After all, one-hundred-million was nothing to sneeze at, even for a successful doctor.

"These challenges," Betsy continued, "are designed to test your creativity and patience. They're also designed to see if you can uphold the spirit of our family."

Henry suddenly walked into the room.

"Ah, Henry!" Betsy exclaimed. "Just in time."

She always seemed absolutely thrilled to see her grandson. Whenever he walked into a room, she beamed from ear to ear. The way she spoke to him was completely different from the way she spoke to anyone else, except maybe Logan.

There was an endearing element of love, compassion, and strict guidance to which Henry seemed to respond well.

Henry and Logan each sat in a chair, looking toward Betsy.

"For Logan and Henry, I've created the Heart of the Family challenge."

"The what?" Henry asked, a befuddled expression on his face.

“Let me explain,” she added, almost scolding him. “Here at Westbrook Meadows there’s a garden called the Heart of the Family. Over the years, it has become neglected, overgrown, and thoroughly unused. I’d like for you both to fix that.”

“Fix what?” Logan asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Restore it,” she answered. “Bring it back to pulsating vitality. Clear out the overgrown shrubs. Tear out the weeds. Clear the old pathways of brick and replace them with new. Replant each of the garden beds.”

“Pathways?” Logan asked. “How big is this garden?”

“Only three acres,” Betsy replied, as if it were nothing at all.

“Mother,” Logan said. “I have less than zero experience with gardening. An acre alone is larger than a high school football field. You think I’m capable of restoring a garden the size of three football fields?”

“No,” Betsy said, matter-of-factly. “But together with Henry, I know you’re capable of it. Besides, I’ve lined up a professional horticulturist to help plan. You just need to execute.”

Oh good , I thought. At least they’ll have help from a professional.

Then again, I expected nothing less from a woman as wealthy as Betsy. After all, she probably wanted the garden to be stunning for all the galas and soirees she was known for hosting.

“Additionally,” she said, “I’d like for you both to add personal touches to the garden. Incorporate elements that’ll reflect both your personalities. At the center of the garden, I’d like there to be a family tree sculpture. A striking iron tree

sculpture—each iron branch adorned with a plaque or ornament for each family member. Even Veronica.”

“Hey!” Veronica exclaimed.

Betsy frowned at her. “Veronica, dear, I’m only teasing,” she said with fake sincerity. “Your name will, of course, go on the smallest branch. I imagine somewhere near the bottom. Perhaps by the roots. Symbolic, really.”

Muffled laughter filled the room from the other family members as Veronica’s face flushed.

Betsy clapped her hands. “Next challenge!”

The room fell silent again.

Betsy glanced at me. “Casey, I just realized I haven’t introduced everyone.”

She gestured out towards the other family members as if they were her gallery.

First, she pointed out a well-dressed man in his thirties. He had a laid-back style infused with quiet wealth. “This is my son Hunter.”

Next, she gestured toward another sharp-dressed gentleman in his thirties, this time with more of a city-slicker professional style, touched with a hint of Charleston southern flair. “This is my nephew, Dean, Logan’s cousin.”

She pointed at a woman in her sixties seated in the front row, immaculately dressed like a first lady of an important country. “This is my sister, Mildred.”

Next Betsy gestured toward Veronica. “And we’ve already spent enough time talking

about Veronica.”

“Pleasure to meet you all,” I said to the room, trying my best to sound confident.

Hunter and Dean both offered a pleasant hello, but no one else in the room spoke.

Their gazes ranged from curiosity to outright indifference.

Tough crowd.

Logan’s deep voice cut through the silence with authority. “Listen everyone, Casey has become a valuable asset to our family, so please treat him accordingly.”

The room went still which took me by surprise. His words obviously carried more weight than I’d expected.

His tone wasn’t just polite. It was firm. It was as if he was staking his claim—in a way that left no room for argument.

Suddenly, my pulse quickened. Presumably a reaction to his kind words.

I hoped.

He was a man who carried himself with such reserve—the only way to interpret an act like this was that he cared. About me.

I wasn’t sure if he could hear me over the murmurs of the room, but I said, “Thank you.”

Then, his gaze flickered toward me. Our eyes met.

If I weren't mistaken, I thought I could see a small, almost imperceptible smile forming at the corner of his lips.

It sent a shock wave through me that I had no business feeling.

I was the nanny. A consummate professional.

I tried to look away, but it was no use. There was something about the way he'd defended me. It was disarming. He somehow had the ability to stop the chaos around him with a few simple words. Nothing too obvious, simply understated.

"Basically," Betsy said, commanding everyone's attention back to her, "don't scare him off or you'll have to deal with me."

Betsy welcomed me with open arms, and I was starting to feel like part of the family.

"Casey has already exceeded my expectations," she added. "And everyone knows how high those are. So, behave yourselves, all of you. Or else. And for goodness sakes, no ignoring him just because he's charming and more competent than half of you."

Logan's eyes sparkled at Betsy's quip in a way that told me he admired her. I appreciated her frankness.

For a moment, I let myself wonder what it might feel like to truly be a part of this family. To have Betsy's fiery support and Logan's quiet reassurance.

But I couldn't let myself think like that. I had to shove those ideas away. I had been hired to do a job, plain and simple.

Veronica scoffed. "Casey has exceeded your expectations? My, Betsy, I didn't realize

your standards had fallen to ‘good with children’ and ‘willing to fetch coffee’.”

Wow. That was a dig. Veronica obviously had her opinions about me.

I fumed inside but kept a straight face.

“Veronica, dear,” Betsy said with a sugar-coated, condescending tone, “if my standards are so low, what does that say about your inability to meet them?”

The air in the room was alive with tension.

The smug expression on Veronica’s face faltered for a minute as she seemed to reminded herself that she was here to beg for inheritance money, so maybe she should smarten up.

“Just an observation,” she said with a fake tone.

“No,” Logan said firmly, “it was an insult, Veronica. Stop it.”

Betsy nodded. “Stop or leave.”

Veronica shifted in her seat and said nothing.

“On to the next challenge,” Betsy said, turning toward Logan’s brother Hunter.

“Hunter,” she said, “your task is the Westbrook Family Carnival challenge. I want elegance and refinement, but also carnival games, funnel cake, the works.”

Hunter nodded as if he understood, which confused me.

Then I reminded myself that he was a member of the Westbrook family and was

therefore accustomed to Betsy's quirks.

"Are you familiar with mechanical bulls?" she asked.

Hunter grinned and said, "I can easily do that!"

"Make it a mechanical peacock," Betsy said as if it was a completely normal request. "Why? Because we're not boring, Hunter. There will also be a gnome-tossing contest, a petting zoo, a family trivia challenge, and a rooster race."

Betsy walked over and handed Hunter a thick binder which obviously contained further instructions for the carnival.

"You'll find lots of information in this binder about the kinds of food I expect," she commanded. "A deep-fried truffle popcorn station, lobster corn dogs, champagne cotton candy, and edible gold flakes sprinkled on various things. Naturally, I've hired a professional event planner to coordinate with you, but you'll be expected to be the driving force in this carnival, Hunter."

Hunter looked confident, as if he were up to the task. Again, a lifetime with this family had probably prepared him for eccentricities.

Not to mention what was on the line: a vast fortune to be claimed by anyone Betsy deemed fit. I'm sure they were all eager to impress.

Next, Betsy turned to Logan's cousin, Dean. "For you Dean, a charity art auction. You'll be tasked with curating art pieces from various artists, getting wealthy patrons involved—you'll even personally auction off some the Westbrook family artwork."

Dean nodded enthusiastically as Betsy handed him a binder, just as thick with instructions as the one she'd handed Hunter.

“Remember dear,” she said, “I own half of Harborstone Gallery here in Charleston. Accordingly, the public will expect a lavish and extravagant art auction, especially if it’s being hosted by a Westbrook. I don’t want the event to disappoint. Do you understand?”

“I understand completely.”

Betsy patted him on the head before walking back to her lectern.

He grinned as he started flipping through the pages.

“Add a modern twist to it,” she said. “I’m testing your creative skills and your public speaking skills, Dean. The Westbrook family name is at stake. And so is your legacy. Don’t screw it up.”

Suddenly, Veronica jumped to her feet, commanding the attention of everyone in the room with all the grace of a bull in a china shop.

“What about the bequeathments?” she asked.

Betsy feigned ignorance, tilting her head as if Veronica had spoken another language. “What, dear?”

Veronica stomped her foot. “The money!”

Her voice carried through the giant room, echoing off the walls. It was the kind of tantrum you’d expect from a toddler denied dessert, not a woman in her forties.

Betsy steeled her expression save for wincing. It was clear that Veronica frustrated her. I couldn’t imagine the burden of having family members constantly buzzing around, acting out in the hopes of getting a big payout.

Betsy relaxed her expression into a forced smile. “The money, my dear, will be addressed when I decide it’s worth addressing.”

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Chapter 4

Logan

Saturdays were typically the only days I was afforded a moment's peace.

And after the activities of the past few days, peace was exactly what I needed.

As I sat in my bedroom, reorganizing my ties, my mind drifted to the matter of the bequeathments. Clearly Mother was toying with everyone and having a blast doing it. Personally, I couldn't be bothered to clamor about like an idiot hoping to grasp a slice of her fortune. I knew my role in life: stay focused on my high-paying career and provide for my son.

That way, I wouldn't need anyone's help, and I could allow my relationship with my mother to be organic and based around love, not money.

A loud honk distracted me from my thoughts.

Glancing out the window toward the vast fields of green grass, I noticed a shiny new car meandering down the driveway, suddenly arriving at a stop.

Henry, in the driver's seat, honked again and climbed out.

"Hey Dad!" he called out. "Come check out the new car Grandma got me!"

Mother climbed out of the passenger seat, beaming ear to ear.

The car was an elegant black Cadillac sedan.

That's a boring car for a teenager , I thought as I descended the stairs and walked out the door toward them.

The last time I'd thought about Cadillacs was when Mother showed me a picture of my grandfather's first Cadillac, that he'd purchased after the sale of his business in the 1970s.

Kind of a pricey car for someone as young as Henry , I thought, but I wasn't in the mood to question Betsy's decisions.

She'd spoiled the kid since Gloria's passing.

But I knew Cadillacs had a reputation for being comfortable and reliable, and that was all that mattered.

Henry looked absolutely thrilled as I approached.

Casey had heard the commotion and appeared as well, smiling as he took in the site of the car.

I found myself wondering if our lifestyle was ostentatious to Casey. I knew the going rate for a nanny, and I knew he wasn't a wealthy man. Part of me wondered if he judged me—judged us—just a bit.

Henry noticed Casey, obviously wanting his approval. "Casey, what do you think?"

"It's a beautiful car," Casey said, walking over to stand next to me.

As Betsy and Henry hopped back inside to talk about the high-tech screen, Casey

tapped my shoulder.

He lowered his voice so he wouldn't be overheard. "It's a beautiful car," he said, his tone careful. "But..." he continued cautiously, "it's a lot of power for someone Henry's age, don't you think?"

"Power?" I asked, chuckling.

Maybe Casey wasn't familiar with the car brand.

"It's a grandpa car," I added. "It's certainly no Mustang."

Casey frowned as if he didn't believe me. "I'm not sure if I've mentioned this, but I have an interest in cars as a hobby. Let me tell you, this car is almost twice as fast as a Mustang."

I cleared my throat. "What do you mean?"

"This is a special edition Cadillac Blackwing V-Series. It has six-hundred horsepower. A Mustang only has three-hundred. This Cadillac can really fly."

I hesitated for a moment before glancing over at Henry and Betsy. I couldn't tell which of them was happier because they were both positively beaming.

To me, a person with no interest in cars, it looked like a boring, comfortable sedan.

Casey pointed to the badge on the back of the car which had the word Blackwing emblazoned on the car next to a racing flag symbol.

Great , I thought. What am I supposed to do here?

If I took the car away, I'd be the worst dad ever.

And ever since Henry's mother passed, I had a hard time telling him no.

Casey looked at me, silence filling the air as he awaited my response.

"I'm sure it's not that bad," I said.

Casey didn't say anything.

Henry and Betsy hopped out of the car. Henry took out his phone and recorded a video around the car, presumably to post it online.

My thoughts drifted away to my first car on my sixteenth birthday. Mother had given me my dad's used Buick—it was certainly no race car.

But I knew that for Henry this was more than just a vehicle. It was his first taste of real freedom. I couldn't take that away from him.

Although I was a little worried about what Casey had said.

Twice as fast.

That didn't sound good.

Nine o'clock at night was the perfect time for me to steal a moment to myself.

Although, admittedly, with Henry's recent independence, I had more and more alone time than I'd ever prepared for. Plenty of time to sit around and reflect on my personal life—something I'd tried to ignore since Gloria's passing.

As I walked toward the kitchen to grab a snack, the sound of my mother's voice jolted me from my daydream.

"You're just in time for dessert!"

I entered the kitchen and saw Mother sitting at the small breakfast table, patiently waiting while Martin served her various desserts.

Approaching the table, I saw an assortment of cakes, pastries, and pies.

I could tell by the hint of a frown on Martin's face that Mother had commanded him to make each of these from scratch on a whim.

"For you, sir?" he turned and asked with an almost rehearsed politeness.

"Oh, you must try one of each!" she said, grabbing my arm and ushering me to sit across from her. "There's a rosewater pistachio cake, a sugared citrus cake, and my favorite, an Earl Grey lavender cake—it's a light sponge cake infused with Earl Grey tea... and lavender! Frosted with honey buttercream."

Martin sliced a piece of the Earl Grey cake immediately without hesitation, as if my mother's words had been sufficient direction.

"Did you make these, Mother?" I asked.

I knew she hadn't.

Martin sighed faintly enough for it to be barely audible.

Before I could enjoy my first bite, my phone rang.

Oh no , I thought. Please don't be work.

I wasn't on call for the day, but my heart still filled with dread at the sound of my phone ringing late at night. It was only ever one thing.

But tonight was different.

It was a number I didn't recognize.

To my surprise—and horror—it wasn't anyone from the hospital.

It was the police station downtown.

“Mr. Westbrook,” the officer said on the other end of the line, “this is Officer Adams from the Charleston Police Department. We have your son Henry here. You need to come down to the station.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was at the local precinct.

I'd never been to the police station in my life, and I certainly never dreamed I'd be there now.

And now, because of my overly rebellious son, I was going to be on a first-name basis with every officer in town. The entire city would hear about this eventually. The story would make the tabloids and local media papers the next day.

Henry sat in the waiting room at the station as Casey and I looked down at him.

The police officer next to us looked more annoyed than angry.

He sipped his coffee out of a flimsy paper cup and looked me in the eye. “We caught

your son's friend Matthew Elliot driving a black Cadillac, going a hundred and twenty miles an hour in a forty mile per hour zone.

Henry looked up at me, his eyes pleading. "I'm sorry, Dad. Matthew said he wanted to drive the new car, and he promised he wouldn't go over the speed limit."

Suddenly it dawned on me: Casey had been right all along.

Casey had only been trying to help. Maybe I should take his advice a little more seriously next time. He was obviously someone I could trust to have Henry's best interest at heart.

I gritted my teeth, trying to hold back my frustration. "You're not keeping that car," I said as Henry looked down at his feet. "It's too fast."

Henry's gaze remained focused on his feet. I could sense from his demeanor that he was genuinely sorry.

The officer scratched his chin. "Your son isn't facing any charges and is free to go."

I gestured for Henry to follow me. "We're going car shopping tomorrow for something nice and slow. And Casey's going with us. He seems to know a lot about cars."

With Henry's back to me, I winked at Casey and his face momentarily lit up.

As we walked through the parking lot toward my car, a familiar voice caught my attention.

I turned and saw the Mercers standing next to their car, lurking in the shadows.

I had no idea what the hell they were doing here.

Helen's lips pursed as she walked toward Henry, gently placing her hand on his face as if he'd been hurt in a car crash. Her theatrics weren't serving anyone but herself.

"Poor Henry," she said, shaking her head. "Are you okay?"

I answered for him: "He's fine. His friend drove the car over the speed limit, now we're going to replace the car with something slower and more reasonable."

Robert raised one eyebrow. "Over the speed limit? We heard on the police scanner that it was one-hundred and twenty miles per hour."

That's really none of your business , I thought, but didn't say it. Plus, what the hell were they doing listening in on police scanners?

I didn't want to agitate the situation further. I needed to get my son back home to Westbrook Meadows so I could give him a good talking to about not handing over his car keys to just anyone who asked.

Helen's voice dripped with condescension. "That's why we're so worried about Henry. We just want to make sure he's living in the best situation possible."

It was starting to sound as if Helen wanted custody of my son.

Which was absolutely absurd.

I turned to Henry. "Go wait in the backseat of my car. Casey's driving the Cadillac home."

I didn't want Henry to overhear our conversation. Casey stood next to me. Once

Henry was out of earshot, I turned to Helen.

“Helen, what’s going on here?” I asked. “The last two times I’ve seen you, you’ve hinted that you have some ideas about Henry’s living situation. What are you getting at?”

Helen turned to her husband for approval, and upon receiving a nod, turned back to me.

“Fine,” she said, her words like venom, “since you insist. We’ve been talking about what’s best for Henry. We think new certain influences have been added to his life that have created an unstable environment for him.”

I lowered my voice. “Certain influences? Is this about me, or is this about Casey?”

Helen flinched at the name as if he disgusted her. “We’ve read the headlines, Logan. People are talking, and it reflects poorly on Henry. It’s a lot for a young man to endure. Don’t you think?”

I stepped closer to her, forcing her to hold my gaze. “Are you trying to say that you’re better equipped than me to raise my son?”

Robert had been uncharacteristically quiet thus far, but he finally chimed in. “We just want to make sure that Henry has a good future ahead of him. That he’s stable. That’s all, Logan.”

I hated the way my name sounded coming from him.

My voice rose in spite of my attempts to prevent it. “Stable? The only instability in Henry’s life is the two of you. You swoop in here every few months to make judgments from your ivory tower.”

Helen's facade of politeness finally cracked. "We're not the ones parading strangers into his life. We're not the ones forcing him to live in a circus!"

Robert squinted at me. "We've heard the rumors about your mother."

My blood suddenly boiled, and I snapped. "Enough! You can say whatever you want about me. But Henry is my son, and you have no right to dictate how I raise him."

Tension lingered in the air outside the police station.

Helen's lips pursed again as Robert tugged at her arm to pull her back toward their car.

"We'll see, Logan," she said with a disapproving frown as she walked away. "We'll see."

Minutes later, we were back at Westbrook Meadows.

Betsy greeted us at the bottom of the stairs, clearly fuming.

This was not going to be pretty. She'd probably already heard the entire story, likely through her many connections around town.

I had no idea how my mother was always able to obtain and process information so quickly. It was as if she had a network of people on call for her at all times, always available to clue her in.

Part of me wondered if her high-powered connections with local officials were in any way influenced by information. Or perhaps more specifically, compromising information.

I had nothing to base my speculation on, but I did know one thing for sure: when Betsy Westbrook wanted something done around Charleston, South Carolina, she always knew exactly who to call.

As she approached the car, I could see the fury in her eyes. She'd probably been worried sick about Henry the entire time I was gone. And I knew for a fact that she was going to be unhappy about my interaction with the Mercers.

I barely had time to process her presence before she looked us up and down and demanded answers.

She shook her head. "Henry Michael Westbrook."

She only used his full name when it was really bad.

Next, she turned to me. "Logan, why on earth did you ignore Casey's warnings about the car?"

Wait, how does she know about that?

Jesus, my mother learned about everything.

She turned back to Henry. "And Henry, did you honestly tell me it was a quiet, underpowered family sedan?"

Henry stammered, his eyes darting around. "Well... I thought you might not buy it for me if you knew it was so fast. So, I... might have left that part out."

Betsy walked over to me, so close that I could smell her perfume.

"Logan, how could you not take Casey seriously? You know how boys are when they

get behind the wheel of a car like that.”

I felt a hint of defensiveness, but I knew she had a point.

“I should have looked into it more,” I admitted.

I glanced at Casey who gave me a sweet smile. He had obviously only been trying to help. My gratitude was silent, but I knew that this would unlock a new level of respect between us.

Betsy pulled Henry close. “Henry, the Westbrook name comes with privileges. But it also comes with responsibilities. If you can’t be honest with me, how can I trust you?”

Henry nodded, evidently visibly humbled.

“As for the car—” she began, but Henry cut in.

“Let me guess,” he said with a sigh, “you’re taking it back?”

Mother shook her head and winked at him. “No dear, I’m not taking it back. I’m taking it for myself. I like a little bit of speed sometimes.”

Unpredictable, as usual.

She held out her hand, palm up. “Keys, please.”

Casey dropped the keys in her hand.

“And as for your car,” she added to Henry, “we’re going to a dealership tomorrow to find the smallest, weakest, most utilitarian car available.”

As they turned to walk into the house, Mother looked back over her shoulder at the Cadillac, obviously excited about her new toy.

I motioned for Casey to come over. "I'm sorry about earlier," I said. "I should have trusted my gut and listened to you."

Casey offered a slight smile. "That's okay, Logan. I'm just glad everyone's safe."

He walked off toward the house, and I noticed that my mother had come back out to talk to me.

"What happened at the station?" she asked.

It was as if she already knew. My mother knew everything that happened in the historic streets of Charleston.

"The Mercers were there."

The expression on her face told me she hadn't known that bit.

"What did they want?" she asked through clenched teeth.

I grimaced. "I get the impression that Helen might be interested in pursuing custody of Henry. She hasn't said it outright, but she's hinting at it."

Mother frowned deeply. "I see."

I knew that by informing her she'd be immediately involved. And when Betsy Westbrook gets involved, things get real. For everyone.

It was as if she was commander in chief of the family, always looking out for

everyone's safety. Especially since Gloria's passing, Betsy had been hawkeyed in looking after Henry. I'd never seen such mama bear—or in this case, grandmama bear—instincts from her before.

She loved my son.

Standing before her on the great lawn of Westbrook Meadows, I could see the fury in my mother's eyes.

Crossing Betsy wasn't just a mistake. It was an unspoken rule to avoid her bad side at all costs. Ending up on that list wasn't just unwise. It was a surefire way to make your life complicated.

I knew it. The moment I voiced my concerns about the Mercers' intentions, Betsy latched onto the idea, like a bloodhound on a fresh trail.

The distant cry of an owl echoed through the night, sharp and unsettling.

Like a warning.

My mother's expression mirrored my own unease. We both knew the truth without speaking it.

The Mercers weren't just showing up out of concern. They were plotting something.

And I was determined to uncover exactly what it was.

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Chapter 5

Casey

The evening of the Westbrook Family Carnival was upon us, and I was completely out of my element.

I'd never been to a party thrown by a bonafide rich person before. Sure, as a nanny to some well-to-do families, I'd attended a few galas and soirees, but nothing of this magnitude.

Westbrook Meadows had been transformed into a glamorous, over-the-top carnival, hosted by Hunter per Betsy's command as part of the Legacy Challenges.

I wandered the grounds and stared in awe at society's most pristine and polished people. There were high-ranking politicians, local industry titans, and a few reporters from local media outlets.

To my surprise, I even saw a few local celebrities and influencers around.

Betsy had intended for Hunter to make a splash, and in that he'd succeeded.

Strolling down the private paths, I took in the sights with wonder. There were vibrant colors, string lights, and carnival booths with games and food stalls.

The air was alive with laughter and chatter.

A mix of traditional and quirky attractions grabbed the attention of passersby.

There were ring tosses, a dunk tank, and a caricature artist drawing exaggerated illustrations of partygoers.

At the heart of the carnival was a small Ferris wheel, its shiny lights reflecting on the nearby pond.

Hunter had arranged for local food vendors to serve an elegant twist on classic carnival food; there was truffle popcorn, candied pecans, and even freshly spun cotton candy.

The massive oak trees around the property were lit with lanterns, and guests sipped craft cocktails from a makeshift bar fashioned to look like an old saloon.

Hunter had gone all out.

My gaze finally landed on Logan, standing near the house, looking almost laid-back for once, but still carrying his trademark stiffness.

Even at a carnival, the man couldn't relax.

Probably the curse of being an on-call cardiac surgeon.

Still, he looked incredible in his suit. Polished and handsome.

Living in such close proximity to Logan had proved challenging. I tried to avoid using the main hallways late at night so that he could have privacy but considering that our rooms were located down the hall from one another, it was hard to be discreet.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand why Betsy had placed me in a guest suite so close to Logan's bedroom. I gazed up at Logan's bedroom window, then my own window down the hall.

As if on cue, Betsy appeared out of nowhere, dressed in a beautiful ensemble that made her impossible to miss: a flowing, blue silk blouse with dramatic ruffles, and white linen trousers that were elegantly flared at the ankles.

"Casey, darling! Why are you staring up at the bedrooms? Is the carnival really that boring?"

I shook my head, chuckling. "Not at all, just wondering if my close proximity to Logan might create discomfort for him. Is the separate guest house in use?"

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, sipping her cocktail. "The guest house is currently being used as Betsy's Bunker."

"Betsy's—"

"That's right," she said, cutting me off. "It's reserved for emergencies. Like if I need to fake my death for a week to see who cries the hardest."

For a moment, I thought I saw a twinkle in her eyes as she spoke, but it was probably just the flashing carnival lights behind us.

"Besides," she said, turning away from me to return to her guests, "you're much more useful here, near the action. And Logan."

Before I could respond, she was gone.

The woman had the ability to appear and disappear at a moment's notice. Like an

angel.

Or a ghost.

Suddenly, Logan was standing next to me.

“Strange night,” he said, catching my attention.

I looked up at him. He practically towered over me.

“Not your usual evening?” I asked, knowing that it probably wasn’t.

Logan was the type of reserved that I couldn’t picture at a bougie carnival. The atmosphere simply didn’t suit him.

Glancing around, I noticed brightly colored banners crisscrossing paths. There was lively energy with a nostalgic charm. Looking back at Logan, I saw that he was anxiously glancing at his phone.

Probably worried about being called in to work.

Lately Logan had consumed more of my thoughts than I liked to admit.

He’d made quite the impression, and my daydreams often wandered to him.

He was like a mysterious enigma, popping in and out of Westbrook Meadows whenever he wasn’t working. With a hospital schedule that sometimes consumed up to eighty hours of work each week, I wasn’t sure how he was able to remain sane. Especially in such a high-pressure, high-stress environment.

Life or death.

Daily.

“Not my typical night at all,” he answered. “But that means I’m not working or at the hospital, so I’ll call it a win.”

He winked at me, and I felt a hint of tension relax from my shoulders.

I reminded myself to keep my daydreams—or fantasies—in check.

Yes, he’s handsome.

Yes, he’s hard working.

But no, he isn’t available.

At least not to me. One, because I’m his employee. And two, because he’s straight.

Watch it , I told myself. Keep it to yourself .

“Hunter has definitely outdone himself,” Logan said, scanning the grounds and taking in the eccentricities. “I’ll admit, it’s a bit livelier than I’d expected. Care to take a walk?”

I nodded and followed his lead, a hint of nervousness tugging at me.

As we wandered through the carnival, we sampled food from various booths, and I could sense Logan starting to enjoy himself. When we arrived at a ring toss game, I jokingly encouraged him to try and to my surprise he agreed. After a few failed attempts, and a few laughs, we called it quits.

“Stick to surgery,” I said. “I’m sure Henry would be proud.”

Logan chuckled. “Glad to know where my strengths are.”

Our laughter created an easy, playful tension that I noticed. But I knew I’d need to keep it to myself. Despite the spark I felt, I needed to remain professional.

There was an undeniable attraction growing, but it needed to remain completely hidden at all times.

The stakes couldn’t be any higher.

I’d never found myself in this situation before, being attracted to my employer.

Then again, it shouldn’t come as any surprise. Logan was a single, thirty-six-year-old man, compared to my previous employers who were usually married men in their fifties.

Betsy had previously explained to me that Logan and Gloria never planned on having a kid at such a young age, but they were happy to have Henry, nonetheless.

“Care for a drink?” he asked, shaking me from my thoughts. “I’ll go grab two.”

I nodded politely as he walked away. As soon as he was out of my sight, I let out a sigh. My face had turned red, I just knew it.

Always happened when I was nervous.

Logan must have been able to see. Maybe that’s why he’d excused himself.

Maybe he’d been uncomfortable.

Before I could think about it further, I noticed a man approaching.

Well-dressed, in his fifties, expensive clothing. Obviously someone connected to the Westbrooks and not an employee like me.

“Good evening,” he said, extending his arm and shaking my hand. “I’m Dr. Jeffrey Evans. I’m a physician at Pinehurst Medical Center.”

A colleague of Logans. Better make a good first impression.

“Good evening,” I said.

It seemed as if Dr. Evans had approached me for a reason.

“I won’t take much of your time,” he continued. “But I wanted to ask: how happy are you working here?”

What?

His question completely caught me off guard.

Was this some type of loyalty test orchestrated by Logan?

Why on earth would his colleague want to know if I was happy?

Of course I was happy. More and more so, the more time I spent around Logan.

Dr. Evans laughed, throwing his head back. “Let me rephrase! Would you consider working for me and my family? I’ve heard that you have a calm way with teenagers, and that’s exactly what my wife and I need. I’d offer a guaranteed pay increase from what Logan is paying you.”

I was speechless.

When Betsy originally hired me after a grueling interview process, I'd been shocked. Now here I was being offered jobs by prominent families.

Maybe there was something in the water around here.

Dr. Evans leaned in and lowered his voice. "I heard about your handling of the speeding situation involving Henry."

Oh no, I thought. Word got around town and now I looked like a failure as a nanny.

Then again, maybe it hadn't made me look bad. After all, Dr. Evans had just asked me to come onboard with his family.

He looked at me with anticipation in his eyes. "We need someone like you on our staff, Casey."

As if he could sense my hesitation, he gave me his card and said, "Give it some thought."

Well, that was odd.

I looked around, trying to see if I could find Logan. He'd been gone for several minutes, and I was starting to wonder if he'd forgotten about our drinks.

I suddenly realized he was standing just a few feet away from me, holding two drinks with a puzzled expression on his face.

I wondered if he'd overheard my conversation with Dr. Evans.

Before I could ask, he handed me my drink and gestured for me to follow him toward the cotton candy booth.

As we waited our turn, an awkward tension lingered.

Logan cleared his throat. “Interesting conversation with Dr. Evans. I hadn’t realized he was looking to hire a nanny.”

Damn. Logan had heard everything.

“He just mentioned an opportunity,” I said with the most casual tone I could muster. “Nothing serious.”

I had absolutely no interest in working for Dr. Evans—or anyone else, for that matter. The Westbrooks had made me feel like family in the short time I’d lived there, and I was grateful. Someone in my line of work couldn’t ask for a better placement.

Logan’s jaw tightened and I noticed a new intensity in his gaze.

I felt a small thrill at Logan’s possessiveness.

I did my best to keep my cool, but I enjoyed his apparent jealousy.

Logan finally spoke. “Henry’s gotten used to having you around. It’d be disruptive if you decided to leave.”

I could sense the unspoken feeling behind Logan’s words. I didn’t want to mention the feeling of jealousy, so I decided to reassure him outright.

“I’m not going anywhere, Logan,” I said with a bright smile. “Henry—and you—don’t need to worry about that.”

Logan’s shoulders relaxed and his expression softened just a bit.

We shared a brief look that was quick but meaningful. It was as if there was an unspoken connection that we both felt but couldn't voice aloud. For numerous reasons.

For me, it was a moment that deepened my care and respect for Logan.

But the bottom line was that I needed to remain professional.

As we shared our private moment, Veronica suddenly interrupted.

She eyed me up and down, obviously disapproving.

"Well, Logan, isn't this cozy," she said sarcastically. "It's impressive how much faith you have in a babysitter. I imagine Henry must miss having a real father figure around."

Logan was immediately stiff again, clearly irritated by Veronica's comment.

I wasn't going to let her anger me, but it was going to be tough to keep my mouth shut if she said something negative about Henry again. I'd started to feel protective over him, and I got the impression that Veronica was bad news.

And something told me that she'd been watching us during our private conversation. The tension between me and Logan was obvious to me—so maybe it was obvious to Veronica too.

I didn't need rumors floating around, especially by the black sheep of the family.

Veronica laughed, her voice dripping with more sarcasm. "Oh, don't be so upset, Logan. It's just that Henry deserves stability. Not this experiment of yours."

That was it. I'd had enough.

I smiled politely through clenched teeth. "I think what Henry actually needs is someone who's around, rather than someone who just shows up to criticize."

Veronica's eyes widened, caught off guard. It was as if she wasn't accustomed to people dishing it back to her.

Before she could retort, Betsy stepped in, having overheard the exchange.

Betsy's face lit up with delight. "Oh, I like this one! Finally, someone who can put a Westbrook in their place. Casey, you're delightful."

Veronica's face turned completely red, and she stormed off, mumbling about outsiders meddling in family affairs.

Logan looked at me with an expression of quiet appreciation. "Thanks for that. Veronica is... persistent."

I grinned and shrugged my shoulders. "Couldn't resist. Besides, Betsy seemed to have my back."

As Logan laughed, the tension from earlier eased. He gave me an appreciative look, and I could sense that his gratitude ran deeper than he let on. Betsy's approving laughter solidified the bond I'd started to form with the family.

They'd welcomed me with open arms, and I was grateful.

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Chapter 6

Logan

Peace of mind had escaped me for the past twenty-four hours.

And I knew exactly why.

I couldn't stop thinking about Casey.

And not just in a professional way. Not because I was grateful for his services.

He had embedded himself in my brain. But I was a willing captive.

As I paced the hardwood floors of my oversized bedroom, I tried to rid my mind of all things Casey. My bedroom was the perfect space for pacing. Below was a library that no one ever used, and outside my door was a wide hallway that was typically vacant.

However, today I heard footsteps shuffling around outside my door, and immediately recognized the pitter patter of Martin's feet. He had a very distinctive way of walking.

No doubt he'd been sent by my mother to spy.

Betsy frequently used Martin as a tool to keep tabs on everyone—and everything—at the house.

“Martin!” I called out, my voice reverberating off the walls. “Is that you out there?”

Through the closed door, I heard a muffled, quiet reply. “Just here to offer coffee, sir.”

Bullshit , I thought. You’re here to snoop.

“None for me, thanks!”

Obviously, Mother had sent him to listen outside my door. Maybe she thought she’d hear a snippet of a conversation, or a cry of angst.

She had probably seen the tension between me and Casey the night before. She was hawkeyed and always aware.

Finally, I heard Martin’s footsteps as he walked away.

I needed to get real. I needed to absolve myself of any notion that anything could ever happen between me and Casey.

First, he’s my nanny.

Second, he’s... a man.

Since Gloria passed two years ago, neither romance nor sex had entered my mind often. My singular focus had been performing my duties at the hospital and providing a happy home for Henry.

Unfortunately for me, that had meant two years of lonely nights.

As Henry grew older and obtained more independence, I wondered what would be

left for me. He was already eyeing colleges and talking about his dreams of campus life. Two years from now I'd be alone with only my career to comfort me.

Before Gloria, there had only been a few women.

Never a man.

But there was something about Casey.

Something captivating. Enticing.

Stop , I thought, my pacing halting for a moment. You can't think this way.

My phone dinged and I looked down to see a text from my mother requesting my presence in the drawing room.

First, I'd need to figure out exactly which room was the drawing room.

There were so many rooms branching out from labyrinth hallways, it was easy to get turned around.

So, I descended the stairs and began to search for the correct room. A few moments later, I found myself in the drawing room after following the voices of a few people—some jubilant, others monotonous.

Betsy and Casey turned and beamed, gesturing for me to join them for coffee.

Martin scowled in the background. He was obviously disappointed that I'd cast him away from the bedroom earlier.

Then I noticed Veronica. The monotonous voice.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand why Mother kept inviting her around. And since Veronica was family, I didn't have the heart to tell her how rotten of a person she was.

In most cases, people learn how awful they are through social consequences for their terrible actions. Certain members of the wealthy, like Veronica, were often shielded from normal consequences. The result was an overgrown toddler masquerading as an adult.

Then again, Veronica wasn't quite wealthy yet. That would depend on my mother's bequeathments.

"Coffee?" Martin asked.

Forced cordiality made him ignore the interaction we'd had mere minutes before.

I shook my head.

Veronica frowned as she noticed me.

She smiled an awful grin.

"It's quite convenient," she said with a smirk. "Don't you think, Logan? This sudden attachment of Casey's."

I found myself wondering if she'd noticed the tension between me and Casey the night before.

Her nerve shocked me.

The tension between me and Casey had been palpable, and it wouldn't surprise me if

Veronica had observed it too.

I put on my most incredulous tone, hoping it would throw her off my scent. “Attachment?”

“That’s right,” she said smugly. “Some people might say Casey is just cozying up to the matriarch. After all, Betsy’s decisions about the inheritance are hardly set in stone, are they?”

She was simply dreadful. Forty-something years of entitlement mixed with a life of leisure and the result was Veronica Westbrook.

The last thing I wanted her to do was speculate on the nature of my relationship with Casey. Especially in front of my mother.

It was a good thing Henry had stayed at a friend’s house and wasn’t around to hear Veronica’s ramblings.

“Veronica,” I said, my voice low and almost growling, “that’s enough. Casey is here because I hired him to be here—for Henry, and for my peace of mind.”

“Well—” Veronica started, but I interrupted.

“Furthermore,” I added, “Casey has shown more integrity than most, and I don’t appreciate your insinuations.”

A mix of shock and anger flashed through Veronica’s eyes. It was clear that she hadn’t expected my defense, presumably because I was typically reserved.

I looked over at Casey and saw that his gratitude was visible. But he kept a polite silence.

Suddenly, Betsy snapped her fingers, grabbing Veronica's attention.

"Veronica, darling," she said with a smirk, "you do raise a good point. Maybe I should reassess the inheritance decisions. Just to make sure I'm making the wisest choices."

Mother winked in Casey's direction, leaving Veronica fuming.

Veronica stormed out of the room, mumbling something to herself that I couldn't hear.

It was clear she was angling for a bigger piece of the pie. But at this point, I wasn't sure if Veronica would receive any piece at all.

Betsy patted me on my shoulder. "Well done, Logan. It's nice to see the Westbrook fire come out in you."

She turned to Casey and said, "Casey, don't worry about Veronica. She's just jealous she hasn't found someone with half your charm."

Casey's posture relaxed. I could sense that he was truly starting to feel welcome in the family.

"Pastries!" Betsy called out, nearly flying out of the room to retrieve something from the kitchen.

Martin followed her immediately.

And suddenly we were alone, just the two of us.

Me and Casey.

With the tension lingering from the previous night.

My heart raced. We hadn't talked about it, but it wasn't like we could pretend.

It was clear we'd both felt it.

The doors clicked shut behind us and the room suddenly felt cavernous in Betsy and Veronica's absence.

The air felt charged, like the stillness before a thunderstorm.

Casey stood by the fireplace with his hand resting on the marble mantle.

Our gazes were locked—it was as if we were two opposing forces about to collide.

Casey's shoulders were rigid, and his jaw was clenched.

I wished I could read his mind.

"Well," Casey said with a smile, "that was... something."

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. "It always is when Betsy and Veronica are in the same room."

Casey squinted at me as the fire roared behind him. "Is it always this... overwhelming?"

I shook my head, moving slightly closer to him. "You get used to it. The chaos. The expectations. But it doesn't make it any easier."

Casey's eyes showed something I hadn't expected—something vulnerable and raw.

He didn't move as I stepped closer, closing the distance between us to just a few feet.

His voice was barely a whisper as he said, "You don't seem like the type of man who lets things get to him."

A faint smile crossed my lips, laced with tension. "You'd be surprised."

I studied Casey's face, my heart racing as I watched for even a flicker, a momentary crack in his walls that I could pierce through.

I decided to speak up. "Last night, at the carnival..."

Casey's face lit up. "Right, the carnival. It was... memorable."

Memorable .

The word lingered in the air between us with all the things we both knew were true but remained unspoken.

"In fact..." Casey started, but his voice trailed off.

Go on , I thought, willing him to continue.

"In fact," he said, "I've been thinking about it since last night."

Before I could tell him I'd been thinking about him too, my phone rang.

The sound was awful, instantly filling me with dread.

Since I was on call, I had to answer it.

On the other end of the line, the hospital scheduler informed me that a woman had been brought in following a serious car accident. After suffering trauma injuries, my surgical skills were required to control the bleeding and stabilize her.

I hung up the phone and looked up at Casey who had probably figured out that I needed to leave.

“I have to go.”

He nodded with a forced smile. “I understand.”

There wasn’t a moment to spare.

As I rushed toward my car keys, I had a sinking feeling.

How much longer was I going to keep up this life?

Leaving important moments to rush to a hospital.

Having no work-life balance, not a single moment to call my own. The one day off a week I received was marred by anxiety about being on call.

Keys in hand, I rushed toward my vehicle, knowing I’d have to practically fly through the streets of Charleston to make it to Pinehurst in time.

As I drove, memories of Gloria’s passing came rushing back to me. She’d died in a car accident, and this wasn’t the first time since her passing that I’d been called into the hospital for something like this.

Memories—constant, agonizing memories—were brought to me regularly in my line of work.

Bridging the distance between myself and the hospital, I reflected on all the time I'd spent in hospital rooms, leaving my wife and son at home alone.

Mother had been after me for years to quit. But that was easy for a woman of Betsy's wealth to say. Me, I had to continue working. It was necessary for me to provide for myself and my son. Henry was already eyeing Ivy League colleges where tuition wasn't cheap.

The urgent tone in the hospital scheduler's voice played in my mind. The details provided had been sparse but alarming: blunt force to the chest, unsteady vitals, internal bleeding.

Time was of the utmost importance.

The city of Charleston flew past me in a blur of lights mixed with dark shadows. The historic streets were normally calming and beautiful, but when speeding through, they almost seemed like an obstacle course.

The nearby harbor brought the scent of salt into my car through the open windows. I could hear the distant hum of laughter and music from nearby bars.

The sounds of a saxophone being played by someone on the street cut through some of the chaos in my mind.

My hands gripped the wheel so hard my knuckles turned white.

As I finally pulled into the hospital parking lot, I steeled myself.

I took a deep breath and tried to regain focus.

I headed inside, trying not to think about the weight of my thoughts.

Something in my life needed to change.

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Chapter 7

Casey

What had started as a quiet day at Westbrook Meadows had spiraled into an awkward lunch with me, Betsy, Logan, Henry, and the Mercers. The air was tinged with unspoken agendas and forced pleasantries. It was like watching people cautiously walk through a minefield.

The Mercers had arrived, per Logan's invitation, saying he wanted to smooth over the relationship and allow them to be a positive influence in Henry's life.

I admired and respected Logan's ambitions to involve Henry's maternal grandparents. But the truth was, spending time with the Mercers was simply awful.

The uncomfortable tension that filled the air lingered throughout their entire visit, never dissipating for a moment.

The table was immaculately set by Martin. There were fresh lilies in the center, beautiful china, and gleaming silverware.

Henry scrolled obliviously on his phone, while Logan poured himself another glass of wine as if bracing for what was about to come.

Helen Mercer leaned forward, the light from the chandelier reflecting off her diamond bracelet.

“Henry, dear,” she said, “your grandfather and I have a little surprise for you.”

“Okay?” Henry said, looking up from his phone with a confused expression.

Robert pulled a sleek velvet box from his pocket and flicked it open to reveal a luxury watch.

It was absolutely stunning. By far the nicest watch I’d ever seen.

The watch face sparkled with encrusted diamonds. The band was gold; gleaming as if polished to sheer perfection.

Betsy cleared her throat and raised one disapproving eyebrow. “That’s a six-figure watch.”

If anyone knew a luxury watch’s value at first glance, it was Betsy.

My jaw dropped but I quickly picked it up, hoping no one noticed.

The lifestyles of the wealthy never ceased to amaze me. Completely and utterly out of my league.

The watch was extravagant and wildly inappropriate for a teenager.

Helen grinned with a smug look. “Pretty much on par with the six-figure Cadillac I hear Henry drives.”

Betsy scoffed. “I’ll have you know I was duped into buying that overpowered sports car, which I mistakenly assumed was a boring sedan, and I am entirely annoyed about it.”

She fired a knowing look at Henry.

“Furthermore,” Betsy added, “the Cadillac now belongs to me, and Henry is currently driving the pickup truck we use for hauling mulch around here.”

Funnily enough, Betsy spoke the truth. As a punishment for the speeding incident, Betsy had forced Henry to drive a filthy—and sometimes reeking after hauling manure—pickup truck back and forth to school.

Meanwhile, Betsy had insisted that I accompany her on a number of late-night speed rides around Charleston in the passenger seat of the stunning Cadillac speedster which now belonged to her.

Our joyrides had actually turned into fun bonding experiences for both of us, and Betsy had more than ever made me feel a part of the family.

I knew Betsy’s punishment for Henry wouldn’t last long; after all, she was a big softie inside.

But not today. Not when faced with the Mercers.

“Whoa,” Henry said, reaching out to grab the watch. “That’s cool.”

Logan frowned, shaking his head. “That’s unnecessary.”

Helen ignored Logan’s comment.

Instead, she beamed at Henry, “It’s actually a limited edition; one of only three in the world. Now you own it.”

Betsy swirled her glass of brandy, leaning back in her chair at the head of the table.

Her southern voice was laced with sarcasm. “Well, that is so thoughtful ,” she drawled. “Nothing says stable upbringing like giving a teenager a watch that costs more than most people’s houses.”

Helen frowned at Betsy’s remark and fired back, “We simply believe he deserves the best.”

The clink of Logan’s glass caught my attention as he set it on the table. “What Henry deserves—in fact, what he needs—is guidance and support. He does not need extravagant bribes.”

Helen pursed her lips. “Bribes? That’s a very strong word, Logan. We are simply showing our grandson that we care.”

Betsy interjected, her eyes twinkling. “Care, huh? Funny how that looks like guilt from where I’m sitting.”

Helen’s demeanor altered. “We’re here because we’re concerned about Henry’s environment. Certain things have changed...”

Helen looked at me with disdain in her eyes. “A boy his age needs structure,” she added.

Logan’s response was fast and firm. “And Henry gets that here with me.”

“Logan, can you be sure about that?” Robert asked, leaning forward. “The press hasn’t exactly painted this household in the best light recently.”

Logan’s face went dark, and I felt my stomach tighten.

Betsy smiled sweetly. “Oh yes, the press. I always forget you two are such avid

readers of the tabloids. How quaint.”

Finally, Helen’s mask of politeness disappeared completely. “This isn’t about the tabloids, Betsy. This is about stability and what’s best for Henry.”

Logan scoffed. “And you think a six-figure watch is what’s best for him?”

Helen shook her head. “What’s best for Henry is raising him in an environment that’s not filled with...”

She looked at me again. “Questionable influences.”

I had no idea why Helen Mercer harbored such hatred for me when we’d barely exchanged two words. Still, the pointed edge in her tone made it clear that she had a bone to pick.

Logan stood up abruptly. His chair scraped the floor, surprising me.

“Helen,” he said, “if you have something to say, say it.”

Helen held up her hands as if she was innocent, then gestured toward the overpriced watch. “I’m just saying maybe it’s time to consider who’s best suited to give Henry the life he deserves. Robert and I have been saving money for years.”

Betsy scoffed with confidence. “Helen, darling, if we’re discussing suitability based on bank balances, let’s just say I’ve bought yachts that cost more than your net worth combined.”

Helen rolled her eyes. “How would you possibly know anything about our finances?”

Betsy sipped her brandy casually. “Three million, last I checked. Or was it four?”

Forgive me, the numbers are so... understated, they barely register.”

Robert’s jaw dropped open. “Are you kidding me, Betsy? Of course you’d use your shady connections to pry into our private finances. Have you no sense of decency?”

Betsy poured herself another glass as she added, “For two readers of the tabloids such as yourselves, you’ll already know my net worth was pegged at six-hundred-million.”

The room was suddenly silent.

Logan was obviously furious; his fists were clenched at his side.

“Again,” Helen said through clenched teeth, “our primary concern is Henry.”

Betsy broke the tension with an icy laugh. “Oh, Helen, do you really think anyone is fooled by this act? If you’re such a concerned grandparent, where were you the last two years?”

Robert’s voice cut through the room. “We’ve given you time to adjust, Logan. Time to grieve. We can’t sit back and watch anymore.”

Logan looked at them with fire in his eyes. “Henry is my son. You don’t get to come in here and question my parenting.”

“We’re not questioning,” Helen said with a dramatic sigh. “We’re preparing... for what comes next.”

Logan’s face was as hard as steel. “What exactly does that mean?”

Helen stood up and looked down at Logan, smoothing her skirt. “It means you’ll be hearing from us soon.”

Helen turned and looked at Henry with a forced sweet smile. “I’ll see you soon, sweetheart.”

Robert followed directly behind her, but first he placed the watch box on the table in front of Henry.

Robert turned and looked at Logan. “Think about it. We only want what’s best for Henry.”

The Mercers swept out of the room, leaving the rest of us sitting with the lingering tension.

“Well,” Betsy said with a sigh, “that was subtle.”

She looked at me and Casey, eyeing us both with a new fire in her eyes. “Time to prepare for war, boys.”

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Chapter 8

Logan

Standing in the unattended garden known as the Heart of the Family, I surveyed the three-acre expanse and pondered the ideas that had been provided by Mother's horticulturalist.

Now more than ever, I needed some good news.

Mother had tasked me and Henry with restoring the garden, and it was the perfect job to distract myself from our pressing problems.

More specifically, the Mercers.

My meeting with Henry's grandparents had been contentious and tedious.

The Mercers had made themselves perfectly clear. They were obviously going to seek custody of Henry.

Through her vast web of connections, my mother had discreetly reached out to the legal circles of Charleston and learned that the Mercers hadn't filed any paperwork yet, but they had indeed consulted with an attorney.

That meant trouble was brewing.

Betsy's reach in Charleston never ceased to amaze me. Her network of connections

wasn't just impressive—it was legendary. Her speed dial consisted of judges, city officials, and lawyers.

Sometimes I wondered if they were indebted to her—in some way. Beyond political donations and fundraisers. Did they owe my mother favors? Were there unspoken debts just waiting to be cashed in at a moment's notice?

It wouldn't surprise me. Because when Betsy Westbrook called, people jumped into action.

And they delivered. Guaranteed.

I heard a yelp escape Casey's lips as he finally managed to pull out a few persistent weeds that didn't want to leave the ground.

“Yes!” Casey said, but I could barely hear him because he was so far away. “Got 'em out!”

I glanced down and saw Henry at the far end of the garden, planting new roses as per Mother's request.

I watched as Casey pulled more weeds out of the ground.

His strength came as something of a surprise to me. But I wasn't sure why.

Normally Casey was dressed in stuffy clothes, but today it was something entirely new.

Today, he cut a nice figure in a t-shirt and jeans.

He obviously took care of himself and exercised regularly. I'd seen him one day at

the private gym at Westbrook Meadows. I was walking by and caught a glimpse of him lifting on the bench press, his biceps flexing just like they were today in the glimmering sun.

I knew I needed to go over and speak to him. We couldn't keep beating around the bush. It was now or never.

I started to walk toward Casey, but a voice caught me off-guard.

I turned to see Veronica, carrying a mysteriously unmarked bottle with a spray hose attached.

"Logan, darling!" she said. "I thought I'd come and lend a hand. Betsy told me all about your little garden project."

I watched as she sprayed the contents of the bottle all over our plants, particularly the areas that were newly planted and still delicate.

"Dad!" a voice called out, turning my attention to Henry. "A snake!"

Without thinking, I rushed over to help, leaving Veronica alone with my new plants.

Upon arrival, I quickly realized that it was a Garter snake.

"Harmless," I said, my heart still racing.

Henry smiled.

Part of me wondered if he was pranking me. Another part of me wondered if there was a hidden camera somewhere and I'd end up on TikTok.

Mother would find the video organically and show me for a laugh.

“Henry, we’re Googling poisonous snakes later,” I said, turning to walk away. “A boy your age living on an estate like this should have an idea about which snakes are dangerous, and which aren’t.”

“And the flowers?” he asked, grabbing my attention again. “Grandma specifically requested these.”

I walked over and saw the most beautiful snapdragons I’d ever seen in my life.

They were vibrant and whimsical.

“Grandma said they’re strong and resilient,” Henry said. “Like a Westbrook.”

Standing in the garden with Henry, my worries about the Mercers seemed to fade away, even if just for a brief moment.

There, with the scent of freshly cut grass and newly planted soil, I was grateful to have a family like mine.

Henry looked up from his shovel. “Grandma also said if I plant them wrong, she’ll make me write a formal apology to each snapdragon.”

I winced.

He wiped dirt from his gloves onto his jeans. “She also said if they die, she’s entering me as a contestant in the Charleston Flower Show, which sounds like a threat.”

I nodded. “I’d take grandma very seriously, if I were you.”

We shared a laugh before I remembered that I'd left Veronica unattended.

I rushed back to see that she'd sprayed most of the immediate area near the entry to the garden. The first impression one receives upon entering the garden. The most important part.

"Veronica," I said as I neared, "are you sure that's the right choice for this area?"

She placed the bottle on the ground and wiped her hands on her skirt, looking wildly inappropriate for garden work.

That was when I finally realized she was wearing high heels. Somehow that had escaped me before.

Come to think of it, Veronica always looked out of place at Westbrook Meadows. She much preferred to be at her high-rise condo downtown. Probably so she could look down on everyone else from her ivory tower.

No doubt she was only lingering around the estate so much lately to see if she could scavenge a piece of the pie from Betsy. Sucking up, pretending to help around the house. It was all a charade meant to further her own agenda.

Veronica had gone beyond normalcy and good taste. She was venturing on cartoonishly evil, hoping to do anything she could to claim a stake in Mother's money.

"Need to go wash my hands," she said with a wink.

"Veronica, why did you come here today?" I asked. "And what on earth is in that bottle you just placed on the ground?"

“Just stopped by to help!” she called out, her tone dripping with insincerity.

Suddenly, Casey appeared out of nowhere as if to rescue me. He made up an excuse about needing help with another section of the garden, and as he escorted me away, I watched Veronica leave.

I kept an eye on her until I could be completely sure that she was gone. I didn’t trust her to leave on her own. In fact, if I had things my way, I’d install cameras all around the property and bar her from ever entering Westbrook Meadows again.

My resentment of Veronica was slowly growing. She had gone beyond a normal nuisance. Now she was actively sabotaging us.

As Casey walked me to the back of the garden, I felt my senses calming with his hand on my back.

It wasn’t lost on me at all that Casey had helped me.

In fact, it excited me.

Later that day, as Casey and I surveyed the garden, I noticed that something was off.

Leaves had started to curl, and I quickly realized it was something in the soil. I knew right away what the problem was and to whom the blame belonged.

We found Veronica’s dispenser only to discover that the label had been ripped off.

As if on cue, we noticed Veronica approaching.

“Veronica,” I said as she grew near, “we have a specific plan we’re executing here. I’d appreciate it if you’d leave the chemical choices to us.”

Her eyes sparkled as she tried to feign innocence. “My only goal was to support you, Logan. How was I to know your plants were so delicate?”

Her words were always so sharp, intending to sting and cause harm.

Veronica shook her head, sucking air through her teeth. “This won’t look good to Betsy, especially with her upcoming decisions about the will. So much at stake.”

For the first time in my life, I felt something close to... hatred for a family member.

It was entirely new and incredibly uncomfortable.

Before I could respond, Veronica turned and sauntered away.

Me and Casey spent the next three hours digging up and replanting the small areas affected by Veronica’s sabotage.

Finally, we sat on two large, discarded boxes, surrounded by scattered leaves and torn-out bushes. Casey and I observed the scene of a garden that was finally taking shape.

Henry had helped for an hour before going in to finish homework.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and smelled the scent of fresh-cut greenery. “I almost didn’t expect any of this.”

Casey turned and looked at me. “Didn’t expect what?”

I gazed down at him, realizing my words had probably come across as intentionally vague.

I hesitated for a moment, my usual reserve failing. I took a deep breath and allowed myself to choose honesty over restraint.

“You,” I said. “Being here. And the way you’ve changed everything, Casey.”

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Chapter 9

Casey

Logan's words completely caught me off guard.

We'd spent the past few days dancing around the issue. Life kept popping up and things kept getting in the way.

But as we sat in the torn-up garden among the scattered flowers, there was no place to hide.

Now I just needed to know what Logan meant by 'changed everything.'

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Logan's candor had left me momentarily stunned.

I shifted closer to him, searching his expression as if testing his sincerity. Between us was silence thick with tension, and without realizing it we both leaned in.

It was as if we were magnetically drawn together, a moment of charged intensity. An unspoken agreement that was finally being secured.

Logan reached over and brushed a stray leaf from my shoulder. Our eyes locked and before either of us could think twice, our lips met in a brief but electric kiss.

Our lips touched and the connection seemed to freeze us in time. For a few seconds, the world narrowed to only this moment. Logan's hand resting on my leg, warmth radiating from his palm. The fresh scent of soil mingled with a hint of Logan's cologne.

The kiss ended as quickly as it began.

We both pulled back, visibly affected.

My heart raced, both exhilarated and anxious about the boundaries we'd just crossed.

My mouth opened as if to speak, but I struggled to find words.

Before either of us could utter a word, the shrill ring of Logan's phone cut through the air like a knife. Logan flinched then quickly fumbled for his phone in his jacket pocket. Glancing at this screen, his expression shifted to one of deep concern.

"It's work," he said, already stepping away to answer. "Hello, this is Dr. Westbrook..."

Logan's posture straightened, and his tone shifted into one of an authoritative surgeon. It was as if I could feel the loss of Logan's presence as it evaporated into the cool evening air.

Logan ended the call and turned to look at me with an apologetic expression. "It's an emergency. I have to go."

I masked my disappointment with a polite smile. "Of course, go save lives."

Logan hesitated, lingering for just a moment as his eyes locked with mine. It was as if he wanted to say something more but couldn't think of the right words. I knew the

exact feeling.

Crickets chirped around us and stars twinkled above, signaling a perfectly romantic evening that had been spoiled by a work call.

Suddenly, Logan turned and rushed away, leaving me in the garden, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

My mind raced once Logan was gone.

I brushed my hand over my lips, feeling the ghost of his kiss. The moment had been brief and fleeting but it had changed everything. And I knew with a smile that, one way or another, there was no going back.

Betsy was the undeniable queen of throwing a lavish event that would make your jaw drop. This evening's art auction was no exception.

Even with the glamorous party swirling around me, the only thing consuming my thoughts was the kiss I'd shared with Logan in the garden a few hours earlier. The kiss lingered in my mind, eclipsing even the most dazzling moments of the soiree so far.

Looking around, I surveyed the room which was filled with Charleston's wealthiest residents. Logan had gone to fetch drinks, and without him by my side, I felt out of place among finely dressed strangers.

The differences between me and them couldn't have been more obvious.

Most of the auction-goers wore subtly expensive outfits that whispered their wealth instead of shouting it. Yet, after spending lots of time around people like this, I'd learned to spot the truly elite—the ones who wore tailored ensembles with effortless

confidence, leaving no doubt in my mind that they lived in a different stratosphere.

The grand ball room at Westbrook Meadows had transformed into a sea of bespoke suits, shimmering jewelry, and couture gowns. The women in the room were elegantly clad in floor-length gowns of emerald, blue, and wine red. The gentlemen looked debonaire in custom-tailored tuxedos. Their pocket squares were folded with precision, and their shoes were shined to an almost mirror-like state.

Above us was a beautiful chandelier that cast a warm glow upon waitstaff that fluttered in and out of crowds in crisp uniforms. Guests mingled, champagne flutes in hand, creating a low hum of conversation punctuated by the occasional laugh and sharp tings of glasses clinking. Towering flower arrangements stood at intervals throughout the room—fresh white roses and eucalyptus.

Art pieces were displayed with precision all along the walls, and other pieces were scattered throughout the space on elevated pedestals. Paintings hung on the walls ranging from sprawling landscapes to abstract bursts of color. Items ranging from sculptures to more delicate works were displayed on black, velvet stands.

It was painfully obvious that I didn't belong. The weight of the wealth in the room was overwhelming, almost radiating.

Logan suddenly appeared next to me.

“Don't worry,” he said in a comforting tone, “they're more bark than bite.”

His reassurance was a welcome relief. He handed me my drink as one of his coworkers, Danielle, came over to say hello.

As he introduced me, Logan put his hand on my shoulder.

Everyone around us noticed.

I was more focused on the smile radiating from Logan's eyes. He knew I was nervous, and it was kind of him to guide me this way.

Logan's colleague pulled him away to speak with a group of hospital staff.

Alone again, but this time feeling slightly more confident.

That was, until I noticed the whispers and stares.

Suddenly, I couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was watching me. It was completely understandable, given that Logan had essentially just demonstrated his first public display of affection with me. Hopefully the first of many to come.

Still, I felt eyes on me. People kept glancing at their phones then back up at me. Much to my own bewilderment. I decided to go to the restroom just for a breather, and when I returned, Logan was nowhere in sight.

But still... eyes followed me everywhere I went, tracking my every move.

Instinctively, I knew it wasn't just paranoia.

Unfortunately, I noticed Veronica approaching me from the other side of the room. I could never quite figure out why the family continued to invite her around. Maybe blood ran thicker than I imagined with the Westbrooks.

She sidled up next to me with a mischievous grin on her face. "Casey, darling, how are you holding up?"

I was confused about why someone like Veronica would inquire about my wellbeing.

“It’s a beautiful event,” I said with a forced smile. “Betsy really went all out.”

She furrowed her brow. “Oh dear, you haven’t heard the news, have you?”

“What news?”

Veronica grinned with false sympathy. “Such a shame, really. But I’m sure Logan will understand... once he sees it.”

She held her phone up so I could view the screen. I squinted and noticed that it was a headline for a news article.

Nanny or Gold Digger? Westbrook Heir’s Controversial Relationship Raises Questions.

My blood ran cold as I skimmed the scathing words contained within the exposé. There were allegations of social climbing, comments about my “suspicious background,” and thinly veiled implications that I was using Logan for financial gain.

Each of these things was reportedly told to the blog writer by an “insider source.”

I immediately knew that the source was Veronica.

If I wasn’t so embarrassed by the article, I’d be furious with her.

How could anyone question my motives? I’d been hired to be a nanny. I was just doing my job.

Unless they’d found out about my kiss with Logan, which had happened only a few hours before.

There's no way anyone could know , I thought.

Suddenly, it seemed like the room was shrinking. I started to feel a slight dizziness as I realized that everyone in the room was looking at me. And it wasn't paranoia or delusional thinking—they were gawking.

Before I knew it, Logan appeared next to me, still smiling as brightly as before.

He must not have seen it.

At the same time, Dr. Evans appeared next to us wearing a concerned expression.

“Logan,” he said, clearing his throat and holding his phone in Logan's view, “you might want to see this. It's stirring up some talk and I thought you should be aware.”

Logan skimmed the article, his expression changing as he absorbed each line.

I searched his face for reassurance, but he avoided my gaze. The wall of silence between us felt endless.

Guests around us watched, their whispers amplifying as they awaited Logan's reaction.

When Logan finally spoke, his voice was controlled but cold. “This is outrageous. Casey is here because he's our nanny. He's not an opportunist.”

I raised my hand. “Logan, you don't have to defend me. It's very clear where everyone stands.”

Dr. Evans shook his head. “Logan, I think you need to come with me and speak to a few of the hospital bigwigs. They've seen the article, and I think a reassuring,

calming conversation might be in order.”

I waited, eagerly hoping that Logan would choose to stay and talk with me. I needed reassurance and comfort more than some hospital executives from Pinehurst Medical.

Logan looked at me with sympathy in his eyes.

“This is hurtful,” I said, my voice nearly trembling as I tried to maintain my composure. “Being seen as a scandal is not what I want.”

Logan was obviously frustrated and uncomfortable with all the public attention.

He frowned at me. “Can we discuss this later? You’re making a scene and that’s exactly what they want.”

Making a scene?

I was gutted by his response.

Before I could answer, Dr. Evans placed his hand on Logan’s back and guided him away from me toward a group of men in stiff suits.

Veronica eyed me with a disdainful smile. “Fame doesn’t come cheap, Casey. But perhaps that’s what you wanted all along?”

I shook my head coldly. “Veronica, I don’t care about your family’s money. But it’s clear that you’d rather see Logan miserable than happy.”

Two hours later, I watched from my bedroom window as the final guests left Westbrook Meadows.

The estate felt empty without the clamor of the crowd. And even emptier without Logan next to me.

I'd stationed myself alone in my room since Logan had walked away from me earlier. We hadn't spoken since. He'd been too busy calming everyone's nerves and putting out fires among his coworkers.

I tried my best to search my inner saint for the capacity to forgive, but it was difficult to excuse the way I'd been treated earlier. I knew that Logan was struggling with the looming custody threat from the Mercers, but I didn't want to manifest excuses for his behavior.

My feelings mattered too.

Glancing around the cavernous room, I suddenly realized I was alone with my thoughts—and that was the last thing I wanted.

So, I went downstairs to head toward the kitchen for a late-night snack. Martin kept the freezer stocked to the brim with various flavors of ice cream. My plan was to snag one then head back upstairs to cuddle up with a pillow and eat my heart out while watching reality TV.

As I crept down the wide hallway, I hoped I'd find myself alone in the kitchen. Betsy was sharp; I knew she'd notice my sadness and ask questions.

I wasn't in the mood for that.

Plus, I didn't have any answers.

As I neared the living room, I noticed Logan and Betsy speaking quietly with two formally dressed people. The air was alive with tension, and as I stepped closer, I

recognized them: Helen and Robert Mercer.

Helen caught sight of me first, her expression icy.

Finally, everyone else noticed me as well. It was clear that I had stepped into a very heated conversation.

I had no idea what was happening, but I found myself hoping it was unrelated to the article published earlier in the day.

As I entered the room, I could tell that they'd just started their conversation.

Helen turned to Logan and, without any pleasantries, said, "We're here because we are concerned about our grandson's wellbeing. We saw the article published earlier today."

Damn. They saw it.

I suddenly felt as if I was nothing more than a dark cloud over the Westbrook family. Since my arrival, chaos seemed to engulf them, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

Robert nodded in agreement with his wife. His face was frozen in a deep scowl.

"You should be aware," Helen added, "we're filing paperwork tomorrow seeking full custody of Henry. We won't stand by while he's raised under..."

Helen turned and looked at me. "Questionable influences."

This was personal. She truly hated me.

Logan's posture tightened as he stepped forward, closing the gap between him and the Mercers. His voice was measured and calm, but it carried an edge of steel.

"Henry is my son," he said, his gaze locked on Helen. "He's being raised in a home filled with stability, love, and guidance."

Helen scoffed, rolling her eyes. "You've been too distracted lately, Logan. Your long hours at the hospital. Your... lifestyle."

Logan's eyes widened and his tone hardened. "My work saves lives."

Helen squinted at him, unimpressed.

Logan didn't relent. "And my 'lifestyle,' as you put it, is none of your damn business. It has nothing to do with my ability to raise my son. Henry is thriving, that's all that matters."

As I watched from the sidelines, my heart pounded as Logan's protective side radiated through the room—I'd never seen anything like it. He was unyielding but composed, a father ready to move mountains for his child.

It was magnetic.

Helen pressed on. "We're worried about the kinds of people you're exposing him to, Logan. He needs structure. He needs discipline. He needs a proper?—"

Logan cut her off, his voice firm. "Don't you dare question the people in Henry's life. Casey has been nothing but supportive and kind to Henry. That's what Henry needs—not your judgment."

Relief washed over me at Logan's unwavering defense of my character. His words

gently patched over some of the sting caused by his reaction to the article during the auction.

Helen switched tactics, clearly realizing she was losing ground. “If you truly care about your son, you’ll reconsider. The court will examine this situation and question your judgment. We’re prepared to argue that you’re choosing companionship over stability, and that Henry is better off being placed in our care.”

Betsy finally stepped forward, breaking her silence. Her expression was as sharp as a blade.

“Well, aren’t you both brave?” she said, her voice dangerously calm. “Marching in here with your self-righteous indignation. As if you’ve already won. But let me be clear: when you poke a Westbrook bear, you’d better be prepared to deal with the claws.”

Helen rolled her eyes, but Betsy leaned in toward her, like a predator sizing up its prey.

Betsy’s eyes narrowed. “Henry is staying right where he belongs—with Logan. And if you attempt to continue down this foolish path, I’ll ensure that regret becomes your closest companion.”

Helen’s composure faltered for a fraction of a second, but she quickly recovered and offered a tight-lipped smile. “Betsy, is that a threat?”

Betsy’s eyes gleamed with icy confidence. “Oh, Helen, threats are a waste of my time. This? This is a favor to help you avoid ruin.”

Helen scoffed before reaching into her bag and producing a sealed envelope. She walked over and handed it to Logan.

“This,” she said with a haughty tone, “is formal notice of our intention to pursue custody.”

Logan glared at Helen, a blaze in his eyes. “If you think you can take my son away from me, you’d better be ready for the fight of your life.”

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Chapter 10

Logan

M orning brought no relief from the horrors of the previous night.

I'd never experienced this type of anxiety—this type of agony. Worrying that the Mercers might take away my son.

My mind raced as I climbed out of bed and looked out the window. Surrounded by Westbrook Meadows and my family's vast wealth—none of it calmed me today.

Even the smallest, most remote chance that they'd be successful terrified me.

Mother had tried to reassure me endlessly since their departure, but I was still fuming.

I was furious with the Mercers. Furious with Veronica for her assistance with the publication of the scandalous article.

I walked over to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I'd only slept three hours, and I knew today was going to be hell at the hospital.

Part of me wanted to call out and take a personal day, but I knew it'd be a terrible idea since I was already on thin ice at the hospital after the article.

The strain of the custody threat had left me unable to enjoy a moment's peace.

The estate was eerily quiet as I made my way downstairs to prepare a quick breakfast before heading to work. Sunlight spilled through the massive hallways, throwing long shadows across the floor.

I had hoped for a moment of solitude with breakfast, but as I stepped into the kitchen, there she was.

Mother sat at the head of the table, regal as ever. She sipped tea from a delicate porcelain cup. Her calm presence was both reassuring and maddening, considering the chaos occurring around us.

Without glancing at me, she spoke. "Good morning, darling! You look dreadful."

"Thanks," I mumbled, heading directly toward the coffee.

She set her cup down gently, the slight clink unnerving me.

"You can thank me later," she said. "Sit down, you look like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders."

I leaned against the counter instead of sitting. "It's been... a lot, Mom. But I'm fine."

She watched me carefully. "Fine? Darling, you're a Westbrook. We don't do fine. Sit. You need a strategy."

I shook my head. "If this is about the Mercers, I've already made it clear: they're not taking Henry."

"Of course they're not," she said with a smile, her tone confident and calm.

Too calm.

She picked up her cup, sipping her tea. “But the way to win a war is to know when to show grace... and when to be ruthless.”

I frowned, having no idea where she was going with this. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“A family dinner tonight with the Mercers,” she said casually, as if it was the most natural suggestion in the world.

I nearly choked on my coffee, almost spitting it out. “You want me to have dinner with the Mercers?”

Mother nodded, obviously unfazed by my incredulity.

“Why would I do that? They’re trying to take my son away from me.”

She smiled faintly—the kind of smile that suggested she knew more than she was letting on. “Because, my darling, the best way to handle an enemy is to invite them into your home.”

“What?”

“Let them believe they’re in control,” she added, “while you hold all the cards.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“What cards?” I asked. “Do you have something you’re not telling me?”

She tilted her head, and her expression was completely unclear to me.

“Let’s just say,” she said sweetly, “by the time dinner is over, I intend to have this

entire custody nonsense off the table.”

I raised an eyebrow, studying her expression for any clue I could extract.

“Mother...” I said, but my voice trailed off.

“Trust me, Logan. You’ll see.”

My inner voice demanded that I ask for more details. But the expression in her eyes—sharp and just a bit wicked—stopped me. Whatever my mother was planning was obviously already in motion. At this point, I was essentially just along for the ride.

I finally walked over and sank into the chair across from her. “I sure hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, darling,” she said before taking another sip of her tea, “I always do.”

Later that day, I headed into work. But the tension from the previous night still lingered.

As I made my rounds at the hospital, I noticed some of my colleagues exchanging looks. There was a slight shift in the way they spoke to me.

I tried to convince myself that I was imagining things, but finally Dr. Evans approached me in the hallway.

“Logan,” he said, sounding slightly condescending, “I want to talk to you about that article. The board has seen it, and there’s concern about how it reflects on the hospital.”

I frowned. “The article was simply speculation. Gossip. Casey’s presence has nothing to do with my work here at the hospital.”

Dr. Evans’ tone shifted from condescending to patronizing. “I know you’re close to the situation, Logan. But you have to consider it from the board’s point of view. They think it’d be wise for you to distance yourself. At least publicly.”

Anger surged inside me, but I refused to show it in such a public setting.

Dr. Evan’s face was draped in a shadow of malevolence under the flickering fluorescent lights in the hallway. He nodded, patted me on the back, and turned to walk away.

If it was his goal to catch me off guard, he’d succeeded.

His tense words made me question how much I was risking professionally by keeping Casey in my life.

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Chapter 11

Casey

As I drove back to Westbrook Meadows from the grocery store, my thoughts were like a whirlwind. Scattered tension lingered in my brain as I thought about the custody situation with the Mercers.

Martin was busy setting the dinner table, so Betsy had asked me to grab a few items for a dinner—with the Mercers.

I was already anxious about how uncomfortable it was going to be.

When I caught sight of the first highway billboard, my foot eased off the gas instinctively.

It was practically impossible to miss—a massive sign, giant black letters against a crisp white background, gleaming in the sun.

Some grandparents bake cookies. Others cook the books. Family bonds are priceless. Tax fraud isn't.

I blinked several times, certain that my eyes had deceived me.

But as I drove past the second billboard just a little further down the highway, my jaw dropped.

Real grandparents don't hide behind fake charities. Where did the millions go?

Driving faster, I noticed the final billboard. I didn't even try to mute the laugh that escaped my mouth.

Offshore accounts, onshore drama.

Transparency is a family value, Robert.

Oh my god. Betsy had called him out by name.

The implications were clear. And at this point, they weren't just implications anymore.

This couldn't be real. Betsy would never do something like this.

Would she?

I shook my head, going back and forth between awe and disbelief. Betsy had completely outdone herself. Hopefully for her it was subtle enough to avoid legal implications, but I assumed at this point Betsy was no longer concerned about that.

Driving back to the estate, I knew that the Mercers were probably fuming, and that I was likely walking right into the storm.

When I arrived, the air was already thick with palpable tension as I made my way toward the dining room, bracing for what I knew was waiting there.

My footsteps echoed slightly off the polished floors, and each step I took made my heart race faster. Normally I was impressed by the scale and beauty of the house on the estate, but when things were tense, the atmosphere almost took on an eerie,

haunted vibe.

The high ceilings, unusual art pieces, and large, ornate rugs that covered the floors all lent themselves to the feeling of being summoned by a royal.

Walking down the hallway, hearing my own footsteps, waiting to see what awaited me around the next corner. On one hand, I had no idea what to expect. But on the other hand, that was to be expected.

Betsy liked to keep everyone guessing, but there wasn't much room for interpretation based on the signs.

Finally, I heard the sounds of clinking dishes coming from the dining room. I braced myself for what I was about to experience. I had hoped that by the time I arrived, they'd be completely finished with their conversation. Conflict over, just like that. I could go back to being the nanny and things could go back to normal.

But as I turned the corner into the dining room, I knew that wasn't likely.

And there they were.

Betsy sat in her chair like royalty, a small, satisfied smile playing at her lips. Logan stood next to her, his arms crossed, radiating calm control with a protective edge.

Across from them were Helen and Robert, seated at the table.

Helen's nails were digging into the armrest, her lips pressed so tightly they were nearly white.

Robert's jaw was clenched, and he glared at Betsy but said nothing.

I lingered in the doorway, hesitating because I felt like an intruder walking onto a battlefield.

“Oh, Casey,” Betsy said, gesturing toward the chair beside her, “come and sit. We’re all just sitting here discussing... morals.”

Robert’s face was furious, and his hands were balled into clenched fists. “This is outrageous, Betsy. You think you can plaster slander all over the highway and just get away with it?”

Betsy leaned back in her chair. “Slander, Robert, is when it’s untrue—everything up there is a simple reminder of how much we value honesty in the Westbrook family.”

“Honesty?” Robert asked with a scoff. “If you want to talk honestly, let’s talk about how you ripped off the Ashford family a few decades ago and stole millions from them. How’s that for morality?”

Betsy shook her head, defiant. “We won our fair share of Harborstone Gallery in a court victory. A judge approved it.”

“A judge you practically own!” Robert fired back.

Betsy glared at him. “The entire case was made public for anyone to research. The Westbrooks won fair and square. We’ve never stolen a thing in our lives.”

“Tell that to the Ashford family!” Helen finally chimed in.

“I have,” Betsy said, her voice steady.

I watched Betsy with awe. Her words were pointed and cutting but she never lost her cool.

Helen bristled but clearly was trying to keep her composure. “Look Betsy, we came here to discuss what’s best for Henry, not to be utterly humiliated.”

She turned to Logan. “Logan, surely you can see that your mother’s behavior is inappropriate.”

Logan glanced at his smiling mother before returning his focus to the Mercers. “What’s best for Henry is a life of stability. And if you had such good intentions, maybe you wouldn’t be so disturbed by a little honesty.”

“Honesty?” Helen asked, her mouth agape. “This isn’t honest—it’s slander! None of these claims are true.”

Betsy leaned forward and stared with a calm intensity that silenced the room. She folded her hands neatly on the table, a faint smile pulling at her lips, but it was anything but warm.

Her tone was measured but still polite—which made it all the more terrifying. “Well, Helen, Robert... you’ve expressed your concerns about Henry’s home life. Now I’m going to express my concerns.”

Robert looked visibly uncomfortable, shifting in his seat. Helen’s face was tight but starting to crack, her carefully applied makeup failing to hide her discomfort.

“The thing is,” Betsy started, “I happen to believe that honesty and transparency are the foundations of a strong home. And I believe that actions speak louder than words. For example...”

Betsy paused theatrically before reaching out and grabbing a folder she’d neatly placed on the table earlier. The kind of folder that could only spell doom.

“Robert’s little adventure a few nights ago,” Betsy said, nodding at Robert.

Helen snapped her head toward her husband. “Adventure?”

Betsy was unrelenting. “Yes, his adventure. Starting with driving under the influence after leaving a bar. But that’s not all, is it, Robert?”

She flipped the folder open and pulled out a shiny, glossy photo before sliding it over to Robert with impeccable ease.

“Here’s Robert,” she continued, “visibly intoxicated, parking your car at a less-than-reputable street corner to purchase something in a little baggie. And here you are...,” she said, sliding out another photo, “snorting it right off your dashboard. Charming.”

Robert’s face suddenly went pale. “This is outrageous! You can’t?—”

“I already have,” Betsy replied, leaning back in her chair with a satisfied expression. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but these aren’t simply allegations. These are stone cold facts, Robert. And I haven’t even gotten around to the financial irregularities.”

Panic flickered in Helen’s eyes as her facade began to crack. “What are you talking about?”

Betsy opened the folder again and pulled out yet another glossy photo, this time sliding it across the table to Helen. Even from where I was sitting on the sidelines, I could see that the numbers in the rows didn’t add up.

“Dear Helen,” Betsy said, “you’ve been thoroughly creative with your bookkeeping. Offshore accounts, income that’s gone undeclared, and my personal favorite: a fake charity. ‘Helen’s Helping Hands.’ Absolutely adorable name, by the way.”

Helen looked completely stunned. “Betsy, you cannot?—”

Betsy raised one hand, cutting off Helen with regal authority. “And before you claim to be completely ignorant, Helen, let me remind you that tax fraud isn’t exactly a slap-on-the-wrist kind of offense—that should come as no surprise. Judges frown on this sort of thing—especially in custody cases.”

Silence filled the room, almost deafening. Logan stood beside his mother, his arms still crossed and his expression ice cold. I could feel his fury radiating, but he didn’t speak.

This was Betsy’s show.

Betsy’s voice was almost a low purr. “I’m more than willing to give the courts complete and total transparency. You said yourself that Henry deserves to live in a stable home, not one built on lies and fabrications. I suggest you think very, very carefully about your next move.”

Helen gripped the edge of her chair, her hands shaking. “This... this is blackmail, Betsy.”

Betsy’s satisfied smile didn’t fall. “Oh Helen, blackmail is such a harsh word. I prefer to think of it as shining a light.”

Robert looked as if he might erupt, but Helen grabbed his arm and dug her nails into his sleeve.

She glared at Betsy, eyeing her as if she hated her. “You’re awful.”

Betsy stared back, unmoving. “I’d think very carefully about testing me again. I’d hate to be forced to release what I have to the proper channels. Think about Robert’s

career at the law firm. The fallout would be absolutely... catastrophic.”

Defiance finally drained from Robert’s face as he slumped back in his chair, looking at the folder in front of him like it was a ticking bomb. His mouth opened, but nothing came out—his earlier bravado had completely vanished.

Helen forced a smile and said, “Well, I suppose we’ll... reconsider our approach. But just for Henry’s sake, of course.”

“Of course,” Betsy said with sweet southern charm, as if they’d just agreed to a perfectly civil matter. “After all, Henry’s well-being is what we’re all focused on, right?”

Betsy’s gaze was as sharp as a blade, daring the Mercers to challenge her.

Helen grabbed her husband with trembling hands.

“We’ll take our leave now,” she said, her voice brittle.

“Wonderful,” Betsy chirped. “And feel free to let me know if you need any further clarification on where you stand. I’d be happy to oblige, any time.”

Helen’s face turned completely red as she pulled her husband toward the door, turning to walk away. They wandered out of the room, their backs toward us, stiff. Finally, the sound of the door closing behind them echoed off the walls.

I glanced at Betsy who sat back in her chair casually, as if she hadn’t just dismantled the Mercers’ plans with a few carefully chosen, devastating sentences.

Logan leaned against the mantle, exhaling slowly. I could sense the frustration leaving the room.

“I think that’s the last we’ll hear from them,” he said. “They’d be stupid to push their luck.”

Betsy smoothed the hem of her jacket. “Oh, stupidity is a common affliction. I wouldn’t count them out just yet— personally. They’re like a bad odor lingering in an otherwise pristine room.”

Betsy certainly had a way with words.

Logan looked at his mother. “Think they’ll leave us alone now?”

Betsy smiled and nodded. “Now they understand just how far I’ll go to protect the Westbrook family. If they’re smart, think they’ll twice before testing me again. I don’t bluff, darling. And I never lose.”

The weight of Betsy’s words hung in the air of the grand dining room. Betsy rose to her feet and walked out of the room with the grace of a queen exiting her court.

A few hours later, I found myself wandering the cavernous hallways of the house, heading toward Logan’s bedroom. I’d found his tablet in the drawing room, and I wanted to bring it to him. Although, if I was being honest with myself, that wasn’t my only motive.

Thoughts of Logan had riddled my mind all day. I simply could not stop thinking about the man.

After Betsy told the Mercers off, Logan and Betsy had relaxed for a few hours. The mood had completely shifted, and it was nice to see Logan finally decompress and smile. When Betsy took Henry out for dessert at his favorite restaurant, I knew it was the perfect time for me to talk to Logan, alone.

Standing outside Logan's bedroom, I gazed in. It was a place I never dreamed I'd be.

Just like him, his bedroom was calm and refined with an undercurrent of intensity.

The walls were a deep gray, the kind of color that made everything in the room feel sharper. Dominating the room was a massive bed with a dark wooden frame and crisp linens.

And there was Logan, standing by the window with his profile illuminated by the glow of the evening light. He turned and looked at me, neither of us saying anything for a moment.

The silence practically crackled, alive with the electricity that had built up between us.

I hesitated by the door, feeling as if I was crossing an invisible line. "I just... I just wanted to bring up your tablet, you left it downstairs." I held up the tablet like a shield. "I'll just leave it here and?—"

"Casey," he said, his voice low, stopping me in my tracks. "You don't have to leave."

I swallowed hard, my pulse quickening. "I didn't mean to intrude..."

"You're not intruding," Logan said, stepping forward with deliberate steps as if he didn't want to spook me. "Stay."

I stepped into the room and gently placed the tablet on the edge of a nearby table, my fingers brushing against the wood and lingering longer than I'd meant for them to, as if I needed something to steady me.

Logan took another step forward, close enough that I could smell the faint scent of his

distinctive cologne.

I glanced up to meet his gaze, my heart racing. His expression was almost unreadable, but there was a hint of something in his eyes that I couldn't ignore.

“Casey,” he said, closing the distance between us in an instant.

His hands cupped my face as his lips met mine. The kiss was eager, almost desperate, as if we'd held back too long and couldn't wait a second longer. My hands quickly found their way to his chest and gripped the fabric of his shirt.

Breathe , I thought, trying to relax.

I tried to steady myself against the table, forcing my legs not to wobble against the wave of emotions crashing over me.

Logan quickly pulled my shirt over my head and brought his mouth to my chest, trailing kisses along my skin and sending a shiver down my spine. His lips found their way to my nipples, gently biting them.

My heart was pounding, and I knew Logan could feel it. His giant, rough hands gripped me snugly.

The sheer power of his touch and the electricity contained within shocked me.

I felt a mix of helplessness and hunger that nearly sent me spiraling, teetering on the edge of control.

I thought I knew what physical strength was. I exercised regularly, tried to lift weights—but next to Logan, I almost felt fragile.

His hands roamed my body as if he were claiming every inch of me. I rolled my hips forward to press against him as he cupped my ass and let out a tight-lipped hiss of pleasure.

Suddenly, I felt Logan's cock stiffening through his pants as he slid his shirt over his head.

My own cock began to twitch and move around, obviously with a mind of its own.

Every subtle move of Logan's body pushed me further over the edge, and I felt my cock straining against the pressure from my pants.

Logan slid his hand between us, repositioning our cocks so that they ran parallel to each other.

I closed my eyes and moaned, giving in to the tantalizing pleasure of his cock sliding against mine between thin layers of fabric.

It simultaneously felt wrong and so very right.

Logan pushed himself into me, further pinning me to the hard, rough wall. But the slight pain only heightened the thrill.

"I want you to feel good," he said, whispering in my ear. "I want to give you the same pleasure you've given me."

I bit my lip, feeling my anticipation swell.

Without hesitation, I gently pushed him back before slowly lowering myself to kneel before him. I gazed up at his stunning face with something almost like reverence. Looking up at him, I felt more than desire—it was something more like awe.

He wasn't just a handsome man, he was an elegant masterpiece, a creation so impossibly perfect he almost seemed unreal. Every line and curve of his body was like a testament to a divine artist's work for me to enjoy. Logan was simultaneously larger than life, yet still somehow tangible.

He was real.

He slowly unzipped his jeans. I waited patiently for as long as I could, but I couldn't resist the urge to reach out and tug them down. They slipped down just low enough to allow his thick cock to spring free and bounce in the open air. I licked my lips, excited by how massive it was.

I wanted so badly to taste the little drop of precome glimmering in the light.

"You want it?" he asked with a grin, gazing down at me.

I leaned forward and pulled the swollen head of his cock between my lips, rolling my tongue over the tip. The salty precome touched my tongue, making me groan as I eagerly swallowed it.

"I want to feel your throat," Logan commanded. "Deeper."

My own cock twitched as I moaned and took more of his length in my mouth. I moved further and further down his shaft, slowly swallowing more of him until I was nearly gagging. Logan rocked his hips forward, thrusting himself into my mouth, fucking my face as I gently moaned.

He held both of his hands on the side of my head, guiding me with commanding strength as he reared back and pushed forward again.

I felt him shudder, and I knew he was in heaven.

I wanted to give him everything he wanted—everything he could possibly ask for.

His pace quickened, and I thought he was going to finish in my mouth, but he stopped.

Logan pulled back, his voice low, and said, “Stand up. And turn around.”

I climbed to my feet, and we found ourselves beside the bed. I felt my knees ache, hinting that they might give out at any point.

I was overwhelmed and engulfed all at once as I faced the wall, Logan behind me.

Desperate anticipation rolled over me as I bit my lip and wondered what was about to come.

Logan leaned in and breathed in my ear as he unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them to the floor, exposing me.

He pulled my pants and boxers down, leaving me stripped.

I let out a quiet groan of approval as I felt the cold air brush over my uncovered skin.

Suddenly, I felt Logan’s length sliding against my cheeks.

“Do you want it?” he asked with the kind of confidence that told me he already knew the answer.

I eagerly, desperately wanted it.

“I want it,” I said, practically begging. “I want you inside me. Please...”

He snarled, his voice almost a growl. "Who do you belong to?"

"You," I answered quickly. "I'm yours and yours alone, Logan."

He growled again. "Damn right."

Hearing the tear of plastic behind me, I turned to see Logan rolling a condom over his length. He grabbed a bottle of lube from the nightstand drawer and squeezed some onto his fingertips.

He pressed his fingers against my hole, causing a loud moan to erupt from my lips.

"Feel good?" he asked.

"Yes," I whimpered. "Oh god, yes."

"Want more?"

I rutted back against his fingers as they pressed into me. "Please, Logan," I choked out, trembling. "Please..."

I relaxed and moaned as he fingered my hole, working the band of muscle as I squirmed. My fingertips were digging into the sheets as I begged him for more.

"Please fuck me," I gasped. "I need it, Logan."

Logan moaned. "Want my cock in your ass?"

"Make it yours," I begged. "Claim it."

I felt his tip first, then slowly, the rest of his length as he entered me.

Both of his hands groped my ass cheeks as I writhed on the bed, pushing my cock into the sheets. Logan kissed and nipped at my shoulders as his cock pushed even deeper.

I closed my eyes and lost myself in the almost unbearable waves of bliss washing over me. He knew exactly how to touch me—exactly what I needed. He hit that perfect spot that made my vision swim.

Logan wrapped his arm around my waist and started to stroke my cock with his free hand. I nearly collapsed onto the bed, frantically trying to breathe.

“It feels...,” I said, my voice shaking. “It feels so good.”

“Good,” he said, his voice rumbling behind me. “I want you to come for me, Casey. Can you do that?”

“Whatever you want,” I choked out, rocked by pleasure. “I’m all yours.”

He stroked my cock harder, then faster, in perfect rhythm with his shaft slamming deep inside me as I clenched around him. I yelped, then groaned before burying my face in the sheets to try and quiet myself.

Logan’s hand slid up and down my cock, delicately at first then rough and quick as I neared the edge.

His thumb toyed with the sensitive tip of my member, practically willing me to come.

I cried out, my entire body convulsing with pleasure as my come spurted out, thick and heavy all over the sheet.

“Good,” he said, his voice raspy in my ear. “You want it?” he asked, sounding

frantic. “Want my come in your ass?”

My hands, legs, and feet shook, and I felt as if I might faint. “Yes,” I said breathlessly. “Please, I want it.”

An animalistic snarl escaped his lips as he slammed into me, holding me in place as he emptied into the condom. I felt every single pulse as he throbbed inside me. To my delight, his breath became ragged and quick as his body gave in to pleasure.

After a few more desperate thrusts, he pulled out and softly kissed the back of my head before collapsing on top of me. Sweat glistened from his body and dampened my skin as it rolled onto me.

Still shaking and trying to compose myself, I pulled my boxers up and we both crashed onto his massive bed. Logan smiled, pulling me into his arms and stroking my hair as I tried to catch my breath. It amazed me that he could suddenly be so gentle after ravaging me.

Instinctively, I leaned into him, pressing my head into his chest. Logan held me closely, the sound of his heartbeat calming me, helping me come back to earth, grounding me.

We came down together, softly landing in a place we hadn’t been before. A place that felt uncharted, yet somehow perfectly ours.

Chapter 12

Logan

Six Months Later

The Westbrook family gathered in the grand drawing room, anticipation lingering in the air. Mother had outdone herself and I hadn't expected anything less. She commanded attention the moment she entered, wearing a tailored navy suit with gold accents. Her gold brooch—a family heirloom—caught the reflection of the light as she adjusted her teacup.

Henry slouched beside me, sitting on a velvet settee, and absentmindedly scrolling on his phone as his knee bounced in restless impatience. I tapped him on his shoulder, reminding him to put it away and focus. Casey stood by the bay window with one hand in his pocket. The other hand rested on the window frame as he gazed out at the garden. Suddenly, he turned and glanced at me, offering a faint smile that made my chest tighten.

Over the past six months, I'd fallen for a man who had completely changed my life.

To say that his presence was a blessing was an understatement. He'd brought laughter and warmth into a house that had been quiet for far too long. Casey's sheer presence had a way of making everyone feel lighter and brighter.

Henry was thriving with a high GPA, looking at colleges in the Charleston area. I was thrilled to know that Henry wanted to stick around. That way, I could secretly and

covertly keep an eye on him.

After our confrontation a few months back, the Mercers officially dropped their custody pursuit, so I was no longer worried about that.

Casey winked at me, and it set my heart racing—my devastatingly handsome man.

Veronica cleared her throat, causing me to glance in her direction.

She was perched—rather dramatically—on a chaise lounge, her lips pressed in an angry thin line.

Aunt Mildred sat nearby, patiently sipping her tea as if she were watching a play she'd seen dozens of times before but still found amusing.

“Well,” Mother said, placing her teacup down with a deliberate clink, “let’s not pretend we don’t know why we’re here. It’s time to address the elephant in the room.”

Veronica shifted in her seat.

“There’s something that needs to be discussed,” Betsy added. “Someone has shown a blatant disregard for this family’s integrity. Veronica, I’m talking about you. You orchestrated the slanderous article. You attempted to damage Casey’s reputation... and by extension, Logan’s.”

Veronica looked flustered. “I’m sure there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Besty lifted a printed copy of the article in the air and showed it to Veronica, glaring at her.

Mother's voice was steady and somewhat cold. "There's been no misunderstanding—this is the evidence, Veronica. Your actions were cruel, calculated, and shameful—and they'll have consequences. I will not allow you to benefit from this family's legacy."

Veronica's face went pale as Betsy stared her down.

"To that end," Mother said, delivering the final blow, "you'll receive nothing from my estate, Veronica. You're no longer entitled to any aspect of the Westbrook family name."

Hunter raised an eyebrow and looked over at Dean who also appeared shocked. They mumbled something to each other under their breath. Of course they were interested in this dramatic turn of events; they stood to inherit some of the one-hundred-million just like the rest of us.

Glancing at Casey, I could see that he too was completely stunned.

Veronica stared at Mother in complete silence before jumping to her feet and stomping out of the room, fury and humiliation written across her face.

Finally, Mother turned and looked at me, her expression softening into something tender. "Logan, you've been a loyal son, an incredible father, and a treasure for this family. I'm happy to announce that I'm giving you thirty-million-dollars of the Westbrook fortune."

Her words crashed over me like a tidal wave, leaving me breathless for a moment.

My heart pounded as limitless possibilities flashed before my eyes: paying for Henry's tuition at his dream school, buying a home for us, sweeping Casey off his feet for a romantic getaway, just the two of us... the possibilities were endless.

The weight of it all gripped me. It felt as if years of strain had been instantly lifted.

“Mother,” I managed, nearly gasping, “I don’t know what to say.”

She leaned forward and offered a warm, knowing smile. “When it’s family, you don’t have to say anything at all. Just know that I love you.”

She paused for a moment, her eyes twinkling, before adding, “But there’s one thing.”

Here it comes.

My stomach flipped inside.

Is there a condition?

“I would never tell my grown children what to do,” she said with a sneaky grin, “but I do hope now you can at least reconsider the grueling hours at the hospital. Henry needs you more than they do, believe me.”

Henry’s face perked up instantly as he sat beside me. “Yeah Dad! Can you cut back on hours so you can be home more? Could you be here in time for dinner?”

I didn’t need to give it a moment’s thought. The answer was already there in every beat of my pounding heart.

“I can do better than that,” I said, pulling Henry in for a hug. “Tomorrow, I’ll give them notice that I’m resigning my position.”

For years I’d dreamed of leaving my stressful job at Pinehurst Medical and spending more time with Henry before he ran off to college. If I ended up with too much time on my hands, I could pursue something quieter like teaching at a medical school, a

dream long buried under the weight of family responsibility.

Now, finally, I could make our dreams come true.

Mother broke the silence by addressing my brother Hunter and my cousin Dean.

“Hunter and Dean,” she said, “your bequeathments will be announced in the coming weeks and months. Hunter, I was thrilled with the carnival, so that’s working in your favor. Dean, the auction was a smashing success.”

She was obviously going to leave them in suspense, but I knew they were probably hoping she’d split the remainder of the one hundred million—after the portion bequeathed to me—between the two of them.

Mother rose to her feet with a triumphant smile. She came over and wrapped both me and Henry in an uncharacteristically warm hug.

“Thank you,” I said again. “This is lifechanging for me and Henry. You’ve given us the gift of more time together.”

“Now that’s a legacy to be proud of,” she said softly. “A legacy worth building.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:36 am

Warm afternoon sun streamed through the leaves of the newly restored Heart of the Family Garden, casting shimmering golden light across the flowers and iron tree sculpture.

I stepped back, admiring the handiwork both Logan and I had put into this garden over the past few months. The feeling of completion was symbolic—we had all chipped in to create something magical. The garden was a living, breathing testament to this family's spirit of renewal.

Logan stepped beside me; his face relaxed in a way I'd never seen from him before. His hands were in his pockets and a smile was plastered on his face. Now that the tension from the custody battle with the Mercers was long past, and Logan had announced his intention to quit his job, he finally looked free.

For the first time ever.

I felt a new sense of freedom, too.

Betsy, Logan, and Henry had welcomed me in a way I hadn't expected. There was a new sense of family and belonging that I'd never been fortunate enough to feel before.

Now, things were different, and everything had shifted.

I was no longer Henry's nanny. Thanks to Betsy's unmatched ability to open doors, I'd landed a job as a partially remote program director at the local youth organization, Palmetto Pathways. Every day my job brought me joy. I was in charge of scheduling workshops, mentorship programs, and community events aimed at local youth. Since

the job was partially remote, I was still able to be a big part of Henry's life at Westbrook Meadows.

Earlier today, Logan made an appointment with a real estate agent so that we could start house hunting in the area. Logan wanted to buy a place that the three of us could call home. A place to cement this new chapter in our lives. It was almost surreal standing next to him, no longer feeling like an outsider. I wasn't just a small part of their lives; I was part of their family.

Finally, everything in my life felt like it was falling into place.

"It turned out beautiful, didn't it?" Logan asked, his voice low and calm.

There was a hint of pride in the way he spoke.

"It's more than beautiful," I said. "It's a masterpiece."

Logan chuckled, his gaze fixed on the iron tree in the center.

He looked over at me. "I couldn't have done it without you, Casey. Any of this."

"You would have done perfectly fine," I said, smirking and shaking my head. "But I'm glad I was here to help anyway."

My voice—just for a brief moment—faltered as I felt emotion swell in my chest. This conversation wasn't just about the garden; we both knew that. It was about everything we'd been through the past six months—the chaos, the battles with the Mercers, the laughter with the family.

It all led us to this moment.

"You've done so much more than help," Logan said, his voice warm. "You've

changed everything for us. You've made our family stronger."

His words felt like the final piece of a puzzle falling into place. I looked up at him before reaching out and interlacing my fingers with his.

"Logan, I—" my breath caught in my throat, but I didn't stop. "I love you."

The most genuine smile I'd ever seen flashed across his face. "I love you too, Casey. In more ways than I ever knew possible."

The air between us was charged with electricity but there was no stopping us. He leaned down and our lips met in a kiss that was full of unspoken promises.

It was a kiss that felt like coming home.

We pulled back from the kiss and Logan rested his forehead on mine. "Will you stay with us? Be a part of this family for real. Forever."

Tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked them back.

My voice was barely a whisper. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be, Logan."

The sound of Henry calling for us in the distance brought us out of our moment and back to reality. Logan grinned and squeezed my hand, turning to walk toward the house. As we walked to the manor together, I thought back to how far we'd come.

From the awkward first interview to this.

The garden wasn't simply a project; it was a true reflection of us.

Wild, chaotic, full of life and love.

And just like the flowers that bloomed around us, I knew we were only at the start of our journey—the beginning of something beautiful.

**